

HALF LIFE

**RON
OLSON**

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This is a work of fiction. All the characters portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people is purely coincidental. A few actual events from the operational history of the Rocky Flats Plant were selected and used as developmental concepts in the outline of this work, but the remainder are fictional.

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THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN FOR MARIAN

NOTE TO THE READER:

The existence of a nuclear weapons facility bearing the name "Rocky Flats" is a fact. The plant is located some sixteen miles northwest of the central business section of Denver, Colorado, and its primary mission is processing plutonium into components for nuclear weapons.

The following are also facts of record: During its existence, there have been a number of fires at the Rocky Flats plant; some have been serious and a few have resulted in plutonium emissions to the atmosphere. Barrels containing plutonium contaminated oil were stored under the ground at Rocky Flats; some of those barrels corroded and leaked oil into the ground, and there were associated releases of radiation. Plutonium, traced to Rocky Flats, has been detected in the water supply of the City of Broomfield, Colorado, a northern suburb of Denver. At least one failure of the air filtration system at the plant, the system designed to filter plutonium contaminants, has been admitted by the government.

Studies have been done on the cost and feasibility of decommissioning the plant and/or relocating its radioactive materials work. Allegations have been made by reputable authorities that plutonium contamination from Rocky Flats is a health hazard to residents of the Denver area.

A fact which is of profound import to every creature on our planet is the development and deployment of nuclear weapons. It is wishful thinking to consider eliminating them, and global reductions, while being the only course of sanity, seem as elusive a hope as total eradication of nuclear knowledge.

It is also an unfortunate truth that one of the most contentious issues of the nuclear age centers around the biological effects of low levels of ionizing radiation. Military personnel exposed to above ground testing of nuclear weapons, civilians who lived downwind of the Nevada Test Site in the 1950's when most of the testing was conducted, nuclear facilities workers, and uranium miners have, for some years, been attempting to make the case that they have experienced and their children will experience adverse effects from exposure to low levels of radiation. In this difficult area, there are many questions, legal, ethical, and scientific, but there are few answers.

A further and related fact is the absolute presence in the world of radioactivity. Indeed, it is now, and has forever been, all around us. There is radiation in the earth, in the skies, and in our bodies - from "natural" sources. Aside from medical uses of radiation such as x-rays, the most significant "man-made" radiation is visited upon us by commercial and military activities. The mining, processing, and transportation of nuclear materials all contribute some radiation to our environment. The testing of weapons, the operation of commercial power reactors, and the storing and dumping of waste are constantly active and prolific sources of radiation.

This work does not presume to define or state a position on these issues which have been planted in our intellect by the nuclear age. The realities of radiation and nuclear weapons are merely the conditions of our existence which combine to constitute the factual predicate of this book. Each reader, if he finds the general subject, or any of its particulars, interesting, should pursue the matter as he will, but he should not rely on the material in this work as being in any way authoritative or instructive.

Proceeding from the facts set forth above, i.e. Rocky Flats and its problems, the presence of radiation and our lack of knowledge about the health effects of exposure to small amounts, and the increasing concern over world wide nuclear

weapons, this book has been constructed as a work of fiction. There has been no attempt to describe any individual, living or dead. Should there be any similarity between real persons and those created in this book, it is entirely the result of fictional coincidence. The description of the plant and its operations are fictional derivations based upon information set forth in a publicly available environmental impact statement prepared by the government. The scientific descriptions are fanciful and are not intended to be instructive, and the levels of radiation described in the novel, with a few exceptions, are not thought to bear any relationship to reality.

The purpose in writing this book has been solely to provide an item of thoughtful entertainment. If an incidental effect is to bring some needed attention to a troubled area, so much the better.

Thus *HALF LIFE* is a fictional display whose outline consists of a few uncomfortable facts selected from among the many which bring such great peril to our time. Yet, with both science and fiction, things are not always what they seem to be, and it is only there, along the margins of uncertainty where skepticism is welcome, that we shall find challenges worthy of our efforts. Therefore, it is for you, the reader, to determine if a segment of life in our time has been defined fairly and treated honestly enough to have challenged your imagination.

Few men realize that their life,
the very essence of their character,
their capabilities and their audacities,
are only the expression of their belief
in the safety of their surroundings.

Joseph Conrad

An Outpost of Progress

PLUTONIUM 239 IS A HEAVY, MAN-MADE, METALLIC ELEMENT WITH THE ATOMIC NUMBER 94. IT IS RADIOACTIVE AND DECAYS BY EMITTING ALPHA PARTICLES WHICH TRAVEL ONLY 25 TO 40 MICROMETERS IN TISSUE WITH LITTLE EFFECT ON THE SKIN. HOWEVER, THE EFFECTS OF PLUTONIUM IN THE LUNG OR IN THE BLOOD CAN BE PHYSICALLY DISASTROUS. INHALED, A FEW SMALL PARTICLES, MICROSCOPIC IN SIZE, CAN CAUSE DEATH BY MASSIVE FIBROSIS IN WEEKS OR EVEN DAYS. THEREFORE, PLUTONIUM MUST BE KEPT ISOLATED AND MUST BE HANDLED BY PERSONNEL WEARING GLOVES AND RESPIRATORS. BECAUSE PLUTONIUM IS PYROPHORIC, IT IS USUALLY PROCESSED IN AN INERT ATMOSPHERE. GIVEN THE CORRECT AMOUNT AND THE PROPER CONFIGURATION, PLUTONIUM CAN BE MADE TO EXPLODE IN WHAT IS COMMONLY CALLED A NUCLEAR DETONATION.

THE HALF LIFE OF PLUTONIUM 239 IS 24,360 YEARS. THAT IS THE PERIOD OF TIME REQUIRED FOR ONE HALF OF THE NUCLEI OF A GIVEN AMOUNT TO DECAY INTO SOMETHING OTHER THAN PLUTONIUM. HOWEVER, BY DECAY, PLUTONIUM BECOMES URANIUM 235 WHICH IS RADIOACTIVE AND HAS A HALF LIFE OF 713 MILLION YEARS

.MAN HAD TO WAIT APPROXIMATELY 1,942 YEARS AFTER THE BIRTH OF CHRIST FOR THE FIRST PLUTONIUM TO BE CREATED. HE SHALL HAVE TO WAIT ABOUT 12.5 LIKE PERIODS OF TIME FOR ONE HALF OF HIS FIRST BATCH OF PLUTONIUM TO TRANSFORM ITSELF INTO YET ANOTHER RADIOACTIVE ELEMENT. MOST PEOPLE WOULD AGREE - THAT IS A VERY LONG TIME - PERHAPS LONGER THAN THE HALF LIFE OF MAN HIMSELF

The Rocky Flats Plant is located in northern Jefferson County almost equidistant from the Colorado communities of Boulder, Golden, and Arvada. The facility is centered at Latitude 39 degrees 53 minutes N, Longitude 105 degrees 11 minutes W, which is about 16 miles northwest of downtown Denver. The Plant site encompasses about 6,550 acres of federally owned land with the major structures of the Plant located within a security-fenced area of 384 acres.

The Plant is a key facility, with unique processing capabilities, for the production of nuclear weapons components and other work directly related to national defense.

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CHAPTER ONE

Pitkin Waay had driven his ancient Jeep north along the foothills and up onto the wide plateau of Rocky Flats enough times to have learned to concentrate on the rising, falling, looping journey itself rather than brood over the problems which awaited him at his destination. He preferred his routine of studying the staggering uplifts of yellow-gray rock and tracing the endless ravines that split through the massive irregularity of the mountains to engaging in unsettling reflections and musings on the business and problems of the plant.

In an undefined way, probably related to his despair over the population explosion which was cascading across the entire front range of the mountains, Pitkin felt sheltered by the rock outcropping which tracked the highway and rose like a great natural wall, shielding his eyes from the sprawling suburbs of Denver lying to the east. Looking west, toward the mountains, he could study the small, inconstant range of hills which bumped along the feet of the sharply rising mountains. They had become as familiar to him as they were to the ranchers who had resisted the lucrative offers of developers and continued, instead, to run cattle in the pastureland maze of rocks, gullies, and crosscutting dry creek bottoms.

Given his strong preference for a view of the open countryside, Pitkin could never really understand why the appearance of the plant, as he topped the edge of the high flats, always captured and held his attention. The indistinct, clustered buildings were, from a distance, simply an anomalous industrial silhouette almost lost amid the sweep of the grassland. Pitkin remembered how, on cold winter mornings, he could immediately note the location of the plant by the stark white plume from the heating building. The steam would sometimes rise into the blue sky like a giant exclamation mark whose period was the flattened outline of the facility itself.

Now, however, the warmth of recent spring days had brought a new intensity of color to the prairie, and the plant was accentuated, both by the sky and by the face of the wide plateau. The complex was surrounded by a soft carpet of natural grass, green and fresh in the cool morning. Above the earth, like a painted backdrop, the bright predawn sky outlined the water tower

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and vent stacks which rose from the clutter of buildings and began to assume individual forms and shapes as he drew ever closer.

For the next few minutes, the whole structured assembly seemed to drift slowly to his right as Pitkin followed the highway, and, for a time, it seemed that he would pass the plant completely. Then, at the last moment, the intersecting access road appeared, and he slowed for the turn. Wheeling his battered vehicle through a ninety-degree turn, Pitkin came into a direct line with the plant. The road also led him straight toward the early morning sun which was just now rising directly behind the plant and burning with a golden, red fire in the heart of the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons facility.

Pitkin quickly shaded his eyes with his hand and squinted down the long road toward the security gate. As he approached the high chain link fence and the guard station, which intercepted the roadway, Pitkin looked for refuge from the glare in the long irregular shadows, which etched dark lines across the grounds. He saw temporary relief ahead in the form of a long slender thread where a vent stack stood against the light. As he drove forward, the shadow darted down the very center of the road and neatly speared the Jeep, laying a dark mantle over his eyes.

"Good morning, Pitkin," nodded uniformed, badged and armed Henry Niwot. "It's pretty early for you to be running late isn't it?"

"I'd agree that it's a bit early, but what makes you think I'm late?" Then, before the guard could speak, Pitkin answered his own question. "They've been calling down here from the office asking if I've checked through?"

"Easily half a dozen times," nodded Niwot. "I'd say you've been expected for at least an hour."

Despite the fact that he was Chief of Security at the plant and obviously knew the Deputy Director, Niwot examined Pitkin's government identification badge with official deliberation and looked from the tiny picture to the live model carefully. It was evident the practices of security had become habit and routine in his life.

"I have a feeling that the whole day is going to be like this," said Pitkin. "I guess all schedules are out the window today, mine especially. But what brings you down to the gate, Henry?"

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Niwot shook his head woefully, "I'm trying to get things set up for the herd of reporters you invited out here. As a matter of fact, we've called in a couple of extra men and I'm giving them some pointers on how to deal with a bunch of smart mouth media types. Say, Pitkin, nobody passed the word to security on when this horde will descend on us. Somebody in administration really screwed up again." Catching himself, he quickly added, "I didn't mean you or your folks, Pitkin."

Pitkin waved the apologetic correction aside. "I know exactly what you mean, Henry, and you're right. Things got pretty disorganized awfully fast yesterday. But the word on the press conference is that it's scheduled to begin at ten o'clock, but I expect we'll have some of our press friends coming in quite a bit earlier. Our newest radiation episode is going to be front page news for a few days, and things are bound to be hectic for a while. Smiling broadly, he added, "I even had to postpone a fishing trip with my son today. From his point of view, this place is an unmitigated disaster."

The security chief was relieved by the assurance that he had not offended Pitkin, whom he and the guard force looked upon as a sympathetic and understanding friend in the highest echelon of the plant's administration. "Sounds to me like that boy has got more sense than any of us. I hope things settle down soon so the two of you can get after those trout before the tourists catch 'em all." Stepping back, he gave a short wave of his hand and Pitkin eased out the clutch of his venerable Jeep and rolled off toward the administration building.

The United States Department of Energy's plutonium processing facility at Rocky Flats was thoroughly federal. It was neatly tiered in structure; it wallowed in regulations and directives, and it thrived on rumors. Any discordant report was always magnified, and any news tremor, however slight, was almost certain to create bureaucratic shock waves which would be amplified by bureaucratic minds. Such a predictable event-response pattern served to prove the rule that, in the rooms and hallways of government, the echo swallows its origin, and, thus grotesquely bloated, presents itself as the truth. Since nearly all federalphiles are programmed to believe in such distorted truths, there are precious few honest skeptics in government. Where they do exist, they are the natural centers of contention, covertly

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admired by those in the ranks and openly despised by most in positions of authority.

Pitkin Waay was just such a skeptic, but one whose philosophical understanding of the system had insulated him from much that was trivial and humbug in the bureaucracy. His was a bemused tolerance for the overreactions of the lined up, organized, numbered, and by-the-book federal workers.

Pitkin had also learned to listen selectively; bureaucratic living encouraged it, and his particular office situation made it a condition of survival. He was practicing the art as he went through the routine of arriving at his office. However, there were others who were equally skilled in not being ignored, especially when the echoes they listened to were sufficiently compelling.

"Doctor Waay."

Pitkin kept walking.

"Doctor Waay, we've been looking for you everywhere."

He nodded but kept walking.

The call became sharper and more insistent. "Sir! Mister Chase is waiting for you in his office."

That slowed him a bit.

Seeing she had caught his attention, an emphatic Etta Westridge continued in her most severe and official tone. "He's asked where you were at least a half dozen times in the last hour. And, Dr. Waay, he's been yelling again."

As Pitkin sighed and turned from his own door toward the adjoining door of the plant director, the secretary, yellow pencil jammed into her tightly curled hair, continued her rapid-fire monologue. "Now there isn't any excuse for that, sir. We're all patient and respectful with him, but he shouldn't be loud with the staff. I believe it's your responsibility to speak to him."

Having been thus advised of his duties, Pitkin forbore any comment whatever. He opened the door of the Director's office and, with an ambivalent sigh, left the imperative Ms. Westridge for a meeting with Hugo Chase.

In contrast to Pitkin who was tall and loosely built, Hugo Chase was a block, a short, compact, square block. The disparity between the two men did not end there. Pitkin's rangy frame was characteristically draped with casual clothes, usually Levis and decorum shattering plaid shirts, while Hugo was a round man's fashion plate. Even the most imaginative iconoclasts among the

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plant's work force could not envision the Director without his suit coat and neatly drawn tie.

The differences between the two men went beyond the mere matter of appearance and persisted in their attitudes, their behavior, and in the reconciliations each had made with his surroundings. While Hugo Chase's world seemed to be the plant with its orderly and logical layout and its planned and routine functions, Pitkin Waay's world only included the plant.

Chase, the Director, prided himself on the precision of the lathes which, enclosed in their glass-metal glove boxes, worked the dull gray plutonium into the classified shapes and configurations suitable for use in nuclear weapons. Waay, who probably knew as much about plutonium as any other living being, recognized the need for the work and the precautions in performing it, but decried the process as dehumanizing and found irony in the fact that twentieth century science had managed to produce, in arresting quantity, material that, instead of enriching man, threatened his very existence.

Chase, the organizer, accepted without reservation the rationale for the work itself. To him, weapons, nuclear weapons, were a logical development of science. The fact that science had become both the benefactor and the organizing theme of society troubled him not at all. Pitkin Waay, who felt ill-at-ease in being organized by a system which had far more questions than answers, was philosophically skeptical of his own technology and of its allure which, in the aggregate, seemed to him to be encroaching with a machinelike sterility upon the more humane accommodations of people to society.

The Director was satisfied that the plant presented no threat to its foothills environment, nor to the people of Colorado. The Deputy secretly, and sometimes openly, wished the facility had been built somewhere else.

Chase, whose fortress mentality caused him to live in virtual isolation, fumed with contempt for detractors who had called the facility "a radiation time bomb" waiting to explode and spew its contamination into the air. Waay, who, more often than Chase, dealt with the public and the media, understood the concerns of the thoughtful critics and sometimes found himself listening to them with something more than governmental politeness.

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Given the differences and the contrasts, it was remarkable that the two men had been able to develop a working relationship that, while not warm, was comfortable and firm. Its success stemmed from the fact that the professional alliance was based upon fundamental needs.

Chase, for the stability of his efficient operations, needed the strongest possible scientific presence at the plant. Beyond efficiency, Chase needed to operate in the contentious arena of local and national politics where Rocky Flats was a focal point in the continuing debate over environmental safety and the emerging struggle over national defense issues. In all arguments, on both issues, the articulate competence of Pitkin Waay was indispensable.

For Pitkin, the challenge of radiation physics, with its demanding intricacies, was a refuge. His questioning intellect was frustrated by the contradictions of a changing society, and the more he questioned himself and tried to balance the costs and risks of nuclear technology and nuclear weaponry, the more profound became his uncertainty. Thus the plant was, in one sense at least, an escape, but paradoxically, it was also the source of his quandary.

Given, then, a disruption, a disquieting event, it was predictable that the reactions of Pitkin Waay and Hugo Chase would be different. It might also be expected that the official reaction, the immutable exposed front of the government, would find its direction in the interaction of the Director with his deputy.

"Dammit, Pitkin, this is the last thing we needed. The timing couldn't have been worse," Hugo began the moment Pitkin walked in the door. The Director stood immediately and began waving his arms, first one then the other. His voice rose to a near shout, "Authorization hearings for us are coming up next week. With this," pointing to the news story, "our fine friends in Congress will start talking about dismantlement just like they did last year." He closed his outburst with a grand sweep of his hands over the desktop as if he was calling it safe in a great wooden slide to finality.

Chase's unmistakable reference was to a copy of the Denver Post, which lay, with its front page turned up, displaying a traditional red headline. The sixty-point type jeered at them.

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PLUTONIUM PLANT PLANTS PLUTONIUM

Inset below the lead paragraph of the accompanying story was a three-column picture of a shovel amid a small pile of loose dirt. Some of the dirt had obviously been soaked, and a very perceptible black stains blotched the otherwise dry soil. The line under the picture was in thick boldface: **ROCKY FLATS DIGS PU**

Reading aloud, Pitkin smiled. "You have to admire the alliteration in the headline, and the picture caption isn't bad either."

"Sure, Pitkin," scolded Hugo, "you just keep on admiring those media bastards, and we'll both be looking for work."

"Easy, Hugo," soothed Pitkin. "We both knew this was coming from the minute it happened yesterday. It doesn't solve our problem to damn the press. They've got a job to do the same as everyone else."

"They sure did a job all right," said Hugo as he sank heavily back into his oversized leather chair. "Have you read this?" he asked, noting that Pitkin was standing by the desk looking down at the newspaper.

"As a matter of fact, I haven't. I'd promised Breck that we'd go fishing the rest of the week. Then this came up, and I had to spend an hour this morning trying to reschedule the whole thing and making arrangements for him to spend some time with Cope."

Hugo was only vaguely familiar with Pitkin's family. "Cope, that's the boy's grandfather?"

"No," Pitkin corrected, "Cope is a friend of the family." Then he added softly, as much to himself as to Hugo, "The kind of friend they stopped making a long time ago. The type who somehow has an uncomfortable understanding of things we feel are so damned cleverly incomprehensible." Shaking off the thought, Pitkin looked at Hugo, "I remember now that you've met him. Last year he came to the plant with me, and I introduced you."

Hugo had an unpleasant and hazy recollection of a nasty old man who had called him and the plant some unseemly names. He quickly decided it was not a subject to be pursued. "Yes, of course. But all isn't lost. I expect that you can fish anytime. The reservoir is close and ..." "Reservoir?" The incredulous

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note in the fly fisherman's voice caught Hugo up short. Pitkin was on the verge of launching into an indignant explanation of exactly how unthinkable it would be to attempt using a fly rod on an over-fished city reservoir, but he realized that Hugo had been making an honest attempt to express some sympathy for his problem with Breck. With a shrug he looked back down at the Denver Post.

Abandoning his attempt at being the understanding director, Hugo returned to the matter at hand. "Read it. Read the damn thing," he said snatching up the paper and thrusting it into Pitkin's hands.

Pitkin accepted the offer and, to the accompaniment of a frown from the ever-neat Hugo, sat in a side chair and tilted back against the wall while propping a foot on the edge of the nearby polished coffee table.

DENVER: Barrels containing plutonium contaminated oil were unexpectedly unearthed today during a government soil testing demonstration at the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons production facility northwest of Denver. An unknown quantity of radioactive oil from a corroded barrel leaked onto the open ground before its contents were identified and before alarmed plant officials could evacuate the area.

First signs of radioactivity appeared when a shovel, wielded by plant Director Hugo Chase, broke through a rusty barrel lying just below the surface of the ground. Additional barrels were being uncovered by plant workers when a plutonium-sensing instrument began signaling radiation. All work was discontinued, the site was cleared of visitors, and the observers were taken to a monitoring station and checked for contamination.

Chase had announced the soil-testing program over a month ago. He promised that it would provide conclusive evidence that the land surrounding Rocky Flats is well within acceptable limits for radiation. Critics of the facility have long argued that plutonium has escaped from the plant and has, over the years, accumulated to a hazardous level.

Deputy Director Pitkin Waay gave strong assurances that no one at the demonstration had received a measurable dose of the deadly radiation. Waay told reporters the barrels would be constantly monitored. He also said immediate steps would be taken to prevent further leakage of the contaminated oil.

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Waay, an expert on plutonium processing, admitted he had been surprised by the presence of the barrels and advised reporters the problem had what he termed "a hazard potential."

Plant officials have scheduled a press briefing for tomorrow morning. Further details on this latest Rocky Flats radiation miscue will be sought at that time.

One unidentified authority said the plutonium release from the barrel deposit could be the largest and most significant radiation threat to the area since the plutonium fires at the plant over twenty years ago. At that time, plutonium releases continued for three days before they were brought under control.

Pitkin folded the paper and tossed it back onto Hugo's desk. Locking his fingers behind his head, Pitkin stretched back in his tilted chair. "It seems pretty straightforward to me," he said. "Actually, I get the impression they were pretty easy on us."

"Easy?" snapped Hugo. "How in the hell, do you read that as being anything but an invitation to every sign carrying, soft headed radical in the state to grab a sign and hit the highway out there?"

Pitkin chose his words carefully. He sensed that Hugo was building up to another tirade against the outside world. Having heard the Director's vigorous and loud editorial on protest marchers and antinuclear critics in all its variations, he wanted to avoid hearing it again this morning. "Hugo, every one of the press people out there yesterday knew what we were doing. We were dishing up pure and simple propaganda about the purity of our operation. It was a setup and they knew it. The fact they even attended was a surprise to me. Then our whole media event blew up in our faces. It would have been easy for them to turn us into more of a laughing stock than they did. I read that story as the Post holding fire and giving us a chance to clear ourselves."

Hugo found little in Pitkin's words that he could directly dispute. The soil sampling had in fact been an orchestrated event designed to dampen criticism of the plant. Hoping to give the plant a new lease on life in the face of continuing demands that it be closed, Hugo himself had been an eager participant in the planning and in the execution of the ill-fated public display. Never in the darkest corner of his worst nightmare had Hugo thought of encountering hidden barrels of contaminated machine oil. It had

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been a genuine surprise and a media disaster. It now remained for the plant manager to answer to the public.

"Pitkin, have you thought of any explanation for those damn barrels? How could we not have a record of them? If I didn't know better I'd say they were planted there."

"I hate to mention it, Hugo, but you selected the sampling points yourself."

"General locations, Pitkin. I only looked at our plant map and said, 'Here, here, and here.' Walking out there and sticking a shovel in the ground at that very spot was a random act, a one in million chance."

Hugo threw up his pudgy arms as if appealing to the heavens for an explanation of why statistical probabilities had turned against him personally. Failing that, Hugo would have settled for a miraculous purging from his mind of the nightmare memory of the previous day's unfortunate surprise.

"I'll have to hand it to you, Hugo," said Pitkin, unable to resist the opening, "When they handed you the shovel, you really put your foot into it."

Ignoring the jibe, Hugo asked, "Have you been able to get any kind of assessment of the situation we're dealing with out there?"

"Not really," answered Pitkin. "Obviously, our first concern was to get the area defined. Last night before I left, we managed to get plastic over what we believe to be the whole pit, but I haven't talked to anyone yet this morning."

"Then, we still don't know just how large the pit is, how many barrels there are or how hot it really is?"

"No, I can't say, but we ought to have some rough numbers for you by noon."

"Look, Pitkin, I know you and some of your people were up half the night with this thing and I know it's slow going, but we've got that ten o'clock press conference. We're going to need something more than promises of having information later. Those media pals of yours won't settle for anything less than specific radiation levels and a statement of the size of the contaminated area."

Recognizing the fact that Hugo would never shed the conviction his deputy was something of a media sympathizer and

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thus borderline subversive, Pitkin ignored the remark about his "pals" and confined himself to the problem at hand.

"Remember these are rough guesses, Hugo. We believe the whole area is between one hundred and one hundred and fifty square meters. That's the entire pit. There may be leakage we haven't found yet, but the one hot spot we know about is where you were digging. Last night it was showing 920 d/m/g. That's the hottest spot, but it's only a few square meters. Over a larger area it averages down to 250 to 300 d/m/g's"

"Jeez," breathed Hugo, "that's pretty hot. Are you sure you have it all covered?"

"Yes, it's covered. With that and the sprinklers, I'm pretty sure we've got the immediate problem under control."

"Sprinklers?" asked Hugo sharply.

"It's pretty dry around there and that means dust," explained Pitkin. "It's purely a precaution, but it seemed like a good idea to avoid any possibility of wind dispersion. I'd bet there's not even a nervous jump of a counter needle anywhere except at our hot spot, but it doesn't cost anything to be a little extra careful."

"I know all that," said Hugo holding his palm up and turning his head to one side as if trying to avoid hearing about sprinklers and water, "but running water out there could be as bad as wind. If we get erosion, it'll concentrate the stuff."

Pitkin was very much aware of Hugo's sensitivity to the subject of plutonium concentrations by way of erosion. A few years earlier, the State of Colorado and the nearby City of Broomfield had collected enough evidence to compel Hugo to publicly admit that detectable amounts of plutonium had been deposited in Great Western Reservoir, the city's water supply. The plutonium had been carried from the plant to the lake by a small stream, which ran through the federal property and carried runoff from the flats directly into the Broomfield reservoir. Despite assurances that the plutonium residues were well within acceptable safety limits and that even those trace amounts had settled in the muddy bottom of the lake where they would probably never be removed, the public had been outraged. There had been demands the reservoir be drained, and only the most iron clad guarantees by the highest officials in Washington D.C. that the situation would

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be monitored had deterred the massive expense and adverse spectacle of a reservoir draining and earth removal exercise.

The Broomfield experience had given rise to intensive picketing and a barrage of newspaper editorials calling for closure of the plant. A congressional investigating committee had naturally jumped at the publicity opportunity and had held hearings in Broomfield, in Denver, and at Rocky Flats itself. As usual, however, the committee's attention span held only as long as the media kept the story on the front page and in the television lead-ins.

Finally, the heaviest thunder of the public storm had abated and, as one wag observed, "The glow faded from the radiation story." More extreme voices continued to hurl charges and make claims about the hated nuclear work and real and imagined human effects of plant activity. But, wiser critics were content to wait for another day. They knew the radiation hazards inherent in plutonium coupled with the problems of handling and containing the potent metal would outlast the superficial interest of politicians. The plant was vulnerable, and there would be other opportunities.

Hugo Chase had held his job only through some adroit maneuvering and by calling upon some old and powerful friends in the nuclear weapons establishment. Pitkin knew, however, that Hugo could not survive another high visibility incident involving radiation danger.

Having no desire to inflame Hugo, he made only an offhand response to the Director's concern over the sprinkling. "I don't really believe that's a serious problem, Hugo. We're only keeping it damp. No one's going to ask about it, but if they do, you can tell them it's strictly precautionary."

Hugo accepted the idea and repeated it, as though settling it in his mind, "I agree. We don't see any need to mention it at all. As you say, it's simply a safety measure, sort of routine."

Hugo's eager acceptance of the idea of downplaying the sprinkling operation could have been expected. His first line approach to the public in general, and more particularly to the media and critics of the plant, was to give out as little information as possible. That was directly inconsistent with the view of Pitkin Waay, and the divergence of opinion had led them into an

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awkward and ill-fitting pattern of responding to public requests for information.

"In that case it would be best if you took on some of the questions about containment," suggested Pitkin. "I could stand the variation in what the Post has called our 'dodge, step, and duck' routine."

"I may just do that, but don't get any ideas about making yourself scarce around ten o'clock."

The Director insisted that Pitkin attend every press briefing. The argument given for the standing order was that Pitkin's expertise had to be on call to avoid the spread of misinformation about the technical aspects of the plant's operation. That element of meetings with the press, although not to Pitkin's liking, was manageable for him.

It was Hugo's penchant for playing on Pitkin's scientific background, which gave rise to the Deputy's resistance. At least that was the conscious reason Pitkin assigned for his grudging cooperation. Had he permitted himself to think about it, he would perhaps have agreed he simply didn't relish attempting to defend, through evasion, things that he felt cried, not for defense, but explanation. "I'll be there, but let's go easy with your 'Doctor Waay, the foremost expert in the characteristics of plutonium' line."

"Now what the hell is that supposed to mean?" flared Hugo, his face beginning to redden.

"Just don't plaster this unfortunate creature of ours with cosmetics, Hugo. Play it straight. That's all," shrugged Pitkin, not wishing to pursue the long-standing debate, which always was loud, but seldom enlightening.

"Okay, okay," waved the Director impatiently, "I just didn't like hearing about water being applied to the area. If you think it's necessary, that's good enough for me."

"Not necessary, only cautionary. It's crude. It's interim, but for a while, it'll work."

Abandoning the subject of sprinkling for one that was growing more immediate and demanding, the Director returned to the problem of explaining the embarrassing lack of information about the stash of barrels.

"Documentation is the key to this press conference, Pitkin. No matter how thin or indirect, we need to turn up a record, an

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entry, some explanation of how and why those barrels were buried out there."

"Then you've found nothing?"

Hugo lapsed into head shaking and mutterings. "No. No record. Nothing. We invite the eyes and ears of the whole state into the compound and then turn up something we can't even begin to explain. I've had Etta and her crew searching almost all night. She knows it's priority, and, if anything was to be found, she'd probably have turned it up by now."

"There are a lot of files out there, Hugo. It's going to take a long time to find anything. It's probably some ledger entry or note in the back of a logbook. I'd guess we're talking about weeks to find it."

"We've got to keep after it though," insisted Hugo. "I can't promise to produce something if it's not there, but I don't want to admit we can't find something either. I expect we'll catch hot red hell either way."

Slamming his fist against the desktop in frustration, the plant's chief officer cried out against the inevitability of onrushing events. "This plant is going to become a target again. Every cynic and every protester who can walk will soon be after us with the volume on ten and the tone on shrill. Mark my words, Pitkin, the cry will go up to dismantle this place. It'll be a replay, a damned bloody replay. By God, if I didn't believe that this place was a vital part of our national defense program, I'd be the first to campaign to shut it down." With a grim smile he went on, "You know, I'd like to shut this place down and toss the keys in their pious faces. Tell `em it's going to be hot for the next twenty four centuries and they can decide what to do with it."

"That's not the type of comment I would recommend for the press briefing," smiled Pitkin. Then he added, "I guess I'd agree with you that the big Casino for today is some record entry of the barrel pit. It is funny nobody confesses to knowing anything about it. I've been here for almost fifteen years and Harvey has been here twenty-five, and neither of us can think of anything which would account for the damn things. My hunch is that someone in the shipping department simply screwed up, probably during one of those periods we were running triple shifts. Things were pretty hectic, and they got behind in getting that stuff loaded and off to Idaho. Then some foreman got tired of working around

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it, and simply took a front-end loader and cleared the shipping dock. If that's the case, our bureaucratic system will have conveniently and officially forgotten what was a very minor and probably midnight event."

"Well, don't forget that you're part of the system, Pitkin."

"Unfortunately for my psyche, that's true, and today I need someone to tell me why I am. Maybe it's just my finely tuned sense of humor that keeps me hanging around this place."

"I fail to find anything humorous about any of this," growled Hugo jabbing his finger at the Post.

"To paraphrase Jerome Lee's fictional Clarence Darrow, 'When you lose your power to laugh, you lose your power to think straight,' Hugo. Thinking back, I almost feel guilty not having paid to see that gusher of ours begin to spurt up from our own little radioactive strategic petroleum reserve. Then came the great press corps withdrawal. That should have pleased you, the media in disarray and in retreat."

"Some fun," glowered Hugo who himself had been seen to join in the hasty and general removal.

"Speaking again of the gentlemen and gentlewomen of the press," said Pitkin, "given time to reflect on yesterday's events, they're sure to be here today with some hard questions about contamination. We did check their shoes and clothing and determined they hadn't picked up anything, but today we can count on questions about inhalation and lung burdens."

"Those questions will just have to be deflected somehow. I don't believe there's anything we could say which would satisfy them entirely. Our answers should be reassurances. The press should be made to understand that as soon as we have definitive answers and after we have prepared a study of the problem, they will be advised." "Hugo," said Pitkin quietly, "that's standard government crap, and I can tell you now, nobody will buy it. Studies are a plague on the honest taxpayers of this nation. Most of them are cut and paste jobs that cost a bundle and say only that more studies are needed. Promises to 'advise' the people are dilatory bunk.

"Giving the small table a shove with the pointed toe of his cowboy boot, Pitkin stood up and jammed his hands in his pockets. "We've been through this too many times, and there's nothing to be gained by going over it again. I've had it with

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making up strategies for dealing with the public. Dammit, Hugo, we're the public. When we hold back on the press, we're cheating ourselves and, each time we do that, we get in a little bit deeper and it gets harder to say anything at all. We're ridiculed and despised and mostly it's because we spend too much time figuring out how not to tell the entire truth. We've forgotten that the people have a right to know what their public servants are doing." Pitkin paused, angry at himself for doing exactly what he didn't want to do, restating arguments made over and over again with his superior. Determined to give the matter some finality, he stated flatly, "We play it straight, Hugo, or you play it alone."

Hugo Chase was close to exploding past any point of reconciliation. His face had become livid, and he had picked up the offending newspaper, which his pudgy hands were twisting into a tightly rolled club. As Pitkin stopped speaking, Hugo sprang from his chair and with a savage sweep of his arm he slammed the rolled paper onto the desk with a furious slap.

The suddenness of the act surprised Pitkin, but its effect on Hugo was far greater. At first startled and then chagrined, he opened his mouth as if to speak, then clamped his lips together in a tight line suppressing what may have been a curse or a threat that he knew he would later regret. His eyes met Pitkin's level stare for an instant. He then spun around and presented his back to his deputy.

"All right, Pitkin, have it your way, but all this straight talk that's so precious will have to come from you." Turning again to face Pitkin, he continued beyond the immediate issue of the possible radiation exposure, "Maybe I'm nailed too tightly to the book, maybe I'm afraid, or maybe I just don't know any other way, but I simply cannot go out there and somehow undertake some kind of revelation for the media. I ask only that you choose your words carefully and try to remember that despite all the trappings of the system you so thoroughly despise, we are engaged in work vital to this nation. If there was another way of maintaining the shred of sanity, or call it fear, which keeps the world from blowing itself apart, I'd be the first to accept it. But pure damnation for its own sake has never solved a problem and never will. Until I hear a constructive and sensible alternative to building nuclear weapons, one which will guarantee the survival of this nation, I'm willing to be a target, but I reserve the right to resist extreme and

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reckless criticism, and I will not apologize for this plant or the program it helps execute."

Listening to Hugo's words, Pitkin realized he was seeing a dimension of the man he had never before thought to exist. The blocky, little Director's final words, spoken with quiet dignity and simplicity, were more compelling than if they had been hammered into a tirade and hurled at him.

Before Pitkin could speak and almost as if her entrance were the well timed walk on of an accomplished actress, Etta Westridge, who Pitkin humorously believed to be the real manager of Rocky Flats, walked in and flatly announced, "Mr. Chase, some reporters have already arrived at the east gate. They're hours too early, but they say they're from a network and claim they need pictures and background material. Shall I tell the guard to hold them?"

Shaking his head and forcing himself to adapt to this new information, Hugo sputtered, "Network? Oh, no. Better have them brought directly in. Security will have to escort them, of course."

"Of course," she echoed. "Shall we take them to the conference room?"

"Why, yes. The conference room, Etta," agreed Hugo.

"I don't believe it will hold all of these and the others who will be coming later, sir. Would you prefer the lunch room?" She asked the question as though oblivious to the fact that she had just suggested, and the Director had agreed to, the conference room.

From his sidelong glance and silent plea for direction from his deputy, Chase received only a "Don't ask me," shrug. Yielding to his secretary's apparent preference, he agreed, "Put them in the lunchroom, Etta. That will do fine."

"Well, if you want the conference room, sir, we may be able to squeeze in a few more chairs..." She trailed off knowing what would come. "Anywhere, Etta, anywhere. Just put them where there is room, and then tell me where they are."

"Will there be slides, Mr. Chase? If there are, we'll have to make do with the conference room. You remember, sir, the briefing for the Senate Committee? We started in the lunchroom, but had to move to the conference room. The Chairman was quite upset that we couldn't get it dark enough to see your slides."

By this time, Pitkin was grinning openly and being very careful to say nothing. He knew from past experience that the

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briefing would be wherever Etta Westridge wanted it, but before she would announce her decision, Hugo Chase would be pleading with her to do whatever she wanted. Once armed with the Director's approval and wearing his authority like a blazing shield, she would produce results with a chilling efficiency.

"No slides, Etta. No formal presentation or statements. Just questions, lots of questions. Please take the newsmen wherever you think most appropriate." Waving surrendered, he added, "Make the proper arrangements, a regular press briefing just like we've had before."

"Just as you say, Mister Chase."

As she turned to leave, Hugo foolishly made a last futile attempt to inject one of his ideas into her arrangements. "If it's possible, perhaps we should have coffee set up for them."

With the kind of deference usually reserved for the aged and infirm, she intoned ominously, "I'll certainly try, sir, but you know how things are in the cafeteria."

No, he most certainly did not know how things were in the cafeteria. He was not going to ask. She knew that. Pitkin knew it, and they all realized that only by not speaking further could Hugo be forgiven his transgression of suggesting something which in all probability she, with her awesome efficiency, had already done.

"Well, ah.... certainly, Etta. If possible, fine. If not, that will be fine, too."

Having reduced Hugo to the status of mere boss, she turned and, with a "Thank you, sir," swept through the door and off stage.

What could be said about Etta had already been said enough times that Pitkin's hearty guffaw and Chase's "damn" were sufficient to say it all again. However, her performance had cleared away much of the tension, and finally, even Hugo relaxed a bit and managed a grudging smile.

"You know, Pitkin, some day that woman is going to go too far. When she does, I'm going to take those damned sequined glasses and that cat-bed wig of hers and drop them in the nearest shredder." The threat was entirely a rhetorical flourish and had, like other comments about Etta, been reduced to a cliché by its repetition over the years of her reign.

"That's what you get for yelling at the staff this morning," admonished Pitkin. "But, by willikers, I have to hand it to you,

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Hugo, you've got the right idea. Now, if you can figure out a way of doing all that, let me know. I'll back you a thousand percent. Yes, sir, I'll be right behind you. Count on it."

Pitkin's spoofing tone provoked a chuckle from Hugo who responded in kind. "I just know you will, Pitkin. You have such a way with Etta, perhaps I should simply transfer her to your staff and the two of you could work more closely together."

"That'll be the day you start looking for a new deputy to clean up your damn barrel caches," laughed Pitkin.

"Speaking of barrels," sighed Hugo, "would it be possible to check that hot spot with your radiation control group again before our press briefing?"

"I'll do what I can and get back to you," said Pitkin turning toward the door.

"One more thing, Pitkin."

The Deputy turned and, without speaking, waited.

"If you get a minute, check with Etta and her people to see if they might have found anything in the files, anything, a map, a note, a log book entry. I confess that I forgot to ask her while she was here, but even if I'd remembered, I wouldn't have had the stomach to try and pry anything out of her."

"I'll ask, but when she turns anything up, I suspect we'll hear about it, fortissimo." With a wave of his hand he agreed to meet Hugo a few minutes before the press conference in the "lunchroom, the conference room...wherever."

Hurrying through the hallway and the increasingly crowded reception area, Pitkin checked through the security door to the outer yard. He crossed the parking area to the garage, and seeing that the shop foreman was busy with some welding equipment, scrawled his name on the vehicle sign-out sheet. He stepped to the door of a pea green Ford pickup and thumped the hood. "Okay, Poudre?" he yelled.

The short, heavily moustached foreman looked up, nodded and called out, "Bring it back in one piece. It ain't no damn Jeep."

"A body'd think I broke one of his precious damn springs every day," Pitkin intoned with mocking innocence. As he pulled off the shop pavement, Pitkin slipped the clutch ever so slightly. It was just enough to squeak the tires. He was rewarded with the

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image of Poudre scowling into the rear view mirror, calling out his familiar irritation at the "pesky damn scientists."

The friendly argument had been going on for years. Poudre had labeled Pitkin a reckless driver, and Pitkin, in turn, constantly badgered the foreman about the inadequacy of his repair of the government vehicles assigned to the plant. The broken spring Poudre complained about had been a result of one of Pitkin's hurried night trips between the plant and the barrel pit during the frantic efforts to control the plutonium release from the contaminated oil. Revisiting the site in the broad light of day, knowing the worst of the spill had been contained, he was willing to take a bit more time and put Poudre's General Services pickup to less risk. Still, it would have been uncharacteristic for Pitkin to pass an opportunity of continuing his running by-play with the shop foreman.

It was a long mile to the southeast quadrant of the facility. Outside the high chain link fence there were no roads and only a carpet of prairie grass before him. Pitkin drove carefully avoiding the worst of the little gullies that crisscrossed his path. He took a keen interest in the condition of the grassland, noting how years of its not having been grazed had created a cattleman's dream. The thick buffalo grass had reasserted itself and was thriving in a nearly natural state.

Yet, Pitkin knew that grazing the land was out of the question because the plutonium, which contaminated the soil, would also be in the grass and would be ingested by cattle. Through the animals, the radioactive metal would enter the food chain. Neighboring ranchers had already expressed serious concern about the possible eventual contamination of their pasturelands, and their fears were not without some scientific basis. The spread of released plutonium had, in fact, reached and, in some cases, exceeded the plant's legal perimeter. Nearing the barbed wire fence that marched up and down the east boundary of the federal land, Pitkin slowed and corrected his course to put himself on a direct line with the little cluster of vehicles and men situated on a small rise. The group of workers was in an area overlooking a sharply descending slope which fell away in a southeasterly direction. He stopped the pickup near the other government vehicles randomly parked around a large black plastic

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cover, which had been framed and secured on its edges by closely spaced cinder blocks.

On the far side of the covered ground, a worker was holding the end of a red hose and waving its sprinkling nozzle slowly and deliberately back and forth. The finer part of the almost invisible spray drifted slowly toward the black shroud creating a dazzle of rainbows over the somber and mysterious burial ground.

Above the glinting spectra of color, Pitkin could see sunlight flooding over the City of Denver. The air was uncharacteristically clear, and, despite the fact that the central city was fifteen miles away, he could see the jutting skyscrapers in startling detail. They glistened, each competing with the other and claiming to be the most lustrous of all. Beyond the downtown area, he could see where the famed Cherry Creek wound its way along, oblivious to the development around it and mischievously confounding the symmetrical inclinations of planners. Still farther to the south and east, he could trace the direction of Interstate 25 by the line of ultramodern brick and glass mushrooms which had sprung up in the fertile soil of energy and technology. Surrounding it all was the unending carpet of houses and apartments stretching to the horizon and apparently beyond.

As he stared at the city, Pitkin realized that the rush hour would now be well underway. The crush of cars would be filling the inbound streets, each vehicle operated by an individual whose identity would be surrendered, for a time, to a mass impulse to hurry, to hurry impassively and implacably with the long term dreams of his life compressed by the immediate goal of simply getting to work.

It was a pattern in which he found no satisfaction. The close, intense matter of traffic was something of a mystery to Pitkin. The impulse in people to be together, to be near others, had to be strong indeed to make them endure the madness of the early morning freeways. He had often wondered why the combination of driver, car, and highway system was not more fragile and more frequently shattered by some random act of neglect or carelessness than it was. Yet, such things did happen, and when they did, lives were changed. Of that he was certain.

With a scowl at the city and the yellow mist beginning to obscure the feet of the magnificently pretentious buildings, Pitkin

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climbed out of the pickup and approached the barrel deposit. Casting one last look at the city skyline, he noted that the man with the spray had moved to another area, and the rainbows had disappeared and fallen as droplets upon the sullen black plastic cover.

Pitkin found Harvey Flagler squatting down near a device used to detect the presence of plutonium. Flagler peered intently at the very nervous needle in the instrument. He muttered a bit and proceeded to make some notations on graph paper clamped to a battered clipboard. After a few minutes, Flagler rose with a grunt and leaned forward, massaging one of his knees.

"Damn thing's going to give out on me if I keep this up. These all night parties and the rush, rush is a young man's game, Pitkin."

"Well, I'm afraid this job is going to make us all old before our time, Harv," said Pitkin, falling in alongside as Flagler began walking toward another instrument a few yards away.

Of all the people who worked closely with Pitkin, Harvey Flagler was easily the least talkative. He had little use for those who were uncomfortable with silence and considered nervous prattle to be the sure sign of a character defect.

It was only after the two had stopped and squatted to read two more radiation counters that Flagler finally spoke, "Water from the sprinkler got into one of these buggers a while ago. I thought we really had a zinger. Needle was stuck off the mark." The technician made a few more notes on his paper before grunting a noncommittal, "Uh huh."

You're beginning to sound like my doctor, Harv. Always and forever hemming and hawing about something but never telling me why."

"That right?" said Flagler, unsmiling. After another moment of silence, he looked directly at Pitkin and added, "Well, I sure hope he knows something more interesting about you than I know about this trash pile."

"If you don't know something by now about this 'disaster,' as Hugo calls it, you're sure wasting a lot of the government's time poking around out here."

Flagler's leathery face broke into a grin. "Say, this thing really has old Hugo spinning hasn't it?"

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"Remember the Senate Committee two years ago?" asked Pitkin. "It was out here about the Broomfield reservoir. I'd say this was at least on a par. That was an argument over radiation levels in the bottom of a lake a couple of miles away. The whole thing was pretty nebulous. The radiation intensity was open to question and the story sort of dribbled out over two or three months. This time we dug up our own radiation on our own property in front of the assembled metropolitan press corps. Toss into that the fact the Senate authorization committee is taking up our budget next week."

"Jeez," whistled Flagler. "No wonder he's, pardon the expression, 'hot.'" Then, squinting at Pitkin and scratching the stubble on his chin he mused, "Yeah, Hugo is like that. This damn plant is important to him. No one can imagine him at the grocery store or fishing or home with a beer watchin' TV. Anything that interferes, he hates. He'd be stirred up all right."

Pitkin nodded absently, "Hugo puts a lot of himself into this place. I guess I admire him in a way. He's one of those rare people who really believe in what they're doing."

"I guess so," agreed Flagler. Then unexpectedly, "It's you, that I can't figure, Pitkin. You work long hours, very long hours. You work like a man who's tryin' to finish a job that's killing him. Maybe you're standing too close to the job, but seeing it from too far away."

Pitkin felt a slight flush of embarrassment at the appraisal so openly and unexpectedly delivered. "That's quite a speech, Harv. Either you've taken up psychology, or you've been spending too much time with old Cope. He's forever telling me that I'm crazy for building bombs when there's so much fishing to do."

"Cope's right. At least about not doing enough fishing. He told me the other day he'd finally got you to agree to take a couple of days off and go up to Routt Lake. Are you still going or are these damn barrels getting in the way?"

"I'm hoping I can still manage it. If I don't, I'll have to contend with Breck, and Cope'll be back at me, calling me a 'pizzen peddler.'"

"I know. He calls Hugo peddler numbers one and you peddler number three. He says there isn't anyone whose 'pizzen happy' enough to be number two to Hugo."

"Speaking of 'pizzen,' Harv, what have we got here?"

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"We're pretty short on anything spectacular, I'm afraid, but here, look for yourself." Flagler thrust the clipboard into Pitkin's hands and returned to scratching the stubble on his neck.

Pitkin's eyes raced down the columns of numbers, pausing briefly at random points before moving on. Tilting the board toward Flagler he asked, "Do you need this right now, Harv?" Noting the negative shake of Flagler's head, he tucked the board under his arm and shrugged, "Pretty nasty, but I don't believe it's a public calamity, just yet. There's a general increase around the barrel pit and one hot spot where we had our gusher. You agree?"

"You're the expert," answered Flagler, "I just read meters, but for what it's worth, I don't think we've got a radiation problem in this area that we can't handle."

Pitkin glanced quickly at him, registering the emphasis on the words "in this area." "Are you trying to tell me something, Harv?"

"Pitkin, yesterday and today were the first times I've seen any soil contamination readings for this area for three maybe four months. You know we monitor the whole reservation and have a routine for checking the air samplers, but have you looked at the ground accumulation logs recently?"

Pitkin's brow furrowed for a moment before he answered. "I'm not sure I follow you. I review them periodically, every three months in fact. Of course, I look at them incidentally when something like this happens. They're not very useful except for background information. Now, tell me why you ask."

"Got an hour? It's something you better look at yourself."

"I'm sorry to say I haven't, Harv. I've got that damn press briefing coming up, and I promised Hugo that I'd take another run at the files to look for some reference to our little dump here. Can it wait?"

"It'll keep," said Flagler with a shrug, "besides it may not be worth the time anyway."

Moments later, as Pitkin wheeled the pickup away from the barrel deposit, he saw Harvey Flagler standing alone staring into a thick green bound book. Pitkin hesitated and even slowed for a moment. Then he looked at his watch and shook off the

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thought. With a frustrated kick at the accelerator, he aimed the pickup back toward the impassive concrete buildings of the plant.

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CHAPTER TWO

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"Gentlemen, oh, yes, and Ladies, I do not have a prepared statement, but I would like to begin by welcoming you to Rocky Flats. I know most of you, of course. However, we do have some new faces here today. Some of your colleagues from the networks have joined you, and I want to be the first to welcome them to this facility. For the first time visitors, I should point out that our goal is to make as much information available as possible. There are naturally some areas of inquiry that are closed, but I assure you, they are narrowly limited, and they are closed only because of the legitimate demands of national security."

Cynics as suppressed sarcasm might have characterized the slight shuffling among the assembled reporters. It was only barely noticeable. In a more compressed atmosphere, such as the smaller, nearby conference room, it would have been decidedly more obvious, but in the spacious lunchroom, it quickly dissipated and a stranger to Rocky Flats press conferences would have passed it off as a sort of settling-in. It must have been that Hugo Chase did not notice the little titter, because he continued without interruption.

"Before taking your questions, let me introduce the men here at the table with me. On my left is my deputy, Doctor Pitkin Waay. Doctor Waay is recognized throughout the scientific community as an expert in the physical properties of plutonium. I might add that Doctor Waay is a native of Colorado. In fact, he grew up on a ranch only a few miles from here."

Inwardly, Pitkin flinched. "The home town boy crap won't sell this crowd, Hugo," he thought, "nor the heavyweights from Washington," he told himself, noting that the local contingent of reporters had indeed been swollen by the addition of some obviously high priced talent from the networks.

As he spoke of Pitkin's expertise, Director Chase may not have felt the sharp glance thrown up at him by his deputy. He may not have heard the accompanying sharp cough, but in any event, he turned in the opposite direction and continued.

"Also here with us is Mister Lamont Wellington, our public relations officer. Mister Wellington arranged this news briefing knowing that the soil sampling program on the property surrounding the facility would be of interest to you."

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"Sure he did," thought Pitkin. "He also was a big shaker in starting this whole damn soil sampling business. If he keeps relating to the public the way he has in the past, Hugo's nightmare of dismantlement may become a living fact."

Hugo was warming to his task; convinced of the truth of the old cliché that reporters were more interested in their stomachs than in news. "Mister Wellington has advised me that, following a question and answer period here, we will have a recess for some delicious hot rolls and coffee. After that, we will adjourn the formal press briefing for a motor tour through the area to allow you to see for yourselves some of the activities associated with the program. Mister Wellington will accompany you and will advise you when and at what point you may take photographs. Unfortunately, we cannot permit cameras in any building other than this one, and even here, in the administrative area, we have photo restrictions."

"Again, I would note the presence of some newcomers out there and accordingly offer a few further words for their use as background."

From the ranks of newsmen came an anonymous, "I thought you said you didn't have a statement, Hugo."

The quick flush of the Director's face was evidence to all who knew him that he was simply talking, perhaps with the hope of softening up what he sensed was an unfriendly and tougher than usual group. It occurred to Pitkin, who knew quite a bit about how his superior's mind worked, that Hugo was angling to provoke enough uninformed questions from among the out-of-townners to dilute the intense interest of the more sophisticated locals.

Hugo ignored the shouted jibe and plunged ahead with a recitation of facts about Rocky Flats. He described how the plant had been constructed in the early fifties by the Atomic Energy Commission and how it was only one link in the chain of nuclear weapons facilities spread throughout the United States. At that point, he recited the standard formulation that Rocky Flats had been assigned the mission of fashioning "critical components" for nuclear devices. Moving on, he painted a picture of the elaborate safety program, the concern for worker health and for the public well being. Hugo next launched into the statistics on how the economic stability of the surrounding communities was, in part,

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founded upon the employment of some three thousand skilled people at the plant, and how the federal government was a dependable employer whose presence was a note of stability in an otherwise volatile job market.

Sensing that toleration and politeness were turning into hostility, Hugo rushed through a canned explanation of the soil-sampling project. According to him, it had been undertaken merely to reassure the community at large that the land surrounding Rocky Flats was virtually free of radioactive contamination. He made it clear that the government's position in the long smoldering controversy over the location and operation of the plant in the Denver area was "under review." He suggested that the views of local officials on the subject were, admittedly, well intended, but technically misguided.

Finally, like a beleaguered warrior taking up his shield, Hugo jammed on the thick glasses he had been nervously cleaning and announced, "I'll take your questions gentlemen,... and ladies."

Hugo, sensitive to his obvious stumbling and his persistent failure to recognize the distaff side of the press corps, called on a young woman who had been glaring at him from the front row.

"Mister Chase, I'm Shelia Montrose and I assure you I'm a gainfully employed reporter. In fact you may have even seen me at one time or another in the past five years I have been reporting the evening news for KCOL TV." Ignoring the suppressed group chuckle that followed her cut at Hugo, she continued, "We all know that yesterday a deposit of barrels containing contaminated oil was discovered during your soil sampling demonstration. My question is twofold. First, what is the reason for radioactive oil being buried here at a weapons facility? Second, what type and how much radiation are we really talking about?"

"Well, Ms. Montrose, that may be a threefold question, but we'll allow it." Hugo's forced, "heh, heh," fell as flat as only forced humor can fall. The only one in the room who joined, or attempted to join, in the Director's little joke was Lamont Wellington. His ingratiating snigger served only to drive plant public relations down another fraction.

"To answer your first question, Ms. Montrose, it was indeed oil that was contained in the barrels. As you perhaps know, one of our functions here requires us to use lathes to

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machine metal parts. In such an operation the lathes are cooled and lubricated with special oils. That oil, once used, cannot be reused and has to be disposed of in a safe and environmentally acceptable manner. Our practice is to ship the oil to radioactive storage areas located on government reservations in Idaho. The barrels we saw yesterday were undoubtedly placed in their present location for temporary storage pending shipment to a depository. I suspect they were overlooked and not shipped as planned. It was clearly an oversight, and I might add, a very minor one."

Pitkin couldn't help marveling at the Hugo's explanation. "He's amazing. Absolutely amazing," he thought. "Where in the world did he find that one. 'Temporary storage,' my tintype." Pitkin was all the more surprised by the Director's statement since no record of the deposit had been found, and in the moments before the press briefing had begun, Hugo had still been toying with the extravagant notion of trying to paste a classification label over the entire affair.

"As to your next question," Hugo continued, "it goes into a highly technical area. Therefore, I will defer to Doctor Waay." Thus, the old pattern, established at press conferences years ago, prevailed. All operational or policy type inquiries were usually fielded by Hugo Chase. Questions delving into scientific or technical areas fell to Pitkin.

As attention shifted to the tall physicist who rose and stepped to the podium, there was an increased level of interest among the reporters who had dealt with him before. Pitkin was known by them to be as direct and as forthcoming as the confines of bureaucracy would allow.

In his mind, Pitkin felt he was performing a ritual. He knew the questions the press would ask. Many of the reporters knew the answers he would give. It seemed that no matter how careful he was in making explanations and how painstaking he was in constructing answers, the reporters were never satisfied with his effort. It was just as true that he was seldom content with the stories which found their way into print.

When he had first come to the plant, he had enjoyed the give and take with the press. Like those not accustomed to dealing with the media, he had the feeling that his expertise was really being called upon and that his questioners were interested in the answers. The ensuing experience had been a bitter lesson for him.

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Each bout with the press had been followed by "interpretive" stories, which were far more editorial than fact. The personal views were reflected in the details, which were highlighted, the arrangement of information, and the subtle adjectives and qualifiers, which were, accepted journalistic technique.

Pitkin's initial reaction to the reporting has selected and out of context statements and their use to support the writer's own pre-dispositions were anger. However, his ire had become the focal point of follow-up stories with such phrases as "irate government official" and "angry denials." He had responded by answering all questions in precise scientific terminology avoiding explanations and analogies. That brought accusations he was being uncooperative and insensitive to the needs of the public. He exercised more restraint than he knew he had by not commenting on the media's rush to raise the banner of the public's "right to know" while, at the same time, using editorial selectivity and the interpretative style to persuade rather than report.

Finally, Pitkin had found a middle ground. He steadfastly refused to compromise on his science, and he insisted on accuracy. Reporters who were fast and loose with the facts were gently lectured at the next opportunity. On the other hand, he recognized the need for generalization in certain areas and also offered suggestions for follow-up where it seemed appropriate. He made their lives easier by supplying dependable, factual information. In exchange for reasonable questions and reasonably accurate stories, he tried to understand their problems and to make their professional lives somewhat easier. Thus, an accommodation, however tenuous, had been reached with the Colorado press corps.

"Yes, Shelia, I saw your clip on yesterday's evening news, so I anticipated your question. However, before getting to the matter of the amount of radioactivity associated with the barrel deposit, I must advise you of one rather serious error in the story your station broadcast. You stated that the radioactivity was discovered by accident, and further stated we were not prepared to detect radioactivity. While that same statement may have been made by other media, it is, nonetheless, not true. As you know, the soil samples, which are really quite small, were to be placed in glass lined containers, sealed, and sent to a laboratory for

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contamination analysis; therefore, it might have been expected that no detection equipment would have been necessary as the samples were taken. However, not by accident, but by my explicit orders two radiation monitors accompanied the group to the sampling site. The radiation was detected immediately when the oil first appeared. In my judgment that was not an 'accidental' discovery of radiation or evidence of unpreparedness. However, it is fair to say the oil was discovered accidentally, so the error was not as serious as it might have been."

Pitkin's matter-of-fact tone and attitude took most of the sting out of what he had intended as a mere righting of the record. Still, the red tint in Shelia Montrose's face told Pitkin that his correction had been received as a rebuke. Trying not to sound apologetic, he addressed her question.

"As for the contamination in the oil, I can assure you the levels we have been registering in the area around the barrels are well below acceptable levels by federal standards. The contaminant is plutonium and we are therefore dealing with alpha radiation, whose permissible level in soils is 20 or 25 d/m/g, depending on which standard you use. There are a couple of further specific notes you may want to have. At the exact point of the oil leak, we have registered 920 d/m/g, however that is the source and it's been contained. The soil contamination in the nearby areas are intermediate, 250 to 300 d/m/g's, but by intermediate I mean within ten to twenty meters from the source. The readings drop to near normal approximately forty meters from the leak we all saw yesterday. The specific instrument readings on disintegrations per second are now being typed. A handout will be available when you leave."

For confirmation of his promise, Pitkin cast an inquiring look at the well manicured Lamont Wellington who acknowledged the preparation of a handout with an affirmative bob of his head accompanied by the sweep of his delicate hands over his perfectly shaped razor cut hair. It was not simply a "yes, Pitkin" nod, but rather a "yes, my friends of the press corps, I am preparing such a release, and I will, of course, personally see that each of my dear colleagues receives his very own copy" nod. The reporters, however, knew Lamont, therefore, they ignored him.

"What the hell is a d/m/g?" called a reporter who squinted suspiciously at Pitkin from the front row.

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"It's an abbreviation for disintegrations per minute per gram. But rather than try to understand its scientific implications, I suggest you think of it in relative terms. Remember, I said 25 was the level considered safe by federal standards. The State of Colorado is somewhat more conservative and says that more than 20 is significant and may require the exercise of caution by people living on such land. Based upon that you can begin to understand just how radioactive a sample of material is when compared to another."

Then 920 would be a lot of radiation?" continued the same reporter.

"Yes. But we find that level only in a confined spot, something about the size of a large table. Fifty meters away the levels are in the neighborhood of 16 and 17."

"How far is the east fence from the barrels?" called Shelia Montrose.

"Forty meters from the east edge of the barrels. Anticipating your next question, we're within federal and state standards at the fence line."

"How many barrels, Pitkin?" The bulk of Deke Prowers, a well known and popular reporter for the Denver Post, combined with his booming voice to give him the edge over his fellow reporters, all of whom had been raising their hands and waving notebooks trying to get recognition for the next question.

"Deke, I can't say. As I just told Ms. Montrose, there was radiation associated with the oil seep. Our first effort has to be containment. As soon as we're satisfied that the area is secure, we can move on to the next step."

"Are you telling us you're still trying to get the radiation under control?" shot back Prowers quickly.

"No. The possibility of further radiation has been eliminated. What I said, Deke, is that it's a matter of first things first, and counting barrels is not a priority with us." Hanging on to recognition for a follow-up question, Prowers demanded, "No argument about your priorities. I'm asking how many barrels and how long they've been there. Now certainly you must have some record you can make available to us."

Hugo was back on his feet, "That is under review and..." Before he could go on, Pitkin began speaking just loudly and firmly enough to override his director. "No, Deke, we have not

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found any documentation bearing on the placement of the barrels." Making his interruption out to be a routine correction rather than a note of dissension, Pitkin added, "As Hugo was saying, we are looking. If and when we find something, it will be made available to the media immediately."

"If," shouted Prowers over the clamor for recognition. "Are you telling us the government may not have a record of those barrels being buried out there?"

In the abrupt silence that followed the question, Pitkin spoke quietly and directly. "It's a possibility. Please note, I said only that it's possible. An employee may have violated procedure; a memo may have been misfiled or lost. The list could go on, but I don't see anything to be gained from speculation. The only thing I know for sure is that we're as interested as you are, and when we know something we'll share it with the public."

In the slight murmur that followed the unusually candid admission, there was a period during which notes were taken and reporters who were prepared to be hostile and antagonistic adjusted their attitudes ever so slightly to compensate. The seriousness was slackened further when the next questioner obtained recognition.

It was Jess Lyons, in his crumpled and stained three piece suits that were as much a part of him as his narrow intense face, "Isn't their plutonium out there, right now. As you people are fond of saying, 'airborne?'"

"In the most limited and extremely technical sense, that is correct, Jess."

"Right, " cried Lyons triumphantly. "A fact the government has always tried to conceal from the public. Now Doctor Waay..."

"However," Pitkin cut him off, "that needs considerable qualification."

"But..." tried Lyons.

"No," insisted Pitkin. "You asked. Now I'll answer, and when it's that kind of question, I will answer completely. There's no headline in my statement that there is plutonium in the air around this plant and, indeed, the Entire State of Colorado. This is a subject many of you have heard me discuss before."

This brought a few groans from the assemblage and not a few hard looks at the combative Lyons. His paper, the Pondera

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Leader, was known in the area not only for its extreme views about Rocky Flats but for its emotional rather than factual approach to all news. Lyons and Pitkin had been through the subject of airborne plutonium on enough occasions to establish a routine, and to the dismay of those who had heard it before, it was being heard again.

"The key, Jess, is the amount. As I have told you before, the amount of plutonium in the ambient air is so slight as to be nearly immeasurable. This plant's routine yearly release to the atmosphere of alpha emitting radiation particles has been steadily declining since 1970. In that year this facility released, through normal operations, 354 microcuries of plutonium. The reduction is apparent when we note that by 1976 the level of release was only 4 microcuries. When you consider further that we operate with a permissible routine release limit of 500 microcuries per year, you can see that we are far, far below acceptable levels." "That's all crap, Doctor Waay," piped Lyons in shrill anger. "It's the radiation falling on people and eating away their lungs that counts."

Unyielding, Pitkin continued, "Translating the full 500 microcurie limit into the more commonly recognized rem unit we find it is equivalent to 10 millirems per year. Comparing that to the 100 millirems of radiation per year every person receives from nature, gives us a better understanding of the relatively insignificant amount emitted by Rocky Flats in the same period of one year."

Lyons' thin face pinched into a disappointed stare. This had happened to him before. He knew Pitkin Waay would bury him with details, and restraint was his best course. But Jess Lyons had long since drawn all the slack from his own approach to news gathering. For him there was no way but taut resolve to score a touch, to make a point, however fine it might be. "Yes, but 10 millirems, Doctor Waay, would be equal to a tenth of a year's natural dose. Instead of getting 100 we're getting 110, thanks to your crowd here. That seems significant to me." "Even if I were to agree with you that 110 millirems is a significant increase over 100, and I hasten to emphasize that I do not agree, you have misunderstood the 10 millirem factor. The 10 millirems is the amount of radiation one person would receive if he lived

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continuously at the nearest offsite location and received the maximum radiation possible from our routine releases.

We cannot under any circumstance make such an incredible assumption. First, the plant does not routinely release 10 millirems each year. In fact, the release last year was less than one fiftieth of 10 millirems. The second and very significant fact you have missed is the improbability of any single person receiving the full measure of radiation released from the plant each year."

Before Pitkin could continue, a smiling Ed Walsenburg from the Rocky Mountain News interrupted him. "All of that is interesting, Pitkin, and I'm sure you and Jess could go on forever over his poisoned air theory, but that really isn't why we're here today. Is there or is there not a hot spot out there?"

"I've already answered that, Ed. Yes, there is, indeed, an area, a very small one, heavily contaminated by radioactive oil, and, as I also said, the precise numbers, as we have them, will be made available."

"And the levels are within acceptable limits?"

"The levels of free radioactivity are well within our operational limitations."

Walsenburg's smiled broadened. "I take it that means the stuff contained in the ground and in the oil is not considered by you to be `free radioactivity?'"

"It is in media which is susceptible of almost total control." Seeing scowls begin to pull at the faces of the reporters, Pitkin explained. "The radioactive elements are, in effect, trapped in the oil and in the soil. As long as the oil does not migrate from the area, and there is no reason to expect anything like that to happen, it presents no containment problems. Essentially the same is true of the soil. As long as we keep it from being dispersed, there isn't any danger whatever."

"Could your little hot spot grow, despite your containment efforts?" asked the suspicious reporter.

"Not if our containment work is effective."

The next question was a natural follow-up, and, since Walsenburg was asking the questions common to them all, the group let him follow his lead. "Would you explain how this containment system of yours works?"

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Pitkin knew he was entering a difficult area and he chose his words carefully. "Our first action was to determine just how much of the area was in fact contaminated. I can assure you it is quite small, something on the order of a dozen square meters. We then did some further exploratory digging to determine just how large the burial site was. The natural settling of the ground helped us there and we were able to define the perimeter fairly easily. It's about ten meters long and four meters wide. Once we were comfortable with the size of the pit, we covered it and the contiguous area with plastic. Of course, we have alpha counters out their now and a team of radiation monitors."

"Give us a specific on what long term measures you have in mind for seeing to it this isn't a continuing problem," persisted Walsenburg.

"After we have removed the contaminated soil, we may elect to cover the area with something permanent, asphalt perhaps."

"I drove up Indiana and came in the west gate," said Walsenburg. "Did I see you sprinkling the area?"

"Yes, that's simply an added precaution. Until we can say with complete certainty that we don't have any more random spots to contend with, we're just keeping the ground out there damp to prevent drying and wind dispersion."

"Won't that wash the damn stuff down into the Broomfield reservoir?" called someone from the back of the long lunchroom.

Hugo Chase was on his feet and speaking even before the question had been finished. "There is not now, sir, any possibility of erosion, nor will there be such a possibility in the future."

Hugo's answer was too quick and his words too loud to escape notice. Veterans in the press contingent knew they had hit a sensitive nerve, and there was no mortal power, which could prevent them from pinching it a bit.

Frank Watkins whose thin mustache and plastered down hair, parted in the middle, reminded Pitkin of a roaring twenties character, identified himself as a representative of a wire service. "Mister Chase, you sound as though you're prepared to guarantee the people of Colorado and especially the citizens of Broomfield that it won't rain."

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"Mister Watkins," seethed Hugo, "I can only guarantee you we are giving this matter our undivided attention, and I am confident it will be entirely cleared up without any further radioactivity being released at or near the soil sampling site."

"Would rain erode the stuff down the gully and into the reservoir?" persisted Watkins. "It's a simple enough question, Mr. Chase, and I'd like something better for an answer than the 'we're working' hash we've all heard before."

"Doctor Waay had described the measures we've taken to prevent that from happening. I would suggest you pay a bit more attention to our answers and the information being given you and less to idle speculation on the improbable."

The hoots and jeers came from every quarter save the one occupied by the embattled plant officials. Watkins, unmoved by either the supporting catcalls or by Hugo's derisive barb, stood his ground waiting for the clamor to subside. "That's hardly an answer, Mister Chase, but if it's the one you're sticking with, I'll be glad to file it exactly as you gave it."

Before Hugo could reply, attention shifted to the impeccable figure that rose near the front of the room. Every soul present recognized him. An aura of self-importance, mistakenly thought by some to be self-assurance, enveloped him. Lesser members of the media edged away from the presence, and he stood alone in his magnificence. His intoned introduction of himself was entirely superfluous for identification, but indispensable to the image.

"Mister Chase, my name is Leighton Marlowe and I'm with CBS news. You may be unaware of the fact that the matter of this plant and its radiation adventures is a subject of keen national interest, but let me assure you that it is so. I should like to first ask you if this plant, at the time the plutonium contamination of the water reservoir of the nearby community of Broomfield was uncovered, did not give assurances that such a thing would not happen again."

Marlowe did not wait for an answer but continued, speaking as much to the assembled press as to Hugo. "Now, by what seems to be a more significant and threatening revelation, the people of this great state are again placed in peril. My question is this. Does not this new spill of plutonium violate your earlier assurances to Congress, and does it not dramatize the need for yet

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another review of the entire question of decommissioning this plant?"

Hugo Chase's anger was apparent, and he made no attempt to conceal it. As if he were tearing away an official seal, Hugo pulled his heavy rimmed glasses off and shoved them in his breast pocket. Then, placing his hands on the tabletop, he leaned toward Marlowe, waiting until the room fell tomb silent, then spoke.

"Mister Marlowe, I believe we all were enlightened by your editorial. We're flattered that you came all the way from Washington D.C. to deliver it personally. Everyone has long been aware of your network's sentiments on defense policy, and it cannot be a surprise that you chose to bring your crusade here. While this may indeed be an inviting forum for the expression of your views, I must advise you that the event you have chosen is one of little moment and may defy magnification, even by your great network's resources."

Extending one arm toward Hugo and the other toward Marlowe, as if holding them at bay, Pitkin spoke firmly enough to cut off comment by either. "Hugo, Mister Marlowe, I wonder if we aren't getting off the mark. I'm certain that our views on the mission of Rocky Flats are well known to the Congress and to the people of the media. I'm also sure both of you would agree that this press conference is hardly an appropriate place for a debate on the defense policies of the United States government. The subject is essentially political and better left to elected policy makers. At this facility, we execute the program assigned to us. The need for such a program is another topic for another place with different parties than are present today."

Before either combatant could respond, Pitkin continued, "The specific questions asked by Mister Marlowe, however, invite us to go into areas reserved for others and, within the context of our role as managers of this facility, we can make only two responses. First, there has been no compromise of the Department's statement to Congress on radiation control. Second, the issue of decommissioning has been before Congress on previous occasions. Whether or not the instant event of discovering a number of barrels of contaminated oil will provide sufficient cause for the question to be revisited is not one for us to answer. Finally, since both of your questions go to subjects upon

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which we may be required to make statements to the legislative branch, I'm sure you understand that it would be improper for us to make any further comments here today."

The polished Leighton Marlowe was wise enough to know that he would get nothing of news value from Pitkin, and he also realized that the Deputy was going to block further needling of the Director. Yet, the pressure of audience expectation and the knowledge that the eye of the camera was upon him extinguished logic and compelled him to speak.

"I understand the reluctance of the government to address these questions, Doctor Waay. However, since the safety and health of the public is at issue, I am confident that the Congress and the people will insist that you do. Would you would be willing to state whether or not there has, in fact, been an escape of radioactivity due to the barrel incident of yesterday?" "Offsite? None."

"The word 'offsite' is a very large qualification, Doctor."

"This is a very large facility, Mister Marlowe."

"Perhaps too large, Doctor Waay. But as you have said, that is a topic for another time. Could you assess for the public," Marlowe opened his hands and held them palms up as if rendering a great communications blessing on the people, "the potential for a major release of radioactivity during the removal of your barrels." Quickly as an afterthought he asked, "You are going to remove them?"

"Yes. They will be uncovered, placed in appropriate containers and shipped to the Department's depository in Idaho. The potential for release during the excavation operation will be slight. It hardly needs to be said that we will take every precaution to guard against any further oil spill."

Fishing now, Marlowe pressed on. "This is my first visit to Rocky Flats, Doctor Waay, and I must say it is an impressive facility, what I have been permitted to see at least. I assume the off-limits areas are where you keep your plutonium. I confess the whole thing is quite mysterious to me, but I'm sure we," Marlowe's gesture took in the reporters, the television cameras, and the glaring lights which had been on since he first rose to speak, "would be interested in hearing your assessment of the possibility of the occurrence of a major accident here."

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Again Pitkin spoke with care, "I assume you are referring to the type of hypothetical," emphasizing "hypothetical," "consideration that enters into the evaluation of credible accidents for such purposes as Environmental Impact Statements or other cost-benefit analyses."

Pitkin paused, looking directly at Marlowe, waiting for him to accept the premise or to state another. Marlowe sensed the hazard and tried to head it off.

"Then you have studied the possibility of a larger and very significant accident leading to major releases of plutonium?" Marlowe wanted only the story building admission that a major release potential had been made the subject of a study. Marlowe had never interviewed Pitkin Waay.

"Such a study has, indeed, been made. We have evaluated the maximum credible radionuclide release resulting from processing criticalities, from aircraft crashes, from accidental criticalities relating to transportation mishaps and from other such events. As one example of this type of analysis, we have calculated that the maximum, I emphasize maximum, credible fire releases are 6.2 microcuries of plutonium with the likelihood being 0.0001 per year. The backup information for that analysis is quite illuminating. I refer to the assumptions and calculations used to derive those estimates. I would be most happy to trace such a derivation for your audience, keeping in mind it is only one hypothetical among many."

"Maybe another time, Doctor Waay," replied Marlow. He had had enough for now, but with a newsman's persistence tried once more for a usable admission. "You seem to be saying the possibility does exist of a larger 'criticality' I believe is the word you used." "Your question assumes a present or immediately past criticality, Mister Marlowe. There has been none. You may be misinformed about the term 'criticality.' By our definition that is a self-sustaining nuclear fission reaction, or a chain reaction. I'm certain you understand we have not had that type of event. Our studies of it are truly hypothetical and discussions of such a phenomena bear little relationship to the actual day-by-day operation of this plant."

Pitkin paused. He was inwardly raging at himself. According to his own standards, he had been discouraging communication by throwing up a barrage of technical jargon. His

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anger was especially bitter because, in his mind, the clever Marlowe had won something of a victory in driving him behind his own barrier. "Besides" he thought, "it's a losing battle." He knew that Marlowe, with his cut and paste prerogative would present a picture of incompetent government managers refusing to divulge information to the public. Seeking to atone for his attitude and salvage something for himself, if not for the plant, he made an offer.

"Since you have expressed an interest in our operation, Mister Marlowe, and have gone out of your way to make this visit, would you be interested in a closer look at those mysterious off-limits areas you mentioned?"

Marlowe's face displayed genuine surprise, but without a fraction of hesitation, he seized the opportunity, "That is a very kind offer, Doctor. I accept."

The television lights switched off as Marlowe sat down, and in the relative gloom left for mere reporters, Ed Walsenburg asked, "Pitkin, is there any reason to believe that any of us who were here yesterday received a significant amount of radiation?"

Pitkin was grateful to Walsenburg for the change of pace, and he took pains to make his answer as non-technical and as responsive as he could. "A good question, Ed. There's a long and a short answer. I suspect you would prefer the one that makes the most sense."

"I'll settle for that," the reporter smiled. "If it's short."

"Agreed," said Pitkin. He realized the high point of the press conference was past and the remainder of it would be detail and confirmation of loose ends. He reviewed the events of the previous day and reminded Walsenburg and others that their clothing and equipment had been carefully checked for radiation after the aborted excursion to the soil-sampling site. He was careful to emphasize the fact that no radiation had been detected on their persons or on their equipment. He bantered with Walsenburg over the need for detailed body examinations, fielded a dozen questions from the others about the schedule for barrel uncovering and removal, and rejected Jess Lyons' demand that the downwind population be evacuated during the process. Promising to consider Shelia Montrose's request for television coverage of at least part of the barrel removal, he reminded the group of the promised tour of the facility and adjourned the press briefing.

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Turning from the podium, Pitkin gestured at the nearby lunchroom doorway. A quiet watcher had been standing there through the entire proceedings moving only to lean against one side of the doorframe and then the other. As the figure approached, Pitkin looked at the CBS correspondent and called, "I'll be with you in a minute, Mister Marlowe." Marlowe waved an acknowledgment permitting Pitkin to give his attention to his assistant.

There was an aura of remoteness about Jenny Gilpin, which disengaged her from much that went on in her presence, or so it seemed to those who did not know her. None who did would have said she was aloof, because there was always warmth in her quiet smile. While an imperceptive stranger might have thought her to be indifferent, she had only a sympathetic sensitivity, which made her shy upon meeting another for the first time. Her casual friends sometimes thought Jenny was nonchalant; had they more carefully noted her steady gaze and intense brown eyes, they would have thought otherwise.

There were senior members of the plant staff who did not understand why Pitkin had chosen Jenny as his assistant. They recognized her academic achievements, her high standing in her graduating class, and her advanced degrees in physics, but Jenny's quiet manner had suspended their complete acceptance. That she was female was no doubt a contributing factor to the coolness of male management. And some of their reservation could be attributed to the fact that her sometimes too incisive mind sliced into their own thinly secure environment and created disquiet and suspicion.

Pitkin Waay, who was either unmindful of the undercurrent or casually defiant of it, depended on Jenny. He had discovered that tasks assigned to her were always done to his satisfaction and often beyond. When she was asked for an opinion, she gave it, and she gave the reasons for it. Jenny had, on more than one occasion, given him the small edge of reassurance necessary to drive the edge of doubt away from difficult decisions. But underlying it all, Pitkin relied on Jenny because she was loyal. Being able to confide in his assistant enabled Pitkin to talk his way through many problems, which were sensitive, and some problems, which were only maddeningly tedious. Recently, both

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categories had expanded, and he, Pitkin, had come to depend on Jenny Gilpin more and more.

"Jenny, I suppose you heard. I committed myself to give Marlowe the grand tour. I'm going to have to ask you to go along with Wellington's group. There shouldn't be any problem. Just let Lamont make all the noise. He knows the routine by heart, but if he starts off the deep end, strangle him diplomatically."

"Are you sure you want me to wait?" she asked with mock seriousness. "It would make a better story if we did it now in front of Marlowe's television camera."

"I don't believe any of these reporters would even write it up. He's not their favorite PR man," laughed Pitkin. Then looking at Wellington talking loudly to a captive group of reporters lined up for coffee, Pitkin's face lost its smile. "Whatever you do, keep that outfit away from those damn barrels."

"If I know Lamont, it should be easy. I'll hint there may be some hot particles floating around. The last time I did that, he whipped out his handkerchief, covered that aquiline nose of his, and did a one-eighty."

"One more thing, Jenny. When the media people leave, drive out to our infamous barrel pit and talk to Harvey. He said he had something to show me, but I'm going to be tied up, at least through noon."

She nodded her understanding then, noting Marlowe was standing nearby waiting for Pitkin, and Jenny turned to leave. As she did, she saw Jess Lyons still sitting scribbling in a ragged notebook. Walking toward him she called out, "Jess, come with me. I'll get you a super nuclide filtering mask and some lead shorts and we'll tour the hot spots."

"She works for you?" laughed Marlowe as he joined Pitkin.

"Yes," smiled the physicist shaking his head watching his assistant rouse the old reporter and lead him off for coffee and doughnuts.

"Would you like to join them?" asked Pitkin, inclining his head at Lyons and the girl.

"For lead shorts or for coffee?"

"Only coffee, I'm afraid."

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"Then I'll pass. My stomach won't take anything stronger than milk any more, besides, I'm anxious to get started on this tour you promised."

"Fair enough," agreed Pitkin. "If you'll walk with me to the office, we can start there."

CHAPTER THREE

Following Pitkin's lead, Marlowe was soon out of the plant lunchroom and into the long corridor leading to the administrative offices. There was nothing remarkable in the secretaries, the clatter of typewriters, and the usual and normal trappings of a busy office, and Marlowe used the walk to take a closer look at his host.

Pitkin Waay was taller than Marlowe was and a good deal more muscular. His neat, clean, and decidedly casual clothing created the appearance of a man who might have just walked in from a nearby cattle ranch. But from the sandy colored hair

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sprinkled with gray to the dusty boots, there was more to Pitkin Waay than scientist in western garb.

Marlowe, the experienced student of peoples the world around, suspected that Pitkin was at intellectual odds with himself. It seemed strange that he would defend the program and the Director, but, at the same time, neatly avoided making statements, which would commit him to either. In the short minutes they had spent together, Marlowe had already seen the studied reserve masking a swift and penetrating intellect. He had watched Pitkin appear to listen to polite questions, all the while thinking ahead, and beyond what was immediately before him. "If he plays chess, he's a master," thought Marlowe. "His anticipation is incredible. I'd wager he's already got my entire tour planned, and no matter what I say or what I ask, he's got the answers with alternatives all planned and laid out."

He also guessed the physicist was a man who could, under the right circumstances, act decisively, but, at the same time, he would be selective of when to act and when to defer action. Marlowe had seen a display of Pitkin's instinctive decision making ability in the handling of the difficulty at the press conference.

The newsman had been surprised by the offer of a plant tour. He dismissed the notion of it being a play for publicity or a pandering to his own status as a nationally recognized figure. Pitkin Waay decidedly was not one to be impressed by titles and pretense. Marlowe suspected that the offer had been made as something of an apology for being avalanched under technical jargon, but, whatever the reason, he welcomed the opportunity to learn more about the plant.

The plutonium story was not one he would have ordinarily covered, but it broke while he had been preparing for a trip to San Francisco. Finding some extra time in his schedule, he squeezed a briefing out of one of his research assistants, and headed for Denver, planning to visit the plant as a sort of layover exercise. Now that he was here, he also found himself interested in learning more about the facility and, more immediately, about the man guiding him into the wide carpeted reception room of the plant's central offices.

In the middle of the reception area, the two men encountered Hugo Chase who perfunctorily shook the newsman's hand and mumbled a stiff and formal welcome. Marlowe made an

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obvious effort to bridge the gap his questions and Chase's answers had opened between them.

"Mister Chase, I'm glad to see you again. I wanted to assure you that my questions were not intended to embarrass anyone at this facility or to inject controversy where there was non. I pride myself on being a professional, and I was only seeking information. If my background information was incorrect, I will be in your debt if you will assist me in correcting it. The tour that Doctor Waay very thought fully suggested will undoubtedly be a long first step in perfecting my education about your plant, and I welcome it. To tell you the truth, I was quite surprised by the offer, and I confess that I'm looking forward to the next few hours. Doctor Waay has already advised me on the ground rules. No cameras, no recorders, and no notes in restricted areas. Having spent my war years assigned to the military, I understand, and, of course, fully accept the restrictions of security."

Hugo eyed Marlowe suspiciously, but nonetheless tentatively accepted the peace offering. I appreciate your comments, Mister Marlowe, and, for my part, would ask you to remember that for the past two days we've all been operating under a good deal of pressure here with very little time for rest. After you and Pitkin have completed your tour, perhaps you would stop by my office. I'd be interested I hearing your reactions once you see firsthand what it is we do here."

With the breach partially repaired, Pitkin ushered the newsman toward his office and pretended not to see the exaggerated look of surprised disbelief that Hugo pinned on his antagonist's backside. From his doorway, Pitkin called to Etta, "Would you have someone bring us two large glasses of milk from the cafeteria?"

"Certainly, Doctor Waay. Would you like a sandwich or doughnuts?"

"No, thank you, Etta. Milk, nothing more."

"I believe Deora brought in some molasses cookies, sir. I could just step down to her office and see if any are left."

"The milk will be fine."

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“If you say so, sir, but I ate some of the cafeteria’s Danish myself, and they were excellent.”

Pitkin was spared a further refusal by Marlowe. “If there are any of those molasses cookies left, I’d love one.”

“And you Doctor Waay?” asked the triumphant Etta.

“Since you are going anyway, Etta, yes, one for me.”

As Pitkin closed his door, the chuckling Marlowe surveyed the comfortable office. “I have that woman’s twin in Washington. There’s really no point in arguing you know. They operate on their own principle of disorientation. If you had asked for cookies, I’d wager there wouldn’t have been one for miles. I’m quite comfortable with my secretary. I decide in advance what I want, then I simply ask for a variation and negotiate back to what I wanted in the first place.”

“Etta has always wanted to visit Washington, ” “began Pitkin.

“Not in a million years, Doctor,” said Marlowe, throwing up his hands in mock protest. Following Pitkin’s lead and taking a leather chair near the cluttered low table in the center of the room, Marlowe heaved a great sigh. Dropping his arms on the wide padded armrests, he looked squarely at Pitkin. “Where do we begin my orientation on Rocky Flats?”

“I suspect that might depend upon how much time you have,” smiled Pitkin. “But it might be more productive for us to talk for a few minutes and decide what would be most informative and what you feel would really be most useful to you.”

Catching Pitkin’s intentional emphasis on “really,” Marlowe bantered, “Well, of course, I really want to see your darkest secrets, the ones you’ve cleverly concealed from the public all these years.”

“That’s a tall order, Mister Marlowe. Would you settle for a look at a rather stodgy and monotonous production facility, flavored with a healthy dose of bureaucracy?”

“Sounds rather droll when you put it that way,” replied Marlowe leaning back into the soft cushions. “Perhaps you could talk me through the least dramatic areas while we wait for our refreshments.”

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“Fair enough,” agreed Pitkin, rising and walking to a long side table. After shuffling through an assortment of papers, returned to his chair. “I’ll try to avoid repeatin any of Hugo’s orientation, but for openers, let’s look at an outline of the buildings and grounds.

With that, Pitkin laid a map on the table, arranging it so it was right side up for Marlowe. Returning to his chair and leaning forward over the upside down map and the maze of black squares and rectangles arrayed on the stark white paper. Pitkin pulled a bright silver ballpoint pen from his shirt pocket and, using it as a pointer, began tracing a thin line that coursed around the outer fringes of the drawing. “As you can see, Mister Marlow, ...”

“Leighton, please. The ‘Mister Marlowe’ puts quite a barrier where there needn’t be one, and with just the two of us here, it seems a trifle awkward. And, if you don’t object, I’ll drop the ‘Doctor Waay.’”

“Fine with me. As you may have noticed,” said Pitkin, spreading his hands and looking down at his boots and Levis, “I wouldn’t stand very high on anyone’s formality register.”

“I don’t believe you could begin to understand how much I envy you in your, shall I say, relaxed attire. It look entirely appropriate for the wide open spaces of your facility.”

“Yes,” agreed Pitkin returning to his diagram. “Our open spaces here would make a very respectal3e cattle ranch. We’re sitting in the middle of over ten sections of excellent grazing land. Six thousand five hundred fifty acres to be exact.”

“Interesting,” mused Marlowe as he studied the map. “I see here on the margin an arrow indicating Boulder to the north. The University of Colorado is there isn’t it? It was more an observation than a question and without waiting for confirmation, the journalist continued. “I’ve been invited to keynote a summer symposium there. I believe it’s entitled “The Media and Public Responsibility.” It’s obviously been arranged by journalists for journalists as a forum to massage their paranoia. I suppose it’s therapeutic for the disillusioned idealists who have rushed into a profession whose essence is public bloodletting and then discovered that the public insists on being told about itself while

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reserving the right to flay the messenger. But, then, reality, in one form or another, probably invades every profession and tortures its most sensitive members. I imagine you find it s even in science?"

Pitkin, whose eyes were fixed upon the map between them, made only a noncommittal reply. Marlowe's words, casually spoken, were needle sharp probes, and Pitkin realized he was being examined by an expert who would balance every word, every inflection, and would find as much substance in what he sensed and felt as in what he heard. But Pitkin, who had been invited by others to express his personal views on the plant, determined this was not going to be the unveiling of Pitkin Waay, not was it going to a philosophical dialogue on the disillusionments of professional responsibility. It was going to be a tour of Rocky Flats, nothing more.

"In any event, said Marlowe, perhaps recognizing Pitkin's silence as a note of caution that the conversation was too digressive, "from what I've seen of the mountains and this area, I think I'll accept the speaking invitation. So far in my gypsy existence, I've managed only to fly in and out of Denver a few times, and I have never really visited your state."

:You could do worse. There's a lot here to see," said Pitkin. "Boulder is an especially beautiful city, despite the fact that a lot of its population is pretty ragged, both physically and intellectually. If you accept your speaking invitation, you should take a few days and get up to the mountains. They're our only legitimate claim to uniqueness."

"How far is Boulder from here?" asked Marlowe tapping his finger in the center of the plant map.

"About ten miles, almost due north." Pitkin indicated an area off the upper edge of the sketch.

Continuing to peruse the plat in from of him, Marlowe was silent for a moment. Pitkin, for his part, was content to simply sit and wait for the next question. Pitkin's resolve was to supply mechanical facts and information. He would leave it to Marlowe to apply the interpretation.

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Looking up, Marlowe remarked, "I see that downtown Denver is really quite close. I had no idea of the proximity. What would you say it is?"

"Sixteen miles to downtown, as the crow flies."

"Or as the wind blows," countered the newsman. "I noticed on the drive up here how close some of the housing tracts are to your perimeter. I also was rather surprised at the growth on the downtown area. It seemed to me when I flew in that there were new skyscrapers everywhere."

Marlowe, looking back at the map, probably did not see the lines of Pitkin's face tighten, nor did he note how the silver pen was enveloped by a hard fist, but with the sensitivity of the skilled interviewer, Marlowe may have caught the subtle tension in Pitkin's clipped, "Yes, Denver's booming. There's precious little doubt that."

"Out here," Marlowe pointed to the lower right portion of the drawing, "is where your barrel cache is located, if I remember Mister Chase's briefing correctly. I guess it's what you would call the southeast quadrant of the facility, closest to Denver?"

"A bit neared to the east boundary fence." Pitkin indicated with his pen.

"I see. Now where are we? I assume somewhere in this area? Marlowe was pointing to the grouped blocks enclosed within the larger open space.

"Correct. The line here represents the chain link security fence that encloses the plant proper, some three hundred eighty-four acres. The L shaped building, here in the northwest part of the secured area, is the administration building.

"For background, Pitkin, "said Marlowe, easily taking up the use of the physicist's first name, "how long has the plant been here? I recall Mister Chase at the briefing saying something about the early fifties, and why in the world did the government choose this metropolitan location rather than some far away desert."

"The Rocky Flats selection was actually made in 1951, and some limited operations were begun in 1952. Growth since then has been a cyclic thing, dependent, of course, upon the inclinations of Congress. As to location, it's hard to believe, but in

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the early fifties this was a relatively remote site. The Boulder-Denver growth hadn't really taken off, and the plant wasn't in anyone's back yard. Remember, too, that the plant, at first, was fairly modest in size and the volume of work was much less than at the present. The location had the advantages of nearby universities, a large work pool of skilled machinists, and excellent transportation facilities. At the time, it must have looked to the Atomic Energy Commission like a good decision. Today, it may be otherwise, but when has hindsight ever been wrong?"

"I can't argue with any of what you say, but my research assistant tells me there has been a pattern of continuous plant growth. And, as recently as two years ago, you began construction on a major new plutonium recovery building. Wouldn't it have been prudent somewhere along the line to call a halt to renovation and new building and reconsider the prudence of continuing at this location?"

"Perhaps, shrugged Pitkin, "but I'll leave the second-guessing to editorial writers. For what it's worth, you should know there have been a number of studies examining the options of terminating all the work 'here and of discontinuing some aspects of it, especially the radioactive materials processing."

"Yes, I've heard of studies being done, but what's become of them?"

"A good guess would be that, like most expensive studies performed for the government, they have been filed and forgotten. Some got a few headlines for a few politicians, but for the most part they have gone the way of most paperwork."

"I know something about contractors and paper studies," nodded Marlowe. "You speak like a veteran Washingtonian, and your guess on where those studies are now is probably correct. But you must have supplied information for the contractors who did the studies and you must have read their conclusions. What's your view on relocating to another area?"

Pitkin very pointedly ignored the question. Marlowe smiled at the demonstration of discretion and changed course. "Pitkin, I remember Mister Chase introducing you as an expert on plutonium. Since the need to process that substance is the reason

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for the operation of this facility, I wonder if we could talk a bit about plutonium. For starters, how much do you actually handle here?"

"Sorry, those numbers are classified."

"I guess I expected that, but based upon your director's briefing, may I assume most, if not all, plutonium components for our nuclear weapons are fabricated here?"

Without answering directly, Pitkin gave an affirmative nod, "It's no secret what we do here. Yes, I'd say your assumption is fairly sound."

"Would you be willing to hazard a guess on just what it is about plutonium which seems to spook the public?"

Pitkin rocked back in his chair and studied the television journalist's famous face. Here in the quiet office, it seemed less of a mask that he remembered seeing on newscasts. Absent the artificiality of makeup, stage lights, and flattering camera angles, Pitkin saw the folds and creases of a tired face, aged by perhaps looking too often at the realities of power and drained by having had to dwell too long on the effects of its misuse. brown eyes, however, which in other men, would have brooded, moved with restless curiosity and expectation.

"A very good question, began Pitkin. in fact and many more things in fiction said, by people who should know better, "Plutonium is many things. For example, it has been that plutonium is the most toxic substance known to man. That's fiction. in fact, it is more toxic than cobra venom, but less toxic than botulism toxin. Plutonium is said to be a killer if inhaled in micro amounts, yet to date, there are few documented fatalities attributable to inhalation of small amounts of plutonium.

"But you aren't saying there's no danger?"

"By no means. A minute amount in the lungs, 12 to 13 milligrams, for example, will cause death by massive fibrosis in less than a week. Plutonium entering the blood stream through a small skin lesion will migrate to the marrow of the bone and probably cause leukemia. Let there be no mistake, we're talking about an extremely dangerous substance, one that is chemically toxic and one that is highly radioactive. The point I was trying to

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make bears only upon the difficulty of discussing plutonium. It's virtually impossible to separate out the truth and render it intelligible to lay people. I realize it sounds defensive to it, but it's in the murky area of truth and half-truth where many of our critics find their most persuasive arguments."

Marlowe was leaning forward in his chair, clearly caught up in the flow of Pitkin's words. The newsman was taken by the fact there was no trace of advocacy in this man's words, none of the urgency he had learned to associate with empire building bureaucrats the world around. There was an openness and honesty in Pitkin Waay that was almost beguiling. Still, Marlowe was puzzled.

Having interviewed people in almost every part of the world across the spectrum of interest and intensity from diplomats to terrorists, Marlowe had become susceptible to a peculiar itch it was most persistent when he was listening to the ingredients of truth being delivered by someone who appeared to be uninterested in the implications of his own words and unwilling to confront the sum total of the parts of his truth.

Marlowe felt such detachment was suspect. It was usually forced and artificial and a mask for emotions. Such disguised feelings were, in Marlowe's experience, far more eloquent than words alone. Such concealments were beyond statements and assertions, and they were the stuff that distinguished a news story from fill and copy.

The old itch was gnawing and biting at Marlowe. He had, over a third martini, once tried to convince a fellow journalist there was such a thing as a human gizzard and he, Leighton Marlowe, had one. That organ, Marlowe had argued, began stirring and itching whenever a story was brewing but remaining elusively just out of reach.

As he listened to Pitkin, dispassionately describe the properties of plutonium and its effects on the human body, Marlowe's gizzard began biting at him. Despite the candid explanations, his news hound instincts kept telling him there was more to the relationship between Pitkin and the plant than met the eye. He wondered if it was the man himself. What could there be

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behind the tanned square face, the classic Marlboro man features that made the old itch pick at his innards until he shifted in his chair in an effort to rub it away? He needed to tack and come at his man from another angle.

Marlowe seized a pause in Pitkin's words to interrupt. "All this you are saying is public information? ... Strike that. The question should be, what would you say is the level of public understanding about the effects of plutonium?"

"I suppose you're going back to your earlier question which went to the matter of public apprehension over plutonium handling. The two are related. Understanding and concern, I mean. Because we are talking about such minute amounts and, in the same breath, about disastrous biological effects, there's bound to be confusion and, in many cases, fear"

"Do you fear it?"

"I respect it. But I'm hardly representative of the public.

"True enough, but I'd like to get some sense of your personal feelings about the plutonium processing being done here"

"My feeling are my own, and not relevant to the mission of Rocky Flats." The answer was firm, flat, and very final.

Marlowe was wise enough not to attempt to drive his quarry to ground, at least not this day. "Very well, but from the perspective of your expertise how much of the public concern about plutonium processing is justified?"

The shield thrown up in response to Marlowe's probing came down far enough for the exchange to continue. "To put our discussion into context, remember, I'm not addressing end uses, governmental purposes, or political motives. I'm confining myself to the operation of this facility."

"I understand," nodded Marlowe, still listening, but now idly and politely. He was getting the official line, something he could read in any public relations pamphlet.

"The answer, in that limited sense, is really quite simple. Given an adequate technical understanding, proper equipment, and intelligent workers, handling plutonium is no more or no less difficult than handling any other dangerous and toxic substance. It can be done safely and with very little risk."

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"It's difficult to argue with an expert, but let me ask a couple of general questions. Since plutonium is the stuff bombs are made of, why isn't there a hazard involved in making bomb parts?"

"In a sense you have the ingredients of an answer in your question. We make only parts, the plutonium parts. The bombs, you call them, are assembled elsewhere."

"That's done in Texas?"

"Your researcher again?"

"I'm afraid so. She probably filled me with more information than I'll ever understand or use. She was pressed with other work, but when she heard my request, she took on the assignment of collecting background information for this story with more enthusiasm than I've ever seen before. I might add, she is not an admirer of the nuclear industry"

"Does she recognize a distinction between the nuclear industry and the federal government's weapons program?"

"I'm not sure, answered Marlowe, but I have the feeling you do."

"Yes, but its really another topic for another time."

Before either could speak to continue the exchange, Etta Westridge swept into the room with a cafeteria tray triumphantly balanced on one hand. "Pardon me, sirs." It was a demand not a request. Instantly, she was between them dispensing the glasses of milk and an enormous pile of golden brown cookies, each dotted with the small outcroppings of chocolate chips.

"Now, Doctor Waay, I certainly hope you're not going to pretend this is lunch. I'm sure Mister Marlowe would like a regular meal. After all, he is our honored guest." Addressing Marlowe directly, Etta continued, "I took it upon myself to substitute for the molasses cookies which were a bit too sweet. I'm sure you'll prefer the chocolate chip."

Holding the plastic tray smartly under her arm, Etta marched back the way she had come, pausing at the door long enough to remind Pitkin, "The cafeteria closes at one thirty, sir, and that doesn't leave much time. "With an almost imperceptible bow of her upper body, she acknowledged the startled "Thank

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you's" and, with sequined glasses flashing, disappeared behind the closing door.

"Would the honored guest like a cookie?" asked Pitkin solemnly. "The honored guest insists on a cookie," responded Marlowe seizing one and holding it up in mock salute to his host. The two laughed and chatted their way through the pile of cookies and glasses of milk until Marlowe, with only a faint and polite protest, accepted Pitkin's offer to eat the last lonesome wafer on the plate. As he sat munching it, Marlowe firmly rejected Pitkin's offer to include a lunch stop in the up coming tour of the plant. "This is more than I usually have for lunch, besides, I can eat anytime. I may never see the insides of another nuclear weapons plant.

"Setting the empty glasses aside, Pitkin returned the map to the table. With his pen, he indicated again the lines of the inner security fence. "Within the perimeter there are more than a hundred buildings containing over two million square feet of floor space. Since there isn't any way we can visit more than a few places, we should decide which ones are the most inviting to you.

Pitkin first identified the maintenance and support buildings, none of which aroused any interest in his guest. Next to be identified were a group of buildings in the lower part of the map. "In what is roughly the southern half of the facility, we house the operations of fabricating uranium, beryllium, and," said Pitkin. Sweeping the tip of his pen in a circle over the upper part of the drawing, he continued, "Here in the northern half of the plant are the plutonium processing activities."

"If I have a choice, that's the work I'd most like to see," said Marlowe, "but I think you anticipated me. Correct?"

"Well, plutonium's card gets punched far more than any other, so it's not really a clever guess, only a function of experience. There are two principal buildings we can look at, processing and recovery." Pushing himself to his feet, the tall physicist looked down at Marlowe, "If you're ready, I suggest we get started."

Later, after passing through security where Marlowe was unceremoniously questioned by a guard who either didn't know or

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didn't care about celebrities, Pitkin led the way across a compound to a large windowless concrete building. They entered by way of a heavy rubber-edged door and were accompanied through by a noticeable rush of air that gushed in from the outside and continued to blow in until the door closed.

Their first stop, just inside the door, was a small room, bare except for a half dozen vinyl covered stools, a like number of gray steel lockers, and a table piled high with clear plastic bags. Pitkin handed one of the bags to Marlowe and instructed him, "This is where we suit up. In the bag you'll find a pair of coveralls, a skullcap, and plastic booties which will fit over your shoes. I would suggest you might be more comfortable without your suit coat." Indicating the lockers, he added, "You can use one of those if you like." As Marlowe fumbled with the unfamiliar apparel, Pitkin easily donned his matching attire and stood waiting for his guest to stretch the booties of his polished shoes. The physicist flashed an understanding smile at Marlowe's good-natured quips on his slightly disordered appearance.

The garb of the plutonium processing building invariably discomposd those unfamiliar with the procedures, and Pitkin found it interesting to note how quickly the protective clothing was accepted and even almost forgotten by those who wore it for the first time. He was relieved by the fact that Marlowe displayed none of the nervous giddiness he had seen in so many others who had passed through this room for the first time, the politicians and especially the departmental political appointees on their initial orientation tours. Bursting with the self-importance of being baptized in the Potomac, they were almost comical in their attempts to appear nonchalant, yet important, but confounded in both by the ridiculous apparel.

Handing Marlowe a respirator, Pitkin advised him, "You may carry this or hang it around your neck by the strap. You won't need it unless, as the airlines say, 'in the unlikely event we experience sudden decompression.' If that or any other radiation related event should occur, there will be alarms giving us plenty of time to clear the area."

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"You were serious when you spoke of decompression," observed Marlowe as they left the dressing room. I was. Did you notice the rush of air when we came in the outer door?"

"Yes. It wasn't strong, but it was very noticeable.

"You were experiencing one of our primary safety systems. It's conceptually a simple process. To understand how it works, imagine a building with a giant air pump sitting in its center. The pump is constantly drawing air out of the building. The result is a structure with interior pressure slightly less than outside pressure, and when you open a door, air always comes in. It never flows out. Now carry your visualization one step further. Think of another smaller building sitting within the larger building. The inner building is also essentially airtight. Its air pressure is again just a bit lower than the pressure of the outer building. When you enter this inner building, you'll experience the same noticeable gush of air from the outer building. That is simply the effect of the pressure differential."

"The idea is to allow nothing in the air to migrate outward."

"Exactly," said Pitkin, leading the way down a corridor to another airlock door. "In this building we have four successive negative pressure zones. We're now entering the second one. The air lock door was a near duplicate of the first, and as with the first, they were ushered through by a draft of air on their backs. "In effect, we are now inside the second building I mentioned," explained Pitkin.

"A building within a building," said Marlowe, nodding his understanding of the idea.

"Roughly correct," acknowledged Pitkin. "However, you'll remember I said four zones. We're in the second. Now, to appreciate the next one, I would suggest you think of our second building as a floor in a large department store. Major departments, furniture, house furnishings, clothing, and so forth are laid out in distinct sections with wide corridors between them. Our second building consists of those corridors."

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Leading Marlowe down a wide hallway, Pitkin turned into a somewhat narrower one and gestured first to his left, then to his right. "On both sides of us are walled off and totally enclosed operating areas. "In our analogy, they are the major departments of the store."

"I see," remarked Marlowe, "ladies hot wear on the left and Rocky Flats house furnishings on the right, cast in glowing plutonium."

Pitkin ignored the attempted humor and continued explanation. "There are a number of operating areas in this building, and although they are separated by the corridors, in the aggregate, they constitute our third negative pressure zone.

Attempting to atone for his failed humor, Marlowe spoke to show he was staying abreast of his instructor. "What you have then are a number of third buildings within the second."

"You could think of that way, yes. If you'll wait here for just a moment, I'll see it we can't go into this one. Without waiting for Marlowe's assent, Pitkin stepped to a nearby door, pulled it open and stepped inside. From where he stood, the journalist could again feel the air around him move toward the door as it closed behind the scientist's white coveralls. The door, molded in rubber, was different from the two previous air locks. This one 'had a large conventional clear glass window in the upper half, but any picture it might have shown was closed off by a window shade emblazoned with forbidding red letters spelling, "NO ADMITTANCE."

While Marlowe stood looking up and down the hall, noting that every door was shaded in the same way, the door behind which Pitkin had disappeared reopened and his tour guide was inviting him into "NO ADMITTANCE." Feeling a bit flattered by the invitation to bypass the forbidding sign, he did so without comment.

Sitting directly in front of him and immediately capturing his attention was a contraption unlike anything 'he 'had ever seen before. Its basic contour was that of a large box. Marlowe guessed it was probably eight feet in height and almost the same number of feet in length. Width was more difficult to assess because there

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were sundry outlets and connections that broke up the surface on the off side of the thing.

Arrayed around the box were windows, each about a foot on one side and two feet on the other and outlined with black molding. The first window was implanted with its long dimension aligned vertically; the second window was aligned with its long dimension horizontal to the floor. The remaining three window Marlowe could see were alternately placed in the same pattern with the lower edge of all the windows approximately five feet from the floor. Below each window, Marlowe saw what appeared to be black rubber sleeves hanging loose and empty. The sleeves were almost eerie because each ended in a black hand. At first glance it looked as that some of the fingers were missing, or at least chopped off.

High around the upper portion of the box was an assortment of dials, pipes, and tubing. A second look revealed a number of switches, levers and knobs, located at what, to his unskilled eye, were random places on the sides of the box

"If you have never seen one of these or something like it, said Pitkin, "you may not recognize this as a glove box. Before I forget to mention it, I should tell you that the interior of these boxes constitutes our fourth negative pressure area. Thus the air pressure inside the glove box is less than it is in this room. Any leakage of air that may be contaminated is, inward therefore, always

"A glove box," contrivance.

"Mechanically, echoed Marlow, still staring at the it's a number of things," explained Pitkin, walking the journalist over to one of the windows. "It's a production unit in a much larger system; it has its own nitrogen atmosphere, it is connected to other units with a conveyor line; and it has its own fire suppression system."

"Obviously these are the gloves the black sleeves." Marlowe pointed to one of the black sleeves.

"Yes, they're made of rubber impregnated with lead oxide."

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"Radiation protection?" asked Marlowe. "The whole thing is for that purpose. The windows are leaded, and the stainless steel sides of the box have lead shielding."

"Of course, I guess I was sort of taken by the sight of the gloves."

"Would you like to try one?"

"Marlowe's answer came fast upon the heels of the question, "yes, I would ... if it's not a lot of trouble or a violation of regulations."

Pitkin turned and walked a short distance to another glove box where a figure in white coveralls and skullcap was looking into a view port and adjusting some control devices. Pitkin spoke to the man for a moment. The other listened, nodded, made a final adjustment of his controls, then walked with Pitkin back to where Marlowe was still studying the contours of the glove box and eyeing its rubber arms.

"Mister Marlowe, this is John Morrison." While the two shook hands, Pitkin quickly looked through one of the windows of the nearby glove box and then back at the journalist and Morrison "John is the supervisor in the module. He and his group are in the process of doing some rather rough preliminary work on small plutonium ingots.

"Speaking to the worker, Pitkin asked, "John, I see that you have a button in there now. It seems to be isolated and clean. Would it be all right for Mister Marlowe to reach in while I hand it to him? "

"No problem, Pitkin," beamed Morrison. Glad for the break in his work-a-day routine, the plant worker volunteered to assist. me help you with those gloves, Mister Marlowe.

When he picked up the dangling rubber sleeve, Marlowe realized that what he had first seen as stubs on the black hand were simply fingers on the glove not fully pulled out when the last user withdrawn his arm and hand. Soon Marlowe was standing close against the box, looking through the window at his own rubber-clad arms. Pitkin, standing only a few feet away was likewise engaged.

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Marlowe watched while Pitkin's hands reached down and picked up a small disk. "Turn your palm up," directed Pitkin.

Marlowe did as he was told and Pitkin's black gloved hand carefully set the disk on the upturned palm. Marlowe's first sensation was the weight of the wafer, or button, as Pitkin had called it. It was surprisingly and deceptively heavy for its size that was about that of a silver dollar. Generally round and it was a dull silver color, very much like a worn nickel.

Curling his unfamiliar rubber fingers around the disk, Marlowe hefted it by raising and lowering his hand, getting a feel for the plutonium wafer. "It feels warm," he said, looking briefly at Pitkin.

"That's the radiation, but don't worry. You're fully protected by the gloves. The sample you are holding will be weighed and tested for quality. Either here or as some later stage, it can be processed like any other piece of metal. It can be machined on a lathe and shaped according to given specifications. Processing can also include cleaning the component, marking it, and sometimes welding and heating it, all according to design requirements."

Pitkin recovered the disk and replaced it in its mold. He and Marlowe withdrew from the glove box while Morrison watched, smiling all the while. "I catch you on the news whenever I can Mr. Marlowe. I sure never expected to meet you," said the worker, shaking Marlowe's hand again as Pitkin began moving toward the door.

The glove box experience had been brief, but to Marlowe, impressive. It was difficult for his mind to accept the reality of the substance he had held in his hand. He had read a number of the popular books by critics of nuclear weapons and from them had acquired an imprecise notion of how much plutonium would be required for a bomb, but he knew it was only a few kilograms. To have held such an awesome material in his hand was nothing short of incredible.

"The alchemists would be impressed." Marlowe's own voice reminded him how silent he had been for the past few moments.

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Pitkin had apparently visited that topic before. He spoke in an offhand way, as though dismissing the matter. "In the sense that plutonium is a man-made material, that's true, however, I believe the purpose of medieval chemistry was to find a way to transmute to gold."

"I dare say your plutonium is more valuable than gold."

"If you calculated the cost of production, handling, storage, and yes, using plutonium, your sum total would exceed by many factors the going price of gold. However, at the end of the line, you have a product whose uses are extremely limited." After a pause, Pitkin added, "And you have a radioactive presence which be around for a very long time."

Before Marlowe could ask the question Pitkin's remark suggested, the scientist halted at a white metal door and pushed it open. Inside a small room, they saw a stainless steel control panel atop a metal console. About waist high, the panel was divided into two sections. On the left were a couple of switches alongside four numerical readouts implanted in elongated slots. Protruding from the right side were three hand levers each with a thumb button on its top.

Sitting on an elevated stand behind the panel and situated to directly face a panel operator was what appeared to be a conventional twenty one-inch television set. Built into the wall to the left of the panel at eye level was a window approximately feet high and four feet long. Its institutional looking black metal frame was studded with bolts set some three inches apart. The glass it surrounded permitted the viewer to see, but rather imperfectly and dimly, into a very long room.

Inside the long chamber on the other side of the window, were a dozen precise rows of small metal casks. The containers looked to Marlowe very much like small beer kegs. Hanging in the middle of the room was a device designed to grasp, lift and move the small containers.

Even to Marlowe's untrained eyes, the panel was the remote control center for the mechanism he saw through the glass. "A plutonium storage room and remote handling system," he said, walking to the window.

"Right. This is where we keep unformed and partially formed plutonium components. It's also a general storage area for all radioactive materials to be kept when they are not being

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processed or handled for some reason. The device you see is called a three-axis retriever, and it's operated by way of a computer program, as you can see, it also has a manual capability. The vault itself is constructed of ten-inch thick concrete walls; it has an atmosphere of inert gas, and the window you see is double thickness of laminated glass with gelled water between the panes.

"Good God Almighty," breathed Marlowe. "Do you have plutonium in all those casks? There must be a couple of hundred of them."

"It's a safe bet a fair number are empty at any given time, than sound like I'm downplaying anything, I'll confirm seems to be your impression. There's a whole hell of a lot of plutonium in there. Don't ask me how much, because, although we have a precise inventory, the amount is classified

While Marlowe stood peering into the storage vault, Pitkin leaned against the wall, letting the newsman get his fill of the sight. So far, the tour had gone pretty much as he expected it. The only discordant note was the discomfort Pitkin felt at some of the questions. Not unexpectedly, the queries about the plant, the equipment, and the processes were simple, and he had been answering them almost without thinking. It was different with the unexpected, innocent sounding questions whose uncomfortable answers, had they been given, would have brought him personally into matters he had always publicly avoided.

Reflecting on the flow of their exchanges, Pitkin sensed he was being bracketed. If his suspicion proved to have substance and to be more than a shadow in his tired mind, he knew that Marlowe, in his own good time, would fire for effect. The realization angered him, and he toyed with the notion of cutting the tour short and sending the journalist on his way, or claiming press of business and dumping Marlowe in Hugo's lap. The more he thought about it, the more Pitkin was attracted by the prospect of getting out of Marlowe's line of fire, of closing himself in his office and stretching out on the cool leather cushion of his couch. He suddenly felt an almost desperate need for a refuge, for some time alone, for an opportunity to reject thinking, but most of all, Pitkin wanted to get away from questions about motivation and questions about his priorities.

"Pitkin," said Marlowe, still facing the window, "if even the most conservative estimates of our nuclear capabilities are

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correct, isn't this madness? Don't we see here," sweeping his hand across the face of the window, the greatest irony in mankind's experience? Brilliance ... genius ... breathtaking imagination and invention, all dedicated to one end ... the massive ... no, the total destruction of life itself?"

"It's certainly one statement which is currently quite fashionable.

"When all the rhetoric is boiled away, isn't it the only valid one?"

"Admitting madness, observing the vitality of mankind's tendency toward self destruction, and noting how technology has been an instrument of that tendency hardly seems to be a productive cut at the real issues."

"Which are?"

Pitkin again felt himself being drawn off his position as scientist and governmental official. With a discipline refined by constant application, he resisted the temptation to throw Marlowe's trite superficialities back into his famous face.

Like every critic before him who suddenly discovered the nuclear issue, Marlowe had begun by marveling over the awesome power and deadly radiation danger. That would lead him, as it had led preceding sages, to the succeeding step of fear bathing that would be ushered in by references to specific instrumentalities to be used in the destruction of the human race. Using throw weights, megatonnage, rad dosages, overpressures, heat blasts, and the newly fashionable nuclear winter, popularized for personal gain by a few careless scientists, the more avid and learned practitioners of the scare art could, by immersion, throw a child into convulsions and arrest the mental process of many adults.

Pitkin remembered one of ABC's great commercial fright movies as being a high point for fear bathers. In his own mind, he compared it to the hot tub fad. In both cases, a massive publicity campaign had made a lot of money for a few promoters. In neither case did the reality match the expectation. In the same way many people discovered they really didn't like sitting in somebody else's bath water, the public discovered the substance in the network's fear tub was, in fact, pretty stale stuff, having already been sloshed through by innumerable talk show hosts, editorial writers, and newscasters.

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In a critique following "The Day After," one observer had made his fellow commentators seem embarrassingly shallow by observing that while the scare game was easy to play, it ignored the only question worth asking, and one nobody wanted to try to answer. "After the hysteria, after the dilettantes have exhausted was with their campaign of fear," the former governmental official asked, "what exactly, what specifically, are we to do?"

Listening to the non-answers, the evasions, and the litany of irrelevancies, Pitkin had found himself troubled by the fact he heard no reasonable or honest answer. He was haunted by the prospect that there wasn't any,

"Mister Marlowe," said Pitkin aloud, ignoring the earlier ingratiating suggestion to adopt first name familiarity,¹¹ the issues which are discussed in the general context of nuclear weapons have been parsed in every newspaper and news magazine in the county. The lunacy of unringing the nuclear bell, of unlearning nuclear science and of trusting other competing nations to do the same is too staggering a folly for me to comprehend. Yet that notion is entertained and is abroad in the land, on the highest levels by people who simply propose to walk away and pretend that a half dozen or more developing nations already have nuclear capability which they will most certainly use in circumstances they deem to be appropriate. Now that is as much an editorial as you will ever get from me. I don't mean to be short with you, but I cannot imagine any purpose whatever that would be served by our discussing my views any further.

Marlowe eyed him for a moment. Pitkin watched what he believed to be a thin line of anger draw his interrogator's mouth into a tight line. The moment quickly passed as Marlowe turned and examined the control panel, and apparently dismissed the episode from his mind. He asked, "What's our next stops?"

"Earlier you mentioned our ongoing construction program, since we had planned to take a look at plutonium recapture operations, I thought we could combine the two interests by going to the newest building we have, the plutonium recovery building."

Marlowe appeared to listening, but his mind was on quite another track. What Pitkin had thought to be anger would have more properly been characterized as self-reproach. The newsman realized he had presumed a bit too much and had pressed his subject more than the fragile bridge between them would bear.

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He had profited from the exchange, however. He had discovered Pitkin Waay obviously had given the building, and yes, the use of nuclear weapons a great deal of thought. Marlowe also learned something about just how closely Pitkin held his own counsel. The journalist had no evidence to support his theory, but he strongly suspected there was a deeply cutting ambivalence in the scientist's attitude. "Did he believe in the weapons program," he wondered, "If not, why did he continue his work at the facility? Maybe Pitkin was a man waiting for an opportunity."

Before they walked out of the processing building, Pitkin halted at what almost appeared to be an elaborate bathroom scale. Pitkin himself stepped up onto the little platform and stood for only an instant, then stepped off and invited Marlowe to perform the same exercise. Pitkin completed the radiation check by taking a small device from a nearby shelf and passing it over his head, and up and down his body much the same way airport guards look for metal on passengers. The same sweep was made of Marlowe, with the same negative result. As they began their walk through the plutonium recovery building, Pitkin explained how they operated on the principle of extracting plutonium from its carrier material by using one of two methods. "For want of better terms, we simply call them either 'slow' or 'fast.' Generally, when we are working with material with low plutonium residues, we use the slow recovery process."

Stopping here and there, Pitkin explained how slow recovery usually began with incineration to reduce the bulk of the material and to convert the metal compounds into oxides. They watched the operator of a remote unit begin to work some incinerated waste through an acid leaching process. Then, Pitkin led his guest through a laboratory where further refining work was in process, explaining how the end product was a nitrate solution sufficiently concentrated that it could be combined with a like stream from the fast recovery process.

"Shades of my college chemistry lab," quipped Marlowe, "we didn't have any concept of what you're doing here"

"It's only that you don't recognize the process. The chemistry is fundamentally simple, and a good chem student would be able to figure most of what we're doing pretty quickly," said Pitkin.

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As they walked through the area in the complex where fast recovery was performed, Pitkin incorporated the remark about college chemistry into his explanations and emphasized the chemical processes. "Here we work with source material which is relatively pure. We can begin with oxide dissolution and leaching which yields a plutonium nitrate solution. We follow with evaporation and precipitation to get to a solid plutonium peroxide which in turn is converted to plutonium oxide by heating. Our oxide is converted to plutonium tetrafluoride by applying anhydrous fluoride spray. Finally, we get to plutonium metal by a reduction of the tetrafluoride."

"Enough. I'm glad I went into journalism," said Marlowe with a surrendering shake of his head. "I recognize the general outline of what you assure me is a fundamental process. But despite excellent attempt to translate it into simple language, I'm lost. All this seems terribly efficient. But if you are able to recover plutonium by these methods, why do we have waste? I suppose I'm thinking of contaminated oil which is what brought me here."

"We have two problems we haven't solved yet. First, some materials simply require so much processing, it's not practical to pursue the plutonium. Second, we often have only trace amounts and recovery is not possible by any method. For example, remember the radiation check we did before leaving the processing building? If one of us had picked up enough plutonium to register the meters, the article of contaminated apparel would have become waste, but plutonium in such a minuscule amount would be impossible to recover. The types of wastes created that way are packaged and shipped to a secure depository in Idaho."

"A bit scary if one thinks of contamination of his skin or hair. What would happen in that situation?"

"Often it can be simply picked off with sticky tape, something like removing pet hair. If we can't remove it that way, a shower may be required. Anticipating your question, the next step would be a session with a health physicist in the laboratory where the radiation would be located and removed."

An hour and many questions later, the two men emerged from the suiting up room without their protective clothing and headed for the administration building. Marlowe, in no apparent hurry, ambled along pointing and asking questions. Pitkin, in his deliberate, studied way, answered.

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CHAPTER FOUR

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The usually ordered and primly neat office of Hugo Chase had a slightly disheveled look about it. Hugo's polished desktop was bearing an unaccustomed load of files, but arranged in four neat stacks. Two white cardboard boxes, whose origin had been Xerox Corporation and whose purpose had been to contain paper for duplicating machines sat near the desk under the overhanging top. Sitting out of place on the cushions of a leather chair was a stack of imposing green paperbound Senate Committee hearing reports.

Behind the desk, the plant Director was caught up in his work, and he apparently did not hear the partially open door swing back, nor did he immediately realize he had been joined by his deputy and by newsman Leighton Marlowe. Hugo Chase's head was inclined over an array of typewritten pages. While one hand held a paper against the desk, the other, wielding a red felt tip pen hovered above, ready to dart down for a quick deletion or to settle on the paper for a scribbled notation

Pitkin, who recognized the activity for what it was, frowned. Marlowe, who had no suspicion that things were other than normal for the office of a busy manager, did not sense anything out of the ordinary.

"Hugo, if you're too busy ..." began Pitkin. "of course not," replied Hugo making an especially furious deletion. "Have a seat."

"If this is a bad time ..." Marlowe's unfinished offer to withdraw was cut short,

"Not at all, not at all," Hugo assured him, finally tossing the pen down onto the bleeding paper. Seeing Pitkin approach the book-laden chair, Hugo said, "Just set the damn things on the floor, I'll be needing them yet this evening.."

"Evening work?" asked Marlowe lightly. "Sounds rather serious."

"Bureaucratic rites of spring," Pitkin explained. "Every year we make our pilgrimage to Washington to appeal for alms."

"Forgive my cynical deputy, Mister Marlowe. In his own curious way, he's making reference to congressional hearings on our authorization and appropriations."

"You have my profound sympathy," said Marlowe easing himself into the chair whose companion was still being ungently relieved of its green books. "Remember, I've lived and worked in

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that city for almost forty years. Having sat through more money hearings than I care to think about, I know very well what you have to go through. The fiscal process of the federal government has always been ponderous and cumbersome, but the last few years have been chaos."

Accidentally, or perhaps intentionally, Marlowe had hit upon a subject near, but not dear, to the heart of Hugo Chase. Marlowe had also, by chance, or by design, taken precisely the correct approach to the topic. Hugo seized upon the newsman's words "Chaos is a good word, a damn good and proper word for what we've been seeing in the budget process." Catching himself, Hugo looked sharply at Marlowe. "If I'm going to be quoted, strike everything after 'hello'."

Leaning forward a bit as if to lend emphasis to his words, Marlowe looked first at Pitkin, then fully and steadily at Hugo "Pitkin, Mister Chase, I have not risen in the news business by reporting off-the-record comments or by making stories out of the kind of conversation we're having here. When I'm looking for copy and planning a news piece, I'll raise my flags and you'll know what I'm about. Besides," he added with a broad smile, "Congress is so screwed up and it's such common knowledge, I couldn't pay the network to carry a story about it."

Laughing and bobbing his head in concurrence, Hugo asked, "Did Pitkin offer you coffee?"

"He did, but I'm afraid coffee doesn't do pleasant things to my stomach. In any event, I've been here longer than I planned, probably missed my flight, and certainly demolished my schedule for the next couple of days. If I don't get moving in a few minutes, things will only get worse."

"Well, now that you have seen something of our facility what's your impression of it?" asked Hugo, remembrance of the morning's events edging back into his voice. Instructive is a first reaction. Pitkin here," inclining his head at the scientist whose face remained impassively neutral, was most thoughtful and, above all, patient. His explanations were in a language even I could understand. I'm not an expert just yet, but I know far more than I did when I arrived this morning."

"Sounds like a good tour. What did you see?"

"Many things, but our two general areas were the processing and recovery buildings."

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Hugo shot a quick glance at Pitkin while waiting for Marlowe to continue. The newsman made a mental note of the Director's reaction, as he continued his commentary on the plant." To be hard bottom honest, Mister Chase, and to capsulize my impression, I'd say I'll leave here petrified. While I have been reassured and given some comfort by seeing first hand the exacting care and precautions you use in doing exceedingly difficult work, I find myself left with the thought of the only potential the use of your product. admire, Another way of saying all this would be for me to admire, in my layman's way, the mechanical facts which attend the handling of plutonium. Your operation here is a part, a critical and finely honed one to be sure in a large and complex machine. Aside form the lesser fact that I am favorably impressed by your efficiency, I am utterly terrorized by the nightmare which nuclear weapons have nailed to my psyche. At this moment, I can tell you that my subject and my concern is not a relatively minor spill of contaminated oil, rather it is the manufacture and use of plutonium in a civilized world."

Hugo was almost matter-of-fact in his response. "You're certainly honest about your position. It's fairly stated and I believe I understand your feelings. It hardly needs to be said but we obviously don't agree on very many aspects of the weapons program. I'm sure we do agree, however, that the tour was a good idea. It's cleared the air and ... shall I say, eliminated some rather unfortunate misunderstandings."

As Hugo spoke, Pitkin had the feeling there was a hint of relief in his superior's words. He realized Hugo was taking what waggish bureaucrat had called a backyard approach. The gist of it was, "things are fine in my yard, let the neighborhood take care of itself."

The words carrying the message that Marlowe's attention had been deflected from the contaminated oil flap at Rocky Flats were, by the backyard standard, sweet music in the Director's ears. Such a positive development was not an insubstantial reason for Hugo's noticeable change in attitude and his compromising tone.

Hugo became the cordial host, asking if Marlowe needed to use a telephone, offering secretarial service to reschedule his flight of Denver, and making standard, polite offers of cooperation to provide further information at some undefined time in the future.

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Standing, Marlowe extended his hand to Hugo and, in turn, to Pitkin. "Since you will be coming to Washington for your hearings, perhaps you would permit me to buy you both a drink. As a matter of fact, let's make it dinner at the Press Club, my treat."

"Time permitting, we'll take you up on that," promised Hugo.

After seeing Marlowe all the way out the front door, Hugo was instantly all business. "Time, damn it, time," he grouched. "Pitkin we've got a hell of a lot to do and precious little time to get it done." As he sailed through the reception area on the way back to his office, he called out, "Coffee, Etta."

"But Mister Chase," she began.

"No damn 'buts,' just bring coffee."

There were occasions, admittedly few, when Etta Westridge understood that it was not politic to trifle with her boss. This was such a moment. With a grand, eloquent shrug and with eyebrows high on her forehead, she disappeared down the hallway in the direction of the little room that housed one of the administration building's coffeepots. Back in his office, Hugo flung a hand in the direction of the clattering boxes and the unseated green volumes. He challenged his deputy, "With press conferences and guided tours of the whole damn place, how are we ever going to get testimony ready for those hearings next week?"

"Hugo," suggested Pitkin patiently, "we'll do exactly what we've done every year before. We'll write what we believe is a credible statement of our needs. We'll add a couple of throw away options, and prepare some justifications for each. Using last year's format, we can plug in the numbers and break them down on a spreadsheet. After we have the whole thing nicely typed, we toss it on the desk in headquarters and watch them rewrite every damn paragraph."

"I wish it were as cut and dried as you say. This year they've sent us new instructions for layout, changed code numbers, and asked for more detailed justification on all items over one hundred thousand dollars."

"Our leaders in Washington change instructions on budget testimony preparation as often as they change their socks, every three days."

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Hugo, not amused, merely grumped agreement.

"Seriously, Hugo, we've already put it together, sent it back there and corrected their revisions or revised their corrections ... whatever. There's only so much we can realistically do.

"Backup, Pitkin. We need to be ready for anything. It never fails, one of those anti-everything Senators always manages to come up with a new angle. They usually have just enough substance to sound plausible. They get their headline and we end up peeling .egg from our faces. The only thing we can do is get as damn prepared as humanly possible. That's especially true since the Committee has scheduled separate hearings just for us. It's an unusual procedure, and quite frankly, I'm worried. We may beheaded straight for a battle over decommissioning this entire facility."

"We don't need to worry about what the questions will be this year," Pitkin assured him. "This go-around it will be the barrels. And for whatever it's worth, I agree that it's decision time on the plant. Congress has been sitting on the edge of that issue for a long time -I suspect we're pretty damn close to a shut down or at a minimum, removal of the plutonium work."

Hugo shoved a stack of papers to one side and accepted a steaming cup of coffee from a tight-lipped Etta Westridge who entered and exited the office without a word. "You're right, Pitkin, but back to the matter at hand, we need to deal with the barrels. While you were out with Marlowe, I've scoured these waste depository registers," indicating the files on his desk, "and there isn't any explanation for the things being out there. It may be we'll never be able to account for them or reconstruct the events which put them in the ground" As an afterthought, he added, "Speaking of our barrels, reminds me of your crew out there. Has Harvey been able to set up a schedule that will keep a couple of men out there day and night? It's priority, so, if he's short of people, he can pull them off something else."

"I haven't talked to him since this morning, but I sent Jenny out there. He wanted to show me something, but since I was stuck with Marlowe, I asked her to see what it was. If there was a scheduling problem, I'm sure they worked it out."

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"Show you something?" echoed Hugo absently, his mind still on barrels and committee hearings.

"That's what the man said," shrugged Pitkin.

"I see. Well, Henry's something of a fusspot. I'm sure Jenny can tend to it, whatever it is." Hugo's dismissal of the subject was a manager's response to a detail which was on another track and more appropriate for subordinate handling. "The important thing now is follow-up on the barrel site, but I'll leave that to you. I've got to spend the rest of the day and tonight going through this testimony."

Leafing forward and back again through the pages of his desk calendar, Hugo continued reviewing his time-crushed agenda. "Tomorrow, Lamont will have his hands full with the press. He said he expected there'd be requests for access to the plant for feature stories. We know some of those people will want to get back out to the site for photographs, and there are always questions on details. We both know how Lamont gets a bit careless in what he says to the media..."

"Careless?" Interrupted Pitkin. "Hell, he's a babbling, gushing fountain of misinformation and contradiction."

"I know your feelings on that, Pitkin," said Hugo, shaking his head as if trying to ward off further disparagement of his media relations officer. "He's here, we both know how and why, and we're stuck with him."

"Yes, but if keeping him on our payroll is the price of keeping one senator happy, I say it's too high."

"Eldon Moffat isn't just any senator. He's a Colorado Senator, and he swings considerable weight on some important committees."

"He's also a superficial and pretentious ass."

"Remember to tell him that, Pitkin. We'll be in his office next week. Meanwhile, we've got to deal with Lamont. He was in this afternoon with his old story about how he couldn't keep up without a full time assistant. As before, I told him we'd consider it. I also told him that, without exception, all future press releases would require written concurrence by this office, either your signature or mine."

"And he agreed?"

"I didn't give him any choice."

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"By golly, Hugo," intoned Pitkin; "I will personally endorse a commendation for your personnel file. Do I have your permission to assign Jenny the job of sitting as sort of doorkeeper? We could route Lamont's draft press releases through her. She could read them for technical accuracy and either send them back for correction or forward them to us."

"I wonder if that might not just produce another of his damn pious protests. He'd certainly resent having to go through her."

"I'm not so sure," countered Pitkin. "Lamont fancies himself to be something of a ladies man, and he already uses every excuse he can think of to 'consult' with her on some of the stuff he writes. If we put it on a 'work with' basis, I'm willing to bet he won't say a word."

"What about Jenny?"

"She hates to see him skidding around on the facts as much as we do, and it really wouldn't take much of her time."

"Well, I suppose it's worth a try. You want to tell him?"

"Nope. I'll have Jenny do it. Using her tact is part of the plan."

Hugo shook his head, signifying he had reservations, but was willing to accept Pitkin's handling of the matter. "Next item," he said consulting scribbled notes on his calendar, "is the recovery building. We need some data on the cost benefits of operating it for the first two quarters of this fiscal year. We don't need it for the testimony, but your favorite legislator, Senator Moffat, has asked for some data. I suppose he's going to use it in a speech. I know he's a pain, but his request is an opportunity as well. If we give him solid information, we may be able to bring him around a bit."

"Those numbers are not going to be very flattering to our operation, Hugo. Total down time has been accumulating pretty fast. As soon as we repair or replace one thing, another goes out. The whole damn building has been a disaster ever since we began installing the damn junk equipment from Arbonne. Now there's a subject the Senate should get interested in."

"On Arbonne and the recovery building, we are in total agreement for a change. But there isn't any way we can initiate anything with the Committee. It's been a headquarters foul up from the beginning and we're only a couple of country boys who'd be well advised to keep our speculations to ourselves." After a

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pause, Hugo's eyes glinted, "Damn tempting though." Taking a sip of his coffee, he sputtered and slammed it onto the desk. "Worst stuff I've ever tasted. I should've known better than to ask for it." He glowered at the door and, with a grunt, returned to business. "Work up an outline, then, and we can talk about it some more before we leave. By the way, is your schedule clear for a Wednesday afternoon flight?"

"Since I'm reasonably certain your secretary," strong emphasis on "your", "has already made reservations, I'll make sure it's clear."

Ignoring the remark, Hugo asked, "Can you think of anything we need to discuss before I bail out of this place?"

"No, but I thought you were working tonight."

"I am, before Shamballa's piano recital and after Shamballa's recital."

"I'm glad you're admitting to life outside the plant, Hugo, because it reminds me that I'm leaving around noon tomorrow."

"Fishing?" Asked Hugo with a sincere curiosity that was surprising to Pitkin.

"With Breck and Cope. Want to join us?" The invitation was a polite reflex and not made with any thought it would be accepted.

It wasn't. However Hugo's answer was almost wishful. "I'll take a rain check and one of these days I'll cash it in. Recently I've been thinking about getting away from this place and taking a look at how the rest of the world lives. But thanks for the offer, Pitkin."

The pensive slump in Hugo Chase's shoulders made Pitkin wish he had pressed his invitation and even insisted that Hugo join him on the trip to the mountains. The pressure of recent events was weighing more heavily on the Director of Rocky Flats than Pitkin had realized, and Pitkin sensed that the seams of his plant world were being strained as never before.

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CHAPTER FIVE

The battered pickup bounced and careened up an ill-defined and seemingly nonexistent vehicle trail. If there was an immediate purpose in the truck's erratic behavior, it was simply to avoid encounters with the larger of the rocks strewn in its path. The greater strategic plan was more apparent, but no less a challenge than skirting the sharp edged rocks. It was to advance up the mountainside, intact.

Whatever effective discipline there was over the truck's progress was being applied by old Cope Gunnison. Like many of

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his generation, Cope seemed ill-at-ease in the driver's seat. He gripped the cracked, discolored steering wheel with both hands, leaned forward slightly, and stared grimly through the windshield as though he was afraid the truck would rampage out of control if he took his eyes off the ground ahead, even for an instant.

All the while, however, Cope was quite animated. It may have been the perilously random road, or it may have been a loose steering mechanism, or, still more likely, it may have been only Cope and his driving habits. But, whatever the cause, the old driver's elbows flailed wildly, wrestling the steering wheel as though it were a thing alive. While his arms pumped to and fro, Cope's head reacted only to the most severe maneuvers of the truck, and his misshapen, felt hat rode comfortably enough, pulled down firmly over his unevenly cut gray hair.

The old driver's face was a tanned brown mask, wrinkled by seventy years of ranch work. A moustache, which in years past would have been described as a handlebar, now drooped and sagged over his mouth. With his eyes riveted on the obstacles confronting his pickup, Cope seemed oblivious to his companions.

Sitting next to him and immediately at risk was a ten-year-old boy who sat flattened against the back seat cushion. Although the boy was endeavoring to look out the windows at the increasingly steep mountainside, his first concern was personal safety. Accordingly, Breck Waay kept a keen eye on the unpredictable elbows and gave them as much steerage room as possible. The long-billed, red baseball cap perched on the boy's head accentuated a thin face, which bore traces of a lingering suspicion.

Earlier in the journey and while the road was relatively passable, Breck had ventured an observation on a rather remarkable bump. Even as he had spoken, Cope's elbow swept over the top of his head dislodging the cap. Breck had restored the cap to its former position, but now he endured the vagaries of the ride without comment.

Pitkin Waay was riding shotgun, his right forearm resting on the ledge of the open window, his left arm on top of the seat behind his son's head. With his left hand gripping the empty rifle rack and with the door on his right side, Pitkin was quite securely braced against the jolting lurches of the truck.

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Indeed, as he swayed and rolled with the jouncing ride, he was obviously enjoying it. The random clouds of dust swirling into the cab and the breezes, which ferried them there, had been sweeping the tension from Pitkin's face and he smiled easily at the by-play between Breck and Cope. Pitkin's baseball cap, a tattered blue bearing the enigmatic label, "Coors Ain't Rice Juice", was casually perched far back on his head. His boldly checkered western cut shirt hung three metal snaps open around his neck, and the sleeves of the shirt were rolled well up onto brown forearms. In these and all other aspects of his outward appearance, Pitkin Waay was, under the circumstances, a very ordinary figure, but the expression on his face was evidence that he was a very contented one.

Pitkin was glad that old Cope, in his grumpy way, had refused to consider taking the trip to the mountains in Pitkin's jeep, and had instead insisted on driving his own battered pickup. Pitkin wasn't worried about what some might have considered to be a hazardous ride because Cope knew the mountains better than almost anyone, and, on this trail, the old rancher's knowledge was second to none. And despite the fact that Cope seemed to be at war with his pickup, he knew its capabilities and was sensitive to its limitations. Of course, Cope would not have considered anyone except himself competent to drive, and Pitkin, to his intense satisfaction, was left free to watch the spectacular scenery and let it crowd out the concerns he had hoped to leave on the windswept flats below.

Had Pitkin and his son been newcomers to the mountains, their attention would have been drawn from the scenery and become frozen on the precipitous slopes, which kept edging ever closer to both sides of the vehicle. Had such a diversion controlled the direction of their gaze, they would have missed a world of various and compelling intensity.

The array of wild flowers, contrasting the most brilliant colors with the most subtle and setting the most delicate shapes alongside the robust and bold, was a spectacle seemingly designed to expand the imagination of even the most languid spirit. One's eyes could only have been tempted away from such a scene by the infinite variety of form and outline presented by the surrounding yellow pine, ponderosa, and blue spruce, or by the panoramic pattern of green on the far distant mountainsides underlining the jagged

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profile of snow-whitened gray rocks which rose against the blue sky. In the midst of such offerings, there would have been no harbor for any thought that theirs was anything but a journey of exhilarating renewal.

However, even the keenest appreciation for the surrounding beauty would not have kept them from being glad that their destination was nearer than the rugged mountain peak ahead which seemed to dart from one side to the other as the pickup labored through the trees. Their ears could not have endured a longer journey. The muffler on the truck, savagely pelted by rocks from hundreds of similar trails, had long ago forgotten its purpose, and the bellowing engine, thus unsuppressed, made even the shortest speech difficult. However, Cope, who was accustomed to the noise of the pickup, defied the roar to announce they were nearing their destination.

"Jest ahead, folks," he called his voice gravelly from the accumulated dust in his throat.

"Less than a mile, just through those trees," Pitkin called back.

Cope confirmed the estimate with a nod, foregoing further competition with his thundering pickup. Thankfully, he did silence it somewhat. Since the incline had lessened considerably and, in fact, nearly leveled off, he was able to shift gears. The reduced noise of third gear was a distinct relief from the ear pounding administered by second.

Pitkin found the relief remarkable. "Sure is easier on the eardrums." Then with a solemn face, he called, "Say, Cope, did you know you've got a bad muffler?"

As he wheeled the pickup into the shade of a narrow trail, which tracked through a heavy stand of timber, the old rancher kept his eyes fastened on his driving, but replied by addressing his young passenger. "Tell your pap, his smart mouth ain't appreciated. Complainin' about a free ride is a sure sign he's got a bad case of cityitis."

Pitkin laughed and replied by way of the same messenger. "Breck, you tell Cope there, I was only being helpful and trying to save him the expenses of an encounter with the highway patrol."

Replying directly Cope scoffed, "I ain't had this thing on the highway fer years."

"Seven years, judging by your inspection sticker."

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"Ain't yuh heard? Yuh don't need 'spections no more in Colorado."

"Yes, but mufflers are still required, and most civilized folks are glad to use them."

The discussion was interrupted by Breck. The somewhat straighter trail through the trees and the reduced speed of the truck had relieved him of the necessity for constant vigilance against being thumped by Cope's swinging elbows, and he had slid to the forward edge of the seat where had been watching for evidence of their destination. "There it be," he cried, delighted to have been the first to see slivers of water through the closely standing lodgepole pine.

Another expectant moment and the pickup rolled out of the trees. There, in the middle of a meadow, was the lake, shimmering in the slanting rays of the sun like a polished silver coin. Their eyes swept along the perimeter of the water and trees, and they saw, to their satisfaction, they were in sole possession of the mountain oasis.

"From the look of the road, I didn't think we'd have much company," said Cope wheeling the truck to a halt.

When he twisted the ignition key, they were enveloped in a welcomed silence. For an instant, the stillness was heavy, having been introduced by a great and persistent sound. But it was also soothing, since the bellowing of the truck had gone on almost beyond the point of toleration.

Cope shoved his door open and climbed out of the cab. An exuberant Breck followed him, but Pitkin was content to sit for a brief moment studying the face of an old friend.

Routt Lake was cupped in the gently sloping shoulder of the mountain which, as a boy, he had named "high scrappy." The top of the mountain, an easy and leisurely thirty-minute climb from the small lake, was the apex of a fat triangle whose base was the stand of timber surrounding the water and whose upper reaches were eroded and bare rock. The arrangement was ideally suited to catch the winter snow and hold it until the warm spring sun could transform it to water, most of which accumulated in the natural catch basin tucked away in the trees.

The site was remote and difficult to reach. Most fishermen, especially those unfamiliar with the area, were attracted to larger lakes and streams, situated closer to better roads and

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stocked by the State Fish and Game Commission. The people who did come to Routt Lake were usually long time residents who knew better than to talk too much about it and who were content to catch only what they called "pan size" fish.

If asked about the lake, Cope's standard answer was, "The fish you get out are too short for the trip in." Yet, Pitkin knew it was one of Cope's favorite places.

Cope had brought Pitkin to the lake for the first time when Pitkin was a small boy. On that trip the two of them had spent a week, fishing in the mornings and evenings and hiking the mountain from midmorning to late afternoon. Years later, Pitkin realized the grand adventure had been a diversion designed to help him forget the death of his father who, injured in a freak accident on the family ranch, had died suddenly in the midst of what had been thought to be a normal recovery.

As an adolescent, Pitkin had been to the lake a dozen times, always with Cope. As a student at the university, he had been to Routt Lake only once, but that had been with a fraternity brother and two girls. Fishing, on that occasion, had been a very thin pretext, but no one had raised an objection to the absence of fishing poles.

Despite his many vague promises and a few tentative plans, scotched by the demands of work, this was Pitkin's first visit to the lake in over a dozen years. And he felt very much at ease and comfortable.

"You gonna sit in there and gape around or help unload this gear?" growled Cope banging down the tailgate of the old truck.

Pitkin welcomed the interruption. His reflections had been drifting toward matters better left in the past. There was a camp to be pitched, and he was suddenly eager to be about it.

Cope had chosen a sheltered clearing along the tree line a long stone's throw from the edge of the water. In the center of the area some earlier camper had constructed a neat rock-rimmed fire pit which was half full of caked black ashes. The grass, already sparse and weak because of the almost perpetual shade of the enveloping trees, had been worn down where tents had been set and where earlier visitors had tramped away what little strength it had.

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It was the work of only a few minutes to transfer the bundles, bags, and camping paraphernalia from the truck to the clearing. While Breck and Pitkin carried, Cope shoved the gear from the front to the rear of the truck. Pitkin chided him for taking the easy job. "I see you gave us the walking and carrying work."

"By damn, that's somethin' comin' from a low down pizzen peddler."

Pitkin had hoped to leave the plant and all references to it behind, and he cringed at the use of the label old Cope had long ago pinned on him. However, he was determined that nothing should mar the beginning of the adventure, so he tried to brush off the label with a lighthearted threat.

"By golly, I'm going to take you back into the plant and give you the special tour."

"Hey," interrupted Breck, "can I go, too?"

"Shoot," scoffed Cope, "I ain't dumb enough to walk in there again. That damn 'tonium blowin' around, burnin' yuhr throat. It's bad enough ever time I get near Denver. Yuh can see the yellow stuff jest settin' there, even hidin' the buildin's. Inside? Hell fire, Pitkin, how do yuh stand it. And Breck, don't yuh let him take yuh near the place. The 'tonium'll take the hair right outa yuhr nose."

As they talked and worked, the camp took shape. The tent, a blazing red nylon arrangement which had been advertised as "alpine comfort for four," blossomed around its aluminum stems. Coolers and cooking stores were placed in convenient locations, and coats and sweaters laid in handy stacks near the tent. Pine cones and fallen branches were cleared from the immediate area around the fireplace, and the dead ashes were removed from the little circle of stones.

Breck took upon himself the task of unrolling and arranging the three sleeping bags, placing his own squarely in the middle of the tent, his father's on his left and Cope's on his right. He then unzipped them, and spread them open, exposing them to the freshening air.

Without being asked, the youngster sprinted off in search of firewood while Pitkin and Cope sorted through the large coolers for the food they would cook that evening. Cope sternly reminded Pitkin that the food stores would have to be kept in the truck at night. "Damn bears," he muttered by way of explanation.

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Pitkin had never seen a bear anywhere near the lake. Neither had any of his friends who fished there on occasion. But Cope was adamant. He had an abiding, dark concern over the presence of marauding bears and seemed convinced that securing the food in the truck was a necessary precaution. Pitkin thought the greater danger, if there was one, was from pack rats or even the ever present camp robber, a large blue bird known to swoop down and take food from under the very noses of unwary campers.

With greater care and agility than one would have expected to find in his big scarred hands, Cope sorted and untangled the fishing tackle. He made no pretense to being a fly fisherman and selected for himself a casting rod. He left Pitkin's bamboo rod in its tube and laid it to one side. He then carefully assembled a new sectional aluminum casting rod, whipped it vigorously over his head, squinted along the beads, then dismantled it and laid it casually among the remaining assortment of extra rods.

Pitkin was sorting through camp supplies and making preliminary arrangements for dinner, and Cope was squatting over a box of lures when Breck returned staggering under a load of dried tree limbs. After arranging them in a stack convenient to the fireplace, he wandered over and began watching Cope.

The old man looked up and growled, "Whatcha starin' at? Instead of standin' around, why don't yuh string up yuhr pole?"

The youngster was not at all cowed by Cope's tone. He had learned, as had Pitkin before him, to sense when Cope was blustering. Obediently, while both men covertly watched, Breck walked over to the rods and began sorting through them. Suddenly his hands darted into the pile and brought forth the sections of the new aluminum rod.

"Say, Cope," he breathed, "I never saw this one before. It's new isn't it?"

As he spoke, the quick hands were fitting the pieces together and aligning them. Whipping the rod over his head, he exclaimed, "This is just like the one we were looking at in the Sportsman." Trying to sound casual he asked, "Would you mind if I tried it out for a while?"

"Naw, I don't care," said Cope over his shoulder. "I've got the fish catcher here," indicating the rod he had selected for

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himself. "Far as I'm concerned, yuh can have the damn thing; it don't look like much to me."

The boy, now fully aware of what had transpired, rushed over and lightly touched the oldster's shoulder. "You went back to the store and bought it. Thanks, Cope. Would you...would you really... uh."

"What in thunderation are yuh hem-hawing about. No, I don't want to use it. All the new and shiny'll jest scare every fish in the lake. Maybe you ought to bury it in the mud fer a few day before yuh go flashin' it around."

"No, siree," cried the boy, now joining in the banter. "There probably won't be any fish left after I get this going."

"Well, yuh better string it up and stop talkin'," admonished Cope, still picking and sorting in his tackle box.

Challenges and exaggerated claims flying, Cope and the youngster were soon at the edge of the water snapping their lures through the late afternoon sky. Pitkin fussed around the campsite for a few minutes and waved a shouted, "Hey, Dad," when Breck thought he had a solid strike.

After a time, Pitkin opened the cooler and pulled a beer from the icy water, opened it and took a long thirsty drink. He opened another for Cope, a Seven-Up for Breck and went to join them, content to fish later in his own good time.

The casting, the calling out to report strikes, and the landing of a half dozen keepers continued through the idle hours of the late afternoon until the red which was left in the western sky by the fallen sun began to fade and dissolve into a darkening blue. When the fishing was concluded for the day, Cope and Pitkin returned to the campsite and kindled a fire in the rock pit. By the time the flames were strong enough to give off warmth, the evening air was cool enough to drive the fisherman closer to the fire.

"You know," said Pitkin, as he added fuel to the little fire and poked it toward greater energy, "the great thing about camping with a ten year old is that they have the enthusiasm to do a lot of the scut work, the intelligence to know they're being had, but the youth not to give a damn."

Cope looked in the direction of Breck whose slim figure was outlined against the lake where he was busily at work cleaning the last of the day's catch. "Yup," he grunted. "He's a

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good boy, Pitkin. It's a goddamn crime you keep him penned up in town. Why don't you send him out to my place fer a month or so. I got a couple of new ponies he could work with, and he's old enough to help out with chores."

"Cope, I appreciate the offer, but you don't have time to kid sit a ten year old."

"Bunk," shot back Cope. "I spend my time doin' jest what I damn please. He's good help and good company, and if it would make the boy happy, he'd be welcome."

Tossing another piece of wood on the fire, Pitkin spoke, perhaps a bit defensively, "Cope, we both know Breck thinks the world of you and the ranch, and, given a choice, he'd spend all his time there. We also know that I haven't given him the time and attention he needs. God knows I've tried to get close to him, Cope, but somehow, for some reason, I haven't. After Hayden...", both felt the quiet moment grow sullen and heavy. Pitkin, quickly composed, began again, "After his mother died, you raised the boy for the better part of a year. Ever since, you've been very special to him, but I'm concerned that he's becoming a burden to you. After all, you're not getting any younger and Breck is reaching a stage where he's sometimes difficult to manage."

"Burden is it?" huffed Cope. "I was yer dad's best friend, Pitkin. I helped put him in the ground. I've known you, boy to man fer almost forty years. In my book, like it or not, you and Breck is family, and family, real family, can't be a burden. Besides, you're all strung up with things at yuhr business, and Breck needs some time up here in the mountains. When you were his age, you practically lived here at the ranch. Yuh were even a fair hand at chores. Things shouldn't be different fer Breck."

There was a long moment during which neither man spoke. It was Cope who broke the impasse. "I don't want to step outa line, Pitkin, but someone's got to say it. You'll keep on ignorin' the boy until yuh bury his mother. It's that damned flat simple, and someone's got to rub yuhr nose in it, for Breck's sake."

"You see it in him, Cope?"

"Every day that he spends at the ranch. Part of it is yuhr infernal business. Jest too much plant and not enough home. Ain't no business worth the amount of time yuh give the Flats."

"Speaking of business, and, believe me, I hate to, I do have to go to Washington for a few days next week and..." As he

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spoke, Pitkin looked closely at Cope and immediately was caught by the sudden change in mood and the old man's amused attempt to maintain a serious look. The moustache drooped too much, the wrinkled skin around the eyes was studiously drawn too tight in support of what was supposed to be a frown. But the devilment in the eyes was revealed by the dancing firelight.

"Oh, Hell," exclaimed Pitkin. "I think I've been had. Breck told you about the trouble at the plant and the trip to Washington, so the two of you thought it might just be a good time for him to visit the ranch. I'll bet the whole thing was his idea."

"I'd have to say he was invited," admitted Cope.

"I certainly wouldn't want to upset your plans," chuckled Pitkin, "and a week would sure give me some breathing room..."

"Two'd be better."

"We'll see. I should be back next Friday. I'll come out and eat one of those stringy steaks you get off those half-breed steers. By then I'll have a better handle on some of the stuff that's been piling up at the plant, at least I hope so."

As his father finished speaking, Breck stepped into the light of the fire and triumphantly held up a string of dripping fish. "Boy, is that water cold, but look, I finished the whole mess." Looking from Pitkin to Cope, he realized he had been the subject of a conversation, and he knew without asking he would be spending some time at the ranch.

Experience told him the matter would be better left for later discussion. However, he would have burst, if he had not spoken. The fish came to his rescue by reminding him of one of Cope's frequently cited rules.

"Gee, Dad, what are you going to eat?" Adopting the language of the author, he continued, "Them as catches and them as cleans, eats. Them as sits on their," here the youngster discretely substituted 'behind' for the more eloquently original word used by Cope, "eats the leavin's."

In the same vein, Pitkin rejoined, "Them as sneaks around and plots against their elders may get their fanny kicked."

Cope diplomatically changed the immediate subject. "And them as jest sits and yaps at each other ain't gettin' any fish fried."

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Until the fish had been rolled in corn meal and flour and had begun to sizzle in the battered skillet, Pitkin didn't realize how hungry he really was. The main course was the delicate white meat of the trout encased in its crisp brown crust. It was supported by the staples of camping, beans and fried potatoes. And as with every Cope Gunnison outdoor meal, there were the greens. Cope always picked them himself from among the low, ground-clinging plants where the vegetation was thick and heavy. Looking vaguely like spinach, Cope's "greens" had a somewhat bitter taste, but they were a subtle and tasty compliment to the trout.

While Breck persisted in teasing Pitkin about eating borrowed fish, his father promised to repay the debt with some "grown up" trout to be caught the next day. They ate all the food, washed the utensils, buried the fish bones a bear respectful distance away, and settled themselves around the fire.

Cope was in a reflective mood, and Breck's persistent questions took the old rancher back to earlier days. "In them days you dasn't go too far in the these hills without yer pistol or a good saddle gun," Cope assured his eager listener. "There were still grizzly bears around and some of 'em were man eaters. Oh, things was different then all right."

"Aren't there still a few grizzlies around, Cope?" asked Breck, with at least a detectable note of apprehension in his voice.

"You betcha there are," exclaimed Cope. "Not as many as there used to be, but I've seen sign, Breck. Even this spring, I have. On this very mountain, up on the very top, on the rock knob yer dad calls 'high scrappy', I seen some bear sign. Course, the damn know-it-all ranger says it wasn't grizzly, but he didn't see it close up and fresh like I did."

"But there isn't any real danger from them now days." Breck was asking for and expecting reassurance.

"Naw! Not if yuh know how to handle 'em."

Pitkin's mouth drew down in a suppressed smile. He knew what was coming. It was a Cope standard, and he remembered hearing it on his first trip to Routt Lake.

"Let me tell yuh, Breck, jest how to handle a big snarling, bloodthirsty grizzly. I recollect one time when I was about yer age. It was late spring, same as now. I was up in the high country, not far from where we are right now. Pap and I

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was pushing some cows up to summer pasture. Somehow I got a ways behind to where I couldn't see the cows or my old man. I started kickin' that old hoss of mine to catch up, but all I did was cause him to slip off a rock and twist his foot. I climbed down and was lookin' at it, yuh know, kinda examinin' the hoof."

At his point, the storyteller leaned close to Breck and exclaimed, "Well, all of a sudden, that nag let out a squeal they could've heard in Denver. Ever hear anything like that, Breck?"

"I guess not," Breck admitted.

"If yuh had, yuh wouldn't be guessin' about it. It's somethin' yuh never forget. It jest flat curdles yuhr blood. Jest imagine, fer example, if we was sittin' here all quiet and restin', and somewhere out there in the trees we heard an ear splittin' scream. Wouldn't that curl yuhr hair?"

The youngster didn't want to admit to being afraid, but his quick glance at the surrounding darkness wasn't lost on the narrator. While Breck maintained a studied calm, Cope expanded his effect by falling silent and casually feeding the fire and casting a long look into the darkness.

Pitkin, for his part, remained quietly at ease, enjoying the friendly fire and marveling at the intensity with which Cope spun his yarn. It was a story with hundreds of variations whose only entertainment value lay in the way it was told. Cope was an expert.

"Must have been a bear," said the boy, by way of encouraging Cope to continue the story.

"Biggest damn bear I ever saw."

"What'd you do?"

"I wasn't left with much of a choice. My horse took off at a dead run, plumb fergettin' about his sprained foot. Like any self-respectin' mountain reared lad, I ran like hell. But that gol' dang bear came right after me. After a mile or so, I realized that, like the idjit I was, I had run into a crink in the rocks and was trapped like a rat."

Again, the pause was too long for Breck. "Whatever did you do?"

"There warn't anything left to do. I faced him square on and let 'im know he wasn't gettin' his teeth into a sinner. I started out with 'Bringin' In the Sheaves.' I kinda forgot them words, so I gave him a line of 'Nearer My God To Thee.' He was comin' on

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growlin' and snapping them big jaws, and I guessed I'd better change my tune. I shifted into 'Rock of Ages.'"

"You mean to say you sang? Sang hymns?" Breck asked, baffled by the calm way Cope described his singing.

"Jest as loud as I could and in my most beautiful voice."

"And that stopped him?"

"Stopped him? I should say so. Dead in his tracks. Fact is, he joined in. Course it wasn't human sound, but he stood there, clawin' the air, growlin' off key jest as pretty as yuh please. It sounded to me like he was singin' 'Go Tell It On The Mountain,' so we did the chorus a couple of times. Finally, he turned hisself around and marched off, still singing. Fer years after that, folks claimed they heard him bellowin' out hymns up and down these canyons."

Even before Cope finished, Breck realized he had been taken in. He fairly rocked with laughter, as much at his own gullibility as at the ridiculous story. He filled the next few minutes exchanging puns with Cope about the "bear facts" and how he had "bearly believed" the tale of the singing bear.

Pitkin listened as the old man recited idle stories about his early days on the ranch. The words called forth images of times when survival required almost full time effort, when community ties made a difficult life more tolerable, and relationships among people were direct and open. However, Pitkin wondered if Cope's was not a simplistic concept of earlier times, a nostalgic generalization.

He remembered a history professor at the university lecturing on the impulse of society to strive for something different than the present. There was a collective pressure, opined the teacher, to reject known dimensions of existence. Every development from the long bow to the transistor, and the insatiable appetite for their popular adoption, was a reflection of such pressure.

In a further, albeit cynical development of the theory, the argument was made that, because man did not profit from his experience, the societal tendency to progress, in effect, perpetually backfired, and successive generations only relived more destructive refinements of the past. That happened, contended the history professor, because the past was never really known at all. The association with anything past yesterday was vague,

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imaginative, and distorted by romantic recreations of what people wanted to believe about earlier days.

In such a formulation, there was little allowance for the behavior of individuals. For the most part, the legendary giants of history were reduced to the role of serving as spokesmen for the popular will. What was seen as prophetic in their acts and deeds was, in reality, only a sensitivity for onrushing inevitability.

Pitkin, however, had never been comfortable thinking of the Churchills, the Lincolns, and, yes, the villainous Hitlers of history as being solely reactive. Such a view left little for creativity and attributed almost nothing to the initiative of individuals when events were in equilibrium and susceptible to positive acts.

Despite a keen undergraduate interest in history, Pitkin had never committed himself to a systematic study of the philosophy of history where the individual stood as an originator of large dimensional events. Yet, he had read enough to have been intrigued with what he understood to be a point of departure and source of contention among the authorities. He had often promised himself that someday he would revisit the subject.

Sitting and listening to the voices of his son and Cope, Pitkin mentally laughed at his own woolgathering. "Still, I wonder if Cope hasn't got a better view of history than all the professors in the country?" he asked himself. "And all their students who carry away a lot of half-baked, lofty conclusions," he added with a wry smile.

"The old days were good enough," Cope was saying. "You could spit without hittin' two tourists, a park ranger, and a gassed up pothead. But they was tough times, too. All the wide-open range stuff was all gone when I was growin' up, but the tail end of it was hangin' on here in the mountains. We had a fliver fer goin' to town, but a lot of the work we did jest like it was done years before."

"You mean the roundups and branding?" asked Breck.

"That and all the other chores too. Seemed always to be too hot or too cold. Dust up yuhr nose and a boil on yuhr butt. Those were facts, Breck. It wasn't anything like they show on television. A roundup wasn't a purty hero all suited up in Sunday

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duds. It was a lot of sweat, an onery horse, and yesterday's underwear. A lot of the past jest ain't worth rememberin'."

After a moment, the old rancher added wistfully, "Still, totin' it all up, I'd take it over what we're saddled with nowadays."

The final assessment was delivered with a long look at Pitkin. Realizing that the talk was heading for contentious, if not dangerous ground, Pitkin spoke to close it off. "It looks to me like we're running low on firewood. Either we leave what's left for morning and go to bed, or someone will have to go stumbling out in the dark and get some more. Personally, I vote for the sack."

With no further discussion, the fire was doused and the campers retired to their tent. The drive up the mountain, the pitching of the camp, the fishing, and the meal combined to quench tent talk and the three, clothed in the warmth of their sleeping bags, were soon asleep.

Pitkin slept soundly until, in the predawn light, he awoke to the high pitched rasping of the trees, leaning on one another and swaying in a wind which was sliding down from the sides of "high scrappy." The ground of the protected clearing was becalmed, and only the squeaking tree trunks and the whishing overhead told him the wind was up.

Pitkin reached one arm out of his warm sleeping bag and, being careful not to disturb his companions, slid the tent zipper up enough for a peek out. Pulling himself further out of the bag, he planted one elbow near the tent flap and thrust his head into the faint light.

"Damn," he murmured under his breath. His head felt the prickling of cold rain. Through squinted eyes, he could see the indistinct outline of clouds against the dark gray horizon. He grunted a bit as he struggled his way out of the sleeping bag, donned trousers, and shoved his feet into his Wigley hiking shoes.

Carefully, Pitkin worked the tent zipper higher, and finally stooped his way through the flap into what was debatably a drizzle rather than a rain. He lost no time in visiting the little slit trench they had dug back in the trees away from the clearing. By the time he got back to the tent, he positively decided it was rain, and in sufficient volume to drench the thought of building a fire.

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As carefully as he had come out of the tent and his sleeping bag, he worked his way back in, closed the tent flap, and shut his eyes. At first, sleep eluded him and tantalized him from the mountain, high above the entangled branches and tree bodies swaying in the wind. But, then, it came. Not soundly, but to the surface of the mind wherein the sleeper believes he sets his course and thinks vaguely that he directs his illusions.

Summoned irresistibly by the familiar vision, Pitkin took a soft white hand and began the climb to the uppermost point on "high scrappy." Together they passed through the cool shadows of the trees and entered the field of rocks, forbidding and threatening, but always offering a handhold or footstep when the way became nearly impassable. The last ledge was a high, smooth and defiant challenge, but Pitkin managed to grasp a secure hold, and, reinforced by the knowledge that he could not fail, that the moment was everything, he pulled himself to the top.

He reached a long arm down, caught the upstretched hand, and with a firm, determined pull, Hayden was by his side, taking in great gulps of air. The wide red mouth was close, and the blonde hair tumbled wildly around her face as her sun browned arms reached for him. Together they had put themselves on top of "high scrappy."

Every outline of Hayden's face was, in the instant of his dream, as clear as reality, but as he tried to touch the face of the vision, and strove to reach through the veil of the past, the image fled. Pitkin felt as though the breath of life had left him in a chamber of dead memories where each competed with the others for a chance to taunt him with its unique unreality.

There were confused snatches of a life with Hayden. Graduate school followed by a succession of assignments at various Atomic Energy Commission laboratories where there was recognition of his gift for nuclear physics, commendations and quick elevation through the clique of atomic scientists. Then there was Breck's birth and a much sought after transfer to the plant near Boulder.

Finally, there was the wrenching torment, the days of anguish, and blinding sorrow following Hayden's death in a traffic accident on a Denver freeway. Pitkin had not been with her and had seen only the debris of the collision. He had only his imagination to tell him about the metal splitting crash and the

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searing fire which had destroyed the lovely Hayden, her softness, her understanding, her life, and the vital core of his own world."

Pitkin never dreamed past that point. It was as though his mind refused to indulge in further illusion. After the vision, and after the nightmare, there was only reality and consciousness.

Lying fully awake, Pitkin cursed himself for letting Cope and Breck talk him into coming up to the lake. Lately, he had hoped the tormenting night thoughts were fading away. The grueling work schedule he maintained had helped. Time had contributed, and in the past few months, so had a few evenings out with Jenny Gilpin who seemed to understand his detachment and seemed willing to accept it. But seeing the mountain had unleashed the haunting memories, and he felt the loneliness twisting inside.

Pitkin forced himself, as he had hundreds of times before, to turn his mind to the present. He reconstructed the drive up the mountain, the arrival at the lake, and the campfire talk of the previous night. It had been thoroughly enjoyable, and he had felt close to his son and happy about the camping expedition. Pitkin was determined to recapture that feeling. Breck needed a father, he told himself, more than the boy needed a mourning wet blanket filled with self-pity and memories, which would not die.

Come on, Dad! The fish'll grow old waiting for you to roll out."

Breck's call brought Pitkin's head out of the fold of his sleeping bag. "Has it stopped raining," Pitkin called through the tent wall.

"Rain? What rain?" cried Breck throwing the tent flap back and peering in at his father.

The morning sun was slicing through the trees on the far side of the clearing, and Pitkin could see the shadows had retreated almost to the edge of the lake. The grass between the camp site and water's edge sparkled and glistened as the sunlight, colliding with the beads of water, collected on the leaves. In contrast to the silvery grass, there was a distinct dark green trail through the wet grass where Cope and Breck had already tramped to the lake and back.

Breck went trotting off in response to Cope's demand for dry wood while the old man pattered with the smoking fire, trying to coax it to greater life. Pitkin pulled on his trousers and

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boots and stretched and yawned his way back into the stream of camp affairs.

"I was awake just a while ago. I guess I dozed off again."

"Dozed off, hell. Yuh been snorin' like a wallerin' pig fer the past hour."

Pitkin gave the squatting fireman a skeptical look, scratched under his chin and asked, "Any hot water for a shave?"

"There's water, a whole lake of it. All that's hot is in this pot and its fer coffee. Besides, this is a fishin' trip. Why would yuh wanna shave?"

"Because my chinny chin chin itches, that's why. I don't see you growing any hair on your face, except that cookie duster, which, I admit, is a classic."

"If yuh're really set on shavin', I'd recommend soap and good ole cold water. That's the way I do it every day, 'cept when I'm fishin'. It'd sure toughen up that pasty face of yuhrs."

After brushing his teeth in the ice cold water of the lake and splashing it over his face and hands, Pitkin decided to forego shaving. Returning to the fire, he found it burning with a higher and heartier flame, although it popped considerable objection to the wet fuel.

Even if Pitkin had set his mind to the task and expended a mighty mental effort, he would not have been able to think of anything that had an aroma comparable to camp fried bacon and coffee perking over an early morning fire. The bacon sputtered and sizzled alongside the eggs and potatoes, providing a cooking medium and lending everything in the skillet a mouthwatering flavor. From another pan, Chef Cope produced warm rolls, his own creations, baked the day before in his ranch kitchen especially for this trip.

It wasn't long before the food was gone. As the men lingered over their steaming coffee, Breck rushed off to the lake to exercise his new fishing rod.

"It's been a while since I threw a fly line," mused Pitkin. "I hope I haven't forgotten how."

"If yuh ever knew, yuh won't ferget."

Tossing the last few drops of coffee on the remains of the fire, Pitkin eyed the lake and decided fishing wouldn't wait any longer. He slipped a small aluminum dry fly case into his pocket and began assembling his bamboo pole.

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Cope watched the procedure skeptically. "I'll never know why yuh insist on fishin' with that stringy damn thing. Seems to me yuh spend all yuhr time snappin' and poppin' it around like a whip instead of jest tossin' it out there with a bobber or throwin' it out and windin' it in like yuh would a good lure."

"The application of skill, the delicacy of touch, is a picturesque and rhythmic blending of form and motion..."

"Bunk!" exclaimed Cope, picking up his own fishing gear and stalking off toward the lake.

Pitkin walked half way around the small lake before selecting a spot he remembered and one he guessed might be productive. It was a large granite outcropping which jutted into the lake like the prow of a ship.

The stone platform, some two feet above the water, was level and abundantly wide, allowing him space to spread out and make himself quite comfortably at home. Rising along the back portion of his station was an almost perfectly contoured stone backrest, which he looked forward to using when the fishing played out.

He selected a gray-bodied fly with black wings and a bright yellow head. He had no basis for the selection other than having seen some gray insects of the same size swooping and flitting over the surface of the water. Having applied an oil based dressing while sitting around the campfire listening to Cope's stories, he had only to secure the reel to the handle of the rod, thread the filament and line through the small and smaller agate beads, and tie the fly to the end of his long tapered lead. Thus prepared, he began pulling and whipping out a plentiful supply of line.

His first casts reminded him of how long it had been since he had worked a fly rod. However, as he began to concentrate on gently landing the fly with only the faintest ripple and working it along the surface, the satisfaction of mastering the line and lure returned.

Pitkin was not prepared for the first strike. There was a quick flash in the sun, the water around the fly roiled angrily, and the gray insect disappeared. Before he could set the hook, the trout contemptuously spat the unnatural thing from its mouth and swam away, presumably to look for something better suited to its digestion and taste.

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Pitkin muttered to himself and vowed to be ready next time. And it wasn't long before the next solid strike came. Setting the hook was a reflex. Keeping the vital tension on his line, he brought the fighting trout up to his rock, raised it out of the water, and neatly hooked his finger in a gill. It wasn't a trophy, but it was a keeper that he snapped onto a galvanized hook on his stringer.

By midmorning, Pitkin had added four more to his string and had thrown back an equal number, promising himself he would catch them next year. He had also missed a couple which were, of course, the granddaddies of the lake.

Proving himself to be a fisherman with foresight, he reached into the icy water alongside his rock and withdrew a can of beer. With beaded water glistening in the bright sun, it looked even more inviting than its commercial. The little tab popped sharply, and the first cool drink, always the best, introduced a break in the angling.

The break became a drowsy head nodding bask in the warm sun. That developed into a nap, a delicious half sleep with an occasional voice in the background and a breeze, just strong enough to ripple the surface of the lake. But it was not forever.

"Dad, are you awake?"

Pitkin blinked his eyes open to confront the inquiring blue eyes of his son who stood looking down at him. "Sure, I was just resting my eyes a bit."

"Cope and I beat you, Dad. I guess you'll have to do more fishing and less sleeping."

"You sure of that?"

"Yep, I already checked your string," said the boy.

"Well, I may not be as hungry as you two. And if we have as many as you say, we won't be able to eat them all anyway."

"Boy, Cope sure knows how to fish," said Breck admiringly.

"Don't tell him that," smiled Pitkin. "He's tough enough to get along with as it is."

With the abrupt seriousness of youth, Breck asked, "You and Cope tease each other all the time, but you love him a lot don't you?"

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Pitkin was surprised by the question, but his answer came easily. "Very much, Breck. He's been like a father to me since I was your age."

Cope is just teasing then when he calls you a `pizzen peddler?'"

"Does it bother you when he says that?"

"No...but I guess I don't understand what he means."

"Remember, Breck, how we've talked about my work. I've explained how we make parts for nuclear weapons. Those parts are made of a dangerous material called plutonium. Even though it is very dangerous, we're careful about handling it."

"I know, but when Cope calls you `pizzen peddler' doesn't he mean you're spreading plutonium all over making people sick?"

"That's what he means, but Cope is an older man and, as much as we both love him, he simply doesn't understand the first thing about the plant, about radioactive material, or about the effects of plutonium on people. He reads the papers about accidents at the plant..."

"Like the barrels you told me about?"

"Exactly. He also reads about smog and how it's affecting people's lungs and eyes. In his mind he's confused these things. In fact, I'm sure he believes we're responsible for Denver's smog problem. He sort of lumps all the problems of smog, plutonium contamination, and other toxic waste problems all together. Because I work at Rocky Flats and because it gets a lot of blame in the papers, Cope just thinks I'm causing a lot of the problem."

"Maybe you could explain to him..."

"I tried that once. I even took him to the plant and showed him around."

"Didn't it help?"

"Not really," laughed Pitkin. "You remember Mister Chase?"

"Sure. He's your boss and is the head of the plant."

"You know how Mister Chase is kinda formal and proper about everything? When I introduced him, Cope blurted out that he thought Mister Chase was `pizzen peddler number one in the whole territory.' Cope even claimed our 'tonium, had caused his chickens to lay rotten eggs. He was offering to send some in as proof when I managed to get him out of there. Some of what he

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said was just pure Cope. When he saw how proper Mister Chase was, he simply couldn't resist ragging him, but some of what he says, he believes. Some of it, too much, he gets out of his favorite paper, the Pondera Leader."

Breck enjoyed the mental image of Hugo's confrontation with Cope. "I'll bet Mister Chase got sterner than he did when I spilled root beer on Shamballa at the Christmas party."

"At least that stern," agreed Pitkin. "But, Breck, if Cope's calling me a 'pizzen peddler' bothers you, I'll mention it to him."

"Oh, no," said Breck quickly. "I think I understand about how Cope gets things mixed up. At the ranch he forgets things sometimes, but I never let on. I just act like nothing happened. If you said anything, it might hurt his feelings."

"I think it might, besides, the whole thing has become sort of a joke. So we'll just live with 'pizzen peddler,' okay?"

"Okay," the boy agreed solemnly as though he and his father had concluded a secret pact.

For his part, Pitkin was more than a little surprised at the way Breck had handled his concerns. The boy had shown tact by coming to Pitkin first, and he had shown a remarkable sensitivity for the old man's feelings. Thinking of Breck's confession that he had noticed Cope's forgetfulness but remained silent, told Pitkin his son was indeed growing up.

Later, as they washed luncheon dishes, Cope announced he was "jest goin' to loaf around camp."

Breck reminded Pitkin of a long-standing promise to lead a hike to the top of "high scrappy." Pitkin quickly suggested exploration of the area below the lake, but Breck was not to be diverted. "'High scrappy's' just sitting there waiting," he insisted. "and it'll be a long time before I have another chance. Please, Dad...?"

Looking up at the craggy mountain, Pitkin agreed. "'High scrappy' it is, and you're right Breck. It may be the last chance either of us has for a long time."

Breck's rock throwing, constant chattering, and stick rattling against tree trunks kept his father's mind close upon the reality of the walk through the forest. The same was true of the climb over the rocks. The boy's chatty observations required answers, his pointing demanded attention, and parental concern

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over unchecked exuberance kept thoughts of the past from intruding upon those of the present.

When they came to the foot of the last rock, the rounded challenging one, Pitkin paused and turned away as if to leave. But the vision suddenly and compellingly seized his mind, and he knew he wanted to pursue it to the top. Without a word, he faced back upon the rock and reached for the ledge, missed it, tried again and caught it. With a desperate scramble, Pitkin pulled himself up and over the edge. He lay there on his back in the sun, bewildered.

Pitkin's mind raced, and fragments of memory collided with one another, confusing him. He even began to wonder where he was. He threw his arm over his eyes to block out the blinding sunlight. It seemed he might touch the images, he even reached out.

Then came the cry, clean and strong, flooding him with reality. "Dad, give me a hand up."

Pitkin rolled to his stomach and put his hand over the edge to his son. He suddenly knew Breck was the living; the boy was the reality, and the vision was only a dream.

As they strolled back into camp, old Cope looked at them and asked, "What the devil you two grinnin' about?"

"Why, we just climbed 'high scrappy,'" bragged Breck.

"Together," added Pitkin.

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CHAPTER SIX

Monday morning depression, a plague upon those who are not content with their life's work, weighed heavily on Pitkin as he passed through the west gate of Rocky Flats. His mood was a product of more than a weekend left behind and more than discontent at overcast skies, which threatened rain.

It was his lot to face the dreary prospect of sorting through accumulated business, preparing written work for a trip to Washington D. C., and actually planning to go there for two days. Under the heading of waiting business were the infamous leaking barrels and continuing problems with the plutonium recovery

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building. In the category of trip preparation, there was the nitpicking of proof reading testimony to endure.

Driving along the short access road toward the administration building, Pitkin could see through the chain link security fence where the morning shift was arriving. Knots of workers bunched up at the security check points and filed one by one past the unsmiling guards whose discipline could not abide a faster identification procedure.

Watching their shuffling advance, Pitkin wondered if they were not, as the presence of the fence, the guards, and the implacable windowless buildings suggested, captives. In truth, had they not been sentenced by an imperfect system to serve until, old and tired, they were freed into the confining years of retirement. And was he any different? Did he, any more than they, have the luxury of choosing to turn around, to reverse his life in midcourse and take another and more open road?

Given such an option, would he take it? Would he be bold, even with his own life, or would he, like Prufrock, know that the "eternal footman" would "hold his coat and snicker?"

"Christ," he muttered, "it's only Monday and I've already worked my way up to T. S. Eliot. Friday, after a day with a senate committee, should really be something."

However, things began well enough. He managed to reach his office, get inside and close the door without encountering either Etta or Hugo. The neat stack of familiar yellow phone message notices was not as large as he expected, and even the "In" box looked manageable.

Most of the call slips represented attempts by newsmen to contact him. He shuffled through them, noticing that Deke Prowers had called twice. There was a third slip showing that Deke had also called Hugo. Paper-clipped to Hugo's notice was a scrawled note. "Pitkin, Please handle this. H."

It was characteristic of Prowers to call Pitkin and Hugo directly. His approach to newsgathering seemed to be the most casual and relaxed Pitkin had ever experienced. Yet, the man's instincts and perceptions were uncanny and, at times, unnerving. And, as did most of the experienced newsmen, he ignored Lamont Wellington. Pitkin set the three notes next to his phone and continued sorting the remainder.

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He paused to read one slip whose message portion was filled by Etta's neat rolling handwriting. "This man claimed to be a reporter but asked some of the most outrageous questions I ever heard. I told him to call Mr. Wellington, but he insisted that you call him Monday. E." The caller had, of course, been Jess Lyons who was editor, publisher, and reporter for Cope's journalistic bible, the Pondera Leader.

Turning from the call slips, Pitkin had just begun to sort through his mail when he was interrupted, not unpleasantly. Following a light tap on his door, Jenny Gilpin walked into his office.

"Before I talk to Cope or Breck, I'll give you a chance to tell me the straight story. How many fish did you catch? Any?"

"Any? What kind of confidence do you have in me? Is that my reward for raising you to your exalted position and giving you the benefit of my experience and wisdom? Any, you ask. The fact is, I caught so many we filled the cooler. How about coming over tonight and helping me eat some of the damn things?"

"Only if you let me fry them my way."

"Since Cope won't be around with his corn meal and flour, someone will have to do it. The job is yours." Catching her eyes directly, Pitkin paused a moment and said simply, "Good morning, Jenny."

She returned his look and, matching his tone, answered, "I like the sound of that. Good morning to you, Pitkin."

The entrance of Etta Westridge closed off the moment, fleeting, but sufficient. Despite her officious and trying behavior, Etta had at least two redeeming features. She had a woman's romantic soul, and she had an almost motherly affection for Jenny Gilpin. Etta instinctively realized her entrance had been an intrusion.

"Oh, Jenny, I was down the hall and didn't see you come in. I'm sorry, Doctor Waay, really I am..."

"Don't apologize, Etta. We were just discussing fish."

With the faintest of faint smiles at Jenny, Etta accepted the explanation. "Certainly, sir. I understand your trip and all. I just stepped in to tell you Mister Prowers is outside. He insists on seeing you. I can tell him..."

"No. I'll see him Etta, but in a few minutes."

"I understand...I mean, I'll ask him to wait."

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"I think we're under suspicion," laughed Jenny as Etta left and quietly but firmly secured the door as if guaranteeing their privacy.

"Yes, but this time it's benevolent," sighed Pitkin.

"Certainly more so than you," she said, trying unsuccessfully to be stern.

"You're referring to my note asking you to take over the job of guiding Lamont Wellington alongside the still waters of truth and responsibility." Then, suddenly, he was serious. "Jenny, we've got to corral him somehow. Every time he opens his mouth, he manages to put another dent in the program. This place simply cannot withstand more of his brand of public relations. Especially now. We're on the verge of a congressional disaster. It was my idea that you read all his releases, and I sold it to Hugo because I think he'll work with you while he wouldn't with anyone else."

"I don't have any special power over Lamont."

"I wasn't suggesting that. But we both know he trusts you and already asks you for help every chance he gets."

"I know," she said opening her eyes wide in mock horror, "every chance he gets. The man is a perfumed pest." Then relenting, she added. "I know the problem. I'll do what I can. As a matter of fact, I've already talked to him, and he gave me two items he wants to send out this afternoon."

"How do they read?"

"They need some work, but none of this is the reason I came in here. So far I've been invited to a fish dinner and been given a pep talk about the Lamont Wellington project. Both are suspect. I really wanted to fill you in on my visit with Harvey, but you went off on your fishing toot before I could get your attention."

"You have it now. What was Harvey's show and tell all about?"

"More barrel problems."

My favorite subject."

"Yes, and I don't believe you'll like it better now than before. Harvey began by showing me the accumulation registers for the east and south quadrants. About a week ago they literally started climbing off the charts. It seems one of the men in his radiation monitoring team noticed the uptick and they started rechecking all the stations. There has been a rise in the others, but

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the east and south areas between the plant and the barrel site have suddenly, very suddenly, gotten hot."

"What kind of readings are you talking about, Jenny?"

"One station, just south of the barrel pit, registered 620, another between the plant and the barrels read 580, and another 520."

"Hot is right. You are talking about d/m/g's?"

"Those numbers are from the continuously running air samplers on the perimeter. You know better than anyone, the standard readouts are disintegrations per minute per gram."

"But the highest, the very highest I remember seeing was something on the order of 30. You're saying we're registering a virtual ballooning of radiation. Damn, he should have told me right away."

"Don't blame Harvey, Pitkin. When he spoke to you the day of the press conference, he had just started looking at the numbers himself. He's been working almost around the clock, looking at the stack samplers, installing backups, and tapping the computers to see if there isn't a glitch somewhere."

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded, Jenny. You don't have to sell me on Harvey. It's just the jump from normal to this that I don't understand. If those numbers are confirmed, we're going to have to inform the state people, coordinate some more offsite monitoring, and do it all yesterday. Where's Harvey now?"

"I left him in the filter lab. He said he'd be here as soon as he could. In fact, I'm surprised he isn't here already. He knows you'll be looking for him."

"Have you talked to Hugo about this?"

"No. Harvey and I agreed that was your department."

"I have the feeling there's more to this than you've told me so far. If I'm right, if this is just the warm-up, I'm not sure I want to go into the game."

"There is more, but I'm a bit vague on the details...."

Jenny's hesitant beginning was interrupted by a hard, solid knock on the door. Pitkin called, "Yes?", and he and Jenny turned to greet Harvey Flagler.

"Ah, I see you're already here," smiled Flagler looking at Jenny.

"Oh, sure, I've got him on the ropes. You can finish him off."

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As he eased himself into a chair, Harvey glanced up at Pitkin, who was still standing behind his desk. "Did she tell you about those samplers giving us some high readings?"

"She said you were registering as high as 620. That can't be an average?"

"No, we haven't done enough sampling to get an average for the area, but, Pitkin, those numbers are for spots a long ways from the barrels. And they're damn high."

"It's over our all time high isn't it?"

"Depends," shrugged Flagler.

"On what?"

"It depends, Pitkin, on how good you think our monitoring was when we had the big fire a few years ago, or when the processing building filter fell out of place and wasn't noticed for a week. We've had other events which resulted in plutonium releases, so this isn't new and, it may not even be what we'd call a significant problem, however we define significant. If we have plutonium levels like that outside the fence, then it damn well is a big problem."

"You sound as though you're still short on data, Harv."

"I am. There's never enough."

"Tell me about the air samplers."

"Since Jenny told you about the 620, you've got the picture, but in general, they tell us the whole south and east areas from the plant buildings to the barrel area have been receiving some radiation worth talking about. The high readings are from the continuously running high volume samplers we installed at random points a few years ago. We routinely collect samples weekly, composite them biweekly and analyze them for plutonium. Johnny Simla was the first to pick up on the problem. He's been feeding the raw data into the computers long enough to recognize this kind of jump without waiting to plot isopleths. We would have routinely caught the problem anyway, but he caught it a week earlier than we would have in the composite."

"You ran a preliminary isopleth outline for the federal property area this morning, didn't you," asked Jenny.

"Got it right here," nodded Harvey, pulling a computer foldout from among a handful of papers. The graphic display he handed to Pitkin consisted of a series of looping lines similar to a land contour map. On Harvey's map, the lines were a series of

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long irregularly shaped ovals the smallest in the middle and successively larger ones around it, like distorted ripples on water.

Since every point on any given line would have the same value, such a map would show the pattern of radiation in a given area. Similar maps for soil contamination would show deposition and concentration patterns for radioactive materials. The lines, or isopleths, on Pitkin's map showed almost circular contours out away from the inner security fence. Customarily those lines stayed in close and were quite small, indicating the highest levels of plutonium were concentrated in an area immediately around the plant.

On the new map the lines looped from the center of the plant buildings out toward the south and eastern areas of the main facility with a distinct bulb growing around the barrel deposit. It looked for all the world as though a new rock had been dropped on the pond and had begun sending out strange elongated ripples, short ones to the north, longer ones to the south and east.

"Okay, let's forget about specific numbers for a minute and take as a given that we've got a radiation problem. Tell me the rest of it. I'd guess you think it came from the barrels."

"Some of it is coming from there, yes. Pitkin, our barrel pit is a lot bigger than we thought. When we first staked the place out, it looked to be a neat rectangular little hole. The fact is we missed the forest for a large tree. We were only on one corner of a large burial site. If I had to guess, I'd say there could be close to a thousand barrels out there."

"Damn," exclaimed Pitkin. "We had hoped for fewer than fifty, and now you're saying close to a thousand, but even at that, why would they start leaking all of a sudden and just now?"

"It hasn't been an overnight thing. There are places, mostly just under the surface and out of sight, where the ground is saturated with oil. The stuff's was leaking out of the barrels and migrating into the ground for years. The oil is a good holding medium, but the traffic in the area...?"

"Traffic?" asked Pitkin wrinkling his brow.

"You may forgotten, but after the last protest march sorta got rowdy and a few of the more ambitious members of the crowd broke down the north fence, Hugo ordered no trespassing signs put up about every thirty feet all the way around the outer boundary. A couple of weeks ago, the maintenance crew finally got around to

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putting up Hugo's signs. While they were at it, they decided to string some new barbed wire along the south line. I guess our neighbor's cows had knocked quite a stretch of it down. There was a crew out there every day for a week and they made quite a trail, right alongside the dump. On top of that, it's been dry and we've got a lot of dust in the air. "

Pitkin had sat down while Harvey laid out his story. It took time, because of the man's slow and deliberate speech. The facts also required some interpretation because of Harvey's penchant for understating matters. Thus his words that there was "radiation worth talking about" told Pitkin that his most experienced and skilled radiation monitor was worried.

"Have you covered the larger area?"

"Yeah, but with a number of little hot spots popping up, we're going to have to do something more and do it pretty soon. We can't cover the whole damn sixty five hundred acres with plastic, but if we get many more leaks, it'll come to that."

"If I heard you correctly, Harv, you said some of the radiation was coming from the barrels. Is there another source?"

"There is. A minute ago, you asked why the elevated readings in the air samplers had occurred so suddenly. I wondered the same thing. We simply had too much radiation in the air despite a larger deposit of barrels, dust, and lots of driving around out there. It didn't add up. It had to be the plant itself. I got lucky when I started tracking it down."

Pitkin noted the trace of pride in Harvey's voice as the radiation chief explained. "I knew we routinely check the samplers on the processing building, and that had been done only days earlier. The samplers on the recovery building had to be up to snuff because we'd just adjusted them, again two weeks ago. But then I remembered one of the electricians talking about the power overloads in the recovery building caused by the incinerators. After thinking about it for awhile, I wondered if the recovery building wasn't a good suspect after all. To make a long story shorter, I climbed all over that building."

"I hope it was worth the effort," said Pitkin, waiting for Harvey to continue.

"Depends on your point of view, I guess. To put it in a nutshell, the filter system in the recovery building is leaking like

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the proverbial sieve. At least the stacks are venting a hellashus amount of plutonium."

Pitkin was visibly concerned by the revelation. He leaned forward over his desk and looked from Harvey to Jenny and back again. He could have asked a hundred questions, but he wondered for a moment where he should start.

"Why wouldn't the automatic samplers have sounded an alarm, they're designed to, and there's plenty of backup?"

"A burned out electrical system would be my guess," shrugged Harvey.

"Burned...you mean heat buildup from the incinerators?"

"Sounds like a good possibility, Pitkin," said Jenny agreeing with Harvey. "If the circuits burned, the backup samplers and alarms would go out the same as the primaries. The wiring probably wasn't designed for separate conduits. The idea was to duplicate the samplers, not the wiring. But we must be talking about some pretty wild heat excursions."

"First things, first," cautioned Pitkin. "We have to work with knowns. Radiation through the stacks is a fact. How and why are still questions? When did you confirm your notion it was the recovery building?"

"Early this morning," said Harvey, "very early. I'd say four, maybe four thirty."

"And there isn't any doubt?"

"About radiation fogging out of those stacks? None whatever."

"Do they know about this in recovery?"

"I haven't talked to anyone except you and Jenny."

Pitkin picked up his telephone and quickly punched three numbers. It was only a few seconds until his call was answered.

"Good morning, Lily. Would you put Mister Meeker on the phone." There was a pause while the secretary spoke. "I understand he's in the lab," replied Pitkin, "but this won't keep. Please call him. I'll hold."

Dropping the mouthpiece below his chin, Pitkin spoke to Jenny. "Would you see if Hugo's in his office? If he is, ask him to join us in here." To Harvey, "Are those your notes on the stack emissions?" Noting Harvey's affirmative nod, Pitkin asked, "Mind if I have a look?"

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After scanning the notes for a few moments, he was speaking again to the telephone, "Hello, Perry. I know. Lily told me you were busy, but that's not important right now. I want you to shut down your operation."

It was obvious from Pitkin's scowl that Perry Meeker had questions. "Perry, I don't give a rat's ass about your schedules or about what you have in the pipeline. You shut that goddamned building down and do it now. And I want your vent stacks closed and sealed. When you've done that, come over to my office."

Without waiting for anything more than an acknowledgment of his orders, Pitkin ended the phone conversation. "Harvey, I think I can make out most of your scribbling," said Pitkin holding up the notes in his hand. "Our next step is to make damn sure meeker gets his operation closed down cold. I'm going to plan on that being accomplished before noon, and I'm making you my personal enforcer. If Meeker objects to you looking over his shoulder, tell him to call me. "

Rising as a smile creased his broad face, Harvey spoke only briefly before leaving, "Don't worry about the shutdown and don't worry about Perry, we'll manage just fine."

Jenny met the newly appointed enforcer on his way out the door. "Leaving, Harvey?" She teased. "The party's just getting interesting."

"I'm being sent out to start my own," he laughed as he went on out the door."

"Any sign of Hugo?" asked Pitkin.

"He's not in his office, and Etta says he hasn't called in."

"He sure picked a good day to make himself scarce. But, knowing Hugo, he'll show up soon enough. Meanwhile, we're going to need a press release. We can't short circuit Lamont completely, so you'll have to work with him on it. Keep it short, non-dramatic, and routine. We've had shakedown problems before, and, for now, we're experiencing another one. Unless something else crops up in the next few hours, I expect that's the way we'll play it."

"I'd better get started," said Jenny, moving to the door. Pausing there, she looked back at Pitkin. "Is this going to put the dinner on hold?"

"In a word, no. Nothing short of a volcano erupting in the processing building will keep me in this place past five o'clock."

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Leaning back in his chair, Pitkin gave Jenny a long look before continuing. "You know, Jenny, crises at Rocky Flats are becoming routine and handling them has almost become automatic. In order, we have the event, the press release, the public outcry, reassurances, continued anguish from protesters, more reassurances, and finally boredom until the next crisis. I've concluded that late night, frantic busywork accomplishes nothing. To boil it all down, I'd rather have dinner with you than agonize over the problems of this creaking, steaming, leaking, old shop."

"Hmmm," she smiled, "Would I be forward if I said I think I see signs of a new Pitkin Waay? I'd settle for the old one, but I like the new one better." Not waiting for an answer or expecting one she called over her shoulder, "Fish at seven then."

Pitkin folded the isopleth map and placed it and Harvey's notes into an empty file folder. After dropping the folder into a desk drawer, he walked to the door, leaned through it and called, "Hello, Deke. Grab your coffee cup and come in."

Deke Prowers would not correctly have been described as fat. Most who met him, however, would place him on the order of "stout", or "husky", with some perhaps saying "pudgy." Pitkin, who had talked to Prowers in one-on-one plant related interviews more than a dozen times and had traded hiking stories with the newsman on a number of occasions, always had an initial impression of the man as being a former football player, perhaps a solid offensive guard with the Broncos. His suit coats, always too tight, looked uncomfortable on the muscular, square torso and supported Pitkin's belief Prowers would be more comfortable in athletic warm-up clothing or in a jersey with huge white numbers.

Pitkin and Prowers had met once in a lounge at the airport. The reporter and the physicist found, during the long wait for delayed flights, that they had a lot in common. Pitkin even made an unspecific agreement to take Prowers to Routt Lake fishing, and Prowers, for his part, had agreed to show Pitkin an almost undiscovered stretch of stream in the Laramie Mountains in Wyoming. Since then, the relationship had continued and grown stronger. Yet, Pitkin continued to keep plant affairs on a strictly professional basis.

Pitkin, instead of returning to the chair behind his desk, took the seat facing Prowers across the same low table he had used while briefing Leighton Prowers. Pitkin had the notion a desk was

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to be used for paper work, not as a refuge when talking to visitors. It was decidedly more informal and, therefore, much more to his liking.

"With people rushing in and out you seem to be busy," began Prowers.

"Monday's are always a little hectic for us," replied Pitkin, waiting for the newsman to work the interview in his own way.

"Didn't I see Harvey Flagler come out of here in high gear?"

"You saw Harvey all right, but in the years I've known him, I've never seen him in a hurry."

"He's the chief of your radiation monitoring operation, isn't he?" asked Prowers.

"Actually, his title is Chief, Radiological Monitoring and Control Group."

Prowers had taken a vinyl covered note pad and stubby yellow pencil from his coat pocket, but had laid them next to his styrofoam coffee cup, apparently not sufficiently interested in the information to take notes. He had also taken a package of filter cigarettes and book of paper matches from the opposite side coat pocket. It was not until he had stuck a cigarette in his mouth that he remembered and looked at the polished wooden plaque on Pitkin's desk. The declaration, in boldly carved letters, "SMOKING IS DEADLY-ESPECIALLY IN THIS OFFICE" halted him in the act of tearing off a paper match. With the deliberation of a sly miscreant abruptly and publicly exposed, Prowers slowly slid the package and matches back into his pocket. Placing the cigarette behind his ear like a short white pencil, Prowers smiled, "I won't even ask, but you'll have to give me credit. I remembered."

"As we live, we learn," observed Pitkin.

"In abstention there is salvation. Isn't that the creed of you non smokers?"

"I'm an antismoker, and my creed is poison yourself, but not others."

Prowers sipped his coffee before speaking. "I understand some of your people put in a long tough weekend."

Pitkin turned the format around, "Whom do you understand from?"

"Now you know I'm not going to talk about my sources."

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"And you know my people don't talk about their work. Since you're just stirring the water, I thought I might take a turn."

"Pitkin, I tried to call you last week. The secretary said you were out of the office. I tried again, and she said you wouldn't be back until today. Chase was in, but he wouldn't talk to me."

"I know about the calls. What's the question? You must be pretty proud of it, if you can't ask it over the phone."

"Let me try it this way," said Prowers, all at once deeply serious. "I know I won't get anywhere with you by bandying words and cute phrases. I'll tell you what I have and you can answer or react any way you want. I have a friend, unnamed naturally,..."

"Naturally," echoed Pitkin.

"Who is quite discrete, but who has suggested a question. This person won't go further, won't give me any background, and refuses to even suggest a follow-up. He says to ask you why you are substantially increasing plant security."

Pitkin's mind raced. He considered saying nothing or giving a "no comment," but he dismissed the idea. Any such response or non-response was tantamount to an admission. In all his dealings with Prowers, the likable newsman had played it absolutely straight. That fact made the question more puzzling. Prowers were not one to invent a strawman and put questions in its mouth.

Especially not this kind of question. Pitkin had expected something about the barrels or even about the plutonium emissions from the recovery building. It would not have been unreasonable for a skeptical and intelligent reporter to have taken a well aimed shot by combining past difficulties with the recovery building with the barrels and hit this week's bull's-eye. Security, however, had not been a problem.

As he considered possible reasons for the question, Pitkin recalled reading some news stories claiming that great volumes of enriched uranium were missing from the gaseous diffusion plant at Oak Ridge, Tennessee. He knew from having worked there for a couple of years after first signing on with the AEC and from having been there on business numerous times since that uranium was indeed lost. But the losses were not at all sinister, as the article had implied. Instead, the losses resulted from years of

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small leaks and from accumulations in the miles of pipes through which the process worked.

Loss of plutonium or alleged loss could trigger the same allegations of diversion and substandard procedures. In such a context, the question about security made sense because any hint about a loss of nuclear material especially weapons material, generated questions about plant security.

"Why have we increased security?" Pitkin repeated the question. "We haven't. And, Deke, I'm not reacting further, on or off the record."

"You think my friend was guessing, or did he know something?"

"If I knew who the friend was, I might have an answer for you?"

"I can't tell you, but I have the feeling you were as surprised by the question as I was." Getting no reaction, Prowers continued, "Speaking of surprises, is there anything new on the great Rocky Flats barrel mystery?"

"I think we're putting out a press release after lunch. You might find some copy there. See Lamont about it."

"No thanks, I'll call." Then in reflective tone, "Why the hell do you people keep him around?" Raising his hand quickly, Prowers answered his own question. "I know, I know. I did my stint in Washington D.C. Covering the Hill. Lamont was in Senator Moffat's office then, gumming up his works. You don't have to tell me how Lamont got dumped on you."

"I'm glad those words came from your mouth, Deke, not mine."

"I don't know how you folks work," said Prowers rising and putting away his pencil and notebook, "but I've got a deadline to meet so I'll be toddling off. Anything in your release worth writing about, or is the same old pap."

"If I tell you, will you sit on it until after lunch when it's official? I don't want to get blamed for playing favorites."

"Consider it embargoed."

"It's probably back page stuff, but we are shutting down the recovery building. That'll be announced along with some further information on the barrels."

"Shutting it down, again?"

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"Yes, shutting it down again. We haven't defined the problem completely, but we believe we've traced it to the incinerator bays, but the theory is off the record."

"Any plutonium emissions?" asked Prowers, immediately interested.

"I'll have to beg off on that one, Deke. It's the old story. We're gathering data, but we did shut down. That'll effectively foreclose even a remote chance of a further problem."

"Interesting," mused Prowers. But seeming to lose some of his interest, he concluded, "I guess shutting down the recovery building for adjustments is pretty much old hat?" He left the question hanging.

"It usually is, Deke." The slight emphasis on "usually" was noticeable.

Prowers gave Pitkin a puzzled look, but realizing the interview was over, he picked up his note pad, stood up and ambled out of the office, tossing a "See ya, Pitkin," over his shoulder.

It was well over an hour before Pitkin heard Hugo Chase's voice in the reception room. It sounded to Pitkin as though Hugo and Etta were exchanging views, loudly, on a typing assignment, either unfinished or not done to Hugo's satisfaction, Pitkin couldn't tell which. He waited until the matter was settled, to whose credit he didn't know. Didn't, that is, until he walked out of his door and saw Etta absolutely hammering the keys of her suffering magcard typewriter. He deferred comment and walked on into Hugo's office.

The Director was unpacking his briefcase. Watching him slam-dunk a thick sheaf of paper into his 'Out' basket, Pitkin had the impression the secretarial-director bout might have been a standoff.

"Two points, or were you fouled in the act of getting to the office?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" growled Hugo, tossing two green bound Senate Committee reports onto the desk.

"If you have to ask, I can't explain it," said Pitkin. Reaching behind his back and closing the door, he asked, "I suppose you spent the weekend working on our testimony?"

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"As a matter of fact, I did. Then I came in and found out that woman hasn't even finished the first draft of the backup material I gave her."

"I hate to be the one to tell you this, Hugo, but we've had some new developments. We'll almost certainly have to revise our statement."

"What are you saying," blinked Hugo, "what new developments?"

"We've got two problems, and I don't know which is worse. Let me start with the barrels. Harvey and his crew have figured out that the barrel dump is a lot larger than their first estimates indicated. As a matter of fact, it's quite a bit larger. Harvey thinks it may contain as many as a thousand barrels."

"Not quite. More like nine hundred and sixty."

"How in the world...?" exclaimed Pitkin.

"It's right there," said Hugo, tapping an aged and battered copy of a Senate Committee report. "The last place we would have ever looked for it. Over twenty-five years ago our predecessors were hit with a six-month period of priority work. The junk oil started piling up faster than they could ship it out and Idaho was having problems making room for it. The managers here simply took it upon themselves to create their own disposal, temporary of course. They advised the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy of what they had done and even supplied a map. It's all laid out, look for yourself."

"Then the testimony they gave the Joint Committee was the record we've been looking for. The people here gave the typed copy to the Committee and probably threw the extra copies away since the original would be printed in the report." Pitkin leafed through the report and easily located the map, which was printed as an appendix and folded in the back. "I'll be damned. A purloined letter."

"A what?"

"We should have had Ed Poe looking for our record."

"Dammit, Pitkin, stop talking in riddles. Who is Ed Poe and what's this talk about a letter. A couple of days in the mountains must have addled your brain."

"It's a tale for another time, Hugo. I was merely making a reference to the nineteenth century writer, Edgar Allan Poe."

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"Oh, well, why didn't you say so instead of throwing that 'Ed Poe' stuff around like he worked out in the shop or something. And since you have seen fit to explain yourself, be on notice, I've read the 'Purloined Letter.' Now what's the other 'development' you mentioned?"

"In an indirect way, it's related. Harvey's people were taking radiation readouts from the air samplers in the barrel area, and they picked up some pretty high readings. At first, Harvey thought it was the barrels and some extra activity in the area by a fencing crew. But he suspected the readings were too high to have been caused by the barrel pit and even the driving around out there. He kept looking and found our second problem. The stacks on the recovery building have been belching out some pretty nasty stuff."

"Spell it out, Pitkin. I'm ready to believe anything," sighed Hugo, resignation heavy in his voice.

"The area between the recovery building and the barrel pit, have received as much as 620 d/m/g during the past six to ten days. The worst case so far would be higher than our record highest level, and it's probably bumping up against state limits. We don't know how those isolated readings will average out and we don't know how far offsite the contamination extends. It's possible we have d/m/g's in the hundreds across the fence. If we do, we've gone off the chart and gone far past state and federal standards both."

"You can't be serious," breathed an astonished Hugo Chase.

"I'm sorry to say, I am. I called Meeker and ordered him to shut down."

"Good. We had to do that. I suppose he bitched about having his schedules fouled up?"

"Only briefly."

Hugo harumphed appreciatively, then scowled a question. "What the hell happened anyhow?"

"We don't know for sure, but a reasonably good guess is that the incinerators ran out of control and burned the electrical control system. The alarms and emissions monitors simply weren't working. I'd guess the heat may have damaged the filters themselves."

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"Then we've been putting out plutonium vapors for a week or more? With that plus the barrels it's no wonder the area's hot. And damn hot at that. I guess we also should get busy on a press release, but one without any specific radiation reading until we're able to get definite readings on the whole area."

"Jenny's already working the problem...with Lamont."

"Sounds to me like you're on top of the thing. Anything else? I'm not sure I'm up to much more."

"Nothing critical. I sent Harvey out to keep an eye on the shutdown. Later this afternoon, we can set up a troubleshooting team to find out exactly what happened, but in the meantime, I'm going to have a session with Meeker. You want to sit in? "

"Not unless you think you need me."

"No, just thought I'd ask. By the way, Hugo, have we received anything from Washington about increasing security?"

"Not anything I know about," replied the puzzled Hugo. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, it's probably nothing. Deke Prowers was in earlier chasing down a tip he received from some mysterious friend. Prowers said his source suggested he ask us why we were increasing security at the plant. I told we him weren't. My guess is there's a rumor loose out there which says we've lost some plutonium."

"What'll the bastards think of next?" spat out Hugo. "You can bank on it. There'll be a story in the news this week claiming we've been shipping plutonium parts to Israel."

"The other variation is that terrorists have been stealing it," added Pitkin. "Back to the mundane business at hand, I think we should begin talking about notifying the state health people on our stack emissions."

"You said we were bumping up against their standards. Have we violated them?"

"I don't think so. But we won't know for sure until Harvey collects samples, does the separation and analysis, and gets computer readout. Until he's finished, we won't be able to say one way or the other. The fact we can't ignore, Hugo, is the state's own sampling system. It may not be as good as ours, but they'll be bound to pick up high readings. If we wait and if it looks like we were cutting a fine line on our agreement to cooperate with them, it'll throw a lot of negotiating, promising, and a fair working

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relationship right out the window. To make the situation worse, the story could break just while we're telling the senate committee what a minor problem we have with the barrels."

"I don't want to start down that road with the state until we know we have no choice." Hugo was adamant.

Pitkin knew the reaction was based in part upon a long-standing war with the Colorado Health Board, which had, in the last two years, been held in abeyance by a fragile truce. The tenuous peace had come as a result of pressure from the Colorado congressional delegation on the federal side and from the governor's office on the side of the health authorities. In truth, it was a cool standoff that endured only because of political pressure, which was as unpredictable in direction, strength, and duration as the wind, which swept fitfully across Rocky Flats.

Hugo's reluctance to face the issue of notification to the state was also predicated upon his vague understanding of the procedures involved and the publicity that would result. He remembered reading the Memorandum of Understanding that, he believed, would require a written notice of emission deviations greater than certain defined limits. Upon reading the requirement, he had condemned it as a "confession," and had told Pitkin, in private after the signing, he'd never write such a thing. The prospect of such a document describing contamination with potential adverse health effects being reprinted in the newspapers was, alone, sufficient to cause him to reject consideration of notification.

Pitkin, however, knew he had to persist. "Hugo, I understand how you feel about notification. But, if we sit on our hands and do nothing, we're inviting criticism from all sides. And we have no defense. There is no way to make a case for playing fast and loose with public health. If we're putting even one citizen at risk, we are not acting responsibly."

With a great sigh, Hugo opened the door a bit. "What do you suggest, short of formal notification?"

"Simple, give Delores Cortez a call. Tell her we've had a problem. Emphasize its not directly related to the barrels. Explain it's in the recovery building and our preliminary information indicates it's related to the incinerators. You can say that we're virtually certain we haven't exceeded any of our agreed upon

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parameters, but we're still collecting data. If we have to, we'll follow up with a notice."

"Even if I agreed to call, why the Cortez woman? She isn't the Chair on the Board."

"No, but she's the de facto radiation expert. And she's pretty down to earth about things. She'll listen with an open mind."

"How do you know so damn much about her?"

"She was a member of the state delegation that worked with us on putting the Memorandum of Understanding together."

"Well, why don't you call her then. I only met the woman once, at the signing of your damn MOU, and I'm sure you recall, we didn't hit it off very well."

"All right, I'll make the call, in your name."

"Fair enough," grunted Hugo, "just so I don't have to talk to her." Gesturing at the books and disordered stacks of papers on his desk, Hugo suggested a division of effort on their immediate problems. "I'm satisfied you've got the recovery building thing pretty well under control. Why don't you stay with it the rest of the day while I try to get our testimony into final form? Later this afternoon or tomorrow morning we can see where we stand on both."

As Pitkin turned to leave, Hugo added, "It'll probably be tomorrow before I'll have time to critique this testimony. I'm already running late and I've got some calls to make. Shamballa came down with something and missed her recital last Thursday and was sick over the weekend, and I promised Paonia I'd pick them up at the hospital this afternoon."

"The hospital? I hope it isn't serious?" Pitkin's concern was sincere. His contacts with Hugo's family had, for the most part, been limited to Christmas parties, an occasional barbecue in the summers, and infrequent encounters at the plant when Hugo's wife, Paonia, came by to pick him up or drop off some forgotten item. He liked the short round faced motherly woman whose life revolved around her husband and daughter. And Shamballa, Hugo's nine-year-old, was a serious faced, but mischievous, little girl who was one of Pitkin's favorite people.

"Oh, I don't think so. She may have just overdone her objection to playing the piano in front of all those parents, but the doctor wanted to run some tests anyway."

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"Hugo, if you need some time, I'll be glad to take over some of the testimony. I should anyhow since presenting it's a rock we both have to push up the mountain."

"No, thanks, Pitkin. I'm already wrapped up in the middle of it, and you'd have to start from scratch, besides, you've got your hands full."

Pitkin returned to his office, and in a few minutes was waiting for Delores Cortez to pick up her extension. He hadn't talked to her for over six months and then only briefly. His recollection of her as being reasonable and understanding was a bit undefined, and he hoped he hadn't oversold Hugo on her as the most sympathetic ear they could catch.

"Hello," the deeply rounded voice immediately brought her image to his mind. He saw a tall, full-bodied woman wearing her black, gray streaked hair upswept and tightly knotted high on her head. Her forehead would be shining as though waxed and polished and high cheekbones would make thoughtful brown eyes appear to be set well back where they had a greater freedom to measure and probe those people they found to be worthwhile and interesting.

"Hello, Delores, "He almost said, "Doctor Cortez," but decided to forego formality. "Pitkin Waay."

"Oh, sure. Hello, Pitkin."

He hoped the upswing in her voice was more friendly remembrance and less a sign of curiosity. "I guess it's been a while since we last talked," Pitkin began.

"It certainly has," she agreed. "If memory serves me correctly, it was a meeting in my office on our proposed modifications to the MOU."

"As always, Delores, your recall is perfect. And before you ask if I've called about your proposals, let me say that I haven't. Washington still has them under review, and I haven't been able to get any word on when we'll hear something."

"Believe it or not, Pitkin, I understand. We on the Board spend a lot of our time on the phone to Washington trying to get answers to the simplest questions. For our trouble we get citations to regulations which nobody understands, or we get dumped on with the most convoluted malarky you can imagine. So much for our little trench warfare with the bureaucrats, what's up?"

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"I'm afraid we have something of a problem out here with the new recovery building."

"You mean you're still debugging that chamber of horrors? You should consider putting those barrels I've been reading about inside that big acid pot and sealing the whole shebang for twenty fifth century archeologists to worry about."

"Might not be a bad idea." She seemed to be in a good mood; he hoped it would last. "Speaking of those barrels, it was a sweep of the area around them which led us to the knots in the recovery building. We were doing some extra monitoring in the barrel area, and Harvey Flagler's guys picked up some readings that seemed too high to have been caused by the barrels alone. As of right now, we've identified the recovery building as being the source of some emissions."

"Plutonium?"

"We're running the samples through analysis now, but there's no reason to expect anything else. Our raw data tells us the readings are below the levels in our MOU, but there's always the chance they may have gone slightly over. If they do, we'll file a notice with the Board, but I wanted to let you know what's up in case we don't reach MOU levels."

"Since I'm only a member, I take it this is all unofficial?"

"Yes and no. Hugo didn't call the Chairman because we felt that would be a little more than the situation called for, and it might obligate us to follow up with something written. Between that and doing nothing this seemed to be a good compromise."

"Might be for you, but don't you think it puts me in the middle? I won't sit on what you've told me; I'll have to call Jim Elbert. If I didn't I'd be in the soup with him and the rest of the Board. As Chairman, he'll at least put it on the record of the next meeting."

"Fine, Delores. I expected that would be your reaction, but before then, I'll call you back and tell you where we stand. If we're filing a formal notice, our present conversation will be superfluous. If we aren't, I'll call Elbert myself, and explain that I called you only because of your interest and research work in radiation, and because the MOU encourages interaction among federal and state officials who have expertise in radiation and health physics. I would say that pretty well describes the two of us."

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"The next agreement I negotiate, I want to hire you, Pitkin, instead of having to work under the watchful eye of the state's legal nitpickers," she laughed. "I'll accept your characterization. We're having a discussion of radiation health effects. And since we are, do you care to share with me any of your preliminary radiation readings?"

"Off the record, Delores, and in a hypothetical setting, you might give some thought to wind dispersion which has yielded 620 d/m/g's of plutonium in samplers three and four hundred yards from the source."

A low whistle came through Pitkin's earpiece followed by an exclamation, "Damn. No wonder you called. I'll be interested in seeing your isopleths, and if I know you, Pitkin, you've got a computerized one on your desk right now. If your 620 average out the way some of your emissions have in the past, you're on a rocket over your own federal standards. We could be talking about a serious hazard to public health."

Without answering directly, Pitkin assured her, "As soon as we've got some reliable displays, I'll give you a call. By the way, we'll be putting something out for the media this afternoon. Our release will track what I've told you, without specific numbers. It'll announce we're shutting the entire recovery operation down until we can find just where the problem is."

"You've had so many problems with the damn misbegotten thing, nobody'll think it's news," she chided him.

"The day the media ignores Rocky Flats will be a day worth remembering," replied Pitkin.

"The same would be true of the Health Board, you're ever on our minds," Cortez reminded him. "I appreciate the call, Pitkin. I expect we'll be talking again soon."

"Hugo and I are making our annual trek to Washington Wednesday afternoon, so I expect it will be the first thing next week before I can call, but I appreciate you hearing me out, Delores."

"Good luck in Washington, and give Hugo my regards," she said.

"Thank you. And Hugo wanted me to tell you hello, too."

Hanging up the telephone, Pitkin knew his call would rouse a number of people in Denver and their reactions would be as varied as the interests they represented. Critical to the

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discussions, the charges, the answers, and strength and vigor of them all would be the actual radiation levels registered by both the federal and state air samplers on private property across the federal boundary lines.

Although Pitkin, from years of self discipline, would go by the book and wait for verified data on the contamination, his experience told him the radiation which would be found off site was greater than any ever before detected. He knew it would be an important consideration in the debate over decommissioning the plant.

Pitkin was also certain the response to the plutonium releases, from the barrels and from the recovery building, would not be confined to Colorado. It would be central among the questions he and Hugo would face, from their own superiors in the Department and from political forces on Capitol Hill. In those places, too, the focus would be on radiation emissions and their potential effects on the people who lived in the communities surrounding the plant.

Events were converging, almost as if they had been orchestrated to force a determination on the future of Rocky Flats. Even though the lives of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people could be affected by a decision to decommission the facility, Pitkin could not help wondering where the conflicting pressures were taking him and what role he might find himself playing.

"If Washington has answers to those questions and a hundred like them," Pitkin told himself, "the upcoming trip might be bearable after all."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Pitkin leaned back in his window seat as the 727 gained speed, lifted off the long north-south runway, and angled strongly upward. Stapleton's concrete runway dropped out of sight in only a few seconds, giving way to shrinking rows of tract houses and shopping centers, and in few moments, the plane tipped its starboard wing in a farewell salute to Denver and climbed toward the East.

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The cultivated land below was irregularly checkered brown and green. The dry, light brown fields were lying fallow waiting for the cool days of fall when they would be sown with winter wheat. In an occasional field, Pitkin could see the dust cloud rolling up around a tractor and duck foot as a dry land farmer fought his perennial enemies, the moisture robbing weeds. If allowed to grow unchecked, their seeds would produce a succeeding generation to compete with next year's wheat crop thereby reducing yields, which, in the high plains of eastern Colorado, were nearly always marginal.

The contrasting blocks of green were, for the most part, the wheat that had been planted the previous September. The wheat plants would now be heading out by transforming their green leaves to tightly bound kernels. In the heat of the coming weeks, the stems and seedpods would be embrowned by the sun, and at the full-bodied time of ripeness, giant combines would march through the fields and transform the crop into pure golden grain. Farm trucks would carry the wheat across the stubble of the newly shaven fields and deposit the grain in the towering, concrete and galvanized steel elevators which were the landmarks of the small communities spaced across the plains.

Pitkin could also easily identify irrigated fields by the circular shapes of the center pivot watering systems and the bright green of their artificially watered crops. Those round plots contained the fragile crops, not natural to the high plains. They depended entirely upon the water drawn from the deep Ogallala aquifer, once thought to be infinite, but, now its level was dropping alarmingly as the powerful pumps drained away water faster than natural recharge could replace it.

Looking at the patches of dull green virgin prairie which had escaped plows and which lay yet unbroken, Pitkin marveled at the persistence of the tough native buffalo grass. Tightly hugging the ground, it defied the endless winds and provided forage for the cattle which had long ago been brought here to replace the buffalo. And it seemed to Pitkin that the eternal prairie grass had simply retreated to the rugged coulees and rock-strewn hills waiting, waiting until man exhausted himself and the underground water. Then, after the winds blew the dust from the unwatered fields exposing the hard pan below, perhaps the buffalo grass would reclaim the land.

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Pitkin knew lack of water would spell the end of irrigated cultivation of the plains, but with a scowl, he wondered if other more lasting and more destructive forces might intervene. Certainly, such forces existed, he told himself, turning away from the window in an attempt to close off such thoughts.

Across the empty seat and sitting next to the aisle, Hugo was staring vacantly at the papers piled on the face of his tray table. Sensing Pitkin's gaze, Hugo turned and looked at him. After a moment, Hugo's eyes turned to the window, but finding nothing to capture their attention, they returned to the paperwork.

Pitkin napped for a time, and when he awoke, he saw Hugo sitting looking at the paper work on his tray. "You still working on that?" he asked.

Leaning far back in his seat, and without looking up, Hugo asked, "Pitkin, do you ever have the feeling that events are piling up faster than we can comprehend, that we're sitting at the bottom of a hill staring up at an avalanche?"

"Sometimes, I do. I suppose with the problems we've been getting the last few days the feeling might be expected."

"Many times I've heard you speak of public health...I was wondering about that. Let me ask you, if we cooked every point of every argument down to a last drop of truth, would we see injury to people, actual injury from Rocky Flats plutonium?"

Pitkin looked at Hugo who still stared at his papers. He wondered, not so much about the answer he would give, but rather about why the question had been asked. It was not at all like Hugo to display the slightest doubt or question about the plant and its operation. In the years he had known Hugo Chase, he had never seen anything in him other than determination to operate the plant as efficiently as possible.

At least on the surface, Hugo's confidence had never faltered, and his faith in their mission and in the manner of its execution had been unyielding. The introspection Pitkin sensed in Hugo's question was vaguely disquieting because it paralleled the manner of his own approach to questions about the plant and their work.

Pitkin had a fleeting impression of dependence. For the first time, he asked himself how extensive had been his reliance upon Hugo to provide the thematic underpinning for Rocky Flats. Never had he entertained doubt about Hugo's belief in the need for

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the facility; Hugo had been unflinching in his damnation of critics; and he had been dedicated to the means of achieving their goals.

Hugo's inflexibility had made him an easy target for the committed enemies of the plant. The refusal to compromise his categorical denials of adverse health effects from exposure to low levels of plutonium had been the source of more than one heated argument with Pitkin. Such an uncompromising position itself, paradoxically, provided the best ammunition for those who wished to assail it. And Hugo, as a focal point of criticism, had drawn the heaviest fire. He had been castigated in the media and had even become something of a symbol of governmental intransigence. Still, Hugo had always been firm in the face of the onslaught.

Pitkin realized better now than ever before how Hugo had supplied the one solid position in turmoil of contradictions. He had depended upon Hugo who provided him with logic, logic Pitkin employed to confine his own apprehensions. Thus in a curious and ironic way, Pitkin had relied upon the existence of Hugo's fixed ideas, and had, in effect, used them as an anchor to restrain his own doubts.

If Hugo wavered, if he entertained doubts, Pitkin knew his own position at the plant was almost certainly untenable. Should Hugo suddenly begin to support and thereby re-enforce his own nagging uncertainties, whatever security Pitkin felt about his own professional world would be gone.

He had no idea what effect his answer would have, if any, but he did know it would be honest. Perhaps the answer was no longer important, because the question had already been asked.

"Injury to people? Yes, I believe we are injuring people."

Hugo's head swiveled around. "Pitkin, if you really believe that, how can you work there?" Hugo's eyes, magnified by his horn-rimmed glasses, stared at him.

"I've stayed on for a lot of reasons. It's a reasonably good job, and I do it pretty well. It also happens to be the kind of thing I'm educated to do, and I have invested a lot of years in the business."

"Superficialities, Pitkin," shot back Hugo with a hint of his old fire. "Given your feeling that we are in fact either injuring people or somehow imposing detrimental health effects on them, you would have to be immoral, insensitive, or hypocritical to work to keep the place operating, wouldn't you?"

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"Perhaps, but there are other considerations. I suppose there's a trace of self serving arrogance to be found in my reasoning, but I feel it has some validity. You and I both know how intense the pressures are to maintain a nuclear weapons program. Whether it's contractor influence, military mindset, or simply good common sense, the program is as strong, maybe even stronger, than it's ever been. Rocky Flats will be operated, at least it will until Congress coughs up the money to move it. While it's operating where it is, I honestly believe I can contribute to the operation. To put it another way, I trust myself to keep it as clean as possible, more than I would trust the man who would replace me."

"Fair enough," agreed Hugo. "I suppose there's some of that in all of us. While we might call it a reason, others would say it's a rationalization. Are you saying then, in terms of plutonium effects, you accept a given number of cancers as inevitable by-products of bomb production?"

Pitkin was saved from having to pursue the dialogue, at least for the moment, by the intervention of sandwiches. The plastic encased tray was thrust at them by a mechanically smiling flight attendant that stood waiting while Hugo deposited his papers onto the empty seat.

As is the custom on airlines, the coffee cart was scheduled for arrival long after the sandwiches, and most passengers would consume their food and stack food refuse on their trays before they would be offered something to drink. Nevertheless, the arrival of the food, and the business of unwrapping it had broken the thread of conversation, and Hugo did not attempt to take it up again.

Pitkin puzzled over Hugo's questions. In them he sensed genuine concern, but more than concern, there was a thaw in Hugo's confidence. It would, he told himself, require a powerful force in Hugo's life to effect a real change in his attitude toward the plant. But, he thought, as the coffee finally arrived, he was probably reading too much into a couple of questions.

Pitkin had only begun to sip his coffee when he felt the slight change in the speed of the aircraft telling him the first stage of the descent into Washington had begun. The distance between the capital and the rest of the nation had grown far too short for comfort. He, along with many other citizens, wished it were longer.

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The plane made the Leesburg turn and started its descent down the valley of the Potomac. From his roaring vantage point, Pitkin could see, through his visitor's eyes, the great blot of buildings and roads pasted across the countryside.

The growth of the Maryland and Virginia suburbs had, in the past twenty years, been stupefying. Automobile traffic along the George Washington Parkway and the Capital Beltway was so continually heavy it was virtually impossible to define a period of time that could be called rush hour. Across the river, Pitkin could see the endless miles of houses and apartments of Bethesda and Chevy Chase, and although his unschooled eye could not define it precisely, the dividing line between Maryland and the District of Columbia.

As the plane turned for its final approach, Pitkin could see the Watergate and the Kennedy Center, marking contradictory legends in the nation's recent history. For an instant, he could see down the very hallway of the federal government, Constitution Avenue. In the distance he could see the quintessential symbol of American government, the Washington Monument. The great obelisk rose from the mall like a white dagger thrust into the sky. Behind it, and farther away, Pitkin could see the classic outline of the capitol building.

Just as the plane seemed to be settling down upon the waters of the Potomac, the runway darted under its wheels and they landed at Washington National Airport. From the instantly crowded aisles of the airplane, Pitkin and Hugo made their way through the Jetway into the jammed walkways of the terminal. Distrustful of airline baggage handling, and planning a stay of only two days, both men had brought carry on luggage and were able to forego the awkward wait at the luggage carousels.

The heat of late afternoon combined with high humidity soon had the travelers sweating as they trudged toward the Metro station, which was a long and inconvenient distance from the terminal building. On an earlier trip, a couple of years ago, they had rented a car. Almost instantly lost somewhere in Arlington, and later in the District, they had parked the car and hailed a cab to take them to their hotel. Later, Pitkin had contrived to have a young staff member in the Department pick the car up and return it to the rental agency. The subway, something of a challenge, would deposit them within an easy walk of the great marble headquarters

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building, and while it wasn't as convenient as a taxi, Hugo was fascinated with the ride, thus the rails of Metro had become their avenue into Washington.

Farecards in hand, Pitkin and Hugo, along with a half dozen other grim faced passengers, passed through computerized turnstiles and took up positions alongside the tracks. To their great relief, the wait was only a matter of minutes. Metro's silver cars slid to a stop and invited them aboard with a swish of its sliding doors. Two quick notes from its chimes and the sudden pull of acceleration was a compelling invitation to use the handholds as they made their way to nearby seats.

Pitkin was always surprised at the speed of the cars. Very soon they were pulling into the Pentagon station where the sliding doors admitted a couple of junior army officers, three expensive briefcases carried by contractor types, and an attractive blonde who took an empty seat behind Pitkin. The car's next invitation was extended to a melancholy empty platform at the Arlington National Cemetery. The car had better luck at Rosslyn where it exchanged the blonde for a mixed group of some half dozen individuals, none of whom seemed associated with any other.

With its passengers sealed in behind clamped doors, the string of electric cars was prepared for serious business. Gathering speed on the slight decline, it clicked its way under the Potomac River. The great rush sent the tunnel lights sailing by, and had it not been for a noticeable change to an incline, only the train would have known it had subversed half the river and reached the District of Columbia.

In quick order, stops were made at Foggy Bottom and McPherson Square. Even though the Metro system was relatively new and had been constructed at astronomical cost, the walls of some stations were already stained with long ribbons of rust and dirt from leaking water. Many escalators were frozen into immobility by mechanical failures. Occasional tiles were missing from the red station platforms, and exit portals were often roped off and signed, "out of order."

At Metro Center where they changed trains, Pitkin looked at the curving walls and high arching ceilings and imagined them to be huge gray concrete waffles folded over his head. The small brown directional signs always seemed woefully inadequate, and it

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was only by luck that they found the line that would take them to station near the Forrestal Building.

After the short second ride, both men were glad to leave their car and head for the exit where they climbed, by the stairs, out of Washington's proud subway system. The late afternoon heat was a welcome relief, and even the intrepid subway rider, Hugo, was glad to emerge into afternoon sunlight.

"I suppose we might as well go straight to Baldwin's office," suggested Hugo. "That's where we always seem to wind up."

"We'll be lucky if he's in. Every time I call his office, he's 'on travel.'" Pitkin's contempt for the gross abuse of travel prerogatives, so pervasive in the federal bureaucracy, was quite evident. "Hell, if you aren't 'on travel' at least half the time, you're really small potatoes in this town."

"He'll be in this afternoon," countered Hugo. "I talked to him yesterday. As a matter of fact, he called me, said he was just confirming our schedule and wanted us to stop by as soon as we got in."

"Kind of unusual for Baldwin to call. Did he give you any clue as to why he's suddenly concerned about us?"

"I don't think we really have to wonder, do we, Pitkin?" asked Hugo grimly.

A security guard check, an elevator ride, and a hike down an extremely long corridor later they were greeted by a secretary. Obviously, they were expected.

"Mister Chase and Doctor Waay?" asked a young woman.

Hugo admitted as much. Their traveling bags were stowed in an inconspicuous corner while they were supplied with coffee by yet another young woman who appeared out of an adjoining office. Thus fortified they were told to "Go right in."

Hatch Baldwin was tilted back in a large brown leather chair, his gleaming bluchers propped on the edge of an opened desk drawer. He was, of course, on the telephone. A dark blue, pinstriped arm waved them to seats. The tanned, boyish face beamed a friendly smile. With a hand clasped over the mouthpiece, his mouth exaggerated the silent words, "The Secretary."

Hatch's first spoken words were deferential, "Yes, Mister Secretary, I understand." After a few moments, he continued,

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"Yes, sir. There may be some grumbling, but I'm certain Senator Sumter will be sympathetic. As a matter of fact, a call to his office this afternoon would be useful. I know he's out of town, but the record of your call would be a good maneuver." Another pause, "Yes, He's speaking in Miami this evening, I checked it with Congressional Relations... Good. I'll tell him you yourself tried to call."

Replacing the telephone, he greeted them warmly. "Hugo, Pitkin, glad to see you. How was the trip?" Without waiting for an answer, he plunged ahead. "Your timing couldn't have been better. Secretary Stewart and I were talking about your appearance before the senate committee when you walked in the door."

"I'm surprised he knew we were testifying," smiled Pitkin.

"Oh, he knows all right. The day we read the story about your little barrel cache, Senator Sumter's office called and asked that the Assistant Secretary appear at the authorization hearings on Rocky Flats. Two days ago, let's see, yes, Monday, the Senator himself called and quite strongly suggested the Secretary appear. The Secretary agreed to rearrange his schedule and make an appearance. Yesterday, the committee staff advised us the thrust of the hearings had been modified to include authorizations to decommission you guys right out of existence. We also heard, unofficially, that some of the senators want to delve into what was termed 'other matters.' Translated, they're going to sharpen some questions about the shutdown of your recovery building."

"And, let me guess," said Pitkin, "the Secretary's been called to attend to other urgent business."

"Indulge my curiosity, Hatch," interrupted Hugo. "What business?"

"He's been called to a meeting at the White House, if you must know."

"Must have taken some pretty fast arranging," observed Pitkin.

"You have a cynical and suspicious mind, Pitkin," replied Baldwin, pinching a speck of lint from his vest.

"And I'll bet my mother's cookie cutter that Julian is on travel."

"Assistant Secretary Wendover is in New Mexico, and despite your innuendo, Pitkin, he's tending to Department business."

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"That leaves you and a couple of other deputy assistant secretaries," said Pitkin evenly, "What are you doing tomorrow, Hatch?"

"I'll be at your side, my friend, while you and Hugo defend God, country, and Rocky Flats."

"I hope you aren't going to tell me this testimony will have to be rewritten before tomorrow," cried Hugo waving the sheaf of papers he had pulled out of his briefcase.

"Quite the contrary, Hugo," soothed Baldwin, "I suggest it's perfect just as it stands. Copies have already been sent to the hill. We can simply explain that we were asked to appear and discuss authorizations for Rocky Flats. We were not advised there would be new subjects and we did not prepare, or clear, testimony on collateral issues. The committee members understand our procedures and know we have to clear statements through the Office of Management and Budget before they go to Congress."

"Sounds pretty thin to me," muttered Hugo. "I don't like the thought of refusing to answer the questions of a senator."

"There's a difference between refusing to answer and simply explaining you are not prepared to answer," explained Baldwin. "The inside game is to answer what you can and promise to supply written material for the record when you're stumped. Believe me, Hugo, it's standard procedure for the executive branch to control their answers as completely as possible."

"It's also congressional practice to get answers to the questions they know are embarrassing," Pitkin reminded the Deputy Assistant.

"Fortunately, for us, that takes considerable time," replied Baldwin. "And, if we're lucky, we can usually moot the annoying questions and compromise the difficult ones before the ricochet hits us in the arse."

Hatch Baldwin's buoyant attitude and youthful appearance were a pleasant facade. Many competitors for promotions in the federal power structure had made the mistake of underestimating his knack of exploiting weaknesses and capitalizing on errors in judgment. Baldwin also knew the value of friendships, especially those with the right people.

The Deputy Assistant Secretary had, on more than one occasion demonstrated a willingness to sacrifice the reputations of others to preserve his own. While some would have termed such

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behavior as unsavory and decidedly undesirable, it was not uncommon among those who climbed their way through the thin and ever thinner branches of the higher levels of government where only a few of the hardy, clever, and devious can exist.

Pitkin was far from being satisfied with Baldwin's breezy explanations of the legislative and executive branch interplay. Having met some of the senators and having testified before them a number of times, he knew them to be opinionated and egotistical, but he also knew they were intelligent and determined. Certainly, they were not so easily sidetracked as Baldwin suggested.

The physicist was also puzzled by the obvious desertion of the Secretary and the Assistant Secretary. He had met Secretary Stewart two years earlier, shortly after his appointment and Senate confirmation. Stewart had visited Rocky Flats during an orientation tour of Department of Energy facilities, and Pitkin had spent the greater part of a day explaining and demonstrating the operation of the plant. The man had been friendly and forthright, and Pitkin had instinctively liked him. Ducking a committee hearing was inconsistent with what Pitkin believed was a strong personality perfectly capable of meeting the awkward questions of a senate committee.

"Hatch, you traveled some of that ground pretty quickly," said Pitkin. "For example, exactly what kind of questions should we expect about the recovery building?"

"If I knew, I'd tell you. I'm only passing on what I said was strictly unofficial information from a committee staffer. It could be nothing; it could be something considerably important. However, our guideline should be to avoid anything not directly relevant to the budget for the plant."

"Are they going to ask about the elevated plutonium emissions we reported?"

"Pitkin, I'm telling you all I know. But I don't know how they could get into that since we haven't talked to anyone on the Hill about your latest spill." There was a note of annoyance in Baldwin's voice, and Pitkin decided to probe a bit.

"Hatch, just to keep the record straight. We haven't experienced anything you could properly call a 'spill.' We blew some plutonium through our filters. I think it's important that the Department be mindful of the potential for misunderstanding

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which occurs as a result of using anything other than precise terminology. Were you under the impression we had experienced something more serious than air dispersion?"

"Did you?" Asked Baldwin impulsively.

"Hell, no!" blurted Hugo. "We explained the whole thing over the phone. Are you suggesting we're holding something back?"

"No, of course not," said Baldwin quickly, "I wasn't suggesting anything of the sort. I was only trying to think of anything that could be sitting out there waiting to blindside us. It could be related to one of the other facilities. Have either of you caught wind of any problems in New Mexico or Texas?"

Listening to Baldwin's defensive answer, Pitkin had the impression that Baldwin was fishing for information. "Maybe there's something he doesn't know, and it's got him worried," Pitkin thought. He knew that the absence of information was the most feared aspect of life in Washington, especially for those who were on their way to higher and more exalted positions.

For his part, Hugo Chase had been a plant director far too long to engage in the kind of talk Baldwin was encouraging. "I'm too busy keeping my own shop running without worrying about the rest of the system," he shrugged.

There seemed to be little of substance left for the group to discuss. Baldwin's plan to use Hugo's testimony as it was written eliminated the need to revise it. And Baldwin, in his mind, was going to confine their participation to commenting on budgetary matters as set forth in their written statement. Yet, the Deputy Assistant had one final matter for disposition.

Brushing the smallest, even imaginary, particle of dust from his bluchers with an elegant finger, he asked, "You, of course, remember you have an appointment with Senator Moffat at the unholy hour of eight o'clock?"

"Sure," said Hugo. "I told you about it on the telephone."

"I understand the invitation was for the two of you, but if you would like, I'd be glad to join you. I can't imagine what the Senator has in mind, but if it's departmental at all, I suppose I should go."

Pitkin suppressed a laugh. Baldwin had gone as far toward inviting himself as discretion would allow. It was the same bug-a-bear, a thirst for information, and a desire to be on the

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inside. Coupled with it was the gravitational pull of political power. In Washington, a senator, any senator, was a powerful force, and few Potomac stricken star worshipers could resist any opportunity to be where they could see, listen to, and, "land-a-goshen," even speak to a real senator. Baldwin had all the symptoms of having been smitten with a full dose of Washington Sycophancy, a contagion among mid and upper level bureaucrats. It was itching the man so fiercely that Pitkin almost felt sorry for him, but just almost.

"Oh, we wouldn't think of imposing on you, Hatch." Pitkin's tone was solicitous and barely serious enough to escape censure as cynicism.

"No trouble, I assure you," replied Baldwin.

Pitkin was firm in his determination to spare Baldwin further aggravation of his affliction. "No, Hatch, you'll get quite enough of the Senate later in the morning. Besides, I'm pretty sure it's only a little local Colorado problem. We'll work it out and see you in the committee room before ten o'clock."

Leaving no room for argument and remaining steadfast, Pitkin rose and began talking about how tiring the trip had been and how he and Hugo wanted to get checked into their hotel. Trailing promises to fill Baldwin in, and streaming assurances that he and Hugo could fend for themselves, Pitkin talked his way to the door, through it and into the reception area. Through it all, Hugo remained silent.

Once they had retrieved their suitcases and gained the open hallway, Hugo asked, "Okay, Pitkin, I went along, but what the hell was all that about?"

"Hugo, did you ever see a kid hankering for some sugary piece of candy, but not wanting to come right out and ask for it?"

"Sure, but..."

"Well, Baldwin wanted to tag along with us to Moffat's office so much he was about to pop, but he couldn't bring himself to come right out and ask."

"When you put it that way, I see," laughed Hugo, and the more he thought about it the more he enjoyed it. Soon the two of them were re-enforcing one another's laughter with snatches of Baldwin's offer.

"Departmental business, Hugo," sniffed Pitkin.

"Unholy hour of eight," mimicked Hugo.

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"I just suppose I'll have to go along," added Pitkin in his best Baldwin voice.

In a somewhat more serious manner, Pitkin offered a philosophical thought, "Washington really isn't so bad, Hugo. In fact, it's a pretty nice city. The natives are generally friendly and easygoing. You just have to be wary of all the outlanders who have their feet stuck in Potomac mud and who comprise the largest mass of the pushy and cushy ever assembled on this planet."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Eldon Moffat was senatorial from his magnificent shock of coiffurist tended hair to the soft black leather of his narrow perfectly arched French shoes. The deep blue, chalk striped suit coat was longishly cut, subtly hinting of a parallel with the stately legislators of the mid-nineteenth century, the Calhouns and Websters. Either golf course time or the sunlamp of the Senate gymnasium kept the face tanned and careful attention to diet kept the profile slim, almost classically gaunt.

The Senator was a study in confidence and wisdom, one of the finest and most finished products of manufacturing and packaging yet produced. His financial backers were content with

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his voting record, the party was satisfied with his staff written speeches, the public dutifully awed by the image, and Eldon Moffat gloried in being the center of it all.

If there was an abrasive note in Moffat's world, if there was an ugly pimple under his fine white collar, it was the distasteful, but necessary, business of fire suppression. The small fires threatened or actually set by disgruntled constituents did not trouble him. He had legions of staff whose sole mission it was to quench such sparks with a bucket of federal money here, another bucket there, or, more likely, a letter, a promise, a packet of information, sometimes, if the need was great enough, a visit by Moffat himself.

No, there was no difficulty whatever with the missed social security check in some small town, the disability pension matter in another, and the hundreds of other anemic cries from the small and weak. The illusion and the fact of power and influence that was embodied in Eldon Moffat kept him politically enthroned in a senate sinecure where the average and the mundane troubled him not at all.

Senator Moffat did, however, worry and did concern himself with destructive fires lapping around the ankles of the large and powerful. Those fires Moffat battled he. He had seen fellow club members perish when their inattention had allowed small fires to flourish. The ghastly spectacle of a crisply fried large denomination contributor was only less terrifying than a senator without a fire escape. Eldon Moffat had, in the past few days, felt some distinctly warm breezes blowing from the west, specifically his state of Colorado. No inferno for him. He intended to make certain there was no fire where he smelled smoke.

"Hugo, Pitkin, I can't tell you how delighted I am to see you. Please, please be seated. I know it's a bit early, especially by our time." Moffat's suggestion that he was mindful of the two-hour differential between Eastern and Mountain Standard Time was a distinctly false note when sounded in the French decor of his elegant office.

"We're always glad to meet with you, Senator," said Hugo, "and the earlier hour suits us very well."

"I'm sure it does. You both look well. Pitkin you've been up in the mountains. You can't get that kind of color anywhere else. The sun even bleached your hair a bit, or am I seeing a few

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more silver threads among the gold? God, how I envy you fellows, living and working back home near the mountains."

"Washington hasn't been so very bad for you, Senator," said Pitkin. "You look as fit as I've ever seen you."

"Do I now? Why, thank you, Pitkin. I try to keep myself in as good a condition as time permits. If I didn't, I'm afraid this place would put me in an early grave." He went on in a reflective way, "I guess I'm really an old war horse in a new kind of race. There's no more of the leisurely debate we used to enjoy, and a man out of shape could easily be trampled by some of these young bucks. But you two didn't come here to listen to that kind of talk. Here we sit and I haven't even offered you coffee."

"Thank you, Senator, but we just finished breakfast, and I think we're set for now," said Hugo.

"Just so," agreed Moffat, "I'm glad to hear you've eaten, but I must confess, I'm embarrassed for not having had you up here for breakfast. I had intended for us to have a bite together, but I had another commitment I couldn't avoid."

"We understand," interposed Hugo, "you can't spend your time eating with everybody who drops in from back home. You'd never get anything else done and pretty soon you'd have my shape."

"Nothing wrong with a few extra pounds, Hugo," said Moffat heartily. "I'm sure you enjoy your meals more than I enjoy the bird food they let me eat."

Shifting the conversation to matters at hand, Moffat observed, "I know you came to town for Alvin Sumter's authorization hearings. I'll be sitting in since I'm on the Committee. I'll try to keep the sharks from tearing off something vital." He chortled at his own crude little joke. "I asked you to come by just to see if you have any questions or thoughts about the hearings."

Pitkin and Hugo exchanged glances before Pitkin spoke, "No questions, Senator. Hugo's prepared statement pretty well lays out our program along the three option lines the committee staff requested, increased operational levels, status quo, and reduced program effort."

"Yes, I've read the statement and agree it's well done. Concise and to the point, refreshing in these days of long

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discourses on every conceivable trivial issue. I suppose you both realize there will be questions about those pesky barrels?"

"We both knew there would be from the minute we found them," said Pitkin.

"Good, I knew the two of you would be ahead of the game." He paused while his gaze swept around the office as though expecting to see his next question written on his original Manet or engraved on the gray stone given to him by the chatelain of the Chateau de Cialare. However, Moffat already had the question in mind, he paused only to give it a bit more effect.

"I trust you have also given some consideration to the possibility of finding some interest among members of the Committee in the problems with your new recovery building?"

"We anticipated some interest their, yes." Pitkin's reply was flat and uninviting of further development.

Bland answers notwithstanding; Moffat's firefighting instincts carried him forward. "It has been a difficult break-in period, has it not?"

"Difficult would be a fair statement," Pitkin's voice remained dry and neutral, but polite.

"Still, the building is a unique affair, and the engineering was necessarily innovative?"

"The concepts are well enough known to lend themselves to incorporation into such a building, but there have been unanticipated experiences," said Pitkin.

"I see, or at least I hope I do." Moffat's words rippled like slow water over large rocks, easily and softly. "Would you assign a reason to these...experiences?"

"Not definitively," countered Pitkin.

The barest trace of a smile tugged at Moffat's lips as he studied Pitkin. From past experiences with the two men, he knew Pitkin would be the one to understand the unspoken questions, and his expectation had been well founded. Moffat felt he had but a short step yet to go. He took it carefully.

"Should the question arise, although I have no reason to believe it will, as to the underlying cause for last week's filter malfunctions, your answer would be...?" He left it hanging for Pitkin to finish.

"The specific cause has not yet been identified by our technical people. To be perfectly honest, Senator, the jury is still

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out." As he spoke, Pitkin wrestled with a question of his own. He wondered how Moffat knew about the in-house theory that the emissions had occurred because of problems with the filters or the electrical controls for them. That fact had been carefully kept out of the news release, at his direction. Until he had a report in hand from Meeker and Flagler, he would refuse to assign a cause for what he had called, for Moffat's benefit, an "experience." The only explanation for the senator's inside information was a leak from someone inside Rocky Flats.

Moffat was now smiling broadly, "In my mind, that's a sound and commendable approach. I suppose it's the only way men of your scientific orientation would dare tackle such a complex matter. To assign blame at this point could be most embarrassing for you and for...the entire nuclear program. I guess you would agree with that?"

Hugo spoke as Pitkin would have expected, but without the enthusiasm or conviction he would have displayed a few short weeks ago. "Our mandate, Senator, is to execute a congressionally assigned program. Frequently, we encounter complex problems with many technical inter-associations. Therefore, we are locked into a systematic pattern of analysis, and premature speculations are seldom productive."

The statement sounded suspiciously political and Moffat nearly retreated from his beaming approbation of what he believed he had heard; however, he dismissed any concern he might have entertained. "Hugo, I'm glad you're running the show out there. You're appreciation of the program encourages me, and I know the Secretary depends heavily on you, as he does on Pitkin. I'll look forward to seeing the both of you in the hearing room. Together we might just put some staples in a few flap jaws."

Conspicuously consulting his watch, Moffat rose to escort them to the door. After vigorously pumping their hands as though he would not see them for years, he left them in his reception room with instructions to his aide to give them any assistance they might require.

The harried and disheveled assistant was visibly relieved when Pitkin and Hugo assured him they were not inclined to ply him with requests of any kind. As they shuffled toward the door, the aide offered small talk about their trip and the hearing. As they stepped into the hallway, he offered a final word, "Please give my

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regards to Mister Wellington. I understand he is enjoying his work at Rocky Flats."

"We'll tell him we talked with you," Pitkin promised as he and Hugo turned and headed down the long hallway.

They waited for a slow elevator, descended a floor, stepped out and looked at a locator board for their hearing room. As they negotiated the corridors studying the room numbers, Pitkin reflected on the remarks of Moffat's aide. "It wouldn't require much detective work to determine whose big mouth talked to Moffat's office about a defective filtration system."

"Lamont," nodded Hugo.

"I think we ought to fire his butt."

"For talking to a senator?"

"No. For talking to a senator without first talking to you or to me," explained Pitkin. "There's a difference, a damn big difference."

"We'd have a tough time making it stick," argued Hugo, stopping in front of the hearing room door.

"I suppose so," said Pitkin, dropping the subject as they stepped into the high vaulted hearing chamber.

They found only one casual clerk in the spacious room. She was at the far end on the elevated platform behind the curving wooden parapet. The leather headrests of a dozen chairs could be seen evenly spaced behind the upper edge of the elongated desk, and jutting up at various angles on flexible arms, a dozen microphone heads waited, one for each chair. The clerk was moving slowly along behind the chairs placing writing pads and yellow pencils on the unseen desktop, one for each chair and microphone.

The room was illuminated only by light from the tall windows. The wood panels lent the room a dignified aspect as they stared down at the rows of chairs and the witness table. The green topped table had been placed a discrete distance from the horizontal balustrade, which topped the senatorial deskwork.

Hugo set his briefcase on a front row chair, and, muttering something about the men's room, left Pitkin alone with the diffidence of the distributing clerk. Pitkin deposited his case on an adjoining chair and began walking casually toward the curved wooden bar and the Chairman's seat, designated as such by its central position behind the desk.

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The clerk ignored him until he spoke. "I guess we're a little early."

She caught his light smile and exchanged it for one of her own. "Oh, things'll pick up soon enough. Are you testifying?"

"Yes. I'm with the gentleman who just left."

"Then you're Mister Chase?"

"No. Mister Chase just stepped out."

Squinting down at a stack of papers Pitkin recognized as copies of Hugo's written statement, she scanned the opening sentences. "Then you're Doctor Waay, and," reading again, "you're from Rocky Flats, Colorado." She sounded as though she thought Rocky Flats was simply a town in Colorado, but the idea of the state seemed to interest her. "I went skiing out there one time."

"Where?" he asked.

"Winter Park. It was beautiful, but I'm afraid it was a lost cause; I'm not really athletic."

"It only takes time. If I can slide around on skis, anyone can. You really should try again."

"I might," she said absently as she began laying out copies of the statement, one for each chair. Halfway along the row, she paused and looked down at him. "Is it true what some of the staff are saying that the plant you and Mister Chase operate? That it has released radiation into the housing developments north of Denver?"

"There's been some problem with radiation getting out of the plant, but knowing staff, I'll bet it isn't as bad as they say."

"Some of them say it's pretty bad, but you're right, they usually exaggerate." Two men coming in the side door carrying light bars and electrical cord interrupted her. "It looks like you're going to be on television," she said, dropping the conversation and moving along with her stack of papers.

The girl had been right on two counts. The television crew was soon assembling light stands and stringing a network of wires around the room. Her assurance that things would quickly pick up also proved to be true. Staff members strolled in and out of the doors as though testing the atmosphere for their patron senators, and a few early arriving spectators began selecting seats from among the neat rows of chairs.

Pitkin took his seat in the front row and was soon joined by Hugo and Hatch Baldwin. The two had met in the hallway, and

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the well-scrubbed Baldwin was exuding charm and deliberate calm. He threw a familiar wave at a staff member before turning his attention to Pitkin.

"I was just asking Hugo about your visit with Senator Moffat. It was his impression that everything went quite well. Do you agree?"

"You mean after Hugo vomited on his carpet?"

Baldwin's jaw dropped, just for an instant. "That's sick humor, Pitkin."

"Did you expect me to say Hugo's impression was off the mark? It was a sick question, Hatch, but to give it the answer it deserves, we managed."

"You're a bit testy this morning, Pitkin. And I might add; your surly attitude isn't appreciated. I certainly don't want it reflected in our testimony this morning. I have quite enough to worry about without having to apologize for field employees who screw up the works and leave it to headquarters to hold the program together and, when called to Washington, forget just where they really are."

Baldwin's intent was the reduction of Pitkin Waay to what Baldwin perceived to be the "field employee's" proper place. He had chosen badly. The time was hardly appropriate and Baldwin simply didn't know his employee.

Pitkin quietly studied Baldwin for a long moment. The instant Baldwin's glance dropped, Pitkin stood, and began re-packing his briefcase. Baldwin watched long enough to comprehend what Pitkin was about.

"Just what the hell are you doing?"

Ignoring the Deputy Assistant, Pitkin spoke quietly to Hugo. "I'll wait for you outside."

Hugo was glaring at Baldwin and for a moment the Deputy Assistant thought he was going to lose both "field employees." As Pitkin walked away, Baldwin fumed, "Goddamn him. He's going to have to answer to the Secretary for this."

Hugo spoke with controlled fury, "I hope you're prepared to explain to the Secretary why he left. I also hope you know that the Secretary considers Pitkin Waay to be the most scientifically competent man in the Department of Energy. I'll stay and read the statement, and I'll testify on administration and budget, but your

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scientific expertise just walked out the back door, Mister Baldwin."

Before Hugo finished speaking, Baldwin's face was white with rage and frustration. The prospect of a confrontation between himself and Pitkin in the Secretary's presence ushered in the cold fear of experiencing a career disruption. Hatch Baldwin began to feel the slender branches of higher bureaucracy bend beneath his weight. He spun on his heel and stalked into the hallway.

Baldwin found Pitkin leaning idly against the wall a few long paces removed from the little group, which always clusters around the door of a hearing room. Pitkin met him with a quiet smile. "What took you so long, Hatch?"

"Why you arrogant bastard," seethed Baldwin.

"Another word like that and I'll move down to the first floor. Now tell me in gentlemanly terms why you're out here."

"I came out here to see if you've realized what you're doing."

"I did before I left. You see, Hatch, I've been considering resigning from the Department for some time. Why not now?"

There was a note of finality in Pitkin's words, and Baldwin knew the statement was not contrived and was utterly and completely true. His reeling thought could not formulate a coherent answer to the flat, "Why not now?"

"You mean you'd quit, just like that. Chuck everything and walk away?"

"The government isn't everything, Hatch, at least, not to me. I expect that's one large difference between your world and mine. And walk away? Certainly, but not before Secretary Stewart and I have a nice long chat about `field employees.'"

"Okay, I was off base. I admit it. Is that what you want, an apology?"

"I want two things. First, I want you to go back in there and apologize to Hugo Chase for being impertinent and insulting. Hugo was working for the program before you ever heard the word `energy.' He has performed the kind of work you only dream about. Rocky Flats operates today because of his skill and because of his dedication, and I will not have his record compromised or libeled by your silly presumptions. Second, I want it understood that you keep your mouth shut during the hearing."

"I'll have to introduce you...I..."

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"Not one damn word, Hatch. Not even a yes or no."

The Deputy Assistant struggled with himself. His instinct was to lash out and to threaten, but he knew there was nothing to do but accept Pitkin's terms. He had the awful feeling that Pitkin was perfectly willing to walk away and leave him the embarrassment of trying to explain things to his superiors. Yet, he could not agree to the humiliating terms without some attempt to salvage a fragment, however small, of his esteem. His notion of his own presence forced him to make the effort.

"I'll do it, but remember, Doctor Waay, there'll be another time, other circumstances. And if I'm asked a direct question in there, I'll have to answer."

"No you won't, I'll see to it. Don't threaten me, Hatch and don't try to compromise. We're not in your office, and I'm not another deputy assistant competing with you for an assignment or for a chance to claim some credit that'll get me a pat on the head. It's take it or leave it. And I might suggest you do one or the other pretty soon. I have the feeling the hearing's about to get started in there."

"All right, but I've got one condition. If you take this to the Secretary, even if I go along with you, there's no reason to buy off on your deal now. Do I have your word you won't report this to Stewart?"

Baldwin was totally unprepared for Pitkin's response. With a broad smile, Pitkin immediately agreed. "Hatch, I give you my word. Stewart won't hear a word about this from me." Thumping the blinking Baldwin on the back like an old friend, Pitkin turned the startled Deputy Assistant toward the door and steered him into the hearing room.

Facing Hugo, Baldwin stumbled miserably, but managed to get through a full apology with only some minor prompting from Pitkin. His most egregious errors were forgetting to call Hugo "Mister Chase" and forgetting the word "impertinent," otherwise Pitkin was satisfied.

When Baldwin stepped a few paces apart to smile a greeting at a female staffer, Hugo muttered his relief at the quick reversal. "Dammit, Pitkin, you had me sweating for a minute. I think he would've tried to tough it out if I hadn't told him Stewart thought you were a genius and would have his hide if you quit."

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"Yes, I agree. The thought of facing the Secretary was enough to dampen his silk socks."

"Well, the next time you decide to rag one of these headquarters types, let me know ahead of time."

Baldwin was occupied with ego repair. He was busily waving at staff friends and letting the little world in on the fact he was a personage of some importance. He was doing remarkably well until he saw a staffer slip through the doorway behind the chairman's seat and head directly toward them.

"Pitkin," hissed Baldwin, "it's Charlie Webber, the Chairman's counsel. I've got to talk to him or he'll think I'm crazy."

"Did it ever occur to you that you are?" asked Pitkin. But before Webber arrived, he mercifully took an important corner off Hatch's gag. "Go ahead and talk to him, but not a word to any senator."

The relief was written into Hatch's voice as he called out, "Charlie, good to see you, my friend."

If Webber was surprised at the heartier than usual greeting, he didn't show it. "Hello, Hatch." The committee staffer looked past Baldwin as he asked, "And you, sir, must be Mister Chase."

Hugo shook the outstretched hand and inclined his head at Pitkin. "Yes, and this is my deputy, Doctor Waay."

Webber extended his hand to Pitkin, and addressed them both; "I'm Charlie Webber. I work with Chairman Sumter."

Pitkin noticed the halftone implication created by the use of "with" rather than the correct word, "for." He also noted how easily Baldwin was reduced to a mere deputy assistant by the imperious senatorial employee. Pitkin felt a flood of anger at the positional foppery on display. His disgust swept away the nudge toward inferiority that the man's attitude had given and was designed to give to the confidence of others. He decided he would nudge back.

Baldwin was explaining the absence of the Secretary. "Didn't you get our message. I'm positive that the Secretary himself tried to call the Chairman. When the White House called, the Secretary, of course, had no choice but to go."

"I do remember something about a call, Hatch, but we are disappointed not to be hearing from Secretary Stewart. However,

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we can't let that keep us from giving a good hearing to Mister Chase and Doctor Waay." Continuing the associative "we," he gave Hugo a figurative pat on the head. "We haven't had an opportunity to read your prepared statement, but I'm certain we'll follow it carefully."

Pitkin couldn't contain himself any longer. "I'm dreadfully sorry to hear you haven't taken the time to read our testimony," said Pitkin, loudly enough to send his voice to the ears of those standing nearby and to other listeners sitting at least five rows away.

Webber's eyes flew open as he threw quick glances around the room. "It just happens I have an extra copy, Charlie," Pitkin's heavy emphasis on the name was a roar in the sensitive ears of the still gaping Webber, "and you may have it." Pitkin held a rolled copy of their statement far out in front of him. Webber snatched it from his hand as though it had been a white finger pointing and naming him to be a negligent and duty-shirking assistant.

"Since you work for," Pitkin came down hard on the word "for," "Chairman Sumter, you may give him our regards, and you may run our message up to him that we are here and at his disposal."

Webber turned and stalked away. His rigid back was an eloquent reflection of his frame of mind. Somehow the code had been rudely broken. Nobody spoke down to any powerful committee staffer except Senators and sometimes they exercised discretion in dealing with the most exalted of the staff.

"I don't believe what I just heard," breathed Baldwin, almost choking. "You managed to torpedo and deep six every shred of good will we ever had on this entire Committee. You're a fool, Pitkin."

"And he's a posturing, strutting fool," said Pitkin. "All your good relations will come bouncing back the minute it serves his interests."

As he spoke, Pitkin felt a light hand on his shoulder. He turned and looked into the smiling face of Alvin Sumter, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Energy.

"Pitkin, my boy. I'm delighted tah see you. And Hugo, you look as fit as a pin."

The courtly Senator Sumter had never been known to speak at any pace other than authentic southern slow. The

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deliberate selection and savoring of each word was soft and pleasant for those who were in his presence to listen. The pacing was disconcerting for those who wished to engage in dialogue because it was difficult to determine when the old gentleman was finished. Fitting words into any of the segments was awkward because it was Sumter's custom to simply continue until his thought was entirely finished. He seemed to not hear the incomplete sentences, the phrases that were thrust into the ranks of his slowly marching utterances.

Hugo forgot the Senator's speaking pattern and began, "It's our..."

The Chairman continued, "And Mistah Baldwin, isn't it? We are always honored tah have one of the Secretary's representatives appear before the Committee."

Baldwin stared at Pitkin, afraid to speak, but equally afraid not to. However, he needn't have been concerned. The Chairman was not finished.

"Sorry tah hear the Secretary was called tah other affairs, but we all understand. After all, the President is the President."

Having offered them that profound thought, he seemed to have finished. Pitkin began to accept his welcome, "We're always happy...."

The Chairman, however, still had a fragment to complete. "Now isn't that so, Pitkin?"

Relieved to be addressed directly and to be given a specific invitation to speak, Pitkin replied, "It certainly seems to me that the President is indeed the President, Mister Chairman."

"Why, of course he is. And the Secretary's bound tah answer a summons from his leadah." His old eyes twinkling, the Senator gave Pitkin a long look. "Doctah Waay, I think you put a welt on Mistah Webbah's backside. I have been persuaded for some time now that our Mistah Webbah has forgotten entirely that Senators are elected and Senators appoint staff. Actually he is an well-educated and quite capable young man. I'm hopeful he will profit from his little encounter and not become malicious or mischievous in his work."

Pitkin made no attempt to reply, and it was well he did not, because the Senator was not finished. He had yet another pleasantry to visit upon them before he was willing to take up Committee business.

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Dropping the pretended formality he had adopted to discuss Webber, he returned with keen interest to fishing. "Pitkin, I have not caught a fish, not a single one, since we had our hearings in Colorado and you took me tah that little trout stream. Have you been back there?"

"Not to that stream, Mister Chairman, but last weekend I went to a small hidden lake and did very well."

"Did you?" exclaimed Sumter. "Would you consider taking me there if I should just happen tah get out tah your country before the summer is over?"

"I'd be delighted, Senator. At your convenience."

"Agreed," he said grasping Pitkin's hand. "I'll make every effort to visit you, soon." To the others he said, "Having concluded an agreement for my personal pleasure, I do believe it is time for us to be about our business."

CHAPTER NINE

It was only a few minutes before the distinguished Senator Alvin Sumter of South Carolina was looking down at them from his seat behind the wooden rail and making preparations to call the Committee to order. A cold eyed Charlie Webber took a seat next to the Chairman, but at a word from the Senator, stood and took a seat along the wall with other staffers and aides.

Soon the door behind Sumter's chair admitted a large senator, whose thick neck hung in heavy fleshy folds, making it utterly impossible for observers to determine where his chin left off and his jowls began. In the best senatorial custom, he squeezed

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Sumter's arm, and leaned over to whisper in his Chairman's ear before taking the chair on Sumter's immediate right.

"The Committee will be in order. We seem tah be a few minutes behind schedule so the Chair will not make a lengthy statement. Today's hearing has been called tah considering authorizations for the Department of Energy's facility in Colorado. That's the plant we all call Rocky Flats. The Chair is fully aware that a hearing on such individual matters is not the customary way of proceeding. However, recent events and certain concerns about Rocky Flats have convinced the Chair of the need for these hearings. The Chair had invited the Secretary of Energy tah attend and give us his thoughts on whether the plant should be decommissioned, removed tah another location. Unfortunately for our hearings, Secretary Stewart was called tah the White House on pressing business and will be unable to join us. I have also been told that Assistant Secretary Wendover is still in New Mexico, but we have a fine representative from the Department's headquarters with us today, Mistah Hatch Baldwin. With him are two excellent people from Rocky Flats, the Director, Mister Hugo Chase, and the Deputy Director, Doctah Pitkin Waay. Gentlemen would you step forward and be sworn by the clerk."

By the time the three had moved up the witness table, been sworn, and arranged yet another member of the Committee had joined their papers on the table, Senator Sumter. The rimless but small lens glasses combined with a bow tie and thinning black hair, parted directly in the middle, to create a professorial look. He was a small man and unobtrusive in the high backed chair immediately to the left of the Chairman. Chairman Sumter, however, treated him as though he were the single most important person in the room. In some unseen political ways, he may have been.

"The Chair is pleased tah note the presence of the Honorable Senator from the State of Massachusetts. We're just getting underway here, Senator Fitchburg, and if you have a comment for the record, the Chair would be happy to receive it at this time."

Woburn Fitchburg, a senator of legendary proportions, had, in the most recent elections, been re-elected to his sixth consecutive term in the Senate. He was the ranking minority

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member on the Committee, fiercely independent, usually caustic to everyone, and always brief and straight to business.

"As you know, Mister Chairman, I am not convinced of the need for this kind of special hearing. Rocky Flats may or may not require funds for a major relocation, but I believe the question could be examined in the regular authorization package for the Department of Energy." Squinting into the TV lights, he added, "I would also deplore any attempts to turn this hearing into a side show for any special interest groups, whatever their persuasion. That's all I have for now, Mister Chairman."

Turning to his right, Sumter asked, "Anything for the record from the distinguished Senator from Kentucky?"

"Only a brief observation, Mister Chairman," drawled the heavy Senator from amongst his folds of skin, "I listened with great care to my colleague, the Senator from Massachusetts, and want him to know I share his reluctance to proceed with this type of hearing. I know he shares my concern over the attempts by some to weaken our defense efforts, but we cannot set the precedent of attempting to conduct hearings on every one of our defense establishments. Why, the task would be endless."

"While I oppose this type of hearing as a matter of principle, I might not oppose a special hearing for the uranium enrichment works at Paducah," snapped Fitchburg. The reference to Paducah, Kentucky and the needling implication that individualized hearings would not be welcomed by Senator Danville reflected the acerbic attitude associated with Fitchburg. Danville's only reaction was a broad smile at his sour senate mate.

"The Chair welcomes the comments of the Senators. For the record it should be said that this hearing was originally set to discuss authorizations for Rocky Flats. A number of questions had been raised about new structures and new facilities out there and the Chair, at the suggestion of some members of the Committee, agreed to hearings. It was only recently decided to include testimony on removal of the plant. As the Chair said a few minutes ago, we had hoped to have the Secretary's thoughts on the subject. Without him, the Chair will have to simply confine our inquiry to the information our witnesses can provide. Mister Baldwin, you may proceed."

"Mister Chairman," interposed Pitkin, "let me introduce the Department's representatives at the witness table."

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Sumter's head came up and he even opened his mouth to speak. Then, with what may have been a faint smile and a glance at Baldwin's beat red face, he deferred and turned his attention back to the papers on his desk.

"Mister Chairman, on my left is Mister Hatch Baldwin, Deputy Assistant Secretary to Assistant Secretary Wendover. On my right, is Mister Hugo Chase, Director of the Rocky Flats facility in Colorado. My name is Doctor Pitkin Waay. I serve as deputy to Mister Chase. We have a written statement, and I believe each of you has a copy on your desk. If it meets with the approval of the Chair, we would ask that Mister Chase be permitted to highlight portions of his testimony and that the entire statement be printed in the Committee's report."

"The Chair notes, Doctah Waay, that you are obviously familiar with our procedures. I hope your insights will expedite the work of the Committee. Without objection, the written statement of Mister Chase will appear in the report."

"Mister Chairman, members of the Committee, my name is Hugo Chase, and, as Doctor Waay has suggested, I will summarize the key points of my statement. At the request of your staff, we have included three funding options for each aspect of our program components."

While Hugo took the senators through the summary points of his statement, three additional senators entered the room and took their assigned seats. The fact that more than one senator appeared signified the hearing had generated more than casual interest. However, some of the senatorial appearances were traceable to the presence of the TV lights and the attendance of a number of reporters.

Taking a seat to the right of Senator Danville was a lady who could easily have been mistaken for a librarian. With steel rimmed glasses hanging around her neck from a silver chain, a starched white blouse pinching together into a high collar, and a stern face glowering at the world, one would, understandably, have expected her to "shhhh" the entire assemblage any moment. The appearance was misleading. Dalles Klamath was no librarian. She was not at all quiet where environmental issues were concerned. Her voice was anything but a whisper when women's rights were at issue, and any "shhhing" she did was strictly parliamentary. Not a few special interest representatives felt that

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Oregonians must have felt exceedingly ill-disposed toward Washington when they sent Senator Klamath into their midst.

Walking in with the Senator from Oregon was Eldon Moffat. Instead of immediately sitting down, he whispered for a moment with the Chairman, to Casey Danville who ignored him, and even made an abbreviated trip to the side of Woburn Fitchburg. Finally, he made his way to the fourth seat on Sumter's right, leaving an empty chair between himself and Senator Klamath.

Latest to arrive was a young, quite handsome senator who smiled all the way to his chair. He surveyed the crowd as if estimating its size and voting potential. Since Washingtonians do not vote for senators, Calumet DeKalb's reaction to this crowd was either practice or reflex. He did manage to settle down in a seat on Fitchburg's left and began leafing through the pages of Hugo's statement, but he did so absently while patting at his hair and continuously adjusting and readjusting his coat and necktie. Illinois had liked either the appearance or the performance of DeKalb in the House of Representatives well enough to send him to the Senate; how well they would like his more visible performance there was still an open question.

Hugo concluded his summarization and looked up at Sumter. "I'd be happy to answer questions, Mister Chairman."

"Mister Chairman, an inquiry?" called out Senator DeKalb.

"The Chair recognizes the Senator from Illinois who desires Tah State an inquiry."

"Mister Chairman, it was my understanding that the Secretary of Energy would be testifying this morning, and I do not see him at the witness table."

From among the aides and committee staffers sitting along the wall behind the Committee members, a young woman quickly stepped forward whispered in the ear of her handsome employer. At the same time Chairman Sumter patiently explained. "As the Chair advised the Committee, before the Senator from Illinois arrived, the Secretary had been called tah the White House. He will not appear before us today."

Waving the girl aside, DeKalb made an effort to recover from the effects of an ill-advised question. "The Senator apologizes for his late arrival. However, I would inquire further.

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Is it still the intent of the Chairman to explore matters relating to the bomb making plant in Colorado?"

"The Chair will proceed in an orderly manner. Since the original call for hearings was naturally budget related, it would seem the best use of our time would be to concentrate on the budget needs for the Rocky Flats plant. The Chair would include within the budget those matters pertaining to removal of the plant to a different and perhaps safer location."

"Mister Chairman," snapped Senator Klamath, "it was this Senator's understanding that we would inquire into recent events at the plant which have resulted in the exposure of many innocent people to dangerous radiation. Is the Chair now saying we are to be confined to budgetary matters?"

"Authorization is the business of this Committee and authorization was the subject set forth in the hearing notice sent to my office," said Fitchburg, waving a piece of paper. "Mister Chairman, with all respect to my colleague from Oregon, I would suggest she pursue her antinuclear campaign in a forum where she doesn't occupy the time of those who do not care to listen to speeches they have heard too many times."

The reply was ice cold. "If the distinguished Senator from Massachusetts could manage a decent concern for issues vital to this country, I am certain he would find my words and those of many of our colleagues less oppressive and more enlightening."

Chairman Sumter had heard it all before and was unmoved by either side. "According to our procedures, Senator Fitchburg, you may proceed."

"Mister Chairman," cried an insistent Klamath and a smiling DeKalb as a chorus of one.

The wily old Sumter continued speaking as though he had heard nothing at all. "To ask our fine witnesses any questions which the Chair feels are relevant to this hearing."

Again, but less insistent and more resigned, "Mister Chairman,"

Their years in the Senate and on Sumter's Committee should have instructed them to better effect. The Chairman was only in mid-sentence. "And as necessary, and from time to time, the Chair will rule on the propriety of questions. Senator Fitchburg..."

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"I thank the Chairman for still another demonstration of the wisdom which has made him a leader of extraordinary dimension."

Fitchburg and Hugo occupied the next five minutes doing what they both did best. They dug into construction costs, and they exchanged sums. They considered financing options and looked for hidden costs. The questions were terse and utterly devoid of rhetorical flourish. The answers were equally stark and bare.

Finally, the Chairman called time on Fitchburg, and turned to Casey Danville. "The Chair recognizes the Senator from Kentucky."

"Thank you, Mister Chairman." "Heavy" Danville, so called by a few inconsiderate detractors, settled himself a bit deeper into his folds of skin and consulted his handwritten notes before speaking.

"Mister Chase, I listened with great interest as you and the Senator from Massachusetts discussed some of the costs associated with operating your facility. I found it very enlightening and, "looking down the line at Fitchburg, "would not necessarily take exception to having any facility located in my state examined in the same manner. However, I would like to sharpen the inquiry and ask about one component of the Rocky Flats facility. Mister Chase, is my information correct on the cost of your new recovery building, forty million dollars?"

"That figure was the original estimate, Senator."

Danville professed surprise. "Are you suggesting to me, sir, that the actual cost exceeded the estimate? Lordy, lordy, we may have uncovered a new phenomenon in government contracting. What was the final cost, rounded off, Mister Chase?"

"To date, we have paid the contractor something on the order of seventy six million four hundred thousand dollars."

"Sounds to me like you had a slight overrun, Mister Chase."

"Some of the increased cost was due to change orders, Senator."

"During construction, you had the contractor build a few things a little higher or wider, or change a window or a wall here and there? Is that what you mean by change orders, Mister Chase?"

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"Certainly, you have correctly described the concept, however, in the case of the recovery building, we found it necessary to incorporate some major changes."

"Just for the purpose of clarification, Mister Chase, for those who are not familiar with your facility, could you outline in general terms what a recovery building is?"

"Since your question may lead into technical areas, I would defer to Doctor Waay who has an intimate understanding of these matters."

"It is not my intent to undertake a scientific exploration of the recovery process," said Danville quickly, "so I would ask Doctor Waay to remain on the high ground."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Sumter with less space between his words than usual. "Senator Danville has stated it well. We'll stay on the high ground through these technical matters."

"The recovery building at Rocky Flats has two purposes," began Pitkin, "The paramount objective is the recovery of plutonium from the various residues which are created by plutonium handling and processing in plant operations. The second objective is the recovery of americium which is a radioactive material with some industrial uses."

"Good capsule, Doctor Waay. Would it be crudely accurate to say the recovery building is your recycling center, a sort of scrap yard where you sort out the stuff that can be reused?"

"Your capsule would be more difficult for me to swallow than my own, but it's perhaps equally descriptive," replied Pitkin.

"Despite my rather imprecise description of your recovery building, I'm sure we all understand that very expensive and complex equipment is required, is it not, Doctor Waay?"

"It is, Senator."

"Now, Mister Chase made reference to major change orders submitted by the government during the construction process. Again, staying on the high ground, as you have so thoughtfully done thus far, what changes were required?"

"We determined the volume of anticipated material containing plutonium residues would be greater than originally planned; therefore, we increased the size of the storage area."

"Pursuing my crude analogy, Doctor Waay, you're saying you needed a larger scrap yard where the stuff is dumped and held until the sorting begins?"

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"I'll accept that, Senator, with one very important qualification. I would not, by indulging in this kind of illustrative exercise, want to leave the impression we handle plutonium residues casually, or that there is anything slap-dash about the recovery process itself. I only offer my reservation because I believe your generalizations may, if pursued too far, create misapprehensions that could not be repaired in the time we have here today."

"I accept your qualification, Doctor Waay. What other modifications were ordered, major changes, I mean."

"We added interim storage vault capacity."

"Storage for the refined plutonium and americium?"

"Correct."

"Why was that necessary?"

"Our operational experience was longer holding periods. For reasons unrelated to Rocky Flats or the recovery building we found ourselves with greater quantities on site for longer periods of time. The reasons I alluded to bear upon operations at other weapons facilities and would be better explained for you by Assistant Secretary Wendover who has overall responsibility for the weapons program."

"Is the greater than anticipated volume of material on hand a current problem, Doctor?"

"I would hesitate to discuss specifics in open session, Senator, but in general we do have a substantial amount of plutonium on hand at any given time. Again it's a result of the way the weapons program currently operates."

"You are referring to logistics and management factors and not basic programmatic changes?"

"Exactly, Senator."

"Would all the changes taken together require a doubling of the cost of the recovery facility?"

Pitkin turned to Hugo and said, "It sound's like he's back in your ballpark."

"I can only recite to you, Senator Danville, the computations from our contracting office. But to summarize, yes. Material, labor, all the allowable costs do almost double the original estimate," said Hugo.

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Looking at Sumter who was about to interrupt, Danville asked, "Would the Chair indulge me for a few additional moments?"

"Mister Chairman," called Moffat, silent until this moment, "I wonder if we shouldn't pursue our regular order. I'm sure other members of the Committee have questions, I'm sure I do, and if times are extended without compelling reason, we'll find ourselves hopelessly bogged down in exceptions."

"I find the questions interesting and the answers illuminating," shot back Fitchburg, "and I commend the Senator from Kentucky. If necessary, Mister Chairman, I would surrender time from my next round to allow this line of questioning to be pursued."

"Mister Chairman, I have no objection to a few more questions, if the Senator will be brief." Klamath's cooperative attitude carried the point. Sumter was not inclined to rule against three senior members of the committee.

"You may proceed, Senator Danville, but the Chair would appreciate brevity."

The fact that time limits were more often violated than respected had made Moffat's objection seem a trifle extraordinary. Some of the staff must have thought it was unusual since there was increased whispering among them. And the Senators from Massachusetts and Oregon had begun to listen a bit more carefully. Veteran Senate watchers among the press corps cocked their heads and looked at one another. "What was bothering Moffat?" they wondered.

"Thank you for your indulgence, Mister Chairman," said Danville, "I'll not be much longer. Mister Chase, setting aside the changes you ordered because of what Doctor Waay called 'operational experience,' why were so many other changes required in the recovery building?"

Hugo had not been prepared for this line of questioning and he sought clarification. "I'm not sure I comprehend the question, Senator. We ordered changes, as the need for them became apparent. I can assure you nothing unnecessary was added."

"I don't think you understand my question, Mister Chase. I am not suggesting there was any gold-plating of the type we find so often in government projects these days, thick carpets,

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decorator furnishings, executive suites, and so forth. Let me try my question this way. Isn't it true that you were making every effort to insure as safe a building as possible?"

"Yes, Senator. Many of our modifications were reactions to demands for a safer operation."

"In fact, a departmental order on radiation standards was issued in the very middle of construction was it not?"

Pitkin and Hugo both began to realize where Danville was going with his interrogation. At least his immediate goal was in view.

Pitkin took it upon himself to respond. "Standards for radiation emissions for Rocky Flats were changed, Senator, and the order was issued shortly after we had reached the midpoint in work on the recovery building. If I can anticipate your next question, we were, as a consequence of the new standards, required to redesign much of the equipment for the building."

"To your credit, Doctor Waay, did you not write a memorandum to Department headquarters on this matter? And in your memorandum didn't you point out that the new equipment should be obtained through competitive bidding?"

"I would guess you have a copy of my memorandum, Senator."

"Your guess would be correct, Doctor. Mister Chairman, I have copies of the memorandum for the members of the Committee. I would ask that it be included in the record of these proceedings."

"Without objection, Doctor Waay's memorandum...what's the date of the thing, Casey? Oh, I see it here. We'll designate it Attachment Number 1. Attachment 1 will be included in its entirety."

"What response did you receive from headquarters, Doctor Waay, if you can remember? I realize it was some years ago and there have been many intervening events."

"I remember very well, Senator. It was a directive that the equipment in question would be aggregated into a single sole source purchase and it would be handled by headquarters."

"For clarification, the effect was to relieve your office of the purchasing authority and to place the authority in Washington?"

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"Correct, and it was our understanding the purchase would be from a single source without bidding among competitors."

"In good round numbers, Doctor, what was your estimate of the reasonable cost of this equipment?"

"Between eight and nine million dollars."

"Do you recall how much the Department actually paid for it?"

"As I have testified, Senator, the matter was handled in Washington, but unofficially, I have heard the seller was paid something on the order of fifteen million dollars."

The newsmen were scribbling furiously. The backbench aides were whispering furiously. The Senators were listening intently, and Eldon Moffat was turning a pale white.

"Mister Chairman," cried Moffat, "we have indulged Mister Danville quite long enough. I must submit this line of inquiry is not relevant and would be better pursued in another Committee where it would be more germane. Department of Energy procurement is not within our jurisdiction."

Chairman Sumter's words were now spaced further apart than usual, or so it must have seemed to everyone who heard them. "Eldon, the Chair is mindful of the Committee's jurisdiction. However, these few little questions are hardly a serious transgression. Besides, the Chair hears no other objection."

"But Mister Chairman, I have reason to expect that Senator Danville may be mounting an attack upon me personally. As a matter of privilege, I demand this entire hearing be stayed until we can meet in executive session."

"Mister Chairman," said Danville, "if you would indulge me for a short time, I would conclude my questioning of our witnesses by asking four more questions. Further, I would give the Chairman my personal assurance that the questions and the answers will be brief, and the name of the Senator from Colorado will not be mentioned nor will there be any charge made against him directly or indirectly."

"Mister Chairman, I move this Committee stand adjourned. I will not permit this Committee to be used..."

A sharp snap of the gavel interrupted Moffat. Sumter glowered at him. "The motion is ruled out of order. Further, the Chair advises the Senator that the Chair has heard nothing that justify the implication that the Committee is being used for

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anything other than its intended purpose and the Chair will be the judge of how this Committee is being used. Senator Danville, please proceed."

"Mister Chase, what is the name of the company which supplied the equipment purchased by your headquarters?"

"Arbonne limited."

"Do you know any of the officers, employees, shareholders, or partners, if there are any, in Arbonne Limited."

"No, I do not."

"Did Arbonne supply the filtration system for your recovery building?"

"It did."

"I believe my next and last question would be more appropriately directed to Doctor Waay, however either of you may answer. Keeping in mind my request for a very brief answer, has the filtration equipment supplied by Arbonne performed as you expected it would?"

Pitkin leaned over the microphone, "No."

"As I promised, Mister Chairman, I have no further questions." Danville turned and began a whispered conference with his colleague from Oregon.

A stir swept the room. As a cool wind will rattle dead leaves against a windowpane, the curiosity of those attending the hearing rustled unanswered questions across the veil of the proceedings. It was a powerful and demanding force that Danville had unleashed.

The old Chairman took the pulse of the situation and decided to continue. He felt he had little choice in the matter. The attendance of more members of the media than he had expected, would have made adjournment look suspicious. There was also the matter of Moffat's motion for adjournment. Sumter had not endured in the Senate and mastered his Committee by acceding to the truculent demands of junior members, especially when those demands were made loudly and in public.

Sumter knew he would have to hold a tight rein on the remainder of the hearing. Controlling aggressive and ego driven senators was not an easy task under the best of circumstances. And to make matters worse, he was working in a clumsily and poorly defined situation. The scope of the hearing had been left for staff

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definition. The result was a vague statement of purpose, which invited the type of scalp hunt designed by Danville.

Senator DeKalb had slipped out of the room during the tedious exchange between Fitchburg and the Director of Rocky Flats. The consequence of his absence was a row of empty chairs to the left of Fitchburg. Thus it was the turn of Senator Klamath to inquire of the witnesses.

"The Senator from Oregon is recognized."

"Thank you, Mister Chairman." She had not "shhhhed" the spectators, but there was no need. She had their undivided attention, and she used it to good purpose. "Doctor Waay, I perceive you to be the scientific expert at the table; therefore, I will address my questions to you. Senator Danville asked you if the filtration system supplied by Arbonne Limited performed as expected, and you indicated it did not. Setting aside, for the moment the operation of the system, let me ask you this. Had it not been for the intercession of your headquarters, where would you have obtained the system?"

"Where is not the question, Senator. No one can could give you a fair answer. How is the question? It would have been purchased through the competitive bidding process. Who the successful bidder would have been, I cannot say."

"The system was not part of the building contract then?"

"Neither it nor the other Arbonne handling and recovery equipment."

"On balance, what is your assessment of the equipment, other than the filtration system, supplied by Arbonne?"

"On balance? I hesitate to make a generalization of that magnitude."

"If I state the premise that it did not perform as it should have, could you give me some specifics to support that statement?"

"Much of the Arbonne supplied equipment failed to comply with architectural specifications. A great deal of the conveyor machinery had to be substantially modified before it could be installed. Subsequently, we found faulty instrumentation and controls on a number of the glove boxes, and they required extensive refitting before they could be operated. The glass in a number of the glove boxes was not adequately leaded, and many seals were missing altogether. The remote handling mechanisms

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proved to be entirely unworkable. My listing is illustrative only and certainly not exhaustive of the specifics which could be used to support your statement, Senator."

"I certainly hope you didn't perform recovery operations under those conditions."

"No, as defects were discovered, they were corrected. Some problems required only repair; in other cases, we simply replaced parts which were defective."

"At no small expense to the taxpayer?"

"At very great expense, Senator."

"Did you maintain records which would reflect the condition of the Arbonne equipment?"

"Yes, we maintained log books in which such things are described in considerable detail."

"Would you make those records available to the Committee?"

"Gladly."

"Were these difficulties brought to the attention of your superiors in Washington?"

"Yes, numerous memoranda were written and submitted."

"Dalles, I have the file," interposed Danville, leaning toward his colleague from Oregon and offering her a thick file folder.

"Mister Chairman, may we have the departmental file made a part of the record?" asked Klamath, taking the file from Danville and holding it up for Sumter to see.

"Senator Danville, I do not at this time want to go into the question of your sources..." began Sumter.

"I understand..." Even long time friend and colleague Danville sometimes forgot.

Chairman Sumter was still talking. "But I do want to have your assurance that nothing in this file is classified."

"There is nothing..."

The Chairman would get there, given time. "Or of a personally incriminating nature, or which would prejudice later hearings or investigations."

"You have my assurances on all points, Mister Chairman," said Danville, speaking only when he was reasonably confident his Chairman had concluded.

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"The Chair will grant the request of the Senator from Oregon that the file be made a part of the record."

"Thank you..." But even Dalles Klamath sometimes stepped on her Chairman's lines.

"Subject to review by the Chair and by Committee counsel. You may proceed, Senator."

"Doctor Waay, returning to the filtration system, could you describe its function?" continued Klamath as certain as she could be that Sumter had finished.

"During our process work, as an example, gaseous radioactive waste is produced when natural air or nitrogen gas comes into direct contact with materials such as plutonium. Since these gases actually contain radioactive particles, it is necessary to pass these gases through a filter system before the vapor can be released into the atmosphere. There are other functions, but essentially we filter to take radiation out of the air."

"Just how effective is your system?"

"We have efficiency levels in our processing building of over ninety nine percent with particles seven one hundredths of a micron and larger. By any standard that's excellent filtration."

"You used your process work as an example. Is the filtration system in the recovery building the same as or similar to the processing labs?"

"They were designed to be even better."

"Have the design parameters been met?"

"It is not possible to say."

"Why not, Doctor Waay?"

"In order to get any meaningful data, it's necessary to have a certain amount of experience, operating time. In the case of the recovery building, we haven't had sufficient time on line to make a fair assessment."

"I understand from my people, that your recovery building has been shut down for repairs and adjustment more than it has operated in the past year. Is that true?"

"Your sources have been quite correct, Senator."

"As a matter of fact you ordered a complete shutdown only a few days ago?"

"I did."

"Please explain to this Committee the reason for the most recent shutdown."

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"Operations in the recovery building were shut down at my direction because air samplers located to the south and east of the plant displayed elevated radioactivity. As the Senator must know, we had an unrelated incident in the same area of the facility only a few days earlier when a deposit of barrels containing plutonium contaminated oil was discovered during a soil sampling demonstration. We were unable to immediately determine whether the source of radiation was the barrels or a second source or a combination. Later, our radiation control team traced plutonium emissions to the recovery building, and I immediately directed the building supervisor to discontinue all recovery work."

"Were any other precautions ordered?"

"I ordered our crews to seal the vent stacks, however, that would be a routine precaution."

"Is it your judgment, Doctor Waay, that the filter system failed?"

"Right now we have a technical group in the building, Senator. They are conducting a complete review to trace the reasons for the emissions we experienced. When their report has been finished, I'll be able to answer your question."

"Thank you, Doctor, I see my Chairman preparing to call time on me so I have no further questions at this point."

"I see the distinguished Senator from Illinois has again joined the Committee. The Chair recognizes Senator DeKalb."

Formerly a Representative who had made the giant leap to the Upper House, Calumet DeKalb was, perhaps, more vain than other senators, but he also had considerably more money than almost any of them. The massive family fortune was sustained by a large and profitable family business. Since older brothers occupied the key corporate positions, there had been no challenge suitable to him. Naturally, the youngest DeKalb had turned to politics.

DeKalb's family had not applauded his career choice, but they had accepted it. And after the first successes, his father had warmed to the idea. Determined that Calumet should have the best, the father saw to it that young DeKalb's staff included a few of the most capable and gifted advisers in the land. Under their watchful eyes, the young Senator had been kept from venturing into political minefields, and thereby from bringing adverse attention to the family, and, of course, the business.

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It had thus been something of a rebellion, which brought DeKalb into the arena with nuclear opponents and proponents. Perhaps he was already growing weary with Senate procedures and protocols which kept junior Senators from center stage, perhaps it was too much success too soon in his life, or it may have been a genuine interest in the subject, whatever the reason, he had announced to his staff that he intended to take an active part in the hearings on Rocky Flats.

There had been a flurry of briefings, there had been a great writing and rewriting of staff papers, and there had been meetings with various nuclear experts with varying opinions. Thus briefed, schooled, and counseled, he felt prepared to bring new insights to the jaded debate over nuclear weapons.

"Thank you, Mister Chairman. Mister Chase, as Director of the Rocky Flats plant, you would be in the best position to describe your mission. What is it?"

Hugo had been answering policy questions for years and was comfortable dealing with them. "Our mandate, Senator, as one facility in the larger nuclear weapons complex, is to produce parts, only parts, for nuclear devices."

"By devices, you mean bombs."

"While I do not propose to engage in semantic niceties, Senator, I believe the term 'device' is more inclusive and, therefore, more descriptive. It is true that most of the components we produce are used as missile warheads, but we produce a wider variety of parts for nuclear assemblages. For example, smaller tactical weapons would not be denominated 'bombs' nor would many of the research components we produce."

"I would suggest, Mister Chase, we are indeed verging on semantic distinctions, so let me take a different tack. Given the legitimate need of our country to defend itself, is there not a point where we need to ask whether the means of raising and maintaining our defenses imposes too great a burden on our people?"

"I'm sorry, Senator but questions on defense costs would more properly be dealt with by elected officials and those appointed to policy level positions."

"You misapprehend the scope of my question, sir. The fault is mine; it did encompass too much. More specifically, if the human cost of the Rocky Flats plant was amenable to

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computation, and we saw a given number of radiation induced cancer deaths in the Denver area, and the source of the radiation was Rocky Flats, would you support the removal of the plant to another, remote and more suitable location?"

DeKalb's fellow Senators began to listen. One or two leaned forward and gave him looks of approval for his finely honed question. There was also a hint of envy in their glances. They would most dearly have loved to have DeKalb's superb staff support to write their scripts.

"Given the facts as you have postulated them, Senator, yes, I would support removal of the processing and handling of radioactive materials."

"Calumet stuck in his golden thumb and pulled out a plum," whispered a reporter from the Post to a reporter for the Times.

"Yeh," came the reply from the Times, "let's see if he puts it up his nose or in his ear."

"I notice, Mister Chase, you said only the radiation work, why?"

"There would be no reason to abandon the plant altogether. It could serve as a superb research facility. Total abandonment would also be uneconomic. I might add, Senator, a number of studies have been done on the subject and they suggest the costs of total removal could run as high as a billion and half-dollars. Partial removal would be considerably less."

"Yes, I've seen those studies," continued DeKalb. "They have a common deficiency. They do not calculate the human tragedy of deaths from lung cancer and leukemia in the cities of Golden, Arvada, Denver, Lakewood, Broomfield, and Wheat Ridge. That listing, as you know, is not comprehensive, but it serves to make my point. Do you realize, Mister Chase, there are over a million and a half people within a fifty-mile radius of Rocky Flats?"

"I'm aware of those statistics, Senator."

"Then you know that the population density in the area immediately surrounding the plant has increased dramatically since the plant was built? Would you agree that the number of people at risk has probably doubled since the facility was built?"

"I would agree the population has increased since 1953, yes."

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"Has not the risk been substantially increased because of the construction of new plutonium handling facilities?"

"I would not agree with your characterization of the increase in risk as substantial. As our knowledge of plutonium handling increases, the safety margin is widened. The facilities at Rocky Flats today consist of second and third generation technology. We constantly work to upgrade the equipment; therefore, the plant sitting in Colorado today is more efficient and safer than the one sitting there even ten years ago."

"However that may be, the risk to Colorado citizens would be totally eliminated if the plant were decommissioned?"

"If the decommissioning were complete, the answer would be yes. I would remind you, however, there are probably no absolutes available to us. Any risk that does exist could be virtually eliminated, but not totally."

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Mister Chase, why would removal not eliminate the risk?"

"With your permission, Senator, I will defer to Doctor Waay for the answer. His expertise is quite extensive in these matters."

"Yes, I'd be glad to hear Doctor Waay's comment."

"In order to give you a complete answer, Senator," began Pitkin, "I must begin by referring you to an ongoing scientific debate. The gist of the matter is a difference of opinion over the effects of small amounts of radiation. Let me give a bit of background. There are various units by which we can describe radiation. One frequently used unit is the REM, which is an acronym for Roentgen Equivalent in Man. Using that standard, various agencies in and out of government have prescribed limits for people working where there may be exposure to radiation. For example, 3 rem per calendar quarter has been a frequently used standard for workers in nuclear installations. To give you a basis for comparison, we need to take a single rem and slice it up into a thousand parts. We will designate each part a millirem, one thousandth of a rem."

"You aren't going to desert the high ground are you, Doctah Waay," asked Chairman Sumter apprehensively.

"If, I have stepped into the shadow of the valley, Mister Chairman, I apologize, but I assure you we'll all emerge in the bright light of the high ground momentarily," Pitkin promised.

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"Please lead on, Doctah," smiled Sumter.

"Keeping in mind we are talking in terms of millirems, you should know that from a standard x-ray you would probably receive 100 of our small units, 100 millirems. Each year the materials in your body would impart perhaps 20 millirems, the radium dial on a watch could give you 20 millirems. An individual living in my area of the country, Denver, Colorado, receives some 200 millirems from his natural environment."

Despite the detour into technical matters, the listeners were obviously interested, and Pitkin continued with his explanation. "It is primarily in this area of millirems that the scientific debate I mentioned goes on. The unresolved question is what are the biological effects of these low levels of radiation. The question for large doses of radiation, on the scale of 25 rems and up is much easier. 500 rems would be fatal to perhaps half the people exposed to such a high level. Again, the unresolved problem is the effect, if any, of one-fourth or one-third of one rem."

"I believe we are approaching that high ground again, Mister Chairman. This brings us back to Senator DeKalb's question of decommissioning the Rocky Flats plant. We can sandblast and paint the walls of the buildings, scrub down the floors and exposed surfaces, remove great volumes of soil from many acres of land, and deep plow many more acres, but we can never remove all plutonium from the soil and materials around Rocky Flats. That means some radiation will remain. Low levels of radiation to be sure, but there will always be some. If people living in the area continued to receive only a millirem or two a year, there are those on one side of the scientific debate I describe who would say there is still a risk of harm. I may have given a longer answer than you wanted, Senator, but it may be a useful reference for understanding why Mister Chase said the risk could never be totally eliminated, even by removal of the plant."

"It is a matter of degree then, Doctor?"

"Degree of risk, yes."

"But removal would eliminate totally the risk of further accidents would it not? I refer to the fires which occurred a few years ago and to more recent events such as barrels leaking contaminated oil into the soil, and a recovery building spewing plutonium into the air."

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"The potential for such events would be eliminated by closure of the plant and removal of radioactive materials, yes."

"Only a couple more questions, Doctor Waay. In your answer to a previous question you said there would always be some radiation in the area, even if we removed the buildings, everything. If that's the case and if it's a result of contamination of the soil, won't the problem simply get worse as more radiation builds up in the area?"

"I believe continued build up of radiation would make decontamination more difficult, but in small increments. You would have to consider how clean you wanted the area to be and what use were to be made of the land. If the land were dedicated to use as pasture for cattle, cleanup would be less difficult. If residential use were to be permitted, cleanup would have to result in compliance with the State of Colorado radiation control regulations. One study estimated that as much as eleven thousand acres have already been contaminated in excess of State levels. Decontamination would require removal of approximately three inches of topsoil from such contaminated areas."

"And as the radiation spreads, the problem grows constantly worse?"

"Yes."

"I have been told, Doctor Waay, that some years ago, the government expanded the size of Rocky Flats by purchasing additional land to serve as a larger buffer zone around the plant proper."

"In 1975, additional land was acquired, but the primary reason was to prevent the encroachment of residential development."

"As radiation creeps ever outward and as the levels grow higher, would the Department of Energy consider purchasing portions of the cities of Arvada or Golden?"

"I'm afraid the question is pretty speculative, Senator, and would be better addressed to the Secretary."

"A final question. You used the word 'always' when you spoke of radiation remaining in the area. Is there not some decay of radiation, or to put it another way, does radiation not lose its energy over a period of time?"

"Every radioactive element decays. In fact, the decay process is what we call radiation. Some matter decays rapidly,

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some decays slowly, very slowly. The material with which we are primarily concerned at Rocky Flats is plutonium and it is exceptionally long-lived."

"I see my time has expired, thank you, gentlemen."

"The Chair thanks the Senator from Illinois for his excellent questions. Does the Senator from Colorado wish recognition?"

"Yes, indeed, Mister Chairman," answered Moffat as though he was casually undertaking a routine legislative chore. "For the record, Mister Chairman, I would like to reiterate my objection to the unprecedented practice of this Committee receiving confidential files for the record. Files that may be quite innocent but which may implicate only by indirection and innuendo. I myself have corresponded with Department officials on a number of matters. Since Rocky Flats is located in my state, I probably have written specifically about it, and perhaps have even urged that certain actions be taken which seemed to be in the best interest of the facility and the federal budget."

"Is the Senator saying he urged the sole source purchase we have heard about this morning?" snapped Fitchburg. "If he is, I would appreciate hearing him say as much so we can get on with this hearing."

"I believe it is improper for a member of the legislative branch to intercede in any manner in executive branch purchasing decisions, and.." began Klamath.

She was cut off in mid-sentence by Moffat, "Mister Chairman, I believe the time and the floor are mine."

"Senator Moffat is quite right, of course," said Sumter, "but he was recognized to address questions to the witnesses, and as yet I have heard none."

Moffat spoke with ice cold cynicism, "Mister Chairman, with all due respect, I have heard Senators make quite long statements as predicates for their questions and I have never heard a Chairman or and Senator object. Am I being denied the courtesy of the Senate? Am I to receive less of an opportunity to speak than any other members of the Committee? I find this abusive and singular treatment most unaccountable."

Moffat had been looking for a digression, and he obviously thought he had found it. Senatorial courtesy, the privileges of the club were more dear, more precious, more

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revered, and more respected than almost anything else in the Senate. By claiming he was being unfairly treated and denied club privileges, Moffat was raising an issue that could transcend and overshadow the unspoken charge that he had influenced Department of Energy purchasing procedures.

Whether or not his offense was a good defense would not be decided in the Committee this day, but he had set the stage for an assault on the procedures and practices of Chairman Sumter. That any such charge against the popular Chairman would quickly fall was not Moffat's concern. For the present, he wanted the fire around him to smoke more and burn less.

His tactic was, however, not new. Sumter, who had been embroiled in some of the Senate's most agonizing controversies, was equal to the challenge.

"Now, now, Senator Moffat," chided the old Chairman, "there isn't any need tah get your water up. You'll get you're full share of time the same as the other members of this Committee. In fact, if you feel the need, the Chair will grant you additional time tah pursue your inquiry and I'm certain your colleagues will suspend during your questioning."

Looking up and down the long desk, Sumter addressed the other Senators, "Now, in the interests of orderly procedure, the Chair will ask each of you tah pull your lines out of the water while Senator Moffat consumes so much time as he shall require. Senator, you may proceed."

Moffat put his offense on hold. "I thank the distinguished Chairman for his equanimity. I have but a few questions. Doctor Waay, have you assigned any reason to the most recent closure of the plutonium recovery building?"

"No, Senator. We have not. The matter is now under review."

"Quite so. Now, Doctor, going back to your testimony on the equipment purchased from...what was the name again?"

"Arbonne, Senator."

"Oh, yes. I believe you characterized the equipment as unsatisfactory."

"That is correct, at least, as to most of it."

"Tell the Committee, Doctor, would there be any way for the government to guarantee, before a contract is signed, that equipment it is purchasing meets certain standards?"

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"Not to guarantee it ahead of purchase, Senator, but I believe there are civil and even criminal procedures for dealing with suppliers who defraud the government."

Moffat felt a strong impulse to change course. "Is it not true that sole source, that is buying from one supplier without competitive bidding, is a common practice throughout the departments of the government, Doctor?"

"I can only speak for our operation, Senator," replied Pitkin.

"Very well, what is your practice?"

"We avoid it like the plague. According to our purchasing experts, it's contrary to the clearly expressed intent of the Congress, and it's subject to serious abuses."

Moffat, finding Pitkin to be an unsatisfactory sounding board, tried Hugo. "Mister Chase, in a newly constructed building as complex as the plutonium recovery building, it is not quite common to experience all sorts of difficulties in its start-up phase?"

"Breaking in new equipment and a new facility is always difficult, Senator," agreed Hugo. "But I must say, the Arbonne equipment gave more problems than it should have, far more."

Moffat saw nothing but problems down that road. He tried another. "Mister Chase, is it possible that you yourself might have decided to go to Arbonne for the recovery building equipment, if it seemed they were a likely supplier?"

"Possibly, Senator. But I would remind you the decision was taken out of my hands by others at headquarters. I might suggest your questions would be better addressed to them."

Moffat tried once more. "Within your experience, Mister Chase, have you not found that cost overruns are quite common in government contracting?"

"I have heard they are common, Senator, but I believe much of that is traceable to poor procedures and even poorer oversight by the Congress. In the time I've been at Rocky Flats, we've built three new buildings. All have been on time and within budget, except the recovery building. For some reason, headquarters saw fit to meddle in that one, and the result has been a long and troubled history of problems upon problems."

Moffat knew when to stop. "Mister Chairman, again I want to voice my objections to the usurpation of jurisdiction by

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this Committee over matters which should be heard elsewhere. I would move at this time that the files introduced by the Senator from Oregon be impounded until we can discuss them in closed session."

Sumter gave Moffat's tactic little time to blossom. "The Senator's motion is out of order. And the Senator's time has expired. The Chair now has a few questions of its own to propound tah the witnesses. Doctah Waay, you said the material you're most concerned with is plutonium?"

"Yes, Mister Chairman."

"And plutonium is the stuff we use to build our nuclear `devices?'"

"Yes, sir. There are also uranium devices, and there are also the much more energetic fusion weapons."

"Why, yes. I recall we used tah talk much of uranium, about mining it and putting it through Casey Danville's diffusion buildings at Paducah. I guess you scientists change the same as everyone else. So now the talk's about plutonium."

Sumter browsed among his notes, unhurried. Much of his talk was not interrogatory, and a wise witness recognized it as such and remained silent until a question actually appeared. And the whimsical remarks and courtly manner had to be recognized as guises sometimes concealing a remarkably keen and retentive mind.

"I wrote down the word `decay' Doctor Waay. I do believe you are the one who used the term a few minutes ago. Care tah make a high ground explanation of what the berry hill you meant?"

"I'd be willing to try, Mister Chairman, as long as I won't be caught up too rudely if I should stray."

"I'll be as gentle as a spring breeze over Charleston."

"I will not attempt any explanation of atomic structure since most of you are already familiar with the concept, however, it might be useful if I refreshed your memories a bit. Matter is composed of exceedingly small units called atoms. Each atom consists of a nucleus made up of neutrons and protons. Around the nucleus we find electrons. In a crude analogy, but one often used, we could think of the sun of our solar system as a nucleus and the planets as electrons. For reasons we do not understand, the nuclei of certain kinds of atoms spontaneously disintegrate, that is, they

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emit particles and rays which we call radiation. When this disintegration occurs, the atom changes. Permit me to give an example. In the complex atom, uranium 238, there are 92 protons and 146 neutrons in the nucleus. Suddenly, for no reason known to science, the nucleus may throw out a particle. The particle would consist of two protons and two neutrons. Therefore we are left with an atom having 90 protons and 144 neutrons. Because the number of protons has changed we have a different kind of atom. It is called thorium 234. I won't go through the process, but step by step it goes on until a stable atom is created which is not radioactive and which does not decay. In the case of our uranium 238, it will ultimately become lead. In a nutshell, Mister Chairman, that is radioactive decay."

"As long as it's decaying it's radioactive?"

"Exactly."

"Then plutonium, the material you have at Rocky Flats, is radioactive until it decays?"

"Yes. It's radioactive while it decays."

"How long does it take?"

"Well, Mister Chairman the half life of plutonium is 24,360 years."

"I'm afraid you'll have to explain 'half life,' Doctor."

"Half life, Mister Chairman, is the time required for one half of all the nuclei in a given sample of radioactive material to disintegrate. Again, I will offer an illustration. Remembering that the half life for each radioactive element is different, and also remembering that when our spontaneous disintegration of the nucleus occurs, the atom becomes a different element, we see this kind of thing happening. Beginning with some actinium 238, for example, in 6.13 hours exactly, one half of its atoms will have disintegrated and become thorium 228. Thus the half-life of the actinium is 6.13 hours. In a second 6.13-hour period one half of the remaining actinium will decay, and so on for each similar period of time. Incidentally, the thorium we saw created had a half life of 1.19 years."

"What does the thorium become?" Asked Sumter taken by the concept.

"It becomes radium 224 which has a half life of 3.64 days. It, in turn, becomes radon 220 with a half life of 52 seconds."

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"And in each element's half life one half of whatever there is just spontaneously disintegrates, decays and becomes something else? By golly," sang out Sumter forgetting formality, "Pitkin, I do believe you people have been hiding some damn fine ideas from me all these years. To make sure I understand this, you're saying the plutonium which manages to escape your filters and concrete buildings gets spread around the countryside and will be alive and snapping for...how long again?"

"The half life is 24,360 years."

"The radiation will be half gone then?"

"I'm afraid not, Mister Chairman. You will recall my comments on decay. As an atom of plutonium decays, spontaneously disintegrates, it is transformed into another element. Plutonium becomes uranium 235 which is also radioactive, and it has a half life of 713 million years."

"I'm an old man, Doctor Waay. I do believe I'll move on tah more immediate events. What do you propose tah do about the barrels of contaminated oil we have been reading about?"

"Our first concern was to make sure the radiation threat was eliminated. As we looked more closely at the situation, we found there had been underground leakage going on for some time. However, the danger there is slight. The plutonium is contained in the oil and the absorption of the oil into soil below the surface does not present an immediate hazard. It is only when the plutonium gets to the surface that it presents a significant problem. If it is exposed, it can become airborne and be carried by the wind."

"Have you managed to keep it grounded then?"

"We immediately covered the area with plastic..."

"Plastic? Since it is radioactive, wouldn't you need something more substantial? I thought you folks always used lead as a radiation shield?"

"We do whenever it's possible. This is only a temporary measure and under the circumstances quite effective. To understand why a sheet of plastic is acceptable as a temporary measure, you need to go back to my comments on the decay of atoms. That's our spontaneous disintegration again. I said the nuclei emit particles and rays. Essentially, three kinds of emissions can be made from an atom. The nuclei of some elements send out rays, really very much like light or radio waves. We call this

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gamma radiation. They can pass through considerably heavy material. The atoms of other radioactive materials throw out beta particles, which are fast moving electrons. A beta particle traveling at the speed of light can penetrate a few meters of air or about one half of a centimeter into water or tissue. The third particle which can be emitted consists of two neutrons and two protons tightly bound together. That is the alpha particle. Alpha particles are really very slow since they travel only about one twentieth the speed of light and haven't the power to penetrate a sheet of paper."

"I can see this one coming, Doctah. Plutonium emits alpha particles and thus your plastic cover does the job. I confess a reluctance to ask, Doctor, but if the radiation from plutonium can so easily be stopped, what is the danger?"

"I'll be brief, Mister Chairman. My earlier illustrations should be helpful here. We always return to the atoms and their spontaneous disintegration. The radiations I mentioned which are shot out of the atom can be alpha or beta particles or gamma rays. As any of those radiations come out of the atom, they dissipate their energy by interacting with the atoms of the substances in their path. They actually knock electrons out of the atoms they encounter. The atom thus hit is said to be ionized. Whatever balance existed between its outer negatively charged electrons and the positively charged protons in its nucleus has been upset. Although our alpha particles do not travel very far compared to beta and gamma radiation, they interfere with lots of atoms along the way. A rough analogy might help. If you think of a crowd of people and imagine a rifle being fired into it, the bullet, like a gamma ray, might hit one or maybe two or none. The alpha particle, on the other hand, would be akin to a truck driven into the crowd. It might not go very far but it would create havoc with lots of people in its path. Therefore, if plutonium is kept outside the body it is virtually harmless since the skin will stop the alpha trucks, but if the plutonium is inhaled and the particles lodge in the lungs, or if the plutonium gets into the blood the alpha trucks which come out of the plutonium atoms smash into and ionize the atoms of sensitive tissue and the result can be devastating."

"By that you mean lung cancer, Doctah?"

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"The best authorities on the subject say that the dangers from alpha emitters may include lung and bone cancer, leukemia, and genetic injury."

"This is the human cost of maintaining the plant in a heavily populated area? The cost Senator DeKalb was asking about?"

"If I recall correctly, Senator DeKalb's question was speculative. He was asking Mister Chase about removal of the plant if the human cost could be calculated. With present science, it cannot. Granting for the moment that very low levels of ionizing radiation do in fact cause cancer, we must ask the difficult questions. How many cancer deaths result from radiation, and how do we identify and distinguish them from the others? Today there is no scientific way of identifying a particular case of leukemia, for example, and stating it was caused by radiation or by anything else, for that matter. The problem, therefore, is one of knowing how many injuries the radiation from Rocky Flats does, in fact, cause. The problem the Congress must face, Mister Chairman, is reduced to this. Does the Congress want to spend hundreds of million dollars moving a facility because it may, and I emphasize may, be causing the injury and even death of an unknown, but small number of citizens. And by small number, I mean two or three; five or six would be too high given the amount of radiation and the estimates of the best experts."

"I suppose the same questions would have to be asked of every nuclear installation in the country. You have a most irritating way of turning this question back upon us, Doctor Waay. We in the Congress have been managing to avoid such hard questions lately. We, with no small encouragement from the White House, have discovered Commissions. We have chosen to disregard Section One of Article One of the Constitution which says, 'All legislative power herein granted shall be vested in a Congress...' Instead of conducting hearings open to the public and putting our bare hands on these nasty questions, we have adopted Commission government. To my mind, our Commission fever smacks of back room deals, closed hearings somewhere away from Capitol Hill, and power brokers putting a package together which, at the eleventh hour, they toss through the windows of the House and Senate with a take-it-all-or-leave-it label. While it makes reelection campaigning a lot more comfortable, it's

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lamentably poor government tah assign our constitutional authority tah a few commissioners. Would you recommend a commission be appointed tah study this entire matter in detail and recommend a solution to Congress?"

"I would not make any such recommendation, Mister Chairman." Pitkin knew Sumter was really making a speech and was relieved that he in fact agreed with what the old Senator was saying. It simplified the process of responding.

"Not even if I offered tah make you a commissioner?"

"I cannot believe I have offended the Chairman. Yet, such an offer would compel me to believe otherwise."

"He even sounds like a commissioner," said Fitchburg.

"Woburn, you have a fine ear for such language and a great affection for Commissions," teased Sumter. "I remember your excellent comments on the Social Security Commission which locked itself into Blair House and wrote a fine piece of legislation which we dutifully endorsed tah the tune of fine speeches by our colleagues. You had some wonderful words...let's see. Shameful abrogation of responsibility and authority."

"Damnable and cowardly abrogation," corrected Fitchburg to the great amusement of his Chairman.

"Gentlemen, the Chair will now entertain requests for recognition tah inquire further of these witnesses. Senator Fitchburg is recognized."

"My question is for Mister Chase," said Woburn. "You made reference to studies on the costs of decommissioning and relocating Rocky Flats. Would you make copies of those studies available to the Committee?"

"I'll send them as soon as I return to Colorado, Senator."

"Doctor Waay," continued Fitchburg, "you spoke of soil removal, the top three inches of over ten thousand acres. Do you have any estimate of the cost of such removal?"

"It's only an estimate, Senator, but the figure was on the order of 15 dollars a cubic foot. From that number it would be possible to arrive at a total, but I must confess I haven't done the arithmetic."

"Seems a bit excessive for simply scraping away topsoil, wouldn't you say?"

"I'm not well informed on such matters, but you must keep in mind the fact the soil is radioactive. It would have to be deeply

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buried on the site somewhere or even boxed and shipped to a waste disposal site, probably in Idaho."

"I hadn't thought of the disposal problem. Yes, the cost would be greater. However, is it not also true, Doctor, that the costs we're talking about would be incurred over a period of several fiscal years?"

"Complete decommissioning and removal could take as long as ten years, Senator."

"Mister Chairman."

"The Chair recognizes the Senator from Oregon."

"Thank you, Mister Chairman. Doctor Waay, Chairman Sumter asked you questions about the barrels you uncovered at Rocky Flats. Could you explain why they were placed there."

"Mister Chase would perhaps be more informed on that subject, Senator."

"I believe it would save much of the Committee's time, Senator," said Hugo, "if I could submit for the record an extract from the hearing record made many years ago by the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy. It explains in some detail how extremely heavy work assignments at Rocky Flats combined with inadequate disposal facilities at other locations, made temporary storage in Colorado a practical necessity."

"Without objection, the extract will be received," said Sumter.

"It does not, however, tell us why they were neglected in subsequent years, does it, Mister Chase?"

"We have found no record or reference to them other than the hearing record, I just mentioned."

"Removing Doctor Waay's plastic cover, the barrels and the surrounding contaminated earth will be an environmental nightmare, I suspect. The contaminated soil will be removed to a Department facility in Idaho, I believe?"

"That has been the practice in the past, Senator," said Hugo.

"The same with the barrels?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell this Committee how much radiation has already been released from the barrel area?"

"We do not have any definitive data."

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"May the Committee expect to receive such data as you ultimately collect?" pursued Klamath.

"As soon as we have information, yes," promised Hugo.

"Mister Chairman," called DeKalb.

"The Chair recognizes the Senator from Illinois."

"Thank you, Mister Chairman. Doctor Waay, I listened with great interest to your explanations on radiation and commend you for enlightening me on a most difficult matter. I also listened to your answer to a question from our Chairman in which you seemed to be saying the Congress should address the question of decommissioning your plant in the context of ignorance of the human cost. I confess I am puzzled. Would it be your testimony that we should continue the weapons work at Rocky Flats despite the fact it is visiting sickness upon the citizens who live nearby?"

"You perhaps misunderstood my answer, Senator DeKalb. I simply elaborated on your hypothetical question to Mister Chase. You asked if he would favor removal of the plant if the human cost could be calculated, if the cost included injury from radiation, and if the radiation could be attributed to Rocky Flats. Have I stated your question fairly?"

"Waay's going to put Calumet's plum up the Senator's gold plated bung," whispered the Times reporter to his colleague from the Post.

"I think you're right," answered the scribe from the Post, "Little Jack Horner should have stayed in the corner."

"Yes, Doctor, you have correctly restated my question."

"My treatment of the issue was intended to give the Committee a dimension which seems too readily and too easily ignored. Simply put, it is the factor of uncertainty. A decision to decommission the plant would, under the terms of your hypothetical question, be necessarily based upon supposition. Even casual reference to the literature, instructs us that there is great uncertainty over the effects of low doses of ionizing radiation. My only concern, Senator, bears upon the certainty that is implied in your question. To boil it down, are you fully persuaded that radiation from Rocky Flats has caused even one single cancer in the Denver area?"

"If I said, yes?"

"I would ask which one. I should say, Senator, I share your conviction there are radiation related injuries, but my belief is

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based upon statistical probabilities. My point is that Congress should proceed or not proceed, as it will. However, it should, in either event, be cognizant of the uncertainties involved and not follow a trail lay by superficial studies or paved with assurances of certainty. To legislate upon assurances of certainty seems to me to be a cosmetic treatment of a complex issue. My point goes to the matter of Commissions just mentioned by the Chairman. It's the easy way out, an evasion of the issue. If I were to be asked, I would say the Congress, for once, should squarely face a difficult issue."

"Mister Chairman."

"The Chair recognizes Senator Danville."

"Just a few clarifying questions, Mister Chase. Do you know which office in the Department issued the regulations which caused you to modify your equipment requirements for the recovery building?"

"To my knowledge, they were not regulations of the type which were published and promulgated in the routine manner. Instead, they came to us as a headquarters directive specifically applicable to Rocky Flats."

"And who signed this directive?"

"I don't know, Senator, but I would expect it to be the Secretary or someone acting with his authority."

"Perhaps Mister Baldwin could enlighten us."

Pitkin leaned close to Baldwin and whispered, "Sounds like a good question to me, Hatch. I think you'd better go ahead and answer."

Baldwin whispered back. "I don't know a damn thing about all this, Pitkin."

"Tell Senator Danville, not me."

Clearing his throat, Baldwin presented the Committee with the most innocent look he could muster. "I have no knowledge of such a directive, Senator."

"Do you sometimes act for the Secretary, sign his name for example?"

"Only when I'm specifically authorized on a case by case basis and such instances are quite rare."

"Is the practice more common for Assistant Secretary Wendover?"

"I'm sure it is, Senator."

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"Did you ever hear Mister Wendover mention the name Arbonne?"

"Not that I recall."

"Mister Chairman," said Danville, "I have no further questions of these witnesses. I do have an unsigned copy of the directive Mister Chase mentioned. I also have copies of travel documents of the Department showing certain trips taken at government expense by a Department official. These were trips, quite a number of them, to Jacksonville, Florida. I would ask the Chair to admit these as part of the record of these hearings."

"The Chair would remind the Senator ours is not an investigatory committee."

"I'm aware of..."

"However, the Chair will accept the documents under the same conditions the departmental file was accepted, subject to the review of the Chair and counsel."

"The Chair, as usual, has anticipated me," said Danville. "I would move that the entire record of our proceedings be forwarded to the Subcommittee on Investigations."

"Without objection it is so ordered. The Chair hears no further requests for recognition; therefore, we will adjourn but not before the Chair expresses its appreciation for the excellent testimony given by these witnesses. Mister Chase and Doctor Waay, I have conducted many hearings in my tenure as Chairman of this Committee, but seldom have I heard more forthcoming and enlightening testimony. You have the thanks of this Committee. This Committee on Energy stands adjourned subject to the call of the Chair."

Members of the media began making a few last hurried notes. The Times said to his colleague from the Post, "Calumet got off the hook, but I have the feeling the whole Congress got dumped on. Did you ever hear anyone like Waay before? He really told it straight, but I don't think he'll last much longer in government with that attitude."

"Neither do I," agreed the Post. "But I think the story is Moffat. He's got a big fire to put out. Ever hear of Arbonne?"

"Not until today, but I bet we'll hear more. You know, it just might be worth a little digging. I think I'll start doing some asking around. See ya, pal."

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While the spectators stood milling about and comparing thoughts on what they had witnessed, Pitkin and Hugo walked to the desk and shook hands with Sumter and Fitchburg. It was a brief encounter and the room began to quickly empty.

As Pitkin stood, collecting papers and sliding them into his briefcase, he heard Eldon Moffat's voice call to him from the end of the long desk. Moffat had apparently been talking to a television reporter, and, even as he spoke, the reporter was walking away coiling his microphone cord. The technician snapped his light bar off and left Moffat standing in the comparatively dim light of the committee room.

Pitkin snapped his case shut, set it on the table, and walked to the desk in front of Moffat. "Well, Pitkin, I suppose you think me some kind of infamous scoundrel?"

"One of my shortcomings, Senator, is my inability to judge other men."

"This entire matter was most unseemly and I'm sorry you and Hugo were caught in the middle. I suppose you know that Casey Danville has been a sworn enemy of mine for years? He has tried to smear me before and failed, and I assure you he will fail this time. I was simply unprepared for it today, but such is the nasty business of politics. I remember you said you kept a log of the Arbonne equipment failures and you promised to forward it to the Committee. Under the circumstances, it might be better if you sent it to me directly. I'll be meeting with Senator Sumter off and on the next few days and I can pass it along to him."

"Under the circumstances, Senator, I think it would be better if I sent the original to the Chairman with a copy to you."

"Are you implying I would tamper with the damn thing?" hissed Moffat.

"I'm not implying anything, Senator. I'm fulfilling my promise to Chairman Sumter and staying out of what you called 'nasty politics.'"

Moffat glared at Pitkin for a moment and, perhaps realizing an insult or a threat would profit him nothing and even be counterproductive later, restrained the impulse to try and bring the defiant scientist to heel. "Thank you, Doctor Waay, I'll look forward to having such a copy. Thank Mister Chase for his testimony, and have a pleasant trip back to Colorado."

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With two aides streaming behind, Moffat took his presence from the committee room. His exit was so abrupt, one might have imagined there was a fire somewhere nearby.

Returning to the witness table, Pitkin was surprised to see Hugo busily engaged in conversation with Leighton Marlowe. From the broad smiles and lively gestures, Pitkin concluded the talk was social and not professional. Of course, Hatch Baldwin was standing near, basking in the presence of a national news commentator.

"Pitkin," called Marlowe, stepping forward to shake his hand, "delighted to see you. After what I just witnessed, you may not take it kindly, but welcome to Washington."

"Thank you. I was beginning to wonder if we would see anyone non-government and non-political before we left this town."

"I've lived with the government and political types a long time but, believe me, I'm not one of them."

"Mister Marlowe was telling me he's been sitting through our little drama from the beginning," said Hugo intrigued and not a little flattered that such a personage would devote so much time to a proceeding in which he, Hugo Chase, had been a key player.

"The news sources of the city must have suddenly become awfully dry," said Pitkin. "I can think of hundreds of places more interesting and thousands where I'd rather spend a morning than in this dank and dismal chamber of echoes. It's too difficult to distinguish the real sounds from the false ones."

"I think you're beginning to understand this city, Pitkin. There are, indeed, few original sounds to be heard in these old buildings, and, as for the people here, most spend their time wishing they were somewhere else."

"And they're the ones you couldn't drive away with a stick," added Pitkin.

"Bingo," cried Marlowe delightedly. "I'm running late as usual, and my staff is probably calling around looking for me, so I have to be going. However, I wanted to stay around and say hello, and confirm our dinner engagement. Hugo told me where you're staying, I'll pick you up at seven sharp, if that's agreeable. And Mister Baldwin here is more than welcome."

For his part, Pitkin would have declined the invitation, but apparently Hugo had already accepted for him. Neither did he

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want to spend the evening being interviewed, but with Hugo and Baldwin present, he might avoid most of the questions. "Seven will be fine," said Pitkin, "and I'll bet Mister Baldwin will manage to join us. How about it, Hatch?"

"Absolutely," said Baldwin. "I'll be at the hotel with Pitkin and Hugo."

"Good," agreed Marlowe, "seven it is." With a wave he was gone.

"Pitkin," began Baldwin hesitating and clearly ill at ease, but nonetheless squarely meeting Pitkin's gaze, "I want to apologize to you. As I sat here this morning, I began to listen, and for the first time began to hear. The work you and Hugo do is the work of the program. I'm a Washington paper pusher and your word was correct, I was impertinent. Again, I'm sorry. And one more thing thanks for including me in Marlowe's invitation for this evening. Why you did, I'll never know."

Pitkin took the outstretched hand and said, "There's still a difference between us, Hatch, and there will be as long as you put your faith in the bureaucracy and Washington, but who knows, someday you may find a reason to change. I hope so."

Laughing at the puzzled look, he glanced around the room, "I think they want to turn out the lights; let's get out of here."

As Hugo and Hatch stepped out the door ahead of him, Pitkin looked back and saw the same melancholy girl walking behind the chairs picking up note pads. He paused, then said to her, "Call me next time you're in Colorado; I'll show you how to keep from getting your ski tips crossed."

She looked up surprised that anyone would think to speak to her. For an instant her face brightened. Then, her smile faded back into its wooden mask. Hers was a life that relied too heavily on the false impulses of a false society. Thus bound, she would always falter from the lack of confidence in her own abilities. Resigned to her surroundings, she bent over the long vacant table and resumed her work.

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CHAPTER TEN

True to his word, Marlowe wheeled his powder blue Mercedes under the marquee of the Washington Hilton promptly at seven o'clock. Pitkin opened the front door and herded Hugo into the front seat. He and Hatch Baldwin stepped into the back.

"I think I qualify for a headline, gentlemen. A Washington newsman on time. I have reservations for us at the Press Club, but if you have another preference don't be shy about saying so. I spend too much time there as it is."

"Those of us from the provinces aren't familiar enough with Washington to have a preference for anything except a McDonalds," laughed Hugo.

"Don't let these guys put you on Mister Marlowe," said Baldwin, "they may be a lot of things, but they aren't exactly rubes."

"How well I know. I was in their territory only a few days ago, and discovered city ways don't end at the west edge of Reston. But hearing no objection, the Press Club it is."

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It was only a few minutes' drive to Pennsylvania Avenue and a few blocks more to their destination. Marlowe turned into a parking garage where he was obviously well known. He bantered with the young man who promised to bring the car back in one piece if Marlowe wouldn't mind having it made the object of a high-speed test drive to Maryland and back. Handing him a five dollar bill, Marlowe said the drive would have to be made in the attendant's own car and promised to demand the money back if the radio was playing or the seat was even warm in the Mercedes when he returned from dinner.

The evening was warm and the sun was still visible through a bank of western haze as they strolled down the street. The air was heavy with humidity, and the bitter sting of smog from the afternoon traffic was strong enough to irritate their eyes.

Even with the discomfort of heat, humidity, and foul air, there was something compelling about the city. Pitkin tried to define it. He wondered if the mere unfamiliarity might not be a spice in an otherwise ordinary scene. There was also the aspect of novelty. A trip to the famed Washington Press Club was not on the tourist itinerary, and, most certainly, the trip was seldom taken in the presence of one who easily qualified as a Washington notable.

Pitkin ruled out the dinner engagement and the company as the attraction, but couldn't decide what was left. Was it an awareness, a knowledge he was in a great center of power? There was the famed Pennsylvania Avenue, he had caught a glimpse of the White House, and the Capitol gleamed through the buildings, bright even in the dull evening sun. But having stood close to those who clung to such symbols and used the visible trappings of government for their own ends, he was certain there was no attraction for him in either symbolism or personalities.

Marlowe had been walking alongside while Hugo and Hatch Baldwin followed some distance behind. The journalist had remained silent, and seemed content to permit Pitkin to reflect as he might on their walk along the humid street.

Soon they were inside the building, through the lobby and in an elevator. The had been joined in the ascent by a harried young man, who, in his sport coat and open collar, was perhaps trying too hard to look the part of a busy reporter. He nodded at Marlowe, but didn't speak until the elevator door slid open.

"Slow day for me, Leighton. How're things on the Hill?"

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"About the same, Fred, slow."

The young man disappeared into the bar and Marlowe explained. "Fred Hood, a young man with one of the wire services. I'm afraid he's having a difficult time adjusting to Washington. He still believes in right and wrong. He would have been better advised to stay with his small paper in California."

As he spoke, Marlowe led the way to a wide doorway where he was instantly met by the maitre d'. The party was obviously expected.

"Table for four, Mister Marlowe. This way please."

Almost every person in the room evidently knew Marlowe. Yet the greetings were subdued and infrequent. Some of those who saw him actually knew him, intimately and professionally, and had no need to do more than nod. Others, who wanted to appear to know him, also kept their acknowledgments casual and indifferent. Whether Marlowe was in truth just another journalist or whether there was a studied attempt to treat him like one was an open question.

Once they were seated, they were visited by a young woman, in a very short skirt, a low cut blouse, and long black knitted stockings, covering smashingly well formed legs.

"Good evening, Mister Marlowe. Something from the bar for you and your guests?"

"I'll have some kind of creme, Molly. You decide for me." Looking around the table, he invited them to order. "Gentlemen?"

Hugo ordered a scotch and was joined in his choice by Baldwin. Pitkin asked the girl, "Would I be inelegant if I asked for a bottle of Coors?"

Sensing he was a visitor, she replied, "That's the 'in' thing in Washington, sir. A Coors would be most elegant."

While Hatch and Hugo engaged in celebrity spotting, Marlowe picked up what he suspected was the thread of Pitkin's silent musing during the walk from the parking building.

"Washington's a most interesting city, Pitkin. There's diversity of material means, a full range of political thinking, flesh prickling monuments, and outrageous corruption. I wonder what people like Washington and Jefferson would think of us. We've changed so much I wonder if they'd even recognize their late twentieth century descendants."

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Marlow's journalistic sixth sense, his reading of Pitkin's thoughts, proved to be on the mark. "I wonder if we really have changed so much, or if we've changed at all," replied Pitkin. "Those men were agrarians; they lived, worked, and thought in terms of farming and open land. Large cities, by that I mean great accumulations of people, were, in their minds, European relics."

"Do I detect something of an aversion to our great American cities, Doctor Waay?"

"I'm afraid, I'm really not an expert on urban affairs, and I haven't given them enough thought to have much of a coherent opinion, one way or the other."

"Instinct or unconscious reaction is often more valid than the most carefully constructed theory," said Marlowe, encouraging Pitkin to speak his mind.

"In some things that's probably true. My instinctive reaction to a city such as Washington, or to any city, is a disturbing ambivalence. I'm attracted by its comforts, and if man has an inborn sense of community, I certainly share it. On the other hand, I believe massed people tend to lose their sense of responsibility for others. And, in a city, it's difficult to practice or to even understand self-reliance and individualism, as our fathers knew it. I suppose I have an idealized notion of such things, but I like the idea that, for some people, there may still be a choice between life compressed by multitudes of people and a solitary life, more difficult to be sure, but nonetheless an existence defined by an individual's sense of his own value instead of having his course set by collective impulse."

"Pitkin, you may be the last of a vanishing species."

"I agree with you. My ideas are out of date and hopelessly unrealistic given the facts of a technological society. I have an old friend, a rancher, truly one of the last of a dying generation. He has summed it up better than I could ever hope to. He told me that running water in houses and indoor toilets were the beginning of the end of his world. I suppose television and jet planes are doing the same to the life style I knew as a boy and a young man. Still, I believe there are decisions to be made. The vast majority of Americans have chosen, or been forced to choose, life in apartments, housing tracts, and condominiums. Theirs is a life of being dragged, by an addiction to mass media, from one fad to

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another and from the adulation of one sports star or rock musician to another."

"You make it all sound rather grim, all the more so, because I suspect there's a kernel of truth in your analysis."

"It's not my analysis. Others have been saying the same things and much more for years. Where there isn't room and opportunity to do one's own living, the only alternative is living vicariously. I prefer to select and experience the events of life personally. Thus far I have managed reasonably well and would not exchange my mosquito bites, hard ground, sunburns, and a dozen other tribulations for a thousand television outdoor sportsman shows with some damn movie star deep sea fishing off the coast of Florida. I could go on, but I think you get the idea. People in cities are surrendering their lives to anonymous directors, selectors, and editors. But I don't believe it's necessary. I cannot abandon the belief that still today we have the chance to choose an alternative."

"The road less traveled by?"

"Yes, Frost said it more beautifully and incisively than anyone else."

"Do you feel it is an individual's free decision, or is it circumstantial?"

"I suppose I'm getting a bit philosophical and beyond my depth, but I've always felt it was a combination. Circumstances do compel responsive behavior, and, at times, an individual's act is shaped by those circumstances such that free choice is nonexistent. However, it's just as true that there are moments, there are critical points when an individual is presented with the opportunity to select one course of action in preference to another and thereby set the direction for a series of subsequent events. Some such selections can be far-reaching and can control an almost infinite number of subsequent events."

"You are a student of history, Pitkin. I hear you contending against those who argue for inevitability."

"Yes, but I'm obviously quite unsophisticated, I know only enough to please myself and provoke others."

Hugo and Hatch interrupted and called upon Pitkin to settle their difference of opinion over the identity of an individual Hugo thought to be an anchorman but Hatch thought to be a Senator from Texas. As Pitkin followed their covertly pointed

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fingers and nods, Marlowe leaned back in his chair and reflected on his interrupted conversation with the physicist.

He remembered how the scientist's blue eyes had narrowed and taken on an almost brittle appearance as he spoke of compressed apartment living. The contrast with his almost reverential look during the brief references to his own camping was nothing short of remarkable. Pitkin Waay was a man torn and pulled by conflicting forces.

Marlowe had seen Pitkin Waay intellectually appreciating the fact of change. At the same time, he had seen a deep and driving emotion, which savored a fading illusion of solitary independence. Both forces were strong and in those instances where they collided, there was great turbulence. Marlowe thought of Pitkin's belief in the capacity of an individual, under certain circumstances, to make keystone decisions. If such a circumstance should arise in Pitkin Waay's life, Marlowe wondered which he would choose.

"You had better settle this, or we'll never have any peace," said Pitkin, bringing the newsman into the celebrity naming argument. "It's the tall man standing near the door taking to the maitre d'. Do you know him? Hugo insists he's the anchor on one of your competitor networks. Hatch, has changed his mind and says he is an editor for the Post."

Marlowe followed the directions and looked toward the entrance to the dining room. "I most certainly do know him. Would you like to meet him?"

As Hugo and Hatch allowed that it would be a great honor and agreed they would, indeed, like to meet the object of their disagreement, Marlowe made his identification. "He's the new manager of the dining hall."

As the laughter died away, the waiter brought menus, and with not a few chortles lingering in the air, they began considering their dinner options.

Looking again to their host for recommendations, they debated and discussed possibilities. Finally, Pitkin folded his menu and put it aside. "Hugo, Hatch, I have a proposal. Since Mister Marlowe has been a perfect host so far, I think we should put ourselves entirely in his hands. If he would be willing to undertake the task, I suggest we have him order for us."

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They agreed instantly. Marlowe was obviously pleased with the suggestion. He enjoyed such things and accepted their mandate with enthusiasm.

With the waiter looking over his shoulder at the menu, Marlowe began. "We'll begin with Escargots de Bourgogne and a plate of Salmon Pate. I remember the White Gazpacho soup. Last time I was here it was excellent; we'll have four cups of it, steaming hot. To make an allowance for our diverse tastes, we'll have what the menu calls the 'Great Plate for Four.' It includes Roast Lemon Chicken, Glazed Turkey with Rice, Red Snapper with Chives, Shrimp, and a mountain of Chesapeake Oysters. And, Devron, the bar's been holding a few bottles of wine I purchased in New York last year. Among them, I believe there are two bottles of 1934 White Bordeaux. I've been waiting for an excuse to give them a go. We'll look at the desert tray later, and each of these gentlemen can select his own. Oh, yes, one more thing, bring us one of those long, warm loaves of sourdough French bread."

The meal was delicious, and Marlowe was an excellent host. He never permitted the conversation to lag, and he kept it light and entertaining. He recounted some humorous newsgathering stories and recited a few anecdotes from his career as a young correspondent in Europe during World War II. Yet, it was not a one-man show. Marlowe involved them all in the conversation by asking questions and inviting comments on everything from the food to current political events.

Marlowe thoughtfully steered talk away from the hearing. He knew shoptalk was a sure spike to a light and enjoyable evening. When the matter did arise, he assured them old Senator Sumter was one of the most capable men in on Capitol Hill. Marlowe dismissed a reference to Moffat with an exaggerated lifting of his eyebrows and a comment about justice catching everyone sooner or later.

Responding to a direct question from Pitkin, Marlowe confirmed the fact that a feud had been brewing between Danville and Moffat for years. Moffat, something of a dandy about town, made no secret of his contempt for the bulldog-like Danville, and Danville had once publicly called Moffat a fop.

Summing it up, Marlowe guessed, based upon what he had heard that Moffat was in some extremely hot water. "Heavy Danville isn't one to show his hand until he's got most of the trump

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cards. Pitkin, you or Hugo might consider gearing up to campaign for the Senate. I suspect there will be a vacancy sooner than you might imagine, and you have a running start with today's television exposure."

To Baldwin, Marlowe suggested, "You might even become a candidate yourself for a high position in the Department. I'll wager the equipment for Rocky Flats came from Jacksonville, and it would also be a safe bet that someone will already be checking into Wendover's travel habits. Still, he might be entirely innocent, a pawn of some other shrewd people who mastermind Arbonne. Whatever develops, it'll be interesting, but almost routine for Washington."

It was Hatch who put Marlowe in a reflective mood with his question about international tensions. The table had been cleared and they were sipping coffee and an exotic brandy Marlowe had ordered when Hatch put forth his query about the Soviet Union.

"Mister Marlowe, you've traveled abroad a great deal and I've seen you on television reporting from Moscow. Do you believe the Russian leadership seriously entertains a belief they could win or even survive a nuclear war?"

"Hatch, you have asked the many billion lives question. I don't believe anyone has the answer and most of all the Russians. Just as in our own country, there are factions in the Soviet Union. They have their own hawks and doves the same as we find here in the United States and Western Europe. The tide of political sentiment there ebbs strongly anti-American and flows back to détente. Of course, the communists control public sentiment and have brought the business of managing popular feelings to the point where they can direct it as they please. The result is we find it difficult to fully understand the moves and counter moves we see reflected in their press and television. We simply do not know what is in the minds of the Russian leaders at any given time."

"You don't paint us a very encouraging picture," said Hatch.

"It's probably a product of my own anxiety and frustration over the absence of good solid information. To me, that is the most distressing aspect of our Soviet relations. We, too often, are walking through the dark not knowing whether we shall collide with a tree or step into bottomless pit. I suppose my journalistic

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instincts are frustrated by not being able to get my hands on a few tangible facts about the smoke filled rooms in the politburo."

"You're saying lack of good intelligence is our basic problem in dealing with the Russians," concluded Hatch.

"The problem has at least two dimensions," replied Marlowe, sipping his brandy. "Our files are nearly empty on the inner working of the higher levels of the Soviet government. That's one aspect of our information gap. The other is a void we have permitted to develop in our own system. Our colleges and universities have not provided us with enough serious students of the Eastern Block of nations. The Kremlinologists we have often exhibit a common failing."

"Which is?" asked Pitkin.

"The apparent inability to comprehend the most fundamental character of the system. The Soviet leaders are absolutists. They believe their philosophy is dynamic and that their system will flourish as ours deteriorates. To be sure, they demonstrate flexibility on the means, on the instruments of achieving their goals. But they never waver from their goals. Never. If it is in their interest to sign a treaty, they sign. If it serves a later interest to violate it, they do so without hesitation. Theirs is a classic and living example of devotion to what we consider the immoral rule of the means justifying the end."

"They sound more like American politicians than commissars," said Hugo.

"There's one difference. Few American politicians have long range goals. They characteristically look at the next election. They talk about preserving freedom and liberty, but recent history teaches us to be suspicious of such speeches, because there's probably a political motive behind them. I'm only suggesting that our politicians practice expediency for their own purposes, while the communist politicians practice expediency with a common, well defined purpose."

"It sounds like you put everyone, the Russians and the Americans, pretty much in the same category," said Baldwin.

"It's certainly true that we have a lot of similarities," replied Marlowe. "More than many people realize. We both have large governments, bloated bureaucracies, ambitious leaders, and lots of innocent people being shoved toward the abyss of destruction. The world's weapons are different, the faces change,

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but the equations remain the same. The French have an old saying, 'Plus ca change plus c'est la meme chose'. The more it changes, the more it's the same thing. And the same applies to people. As Pitkin was saying a while ago, people, their instincts and their appetites have changed little or not at all in the past two or three thousand years."

"You wouldn't know we're bogging along in ignorance to watch the television," said Hugo, still reflecting on Marlowe's remarks on the lack of credible information about the Russians. "I see the tube filled with experts on the Soviets."

"It would be simplistic to say we have too many 'experts' on the Russians, but there is a grain of truth in the idea. We have individuals who profess to have knowledge on the Soviet system, many individuals. I include politicians and, sadly, members of my own profession. They clamor to be heard and end up actually competing with one another for public attention. Each tries to out do the others in the sophistication of his analysis. The result is some of the most inane commentary imaginable. Much of it is pure claptrap, academic hair splitting. The public is confused and often sadly misled. On this point, I must say I know of no answer for us. We live under the First Amendment, and we have no way to determine who should be designated as authorities on the Soviet Union or any other country. I think the only solution is to recognize the problem and then undertake a process of education to teach people how to selectively listen and how to separate logic and facts from bilge."

"Interesting ideas, Leighton," said Hugo. "But to return to Hatch's question, what are the probabilities for nuclear war?"

"Actually, they are quite high. Tensions, misunderstandings, nervous leaders, perceptions of weakness, of too much strength, the list goes on, but any factor or any combination could be disastrous. However, it is not inevitable that there be an exchange of nuclear missiles. If the United States and the Soviet Union could find a substitute for nuclear war, the world might yet hold on for a while."

"What do you mean, a substitute?" asked Pitkin.

"A treaty for disarmament would be such a substitute, but such an agreement hardly seems to be a real possibility given the present appetite for posturing and maneuvering."

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Pitkin was not satisfied with the response. "I have the feeling you believe there are other alternatives to the use of nuclear weapons?"

"Yes," Marlowe confessed, "I do have other such possibilities in mind, but they range from the plausible to the slightly balmy."

"Let's hear a slightly plausible one," suggested Pitkin.

"Consider a confined, spectacular demonstration."

"Do you suggest we drop a bomb on a test site, a desert, or on the ocean somewhere," asked Hugo. "I can't see any value in that. We've had hundreds of such detonations at the Nevada Test Site, in the Pacific, and the Russians have seen plenty of the same at their test sites. What would be the value of another atomic blast?"

"I wasn't thinking of a detonation at the test site," said Marlowe. "I was thinking of obliterating a major city."

His listeners stared at him, unbelieving. They had been startled into silence by Marlowe's proposal.

"As a demonstration?" cried Baldwin.

"Yes. By calculation and by design. After you get past the utter black madness of the idea, ask the essential questions. Would such a sacrifice sufficiently shock the world to restore sanity? Would the destruction, the devastation jar the superpowers out of their ruts? If it would, you must then decide whether or not to make such a sacrifice."

"But destroying a city is unthinkable," protested Hugo.

"It wasn't in 1945. The result then was a sudden end to what most experts agree would otherwise have been a terrible and protracted war with enormous losses on both sides. The shock was effective then, why not now? Would you agree to such a thing if there were a reasonable chance it would save the entire world from Armageddon? Would any of you make such a choice?"

"Not me, not a city full of people," said Hugo, "A demonstration, perhaps, but..."

"You want a substitute without a price," laughed Marlowe. Looking around, he pursued the question. "Pitkin, would you make such a decision? You recognize the age-old question, of course. Would you throw one person out of the lifeboat to save the rest?"

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"I don't expect to be given the opportunity," replied Pitkin thoughtfully. "But in the final analysis, I might. If it came to such a point, I'd bargain for better terms, and I think fairness would require that the one who made the decision remain in the city he selected. If it was a lifeboat, the decision maker himself should jump overboard."

"I'd prefer hearing another of your substitutes, Mister Marlowe," said Baldwin.

"Very well. Let us consider an arena for controlled hostilities."

"I think you lost me with that one," said Hugo.

"Let me outline what should be rather obvious and fundamental conditions of coexistence. If either nation, the United States or the Soviet Union, were to aggress the other with nuclear weapons, the one aggressed would certainly retaliate, and we would have begun the incineration of the surface of the planet. Moving away from the homelands of our two nations, we have our neighbors and allies. The question becomes more difficult. Would we engage in nuclear war should Canada or West Germany be subjected to overt action by the Soviets? The answer would seem to be 'yes', but it is not the resounding 'yes' we would give in the case of an attack on the homeland. Still another step removed is those areas, which we in the United States have called areas of vital interest. The best example is the mid-east. Would a direct attack on Israel move us to engage in nuclear war with the Soviets or with any other aggressing nation? The answer is not 'yes', but 'maybe', and even that receives all kinds of qualifications and is tagged with 'ifs' of every gradation. Thus, if you move the battlefield far enough away and find one where the perceived interests of the combatants are vague and certainly not vital, you arrive at a position where war without nuclear destruction is possible."

"Then you're talking about a non-nuclear war as a substitute for nuclear war," concluded Pitkin.

"What I am suggesting is the possibility of an engagement in an area of the world which neither side considers valuable enough to defend with nuclear weapons. Such a place would be the arena for controlled hostilities."

"But if it's not important to either side, why would they fight at all? Asked Hatch.

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“Because they have been preparing for it for over forty years. Because they both have many untested conventional weapons. Because the leaders of one or both nations might need a friendly and controlled war for political reasons. Because we have in positions of power, a generation that has no first hand experiences with war. Because it would release one hell of a lot of tension in a world that's wound so tight it might explode otherwise.”

“Where could such a thing happen?” pressed Hatch.

“One of the more likely areas would be Africa. Neither nation has allies of the first rank there, none of its little nations has its own nuclear weapons, nor the entire continent is generally accessible to both. China would be another candidate, if its nuclear capability could be neutralized.”

“And this is based upon an unwritten understanding that neither side would use nuclear weapons?” asked Hugo.

“Something like that,” answered Marlowe. “I admit the idea is rather bizarre, but watching the constant sparring, the repeated near misses, and the institutionalization of the surrogate technique now used around the world by both parties, one must wonder if it's not a real possibility.”

Looking from one guest to the other, Marlowe brightened and said, “I hope my gloomy talk has not depressed you. It shouldn't. It's entirely hypothetical and quite properly relegated to a giant heap of speculative talk which has accumulated around me these last few years as I have grown old and imagined myself to be wise. If you have finished, I would move we adjourn.”

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Pitkin and Hugo had finished eating breakfast and were in the process of checking out of the hotel, when the clerk handed Hugo a note, "This came in for you just a few minutes ago, Mister Chase."

"I wonder what in the world this is about," puzzled Hugo. Reading the note, his face wrinkled into a deep frown. "Here, Pitkin, see what you make of it."

The message was on a standard hotel message form and read:

To: Hugo Chase
Message From: Sec. Stewart
Unable to contact you by phone. I'm on my
Way to the hotel. Wait there. Priority.

"Seems pretty clear to me. Stewart's on his way to the hotel and wants you to wait for him," said Pitkin returning the note to Hugo.

"I hope to hell he doesn't take too long to get here. We've got a plane to catch." grumbled Hugo.

"It isn't when he gets here as much as how long he stays."

"I wonder what the 'priority' is all about?" muttered Hugo.

"Hard to tell. Everything is priority with people on Stewart's level."

"But Stewart's always been a pretty low key and collected type of manager. It's not like him to label a simple hearing critique 'priority.' I'm betting he wants to talk about the business with Moffat."

"Secretary Stewart may be the chief executive officer of our favorite equipment supplier, Arbonne," suggested Pitkin with dry humor. "But I'd say it's equally likely he's charged up about the recovery building. Anyhow, we'll know soon enough."

"Kinda makes me wonder though, this business of him coming to the hotel, seems strange for a cabinet officer to go this much out of his way."

"The only thing we can do, Hugo, is sit and wait him out."

They selected chairs near the door and divided a copy of the Washington Post. Hugo opted for the financial section, and

Pitkin began looking for an editorial with substance rather than an anti-something harangue. Finding nothing he considered worth reading, he leafed casually through the news pages.

On page four he saw the story about the hearing. The headline read: COLORADO SENATOR GOES ARBONNE. The four-paragraph story set the stage as being "a special hearing on plutonium contamination at the Department of Energy's Rocky Flats plant in Golden, Colorado." The lead paragraph went on to identify Moffat and called his objections an "outburst." The second paragraph quoted an unidentified source as linking Moffat to Arbonne, "a mystery shrouded contractor." The third paragraph identified Hugo and said he and a deputy had answered questions about the "problem ridden" facility. The final paragraph quoted Senator DeKalb as having stated he was planning to introduce legislation to "remove the Rocky Flats time bomb to a more remote location in order to curtail the rising intensity of radiation in the area."

Pitkin interrupted Hugo's study of stock market quotations by handing him the paper and indicating the news article. "I know you had hoped for page one and a picture," he said, "but you'll have to settle for page four and the third paragraph."

Hugo read the story and sputtered a running commentary. "In Golden," he read, "Hell, it sounds as though we're sitting downtown next to Coors. 'Problem ridden facility,' well, I guess we can't quarrel with that." He was silent until he came to "time bomb." "This guy's been reading the Denver Post," he fumed.

"Just be glad it was Moffat and not you in the headline," teased Pitkin. "How do you think I feel? They didn't even mention my name."

Hugo had no chance to reply. From the doorway of the hotel, they heard the booming voice of Secretary of Energy Stewart calling to them. "Hugo, Pitkin, damn, I'm glad I caught up with you two."

"Mister Secretary," they greeted him in turn.

Shaking their hands, he looked down at their flight bags. "I guessed as much; you were on your way to the airport. Well, I'll save you the taxi fare. Are you both checked out and ready to go?"

"Yes, Mister Secretary, we were checking out when we got your note," said Hugo.

"Good. Come along then. I've got a car waiting."

They picked up their bags and followed Stewart through the doors where they saw the Washington standard, a long black limousine. The driver came smartly around and took their bags and began stowing them in the trunk. The door of the imposing, long black car was open, and standing beside it was a solemn faced man who only nodded at they approached.

Stewart climbed in and called, "Hugo, why don't you join me here?" indicating the seat cushion next to him.

Pitkin followed Hugo into the car and sat on the jump seat facing Hugo and Stewart. The poker-faced man holding the door came in last and joined Pitkin on the rearward-facing seat. The driver came by and closed the door.

Stewart began talking the instant they were all seated. "Let me begin by making the introductions. Hugo Chase, Pitkin Waay, this is Mark Stanley. Mark, these are the gentlemen I was telling you about. Hugo here is the Director of Rocky Flats, and Pitkin is his deputy. Mark is Head of an FBI Special Investigations Team which operates immediately under the Director of the Bureau."

As they shook hands, Stewart continued speaking in his characteristic louder-than-necessary voice. In the confines of the limousine, the bellowing Stewart caused his listeners to lean away from the source a bit and squint at the louder words as though that would help moderate the effect on their ears.

"We've got a lot to cover so we'd better get right to it. First, I've already talked to Senator Sumter. He was very impressed with your presentations yesterday. A couple more days with you, Pitkin, and he'd be ready to take over one of our labs. I want to thank you both for carrying on without me and doing a fine job. I hope Hatch explained where I was?"

"Yes, he told us you were meeting with the President," said Hugo.

"Close, but not exactly correct. I was at the White House meeting with the President's Chief of Staff. Mark and I are meeting with the President in a couple of hours. I just wanted you to know I was, in fact, tied up and not ducking the hearing. Was Hatch useful to you? He's a young man with lots of potential, but he's a bit starry-eyed and sometimes tends to take his position too seriously."

"I believe Hugo and I share your assessment of him entirely," said Pitkin.

Stewart caught Pitkin's eye and chuckled, "I thought as much. Well, Hatch could benefit from some field experience. I propose to give him some, but more about that later. Let me go back to the hearing. Moffat, as you could guess, is into something. The story in the Post this morning is probably only the beginning of a series. Once their people get a hold on something, they don't easily let go, and they've set their teeth into Moffat's hide. Since you two are in his state, he may send somebody nosing around trying to cover his tracks on this Arbonne thing."

"He already talked to me," said Pitkin. "Immediately after the hearing he asked me to send him our logs on the Arbonne equipment. I offered him a copy, and he wished us a pleasant trip home."

"Excellent, Pitkin." Roared Stewart. "I can see you don't need any coaching from me."

"There is one difficulty, Mister Secretary. A small one to be sure, but you should know about it. When Hugo and I met with Moffat before the hearing, he talked about problems in the recovery building that we haven't made public. On our staff, we have a man who used to work in Washington for Moffat, Lamont Wellington. Some time back, Moffat dumped him on us, and he's been working as our public relations officer. I have no direct proof, but I'm almost certain Wellington is Moffat's source of information."

"He used to work for Moffat?"

"Yes."

"There's no other way Moffat could have gotten the information about the recovery building?"

"None that I can imagine."

"Okay, we can't prejudice the man's reputation or take any action against him without direct proof, but I want you to isolate him. I don't want him to have any access whatever to information or material relating to the recovery building. We'll make that a standing order until this thing on the contractor is settled. While we're on the subject, you both should know this whole thing might get pretty messy before it's over. You'll be getting calls from the media people and sooner or later you're going to find yourselves testifying again, probably here in Washington, and maybe even in front of a grand jury in Colorado. I should also tell you about my own investigation. As of this

moment, I don't know the origin of the directive that forced those equipment changes. The only thing I do know is that it was issued before I became Secretary, but I'm going to find out whether the individual responsible is still in the Department. I'm sure some senate committee will be asking about it before long. My final word on this is an instruction. You are to fully cooperate with any duly constituted investigatory body. Should any questions arise, call me personally."

"Mister Stanley, then, is conducting the investigation?" asked Hugo.

"No, Mister Stanley's business is not related to Moffat and the recovery building. But before we get to him, I want to know how much of a problem we have out there. Quite apart from the Moffat thing, we're going to be looking at legislation on decommissioning the entire facility. I can tell you now the President is not going to be pleased with the idea. Removal is expensive, and judging from everything I've been told, the case has not yet been made for plutonium induced harm to the residents out there. Am I right on that, Pitkin?"

"A conclusive case has not been made, but the evidence might be enough to convict a criminal of murder. I mean, there may be enough evidence to make a case beyond a reasonable doubt."

Stewart brushed back his mop of unruly black hair. "That bowls me over, Pitkin. If what you say is true, we're going to have to revisit the whole question." He took another swipe at his hair, but to no avail. "If there's harm...if we're contaminating and ...damn, Pitkin, you're sure as hell setting a lot of fires in one short trip to town. Well, we'll have to talk about this later. But for now, how bad is the situation out there, strictly in terms of radiation?"

"The emissions from the recovery building stacks, combined with the leakage from the barrels has put us over state limits," said Pitkin. "Before we left to fly back here, we talked to our chief of radiation monitoring, and he told us that for two days the ambient air samplers were giving higher readings than any time since the major plutonium fire in the sixties."

"Have you advised the state people?"

"Not officially, but under the terms of our Memorandum of Understanding, we are obligated to file a report on such an occurrence. I've talked to one member of the Health Board, but off

the record. Our written notice is already overdue, and I believe Hugo and I agree, we'll have to send them something tomorrow."

"We've got problems all over the lot," scowled Stewart, "and we don't need another one with the State of Colorado. File the report, and send a copy to my attention."

Looking out the window, Stewart saw they were nearing the airport exit road off the Parkway, "We're almost there, and I haven't gotten to my main reason for wanting to talk to you. Mark, tell him to pull into the short term parking lot, would you?"

Stanley turned around and slid open the glass door in the partition between the driver's seat and the rear portion of the limousine. "The Secretary wants you to drive into the short term lot, okay?"

The driver nodded his understanding of the instruction, and Stanley closed the glass door. As he turned to face the others, Stewart addressed the agent with an invitation for an explanation of his presence. "Mark, I think we've covered our routine company business, I'm going to ask you to take it from here."

Stanley's modulated and smooth voice was a welcome relief. He spoke deliberately and in an even tone, relying on his constantly moving hands to supply whatever emphasis was required. "As Secretary Stewart told you a few moments ago, we spent yesterday in the White House meeting with the Chief of Staff. Our task there was to prepare a comprehensive briefing for the President. From here, we'll go directly to the oval office to make that presentation to the President, and what I'm going to tell you is the substance of that briefing. Since you both hold positions of responsibility, it is hardly necessary for me to say this, but for the record, I must remind you that what I shall say is absolutely confidential."

Stanley settled back a bit and hesitated as though he was searching for a way to begin. Pitkin had the impression Stanley was deciding exactly how much information to disclose. He knew that if Stanley operated the same as other Bureau agents, he and Hugo would be dealt with on a need-to-know basis.

"For some time," said Stanley, "we have been conducting an investigation of domestic terrorism as it has actually been practiced and how it might be practiced in the near future. You are, of course, aware of some of their major acts of violence committed in the past few years overseas. The Bureau has been

increasingly concerned over reports from...sources, that terrorist groups will try to perpetrate similar acts in this country. We have been responding in a variety of ways, some more obvious than others have. I'm sure you remember the press accounts of the concrete barriers placed near the White House and the State Department? Rather spectacular, but necessary. It was also a useful signal of our determination to combat such threats. I can't say it was a deterrent, however. Terrorists are a rather determined breed, and damnably clever to boot."

Stewart sounded a loud interruption. "I don't know whether or not you noticed, but we've also stepped up security at the Forrestal Building. We tried to keep it from being too obvious, but if you know what to look for, it's there to see."

"I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary." Hugo sounded a bit surprised at the Secretary's revelation.

"So much the better," replied Stewart. "If you aren't looking for it, you shouldn't notice anything."

Stanley elaborated, "Measures have been taken throughout the city, and in most cases they are happily unspectacular. However, to return to more immediate matters, we have been advised by reliable people in this country and informants abroad of a new terrorist project. Their immediate purpose is twofold. They want to do something, which would attract headlines around the world. If terrorism is to succeed, the campaign of violence and destruction must be brought home to as many people as possible. In short, they want a spectacular which will send shivers down the spines of every established government in the western alliance."

"My God," breathed Hugo, "we're the target."

"You might be," corrected Stanley. "As you have guessed, the second purpose of such a terrorist group would be to inflict actual injury on our defense establishment. They have begun to realize that symbols are cheap shots. The Statute of Liberty, the Washington Monument are tempting targets, but little actual damage is done considering the risk to the terrorists personally, and very little terror actually results. Therefore, they have targeted our nuclear weapons facilities, or so we have been told. Rocky Flats may be one such subject. Sitting here at this moment, I can't tell you we expect a terrorist attack on your facility. I can say there'll be an attempt made against the system, and you are a conspicuous component in the weapons complex. The logical

question at this point would be what are we doing about it? We're spread pretty thin and we're trying to cover all the installations. We're giving the same information to all the Directors that we're giving to you. Yet the fact remains, damage to Rocky Flats in such a campaign would be a tempting objective."

"Just how reliable are these sources?" asked Pitkin.

"They have supplied information to us before, and it has never been materially incorrect. We are expecting further information from them soon, perhaps today. When we receive it, we may know the target and the method of attack."

"This is incredible," cried Hugo. "We've always known such a thing was possible, but it's always been abstract, unreal somehow. I can hardly believe what I'm hearing."

"It was a blow to me, too, Hugo," said Stewart, "but as you say, we've always known it was a damned nasty possibility sitting out there somewhere unseen and terrible."

"The one good thing about this is our knowledge," Stanley reminded them. "Our information is solid, and with a little luck, we'll know which facility, when, and what kind of attack they plan on making. It could be a charge in a briefcase by an insider, or it could be the suicide car type of approach. We hope to be able to abort the thing before it really becomes a life threat to anyone."

"Meanwhile you must have some steps you want taken?" asked Pitkin, his mind already probing and dismantling the problem.

Stanley was encouraged by Pitkin's response. It was positive, and it was solution oriented. "Secretary Stewart has agreed to give me plenary authority over security during the next few days. I'll work through his office as much as possible, but there may be circumstances, which require me to act rather swiftly, and directly. In such cases there will not be time for taking that route."

"Mark, is fully in charge of security," interrupted Stewart. "He's being considerate in working through me, but under these conditions, we can't carry bureaucratic niceties too far. Let's keep it simple. He's giving the orders."

It was evident Mark Stanley was a man accustomed to assuming control when the fears or inabilities of others brought them to an impasse. "First, I want you to put an absolutely tight lid on the plant. No one comes in the gate except employees. No

visitors of any kind. Second, cut all work to bare essentials, and keep employee presence to a minimum. Third, increase your security force immediately. I would hope you have a reserve of some kind?"

"Yes, we do," Pitkin assured him. "Protest marchers have kept us pretty well exercised, and we can beef up pretty quickly. We'd have a tough time sustaining it for more than a day or two, however."

"I'd guess three days will be plenty of time. This thing is close, and if it's going to happen, it'll be soon. Next item, do you conduct perimeter patrols?"

"No," answered Hugo, "but we have excellent detection and monitoring systems which serve as well, probably better."

"If you have the manpower, begin patrols, foot and motor."

"We'll manage something." Hugo was picking up speed now and beginning to show a tough, combative streak.

"Before we leave the subject of security, Mark," interrupted Pitkin, "you should know about a question that was put to me Monday morning. A reporter came to my office and asked why we were increasing plant security. My guess then was that he was simply taking a shot in the dark based upon the stories floating around about missing uranium. If a missing plutonium story were starting to make the rounds, an increase in plant security would be a predictable response. What you've just told us puts his question in a different light."

Pitkin's statement brought a sudden look of interest to the FBI man's strictly business face. "Interesting. Yes, I think your reporter's question is most interesting. What's his name?"

"Deke Prowers."

"That's strange. I seem to recall the name. What paper does he work for?"

"He's with the Denver Post, but I think he used to work here in Washington."

"Oh, yes, now I remember. He was a reporter for the old Washington Star until it folded. A solid reporter, if my memory serves me well."

"I've had the same impression," agreed Pitkin.

"Did you get the idea he had a source feeding him information?"

"He gave me that up front and seemed pretty straight about it. Of course he wouldn't give me a name, but he said a friend suggested the question."

"It could be a coincidence," said Stanley, "but I doubt it. Our investigation of terrorism has been pretty far ranging and there are any number of ways Prowers out in Denver might have picked up on the story, but the specifics of this present effort to make a move against one of our nuclear defense installations have been kept close enough that I'm confident nothing has gotten out yet. I might want to talk to him later."

"But when we begin increasing security and doing the things you've outlined, the press'll pick up on it right away," said Hugo. "At that point, how do we maintain any kind of confidentiality?"

"We won't be able to," admitted Stanley. "As I was saying earlier, our concern is the next two or three days. Keeping this quiet that long is critical. We don't want to create a panic, and we don't want to tip this terror squad to how much we know. If they knew we were onto them, they'd scatter, regroup and come at us again. The next time around our information almost certainly wouldn't be as current and reliable."

"What's next on your agenda?" asked Pitkin.

"I'd like to have a list of new employees, include anyone hired in the past four years. Put the most recent ones on top."

"Can we contact you through the Secretary's office?" asked Hugo.

"Yes, but here's a better number," said Stanley handing him a business card. "If you have an emergency, use the second number, otherwise just use Secretary Stewart's."

"You'll have your list by telefax an hour after we land," said Hugo. "Mister Secretary, we're obviously going to be hard pressed for a while. I'm short-handed as it is. Some of the routine stuff is going to be running pretty late."

"I don't believe I have to tell you what gets priority, Hugo," replied Stewart. "And I know you're stretched pretty thin. As a matter of fact, I'm sending you some help. Do you think you could make good use of another hand for a while?"

"We'll take anything we can get." Hugo's acceptance was less than enthusiastic. He had been sent assistance from headquarters before and had not been well served by any of it.

"I'd hoped you'd say that," beamed Stewart. "Hatch Baldwin will be on the plane with you. I called and ordered the young scamp out of bed at five o'clock this morning. I told him to pack, but leave his three-piece suits and shiny shoes in Washington. He's been kept completely in the dark through this whole thing so he's bound to be full of questions. You have my permission to brief him, but not on the airplane. You'd best let him wait until you get to a less public place."

Pitkin and Hugo were both smiling. "He's the very one, I would have selected, Mister Secretary," said Pitkin. "And keeping him waiting a bit longer certainly won't do him any harm."

"Gentleman, we have an appointment," Stewart reminded everyone. "Hugo, Pitkin, again, thank you for your good work yesterday, and ...good luck."

As Stewart shook hands with them, Stanley offered a final comment. "I'll call you this afternoon, I hope I'll have some news for you then. And let me say, I feel more confident about this thing having met the two of you. I think Rocky Flats is in good hands."

The limousine nosed its way out the gate of the small parking lot and sped off toward the George Washington Parkway and the city across the Potomac. Pitkin Waay and Hugo Chase stood and watched the sleek statement of pretense until it disappeared into the traffic. Then, without speaking, they lifted their suitcases from the pavement and turned their steps toward Colorado and home.

CHAPTER TWELVE

As the airplane carrying Pitkin Waay from Washington to Colorado passed over the dry and sparsely populated land east and north of Denver, the sun was high in the sky and visibility for the air travelers was unlimited. Pitkin, sitting in the right hand window seat, looked out over the leading edge of the wing at the dry, green, rolling prairie.

Far away, at the end of his gaze, and beyond, between two long hills in southeastern Wyoming, a short blue trailer house with rounded ends sat hitched to a darker blue van. There was nothing

other than the trailer and van to suggest a human presence. Had there been a man there, he would have felt the warm air hang in the little valley, unmoving, waiting for a wind to stir it, to lift it up and carry it across the expectant land. He would also have become immediately aware of the silence, the silence of unyielding sun on thirsty grass, and the silence of an endless blue sky.

Had such a man walked to the crest of either hill, he could have looked beyond the shallow valley and searched the grassland for miles in all directions. However far he could have seen, and however sharp might his vision have been, he could not have looked beyond the property lines of the Line bar Five ranches.

The proud old cattle ranch had passed through many generations since being settled in the years following the Civil War. The rawhide tough original owner had endured the worst of Wyoming's bone freezing winters and its burning, dry summers as he expanded and developed his holdings. Succeeding generations had followed the tradition of expansion until the lure of far away comforts divested the ranch of the last of the old settler's descendants.

A year before the van and trailer arrived; the ranch had been sold. The purchaser had been a corporation whose foreign principals kept their identities well concealed behind agents and a tangle of parent and subsidiary relationships. Neighboring ranchers thought it strange that the appointed manager cared not at all for livestock and cherished only privacy. Whatever they might have thought, they said nothing. After all, wasn't it true that absentee ownership was a common phenomenon, and wouldn't the land endure and survive the new "no trespassing" signs that adorned the barbed wire fences and a truculent manager who permitted no hunting, no visitors, and not even a modest herd of cattle.

As though the forbidding signs had the desired effect, no one came to the ranch. Nearby residents and the entire world apart seemed to have heeded the signs and abandoned the place or determined never to attend upon that lonely place.

The solitude had been complete and pure until the van and trailer arrived. The van had pulled up to the ranch house in the darkly disconsolate hour before dawn and halted for a time. The manager had talked to the driver, and the van and trailer had disappeared into the long reaches of the empty landscape. It was

unlikely anyone except the manager had seen it arrive or crawl away with the beams of its yellow headlights sawing at the darkness as the van rose and fell over the uneven contours of the virgin grassland.

The manager had stayed at the ranch house and, in remaining behind, had become more vigilant and jealous of his privacy than ever before. The morning following the arrival of the van, the manager drove a pickup along the fence lines, and he watched the entry road. Later, as Pitkin's plane swept toward Denver, far above and out of the sight, the manager had cursed a feed salesman, called him a damn fool and sent him back down the access road toward Cheyenne, a hundred miles away.

The feed salesman stopped just out of sight and scribbled notes in a small book. And instead of turning toward the state Capitol, he aimed his car in the direction of the nearest neighbor some twenty miles away. There he found a better reception, one so good he was invited to step inside. He accepted the offer and disappeared from the landscape, leaving the ranch-yard as quiet as he had found it.

Inside the house, the feed salesman met with a type of resistance he had not anticipated. It came when he asked if he might use the telephone. The rancher absolutely ridiculed the request. Didn't the salesman notice there were no phone lines or poles, nor any electrical poles for that matter? What telephone company would plant poles and string wire fifty miles to serve three ranches. The idea was plumb foolish, yes sir, dumb stump foolish. The salesman accepted the characterization, but wondered how near to the ranch had the economically prudent Telephone Company actually carried its lines.

The salesman's cooperative customer walked with him back into the ranch-yard. There, the feed merchant received instructions on how he should proceed, if he had such dire need of a telephone as to be willing to take a short cut. Giving arm waves for long stretches of road and making little scooting motions with his hand for turns, the rancher gave directions. Dubious of the assurance that "he couldn't miss it," the salesman climbed into his machine and set off down the dusty road.

"Damn fool didn't even ask me to buy anything," said the rancher to the empty yard. "And I would've too," he added as he spat into the dust.

While the salesman rolled along, watching apprehensively as the poor road began to give way to tire tracks through the grass, another road was taking shape alongside the van and trailer. It began at one end of the little coulee and extended to the other. It lacked refinement, however, and apparently was only being staked out for future development. The lone road worker was setting the curious, short, bulb-topped stakes quite far apart but was being careful to keep them parallel and on the floor of the hidden valley. In the middle of his road and some distance out away from the end of it, he placed what, for all the world, looked to be an automobile battery and some small attachments.

By the time he had finished, the sun was tiring of its journey, one of the longest of the year, and was heading for a well-deserved rest in some western haven over the far horizon. Surveying his work from various angles and finding it satisfactory, the solitary road worker retired to his trailer, unmindful of the salesman who would have welcomed the sight of any habitation, however humble.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

As the lonely road builder labored at his singular task, and as the seed salesman sought contact with the outer world, Pitkin Waay was immersed in a populous world and was faced with many tasks, some unfinished and others yet to be begun. Yet, an awful knowledge now drew a heavy cloak of responsibility around Pitkin's every thought and his every word. The burden of decision was greater for him than it had ever been, and the isolation it imposed upon his spirit was more inflexible than any he had ever known.

As always, Pitkin was confronted with a demand for decisions by plant supervisors and operators, concerned with day-by-day operational and managerial matters. The stack of telephone call messages seemed higher than ever before, the list of people waiting to see him was longer than normal, and there could be no doubt about the intentions of the tidal wave of papers in his "In" basket. They were to engulf him, his desk, and his office in paper and sweep the entire accumulation away in a sea of words, ink, and pulp.

Pitkin looked around the familiar office, spotted an almost empty place on his side table and filled it with his briefcase. He gestured at the empty chairs and said, "Make yourself comfortable, Hatch. I'll have someone find you your own little hole later, but right now the coffee table there'll have to be your headquarters. On the way out here from the airport, you said you had a general knowledge of how security is managed at the weapons facilities. That may come in handy now because Hugo and I think the best use of your time, at least for this evening, would be for you to spend some time with our Chief of Security. I asked the secretary to call him, and he should be here in a few minutes. He's an excellent man; he knows his business and does a damn fine job of carrying out orders. He'll take you around and get you oriented faster than anyone else. I want you to listen and learn, okay?"

Hatch Baldwin had been, as Stewart had predicted, filled with questions. As Stewart had said and as Pitkin had suspected even earlier, Baldwin had been kept in the dark on the reason for Stewart's visit to the White House. Pitkin and Hugo used the transit time from the airport to the plant to brief Baldwin on the details of the information Stanley had revealed during the limousine conference at National Airport.

As they had been, Baldwin was totally surprised by the information. His orders from Stewart had been to catch the plane to Denver, to go to Rocky Flats with Hugo and Pitkin and to do exactly as they directed. There had been no intimation, no suggestion, and no hint he was being sent to what was the potential target of an active terrorist group. But Secretary Stewart had read Baldwin correctly.

After the new had worn off the information, Baldwin was mildly annoyed with not having been advised of the situation earlier. That reaction was soon lost in his realization the Secretary had, in fact, placed a great amount of faith in him by sending him to Colorado. He had been thrown into a delicate and difficult situation. It was also potentially dangerous, but it was a challenge, which would allow him to obtain valuable experience while participating in a significant new development in the nation's nuclear history.

Listening to Pitkin instruct him on his first assignment, Baldwin had already lost some of the veneer of headquarters self-importance. He was honestly eager, curious, and willing to roll up his sleeves and dig into the work at hand. His attitude was reinforced by a growing regard for Pitkin who drew forth and held the confidence Baldwin had never before placed in one person.

"Sounds fine to me. I have one question. You said 'this evening.' Do I need to call around for a motel room, or will I be here all night?"

"This may or may not be an all-nighter, Hatch. You can ask the secretary outside to make a reservation for you, and someone can drop you off at your motel later if we decide to put this thing on hold. If we stay, there are cots and couches around which have been pretty well broken in."

"Sounds like another one of those nights, Pitkin," smiled an uniformed figure in the open doorway.

"Oh, hello, Henry. Come on in," called Pitkin.

"Etta said you wanted to see me."

"Yes. We've got quite an assignment cooking. Henry Niwot, this is Hatch Baldwin. Hatch flew back from Washington with Hugo and me, and he's going to be in your hair for a while."

"We've had Washington visitors before, Mister Baldwin, glad to have you aboard," said Niwot diplomatically.

"I'm not the kind of visitor you might think, and I'm certainly not going to be a formal one. Please drop the Mister Baldwin, I'd prefer Hatch."

"Sit down both of you," said Pitkin. He then directed himself to Niwot. "Henry, Washington is issuing a directive to all nuclear weapons facilities to take some immediate steps to increase security. I can't go into detail with reasons, but beginning immediately we need to take some specific steps. Activate your reserve force, maximum effort. We have been directed to begin foot patrols and motorized patrols of our perimeter. Nobody comes through the gate without a badge or personal approval by Hugo or by me. Hatch will go with you. Not to direct or supervise. Let me say that again. He's strictly an observer; you're fully in charge of plant security. Take him along as you set up your patrols and check systems and, as you're able, show him where and what everything is around here."

"You've given me a whale of an order, Pitkin. This is going to take some doing."

"If you can use Hatch, put him to work."

"I'll do that, but what the hell are we looking for, Pitkin?" asked Niwot, taken aback by the abrupt and far-reaching orders.

"Anybody or anything constituting a threat to the plant, Henry. As always, you have to operate on the suspicion there is an intrusion planned. It's our job to stop it."

"Is this a drill?" Asked Niwot looking suspiciously at Baldwin. "If it is, I'd like to know. I don't want someone getting hurt out here."

"Sorry, Henry, this is not a drill. I want every security measure we have active and on line. If you have questions, bring them to Hugo or to me immediately. We've spent a lot of time working and reworking our standard procedure manual. Unfortunately, the time has arrived to apply it."

"We won't be able to sustain this kind of maximum effort for more than a few days, Pitkin."

"I realize that, Henry."

"Our procedures for an alert include notice to the Sheriffs of both Jefferson and Boulder counties and to the State Patrol. Will you be calling them, or should I?"

"We're considering that question now, Henry. But for the moment, Washington has directed us to keep this matter internal to

Rocky Flats. In the next hour or two, I'll be talking to headquarters again. I should know a great deal more than, and I expect them to tell us whether or not to expand this alert. One more thing, Henry. Hugo is having a meeting of section leaders in about half an hour. He'll be telling them essentially what I told you, so you don't need to worry about attending. I suppose you have plenty to keep you busy without another meeting."

"I'd say that's an understatement, Pitkin," agreed Niwot rising to his feet. "Hatch, you ready?"

With a hearty, "Yes, sir," Baldwin joined Niwot, and the two headed for the door.

"Henry," called Pitkin, "I think Jenny's in the area. Would you ask Etta to track her down for me?"

"Glad to, Pitkin," replied Niwot.

It was only the space of a few minutes before Pitkin looked up and found Jenny Gilpin's thoughtful gaze upon him. She was wearing a bright red and black checkered blouse, which accentuated her figure and seemed perfectly matched to her short dark hair. A faint wrinkle on her forehead and the straight line of her mouth suggested concern and her voice confirmed it.

"Pitkin, I have the feeling there's a stir in this place. Is there?"

"A stir?"

"You know what I mean. Etta's rummaging through employee lists, Henry Niwot came down the hall looking as if the weight of the world had fallen on him, and I haven't seen you since you got back."

"Jenny, I'd like nothing better than to tell you that your imagination was working overtime, but it isn't. The plant has suddenly acquired a horrendous problem, and, at the same time, I'm waking up to a couple of difficulties of my own. Look, you're the one person in this place I know I can trust, completely. For that reason I want to confide in you, but I have another reason for not wanting to tell you anything."

"I understand a little bit of that, Pitkin. Some of it I get from a feminine hunch, some from a fish dinner and some from seeing more seriousness in you than I imagined possible. But are we going to stand here bouncing double meanings around like a couple of characters in a low budget soap, or are you going to tell me what's going on?"

As he looked at her, standing with her hands in the hip pockets of her blue jeans, studying him with the faintest trace of an impish taunt, Pitkin knew that what had seemed to be a dilemma was, in truth, a failure on his part to accept their relationship as completely as Jenny had. Once the thought came to him, its elementary and fundamental truth was obvious, and he felt its strength and its comfort as he had in years gone by, before tragedy had taught him to forget such things.

He had been closed within himself too long and had forgotten to apply the most basic rule of loving another person. It was sharing, not some things, not just physical enjoyment, not only intellectual companionship, but sharing everything. All things had to be experienced together and it had to be complete. Jenny had understood that fact and accepted it without question. If she was a bit bewildered, it was because Pitkin had hesitated. She didn't realize he had been reluctant to confide in her only out of a desire to shield her from unpleasant news and possible danger.

His laugh, deep and strong, told Jenny that Pitkin had suddenly stepped across a great obstacle, that he had remembered how to share and how to love. Basic to all, Pitkin had simply faced the matter squarely and suddenly realized what Jenny had become to him. Perhaps circumstances had compelled it, or time may have simply ripened what had been growing for months, whatever the reason, Jenny and Pitkin had, with unspoken assent, become one.

The rest came easily. He outlined the events of the trip to Washington. He explained the steps they were taking and went on to say he hoped Stanley had been giving them the full story, but told her he suspected the agent of holding back information.

"Why would he keep anything from you," she asked.

"He could have decided to save the punch line for later, thinking we would have had time to adjust to the idea. It's possible he was afraid we would panic. I don't know, Jenny. I just think this thing may be worse than we have been told. I also wonder if Stanley's information is as good as he claimed it is."

"The whole thing is pretty darn scary."

"I know better than to ask if you would consider taking a trip up to Cope's ranch for a few days, but on the chance you would..."

"Not on your life. You're where I want to be. Subject closed. But if it's possible, we should drive up there together this

evening. Breck called and asked when you were coming home. He sounded kind of lonely. Is it out of the question?"

"Right now I don't know. A lot depends on Stanley's call. If one of the other facilities is definitely the target, we can shut things down here, otherwise...we could be in for a two or three day siege."

"Once they know where those people are planning to strike, won't they call out the army or something?"

"Maybe, but not until they're sure. Can you imagine the panic we'd have if troops suddenly began pulling in here from Fort Carson?"

"I see what you mean. There'd be more trouble controlling the people around here than there would be stopping a whole gang of terrorists."

"And remember, panic is the very goal of those people."

Jenny was quiet and reflective for a moment. The enormity of the situation was coming home to her. "I wonder if it might not be better, though, to evacuate people from the vicinity of the plant to avoid accidental injury to them?"

"It wouldn't be possible to do that without alerting everybody, besides, we're the target, and I think our attackers will be using some kind of explosive device aimed at our buildings. It isn't likely there'd be anything to affect people miles away. Unless..." His words trailed off, and he fell silent.

"Unless," she gasped, "they managed to blow up the processing building." She had been sitting in one of his leather chairs, and he had been standing nearby looking down at her. When the thought struck her, she seized his arms and cried, "Pitkin, my God! It's monstrous."

"Easy, Jenny. It's a long way from the idea to the doing. Our best weapon is the fact we have some advanced warning. If Stanley says we're the one they're after, we'll order process work halted and materials returned to storage. It's hard to believe they could get through everything we have to put in their way, fences, guards, concrete and steel barriers, not to mention a few classified surprises. No, I think they intend to make a big noise, scare the hell out of a lot of people, and make a splash in the newspapers and television."

Hoping to take her mind off the subject by giving her something to do, Pitkin freshened his tone and asked, "How have you and Lamont been getting on?"

She responded as he had hoped, "Lamont? Oh, yes, that damned grease mop. After we got out the first press release on the recovery building, he started asking me to call you in Washington, 'just to keep tabs on the Doctor,' he kept saying. This morning he was holed up in his office, talking on the phone I think. About noon, he came to my office and asked me to help him find the logs on the recovery building startup. He tried to sound offhand about it, but it was pretty obvious he was up to something. I told him they were locked in your office file, and he'd have to wait for you to get back if he wanted to look at them. A couple of hours ago, I heard him arguing with Etta. After that, he disappeared, at least I haven't seen him."

"Remember what I said about Moffat and the Arbonne business that came up during the hearing? What I failed to mention was the connection between Moffat and Wellington. Lamont used to work in the Senator's office in Washington. There's enough smoke around Lamont and Moffat to cause Secretary Stewart to want Lamont isolated from information and data about the Arbonne equipment. Therefore, Jenny Gilpin, you did exactly the right thing to keep him out of the files. As soon as some of our other problems simmer down, I'm going to give you a proper reward."

"I'll look forward to it, Doctor. Believe me, I will."

"Meanwhile," he sighed, reluctantly forcing he backs to instant events, and "we've got another happening to attend."

"You mean Hugo's meeting of section leaders?"

"Yes, and I told Hugo I'd touch base with him before the meeting. I'd better get over to his office before he comes in here and catches me fraternizing with the help. By the way, you're invited to the meeting." Before leaving her in the reception area, he said, "Oh, yes, if you see your 'friend,' Lamont, remind him of the meeting." He grinned at her scowled reaction to the word "friend" and ducked into Hugo's office.

Hugo was talking on the telephone when Pitkin came in. He waved Pitkin on into the room as if he were anxious to have him present. "Yes, Doctor Elbert. It's settled then. We'll expect you around two o'clock tomorrow afternoon." Hugo hung the

phone on its cradle and gave it a sour look to show what he thought of either the caller or the call.

"Jim Elbert, State Health Board?" asked Pitkin.

"The one and only. It's what we expected. Their samplers picked up the stuff from the recovery building. They knew we'd be sending a written notice, but he and the Cortez woman want to meet with us before then. I'm pretty sure he's acting on direct orders from the Governor who's told him to come out here and pry some answers out of us. I did everything I knew to stall it, but couldn't. They're coming out here tomorrow. He said noon."

"Did you suggest meeting downtown?"

"Elbert wouldn't hear of it. He invited himself. If I had categorically refused to meet them here, they would've gotten suspicious and begun thinking we were covering up. It's the difference between jumping in and being thrown in. We get soaked either way."

Pitkin tried to be a bit more optimistic. "Chances are they won't notice anything out of the ordinary anyway. Even if they do, and our security cat gets out of the bag, it'll be then rather than later. The media is bound to get this pretty soon. When we talk to Stanley, we should tell him his idea of keeping this thing quiet is falling apart."

"Agreed. If I forget to make the point, you'd better remember, Pitkin. I've got too many other things grabbing at me. I got a call from Paonia. She wants me to come home as soon as I can. She wouldn't listen to reason and insisted I get there right away. I'll call her back when she cools off, but it's just one more thing. Damn. I wonder what's next. Everything is happening too fast; we can't even react anymore."

Hugo's exasperated summary of his feelings was a mirror of Pitkin's who also had the nagging and frustrating impression of events marching faster and faster with no way of reacting or directing them. His life as a scientist had been one of studying ways of controlling the forces of nature, of channeling them in defined ways, and his work as a manager had been a process of setting the course of events for people and their work.

Suddenly, Pitkin was finding himself watching helplessly while otherwise inconsequential technical aberrations compounded themselves. And unseen, unidentified people were controlling events wherein he was a mere object. Pitkin was

experiencing more than frustration. The very tenets of his life were being drawn ever tighter. It almost seemed that some omnipotent power had determined it was time to pin Pitkin Waay to a specimen board for analysis and dissection.

As the two men walked out of the Director's office, Hugo looked at Etta and in a monotone asked, "The conference room?"

Without any sign of her positive efficiency, Etta merely nodded and muttered a faint, "Yes, sir." Apparently, she too, had been affected by the strong current of change, which was sweeping through the administrative offices of Rocky Flats.

Already seated around the long oval table were the individuals who, under Hugo and Pitkin, headed primary work groups. Harvey Flagler was in charge of radiation monitoring and radiation control. Sitting next to him was Perry Meeker from the recovery building. Perched like tight bundle of nerves next to Meeker was Louis Poudre, head of the motor pool, sitting in for his absent boss who was in charge of overall plant operations and maintenance. In contrast to Poudre, Marshall Hinsdale sat easily reading a stack of computer printout sheets. Oliver Kutch sat near the end, staring vacantly at the top of the wooden table as if his mind was still back among the files and accounting records for which he was responsible. Jenny, in her capacity as Pitkin's assistant, sat at the end of the table.

After Hugo and Pitkin were seated, a number of chairs remained unoccupied. Hugo looked around, taking a mental roll call. "I see everyone's here except Henry and Lamont."

Jenny answered the unspoken question. "Etta told me just a few minutes ago that Lamont checked out for the rest of the day."

"I wonder if he got the word on the meeting?" Hugo asked of no one in particular. He didn't take it well when his staff missed the frequent meetings he called, often with only a few hours notice.

"Well, it's Friday and getting pretty close to shift change, so I'll get right to it. Pitkin and I got back from Washington only a couple of hours ago. To say the very least, it was a memorable trip. I'll give you a complete rundown next week on the hearing and what's happening with our authorization and with some of the decommissioning legislation. Today, I have only one subject to present to you."

They remained silent. Rocky Flats management was no different than similar organizations the world around. Rumors spread faster than the wind, which carried them, and already they knew something novel was afoot, but they were content to wait for Hugo's explanation.

"Washington has placed Rocky Flats and the other nuclear weapons facilities on what you might call an internal alert. Don't ask me to define exactly what that is. For right now, subject to change at any moment, it means we have not notified state or county officials. Therefore, this is still an in-house event, and I am directing you to treat what I say here as classified information. It's in the same category as weapons data. I know your record on such matters in excellent, and I know you'll act just as responsibly on this business."

This was considerably more potent information than they had expected. The tension in the room went up a couple of stiff notches as they waited for Hugo to continue.

"On orders from Washington, we will do the following. First, security is being increased, I mean the place is being really battened down. Henry Niwot isn't here because he's already calling in reserve security. There will be no visitors of any kind without personal authorization by Pitkin or me. The next point affects your operations. For the next two days, at least, you are to discontinue nonessential work. In other words, we won't keep the cafeteria open, no laundry, no routine maintenance, and no office work will be done. Those things are not really a problem because of the weekend coming up, but if any people in those categories had been planning to work, cancel those assignments. On the other hand, I want fire squads, ad monitors, storage vault operators, and process foremen at full strength until further notice."

Marshall Hinsdale got in the first question. "Does this mean you want alert procedures put into effect for immediate recall and storage of all SNM, or do you want standby for recall?"

Hinsdale, who had the responsibility for conducting operations in the processing building, was using the acronym SNM for Special Nuclear Materials, which included the smaller quantities of enriched uranium present at the plant as well as all plutonium. Since the primary storage vault was in the processing building, Hinsdale's concerns were naturally priority.

"Standby, Marshall," answered Hugo, " and pray it stays that way."

Poudre managed to get in the second question through his twitching heavy moustache. "You may have already answered this, but does Niwot have the authority to take over every damned vehicle I've got in the motor pool?"

"Every one, Louis, every blessed one," said Hugo.

Perry Meeker cared for one thing, meeting schedules. "Is this little flare up going to keep us from getting recovery back on line?"

Pitkin, catching Hugo's quick glance, took the question. "Perry, I haven't talked to you or Harv since I got back. But as Hugo suggested, Washington was lively. The recovery building and the equipment we got from Arbonne received some attention. You might as well get used to the idea, Perry, we're in for a lot of attention, and your operation may not be normal for some time. For the next few days, it stays closed."

Meeker was not overjoyed, but neither was he as negative as he might have been. "If you're saying headquarters is going to do something about the junk they bought for us, I say it's about time. If we got rid of most of it, we could really meet some deadlines for a change."

Hinsdale got Hugo's attention again. "Do I gather from what you said, Hugo, that you'll be getting some further word on this alert pretty soon?"

"We're expecting a call anytime, Marshall."

"Nobody's asked, and I haven't heard, Hugo, what's the reason for this alert?" asked Flagler.

"The specific reason, I can't say Harvey," said Hugo, "but I can tell you it's not another drill worked up by somebody in the Forrestal Building."

The room fell suddenly and strangely silent. Hugo used the opportunity to issue a further word of caution. "Keep in mind, all of you, this is internal. No discussion with family, especially family. Washington is correct on this point. If the wrong word leaked out, we'd have a mini-panic in the area. We have some Health Board types coming in tomorrow. If you happen to see them or get called in to talk to them for some reason, remember that it's not necessary to talk about this alert."

"Do you want us to stay over during the evening and night?" asked Kutch.

"I'm sorry, but, yes," answered Hugo. "You have all worked late before. Call your homes and give the usual reasons. I know what an inconvenience this is; I have my own problems with it, but this is a real one, folks. There won't be any exceptions unless they come from headquarters. I suggest the routine procedures for a station alert will keep you busy, so I'm going to adjourn this meeting. If you have questions, bring them directly to me or to Pitkin."

As they rose to leave, Etta Westridge appeared in the door with a yellow phone note in her hand, "Mister Chase, Washington is on the line. It's a Mister Stanley; he said you were expecting the call."

"Thank you, Etta. Pitkin and I will take it in my office."

Only a short moment later, they were in Hugo's office and he was punching the buttons to put the call on the telephone speaker. Hugo, because of past trying experiences with speaker boxes, was deliberate and careful in his handling of the unfamiliar devices, and this time he was more cautious than usual. "Hello, Mark?"

The reply came thought strong and clear. "Yes. Hugo? You sound a bit distant."

"I have Pitkin with me, and we're using the speaker if you have no objection," explained Hugo.

"None whatever," replied the voice, "Hello, Pitkin. I'm glad you're on."

"Hello, Mark. I hope you have some decent news for us."

The voice came back clear and precise, cutting through the air. "I have some good news, some bad news, and some to which you may be rather indifferent. Let me begin with the easier to deliver item. I can tell you there will be no terrorist act attempted at your facility or any other during the next twelve hours at least. We're certain of that much. However, Secretary Stewart and I agree, the security measures we discussed must be kept in place. It wouldn't be practical to call them off and then put them back in place. I recommend you release key people with orders they report back first thing in the morning. That will insure fresh minds, and, I would guess, happier minds."

"Happier is relative, but correct," agreed Hugo.

"Next item," continued Stanley, "Rocky Flats is still a potential target. It's no comfort to you, but we've taken Kansas City, Idaho City and Richland off our list. You, Los Alamos, the laboratories in California and Amarillo are possibles. Albuquerque and the other western offices were never included."

"It sounds like you people really have pretty detailed information on these terrorists," observed Pitkin, hoping for some elaboration.

"We really do, Pitkin. Putting it all together on short notice is the problem. This faction started moving before we expected them to, and we were caught a day short. We believe they may have figured we were on to this campaign, and to keep us off balance, they advanced the schedule."

"I take it the bad news, then, is that we're still on the list," said Hugo.

"There's more. One of our agents has failed to report. He's in your general area. He was tracking a vehicle driving west across Canada and he reported it crossing the border at Pembina, south of Winnipeg, Manitoba. His last check in was from Rapid City, South Dakota. If our calculations are correct, he either lost it or he lost him in Wyoming. In short, we think our visitor is headed your way."

"I see," acknowledged Hugo in the forced calm tone of one receiving and expecting to receive disaster news.

"My last item is my own travel," said Stanley in a lighter voice, "I'm catching an Air Force jet out of Andrews early in the morning. I've checked and believe the Jefferson County Airport is only a few miles away?" It was a query as much as a statement.

"That's correct," said Pitkin.

"Good, I'll be landing there about seven A.M. your time. Would it be possible to have a car meet me?"

"One of us will be there," Hugo promised.

"I'll see you then. I have one more request," said Stanley. "Could you arrange a meeting with the principal law enforcement officers in your area. I would suggest the county sheriff and head of the State Patrol."

"Any particular time?" asked Pitkin.

"The sooner the better. I'll leave it up to you. I should also tell you that Secretary Stewart is putting in a call to your Governor. It's advisory only with a request for the cooperation of

law enforcement authorities in tracking down a man we have characterized as a maniac with a bomb heading for your facility."

"Do I understand you to be saying you aren't even telling the Governor it's a terrorist, a dedicated, intelligent professional?" Asked Pitkin incredulously. "You're letting him think its some demented psychotic whose just wandering around openly waiting to be picked up?"

"It's a pretty loose characterization, Pitkin, but at this point, it's necessary. We don't want the Governor to panic and do something stupid like calling out the National Guard. We don't know much about the man and how he would react in an emergency. By the time I get there we should know even more than we do now. I assure you, if the situation warrants, the Governor will be notified. I should also add, this matter has a lot of political thorns attached. The President was quite concerned when we briefed him this morning. There have been other terrorist false alarms in the past, and he doesn't want another one. Then, too, the situation in the mid-east is fragile. Name calling and finger pointing could offend certain groups or factions and we don't want to risk that unless it's absolutely necessary."

Pitkin was furious, and his words went into the speaker box as hard slaps at an unseen antagonist. "This plant is at risk, the people who work in it are in danger of being blown up by a damned terrorist, and you want to talk politics and false alarms. I would suggest you have the President haul his politically tender ass out here and deliver that speech in our lunchroom as we wait for the TNT to go off. If the Governor or any law enforcement officer asks me, I'll tell them the truth, as I know it. And unless Hugo orders me not to or fires me on the spot, I'm going to tell the people who are being asked to sit on this target the damn unvarnished truth. I find it incredible, based upon the new facts you just gave us, that politics would even be considered."

Before Stanley could reply, Hugo joined in and made his views equally clear. "If Pitkin doesn't tell our people, I will. I refuse to ask them to jeopardize their lives without knowing what the threat is or where it's coming from. I was willing to go along with your internal alert idea, Mister Stanley, under the circumstances you described in Washington. Those circumstances have materially changed."

The speaker box was silent, but only for an instant. Stanley's voice was relaxed almost to the point of laughter. Pitkin and Hugo were surprised by his response. "If you two had said anything else, I would have started worrying. While I will not myself attempt to describe the little speech I delivered, I'll simply tell you, it's the party line and I did my job by repeating it. However, I think there's some truth in the matter of avoiding public panic. If you agree, let's keep what I've told you on a need-to-know basis. You decide who needs the information and go from there. That's all I have now. Will my plane be met or shot down?"

"It'll be met," said Hugo.

"I'll see you at seven then," said Stanley. The speaker box clicked as the FBI man hung up his telephone.

Hugo punched the disconnect button on his telephone console and leaned back in his high leather chair. "Pitkin," he mused, "is anything more predictable than political expediency? I always knew political leaders would say anything to protect them, but now I realize it goes farther. They will put others at risk if it serves their personal ends."

Hugo's indicting monologue trailed off, and he fell silent for a moment. When he picked it up again, he had turned the accusation against himself, and there was a hint of desperation in his words. Pitkin felt uncomfortable and wondered where the discussion would take Hugo.

"I've dedicated my professional life to carrying out a program," said the agonizing Hugo. "How can I now face the fact the program was designed by Washington politicians? It sickens me to think I've been the instrument of a system designed and maintained to serve the interests of unprincipled people who serve only their own interests. Pitkin, you've been the conscience of this place, you and the events of the past few days have brought me to where I find myself understanding some of what you've been trying to say. Yet, in spite of your concerns about the morality of the work and its possible effects on innocent people, you've stayed on. You said on the plane, it was because you felt you could do a better job of controlling our operations than your successor could. If Rocky Flats will run with or without us, I suppose what you said makes some sense. But only if we really do control and operate it. Tell me, do we actually have our hands on the controls or are we

merely extensions of politically degenerate hands from Washington?"

"Hugo, I have always believed we here at the plant were actually making the critical decisions that had real world consequences. The last couple of days have almost persuaded me I was wrong. We've learned that others before us buried a hazard in the earth and then forgot about it. We discovered plutonium contamination which may have been caused by a corrupt politician dealing with our headquarters and causing us to use defective equipment, and now, in the face of a serious terrorist threat, other, higher level politicians tell us to sit at ground zero while they temporize and worry about false alarms and tremble at the prospect of offending some foreign factions who have never counted us among their friends. To answer your question, one thing has kept me here, the conviction that I was in effective control of the wheezing of this old machine. Today, I wonder."

Abruptly, shoving himself up out of his chair, Hugo stepped to his table and picked up his briefcase, set it on his desk and threw it open. He looked at the papers on his desk, paused as if thinking about how important they really were, then slammed the empty case shut. "Pitkin," he said, "I'm going home. Would you mind calling the section leaders together and telling them what we just heard from Stanley, all of it. Send them on home for the evening. You also need to put out the call for Stanley's posse. Then take Jenny and get the hell out of here until tomorrow morning."

Pitkin's answer was a relieved and broad smile, "I'd be delighted, Hugo."

Half way across the room Hugo stopped and spun around to face his deputy, finality stamped on his round face, "Pitkin, we'll either run this goddamned place, our way, or I'll close it."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jenny was driving while Pitkin sat watching the first shadows of evening appear and disappear across the hood of the compact station wagon as she guided it up the canyon road. The sun was trying to settle peacefully behind the mountains by yielding the valley floor to darkness, but the climbing vehicle kept finding shafts of light streaming between the close, high mountain walls. The alternating light and dark tormented Jenny's eyes and she fought back with sunglasses, her visor, and a raised hand.

After a time, the vehicle came out of the canyon and into to a wide valley many miles across. Gratefully, Jenny slowed and turned off the pavement onto a gravel road, which carried them on a tangent out of the face of the setting sun. Pitkin turned his sun visor back up out of the way and asked, "You want to turn the windows up? It's going to get awful dusty."

"It'll wash off. We could use Cope's stock tank."

"What's wrong with the creek?" teased Pitkin.

Recalling their last trip to the ranch a few months earlier, Jenny laughed. "You were the one that fell in. I only got wet trying to help you out. But it was sure enough cold. I don't know how water can be so cold and not be frozen."

"It really is frozen," said Pitkin solemnly, "it's only in liquid form."

Jenny was relieved to hear Pitkin talking easily and making jokes. It was almost miraculous the way the mountains were a tonic for him. Up here, he seemed to be a different person, relaxed, seldom entirely serious, and generally at peace with the world. She found herself wishing they could stay at the ranch and never return to rocky flats.

Pitkin had been studying Jenny's profile, and he knew her thoughts had returned to the world they had left below. "Say, Jenny, you should know what I do to people who make agreements and don't keep them."

"What's that?" She asked reflexively, not really thinking about what he had said, but rather responding in the way of one distracted by a daydream.

"I require them to sit and listen to a full lecture by Cope on the evils of Denver."

"You..."

"If you can't stop thinking about flatlander agony, you need some schooling on how it's done and Cope's the best there is."

Catching up with him, she laughed. "Sorry. I know we agreed there wouldn't be any shoptalk, and you caught me in shop thinking. But it was nice thinking, Pitkin. You were cast in the lead role. But what do you do with Cope when he calls you a 'pizzen peddler?' That surely brings work talk to the mountains."

"I do just what I'd do if he were my father. Sometimes I argue with him, sometimes I get rebellious, but most of the time I just ignore him. And Cope's notions of plant matters are so out of sync with facts that talking to him about 'tonium can't be placed into the context of any reality you and I know. Sometimes he's downright entertaining. As a case in point, he once told Breck that 'tonium was causing scours in his calves."

"Where in the world does he get ideas like that?"

"He reads every word of the Pondera Leader and takes every statement as gospel."

"I've seen copies of it around his house, but I can't believe anybody takes Jess Lyons and his ravings seriously. It's pure fiction, scare fiction. I've known Jess for years, and I really like the old inkpot, but you can't believe anything he writes."

"Don't even breathe such a thought to Cope. I once said the Leader was full of bull. Cope ranted at me for weeks

afterwards. He finally ordered me to sit down and listen while he read one of Lyons' silly editorials, something about plutonium interfering with the transmission of electricity. After he finished reading, he pulled off his spectacles, laid the paper under my nose and said, 'There you are, Mister Expert. It's right there in black and white. How can you say it ain't true?' I have to say, Jenny; I bit hard on my tongue. The one thing I could never do is laugh at Cope, but his absolute, I-told-you-so, matter-of-fact reliance on that silly paper almost caused me to blow a hee haw gasket."

"When you mentioned laughing, Pitkin, I realized I have never seen Cope laugh. That seems strange somehow."

"Wait until you get to know him better. Belly laughing and knee slapping aren't his nature, but he has a wonderfully subtle and dry sense of humor. Watch him carefully, Jenny. You'll see he laughs for himself not for others. He's the same in all his emotions. He keeps them pretty close. I can think of only a couple of times when he was obviously angry, once when a hunter wounded a fawn and drove off and left it in a dry creek bed and another when a neighbor sold a tract of timber for clear cutting. The timber sale was years ago, and there's a healthy stand of re-growth there now, but Cope has never spoken to old man Creede since. Cope's human enough; he just takes some getting used to. Take everything he says with a block of salt."

"I'm afraid I don't always see through the gruff and growls."

"Nobody does completely," laughed Pitkin. "He's one of a kind. He winters up here on his ranch, feeds his cattle, quite a few deer, and any other animal that happens to come around looking for a meal. And while you might think he would be lonely, Cope has more friends than any other man in the county. He and his pickup are as familiar to most people as an old shoe. He drives around, gossiping and doing favors here and there, a sort of alpine gadfly."

Jenny had slowed for yet another turn. As they left the gravel road and rolled onto the narrow dirt access road leading to the ranch, the dust swirled in through the open windows like a dry brown fog. Jenny pulled to an immediate stop, but the absence of an air current made matters momentarily worse. Gasping and wheezing, they threw their doors open and clambered out of the station wagon.

"Whew,' cried Pitkin, "We really hit a dust puddle. I didn't realize it was so dry up here." Walking to the road, he kicked at the dust. "It's like face powder, and there at the corner it's been accumulating. It must be six inches deep in places."

Jenny joined him, brushing dust from her hair and face. "Look at the car," she exclaimed.

The dust had settled so heavily, the entire vehicle seemed to have been painted dust brown. The rear window, as with all station wagons, had been picking up dust since they left the pavement, and it was caked with an opaque brown film. As they looked in the open doors, they could see the seats wore a heavy coat of dust.

"Let's abandon this bucket and walk to the ranch," suggested Pitkin.

Thinking he was serious, Jenny reminded him, "Pitkin, it's almost three miles. You walk. I'll drive."

"Okay, I'll ride, but only if we get to roll the windows up."

Together they swiped the seats relatively clean, cranked up the windows and proceeded, slowly, toward the ranch house.

Cope's private road was actually a two track meandering trail, which generally followed a creek around the wide foot of a tree-covered mountain. Finally, the tracks straightened and lead directly to the ranch house.

The ranch buildings included the house, a steel building which served as shop and machine storage, a log barn surrounded by lodgepole pine corrals, and a couple of smaller outbuildings. By any fair standard, the ranch would have been described as picturesque. It was framed on three sides by dark green timber and in the semi-light of the summer evening, it bespoke serenity and calm.

As he did every time he came here, Pitkin was swept by a feeling that he had come home. Every detail, the arrangement of the buildings; their shapes and contours; the tree lines, jagged and natural; and the sheltering mountain, leaning off to the left as though it were melting, these things and a thousand more were as familiar to him as nostalgia, fondness, and a sense of belonging could make them.

However, Pitkin had learned long ago that the idyllic setting was only a fortunate and happy flavoring. The substance and meaning he found in this place was the relationship with the

old man he and Jenny had been discussing. Years earlier he had been rhapsodizing over the beauty of the ranch to Cope who listened for awhile then scoffed. "Them trees, the rocks, and the mountain is fine, Pitkin, but take it from someone who knows, they don't count fer much if they only spell lonesome. It'd be like havin' a pickup full of gold yuh couldn't spend, just a lot of damn dead weight if yuh couldn't bring them trees and the rest of it alive by talkin' to someone about 'em."

The days and weeks spent on the ranch with Cope and often with Breck had done much to prove truth of those words many times over. Bringing Jenny to the ranch had, in months past, re-enforced the wisdom of Cope. Bringing her again finalized it.

Jenny parked next to the Cope's famous pickup and shut off her engine. Still brushing and whisking at the dust, they stepped out of the car into the cool clean mountain air. Pitkin stretched and looked around the ranch-yard.

"You know, Jenny, I would swear I smell steak frying."

"Oh, yes! I think you do. Do you suppose there might be something left? I'm starving."

"If were in luck, they haven't started eating yet."

On the chance the steaks were being fried in back of the house on the patio, Pitkin and Jenny followed the rock stepping stones around the house to the back yard. There, as he had guessed, Cope was jabbing long fork at large slabs of meat laid out on his barbecue grill.

Breck saw them first. "Dad, Jenny," he yelled, leaping up and running toward them. He plowed into Pitkin and received a great hug in return. Then placing himself between his two trophies and holding an arm of each, Breck triumphantly marched them the last steps to the large covered patio.

"Look, Cope, we've got company," he called.

Still poking the meat, Cope grouched, "I thought you'd be draggin' yourselves up here. Yuh must of knowed there was food cookin'." Giving Pitkin a sharp glance, he added, "Yuh look like yuh both been wallerin' in the dirt."

Cope always used a soft, "frail woman" tone when addressing Jenny directly, and he invariably spoke to her as though she was a poor innocent who had fallen in with rude company. "What kind of blamed fool would've dragged yuh through the dust like that?" he asked in his most solicitous voice.

"Yuh must be wantin' to wash up, Jenny. Jest make yuhrself at home inside."

"You just made the best suggestion I've heard today," she said, crossing to the door and going inside.

Addressing Pitkin, Cope observed, "Yuh look like somethin' old Moppet would try to carry in the house. There's water enough fer two. But while yuh're waitin' fer a chance at the bathroom, why don't yuh fetch us a couple of beers?"

Pitkin didn't hesitate. He entered the plain square kitchen through the screen door, which he neglected to catch as its spring pulled it shut with a bang.

"Don't slam the screen," called Cope, as though his shouted direction after hearing the noise would cure the misbehavior. "Yuh, damn slicker, yuh're worse than Breck here ever thought of bein'."

There hadn't been any doubt before, but Pitkin knew he was home. The familiar voice through the screen door proved it. The linoleum floor, the round oak table, the chipped porcelain sink, the old wood fired cook stove, and the little square white refrigerator all combined to prove it. He believed the world would change, but the ranch kitchen would always remain the same.

Pitkin pulled open the refrigerator door and reached for the beer. His hand stopped halfway. Sitting there glaring at him was a case of Budweiser. Frowning, he pulled three cans out, closed the door, and returned to the patio, being careful to ease the screen shut with his heel.

Popping the tab, he handed a beer to Cope. "Budweiser?" he asked, puzzled.

"Yep," replied Cope without comment.

"What happened to Coors? You were weaned on the stuff?"

"Pizzened," said Cope simply.

"Now wait a minute," said Pitkin, "your aren't going to say our plutonium has poisoned your beer?"

"Didn't say 'tonium," snapped Cope, "I said pizzened. The Leader says the barley's been sprayed with some kind of vicious, deadly pizzen."

Jenny had returned from the house and stood listening to the exchange. Pitkin handed her the third beer. Cope watched him, but didn't comment. Pitkin knew Cope did not approve of women

drinking anything but water and tea, believing anything stronger wasn't ladylike.

"Here, Jenny, have some pure rice beer. Cope says Coors is poison. It seems The Leader has spoken."

"Damn right it has, Pitkin. You'd best start readin' more of the paper and less of yuhr 'tonium books. The Leader didn't say it straight out, but now yuh mention it, I 'spect there is 'tonium in Coors too."

Cope leaped from that speculation to a conclusion and admonition. "Pitkin, yuh ought to know, people is gettin' nervous about that factory of yuhrs, and Coors won't stand fer yuh ruinin' their business."

Pitkin placed his Budweiser on the redwood table. "I'm going to wash up," he said evenly. Again, without banging the screen door, he entered the house, hoping the plutonium would settle by the time he returned.

Apparently it had. When Pitkin retrieved his Budweiser, Cope was explaining to Jenny the correct way to proceed with the serious matter of cooking good meat. They were chatting lightly like two backyard neighbors. Cope was displaying his best manners for the delicate sex, and Jenny was listening and asking questions as though she had never in her life seen steaks cooked on a barbecue.

Pitkin sprawled on an ancient, squeaking chaise longue Cope had purchased at a distress sale. Instantly, Breck joined him.

"Tell me about Washington, Dad. Did you see the Capitol, did you see the White House, did...."

"Whoa," interrupted Pitkin, "one place at a time. But one word will cover the waterfront. Yes, I saw those places and a few more."

"Maybe next time I could go along?" The youngster supported his request with the promise of educational benefits, "It'd give me something to write reports about for school."

"Are you already thinking about school? A few weeks ago you couldn't wait for summer vacation to begin."

"The answer was instantaneous. "Oh, no. It was just an idea. I'd stay up here this fall and not go back to school if I had my way."

"How have things been going, Breck? Have you been getting along with Cope?"

"Sure. Cope says I'm too young to do it this summer, but next year I might be able to drive his pickup. Only around the hay meadow," he added quickly. "Not on the roads or anything like that."

"You don't miss not having some other kids to play with?"

"Naw, lots of them go off to summer camp anyway. I've got my own camp right here." After a pause, he added, "Of course, it might be fun if Tommy Ordway could come up and go fishing. Cope said I could invite him anytime I wanted."

"Sounds like a good idea to me. Why not Saturday or Sunday, a week from now?"

Breck had found at least one answer, and it was for a question he had been reluctant to ask. "You mean I can stay up here? I was afraid you might take me back to town." Quickly realizing what he had said, he tried to make amends. "I didn't mean to say I didn't want to go, Dad. I want to be with you, but I want to be up here, too. I...well, you know."

Pitkin chuckled at Breck's attempted explanation. "I understand exactly what you meant, son. No need to explain."

Demonstrating some gentlemanly discretion, the boy lowered his voice as he observed, "Jenny sure is pretty, Dad. Do you think you might marry her?"

"Would you like that?"

"You bet," he said. "She's super. A lot like Mom would've been, I'll bet."

"Well, I haven't asked her yet. She might say no."

"I'll bet anything she'd say yes."

"Anything?" Asked Pitkin, implying the stakes might be enormous on such a bet.

"Almost anything."

"How about a week straight of doing the dishes, setting out the trash, and cleaning the house? A full week of maid service?"

Breck had played this game with his father many times, and he had learned to be cautious. "If she says yes, I win and you do the work, right Dad?"

In a low conspiratorial whisper, Pitkin said, "If she says yes, Breck, we both win. We'll have someone to do the work for both of us. If she says no, you lose and you do the work."

"But you don't do it either way."

"That, son, is what you call a good bet."

Breck burst into boyish giggles at the whole idea. "All right, it's a bet."

Pitkin cautioned him. "Not a word now. Not to Jenny to Cope, no one. Okay?"

"It's a bet," agreed Breck and with as much seriousness as they could muster, they shook hands.

Soon the boy had gone off to watch the cooking and meal preparations, leaving Pitkin to his beer and to the precarious old chaise. Darkness had closed in and the only light on the patio was from the window and door of the kitchen. Cope had rejected recommendations that he install a porch light, claiming it wasn't needed and would only serve the purposes of millions of flying insects.

As Pitkin watched, Cope turned on a small flashlight, checked the progress of the steaks, seemed satisfied, and snapped it off. Following his orders, Jenny and Breck moved back and forth bringing the food from the kitchen to the patio table. When everything was set to his satisfaction, Cope forked the meat onto a great platter and carried it to the table.

"I certainly hope you didn't overcook my steak," called Pitkin. He knew what response he would get, but also knew Cope would welcome the question. It would give him a chance to expound on his cooking.

"Shoot," he said contemptuously, "if yuh think yuh can sit over there in the dark and hollar orders on cookin,' yuh're hen house wrong. Yuh ought to know by now; I cook meat one way fer everybody. The way I do it, a man's stomach can handle it without growlin' and bitin' at him later, and it isn't somethin' any jaybird can do. It takes some knowin' about meat, how it's growed, and how it's been kept. There's a lot in fixin' the baste. Course that's mostly one man's taster workin', but I haven't heard any complaints. A person's got to know somethin' about turnin' the meat and about arrangin' the fire and all."

Cope's rambling discourse included strong hints that he was a master of the art, and it went on to include a scornful reference to Pitkin's failing in the same area. "I've seen the blood red of that shoe leather tough stuff you've tried to cook, Pitkin, and I know you ain't ever goin' to be a meat cook. Now get on up here so's we can eat."

The thick sirloin had, in fact, been cooked to perfection. Topped with wild mountain onions, the meat alone would have been a meal, but Cope's fare also included baked potatoes whose crisp golden skins were a delicacy. The salad included lettuce, onions, celery, cucumber slices, and tomatoes that refreshingly tasted like tomatoes and were deliciously unlike the commercially sold red baseballs found in stores. And no meal at Cope's was complete without warm bread for what Cope called "soppin' up and plain eatin'."

The meal proceeded in the dim yellow light that filtered onto the redwood table through the curtains on the kitchen window. Any possibility of a long silence was remote since Breck managed to ask a question or offer a comment whenever an opportunity presented itself. Jenny was involved in her own asking and answering and happened to hit upon a matter of interest to Cope when she described their experience with the dust puddle.

"It's bad, that's fer sure," he agreed. "The damn county keeps on raisin' taxes and lowerin' service. I've been after 'em fer years to dump some gravel around there to keep the dust from pilin' up, but they say it's my road where the dust is, but I say it hooks on to their road and the junction's somethin' we ought to fix up together. Pitkin, I been meanin' to ask yuh about that. Since yuh hobnob with them politicians, do yuh think yuh could manage to talk to 'em about the roads up here? Mine ain't the only bad one. Up and down the whole line the bottom's goin' out and there's times folks up here can't get through to the blacktop."

"I'm not really on the Commissioners' list of favorite people, but I'd be glad to make a call to the road office for you."

"Good, folk's up here'll be obliged to yuh." Having enlisted Pitkin, Cope seemed satisfied that the matter was under control, and he turned his attention to other matters. "Are yuh stayin' the weekend?"

"I've got to be at the Jefferson County Airport by seven in the morning," said Pitkin.

"Where in blazes yuh flyin' off to now?" asked Cope with a scowl.

"I'm just meeting a man from Washington."

"Then yuh can leave Jenny here and come back up when this gent from Washington has had his say at yuh."

Jenny helped put the question to rest. "I've got to go down, too, Cope. I'm afraid we're both going to be working this weekend, but if I have my way, we'll be back next Friday and we'll stay for a while."

Pitkin anticipated Cope's follow-up question. "If you wouldn't mind, I'll leave Breck here for the week."

Cope's relief was evident. "Mind? Why, I wouldn't think of lettin' yuh drag him down the mountain jest so's he could sit around while yuh're footsyin' around with some big sneezer from Washington. Of course, he'll stay."

As Cope rose and began collecting dishes from the table, Jenny rose as if to help. Breck jumped up and began quickly lending his assistance to Cope. "I'll do it, Jenny," he offered. "You must be tired. You can just sit and....talk to Dad."

She shrugged and sat down. After Breck and Cope had cleaned the table and retired to the kitchen to wash and clean up, she asked, "What in the world was Breck saying? Are we supposed to talk about something?"

"Who knows what goes through the minds of kids," said Pitkin, rising. "I need to walk off some of those potatoes. Want to come along?"

She answered by joining him as he walked out from under the patio cover into the light of the stars. The clear mountain sky was a panorama of dazzling, winking points of light. It was a spectacular that man's technological haze, smog and general pollution was squeezing into remote and uninhabited places.

They walked together through the ranch-yard, into the open meadow, along the little brook, and toward the forest. As they drew close, the outline of the trees rose ever higher above them and became a foreboding jagged line separating the black gloom below from the starlit sky above.

Short of the tree line, they came upon an old and decrepit wagon. They slowed, then stopped, attracted perhaps by its weather-bleached boards that were silvery white against the grass of the meadow. They felt the smooth iron rims of the spoked wheels which leaned at awkward angles on their broken spindles, and they ran their hands gently over the rough uneven wood whose softer grains had long since been eroded away by the water of countless melting snows and rains. The wagon would never

move again unless some ambitious collector were to violate its resting-place and carry it away in pieces and splinters.

It would have been natural to wonder who brought the old relic to this place. Why had it been left in this particular spot? What had it carried and where had it come from? Had its owner gone ahead into the trees and mountains, or had he turned back and if so, back to where? Had he possessed himself of a motor car and forgotten the old wagon? And what of the horses who had pulled the wagon? Certainly the beasts were long since dead, and there was no memory of them, their sweating and pulling at their burdens to what end they could not comprehend.

Was it possible some inexorable decaying process had transmuted the lives of those horses, the same as the world of life around them? Was the march of time the only constant in the cosmos?

Was there truth in the words Pitkin had once scribbled in a notebook? "God damned by time."

It had to be that an omnipotent power had denounced the universe and perhaps abandoned it altogether, either condemning it or neglecting it to whirl away as it would. And by immersing it all in a sea of time, had decreed ceaseless disintegration.

Pitkin's mind carried itself to the nearer world, and it seized and examined the cascading events of the past few days. It sensed change, close and closing upon him. "But how would it come?" he wondered. "Would it be brought from some unseen place and by some unforeseen means? Was it possible that it was perhaps even now approaching under the same canopy of sky?"

Pitkin reached out and gently pulled Jenny closer. His world had become a labyrinth of haunting, unanswered questions, but Jenny was as real to him as the eternal stars and as near as the breath of life itself.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

At first, here was only the night, like a million nights before, to occupy the little valley. But then came the solitary watching and listening road worker. After a time, the silence was invaded by the almost imperceptible drone of engines in the sky. The watching and listening figure, standing alongside the van, spoke for a time into a microphone, put it back inside the vehicle, stooped over a mechanism and waited. The noise grew louder. The mechanism was activated and the tops of the road worker's stakes glowed red and the light at the end of the road began flashing a contrasting green.

The powerful twin engines airplane made one low pass over the lights, climbed slightly, and turned in a full tight circle. The completely darkened airplane was aligned with the flashing green light. Wheels down, the plane came to earth directly between the parallel lines of red lights. It bounced slightly, settled firmly to the ground and rolled to a stop. With a roar, it turned and rolled back toward the van and trailer.

As the plane approached, the landing lights winked out and the makeshift field fell back into darkness. And when the engines were shut down, silence returned to the prairie.

The pilot climbed out of the plane and conversed with his sole ground crewman. After a time, the two disappeared into the trailer, and the airfield was again lifeless.

Miles away, the seed salesman had not yet found his telephone and was walking as rapidly as his tired legs would permit. He had discovered that the finite supply of gasoline in his automobile had not been sufficient for the rancher's short cut.

However, the salesman's hopes had risen markedly when he came upon the dirt road that in the last hour had improved to gravel.

The walking had warmed him and he had pulled off his coat and slung it over his shoulder. Whatever nocturnal animals might have watched his steady progress would have been no doubt puzzled over the sight of a shoulder holster and revolver strapped under the arm of a lost seed salesman. Like the rancher who hadn't been asked to place an order, they would have written it off to strange city ways and gone on about their own business.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Summer Saturday mornings, when the weather was good for flying, was a busy time at the Jefferson County Airport, but the modern terminal building was relatively quiet compared to the bustle on the flight line around the light aircraft. A coffee shop was the center of what life there was, and it was only a stopover point for pilots heading for trips, for practice, and for some recreational flying in the quiet air of early morning.

The midsummer sun was already up and busily driving its rays through the large windows where Pitkin Waay stood watching the take-offs of an assortment of airplanes. Yawning and rubbing sleep from her eyes, Jenny stood at his side.

After a time, there seemed to be a pause in the busy traffic. Into it swept a silver sleek Air Force jet. Pitkin waited until he could see where it parked before turning and leading Jenny through a side door of the terminal onto the tarmac that was already warm under their feet from the morning sun.

By the time they reached the jet, Mark Stanley had climbed down the short ladder and pulled off his flight suit and white helmet. As Pitkin approached, Stanley waved at the pilot who was still sitting in the cockpit. Stanley then picked up his briefcase, turned, and shook hands with Pitkin.

"It's fast, but I wouldn't recommend it to the faint hearted," said Stanley.

"Mark, this is Jenny Gilpin, my assistant."

The agent shook her hand and smiled, "I only needed a car. A committee wasn't on the agenda."

"It was on the way," she replied taking Pitkin's arm as they headed for the parking lot.

Pitkin and Jenny had taken the time to clean the windows of the little station wagon, but elsewhere, it still wore its heavy coat of dust. "Looks like someone dropped a giant vacuum cleaner bag on you," quipped Stanley, who chose the back seat for himself and his bulging briefcase.

"We were up in the mountains last night and managed to find the dustiest road in the county," explained Pitkin. "I can't prove it, but I think the ranch owner keeps it that way to discourage tourists."

Jenny smiled and coughed slightly, probably from the dust that swirled up as they closed their doors. As she wheeled the car out of the parking lot and onto the road, Pitkin turned and began orienting Stanley to the countryside. They were traveling west on Colorado State Highway 128. The airport was to their left, but it quickly fell behind and disappeared. The highway followed the spine of a high ridge, and, except for a few turns imposed on the road by geography, continued west. Pointing off to the right, Pitkin explained that the great wide basin north of the ridge contained Boulder and some of the northern suburbs of Denver. To their left they had a spectacular view of downtown Denver. The smog had cleared during the night and Saturday morning traffic had not yet distributed its customary haze over the area.

Stanley, like nearly every visitor who took the same route, was amazed at the near proximity of downtown Denver. "Just down the hill a ways," he observed, looking at the shining skyscrapers.

The airport was only a short distance from the plant, and after the turn south on Indiana Street; the east entrance was less than a mile. There were four heavily armed guards spaced around the chain link gate. One of the guards walked cautiously up to the window and looked in at the three passengers.

"Morning, Miss Gilpin, Doctor Waay. I'll have to ask you all to step out, please."

They complied. As the guard opened the doors one by one and rummaged in the back and front, another guard looked under the hood, and at the undercarriage. Satisfied, the first guard

walked over and carefully inspected first Jenny's badge, then Pitkin's. He frowned and studied the unfamiliar badge of the FBI agent.

"I'm sorry, sir," said the guard to Stanley, this won't get you in. "Doctor Waay, you'll have to sign him in yourself." Pitkin accompanied Stanley and the guard to the security building and followed the prescribed procedures of identifying Stanley, stated the agent's business was "official", and signing a thick log book.

"Thank you, sir," said the guard. He handed Stanley a white plastic badge bearing a large V. "Snap this to your coat and make sure it's visible at all times," he ordered. With that, he was signaling to another guards to open the gate.

Once past the heavy chain link gates, Stanley looked up and down the fence and quickly spotted two guards walking the perimeter fence. "You've got a good security man, Pitkin. I'm looking forward to meeting him."

Stanley's appreciation for Henry Niwot's work increased when Jenny slowed for a heavy truck blocking the entire width of the road where it cut through a hill. To have driven around it would have been impossible because the land rose sharply on either side. As the car came to a complete halt, a guard appeared from behind the truck and read their license number. He talked into a portable radio, nodded, and directed an unseen driver to pull forward just far enough for the station wagon to slide safely by.

"Yes," repeated Stanley, "a good man."

Once inside the administration building, Pitkin led the way to his office where he found Hatch Baldwin sprawled in a chair, sipping coffee. In the opposite chair, a bleary eyed, Henry Niwot was studying a map of the plant.

After the introductions had been made, Hatch went off in search of a cup for Stanley who immediately engaged Niwot in a conversation over the map. Pitkin walked with Jenny back into the reception room.

He still would have preferred sending her on an assignment far from the plant, but that issue was already behind them. Pitkin settled for routine and necessary work where she would be nearby.

"I think the best use of your time would be to begin a draft of the formal report we have to submit to the State Board of Health on Monday. I'm sure Harvey will be in the area. Get him to

sit down with you and work up the data on radiation levels. He knows how I feel about it so you won't have any trouble. The guideline is to tell the total unadulterated truth. At the same time, we honestly don't know the cause for the emissions from the recovery building. Put it in the report exactly that way. Explicitly say that we don't know the precise cause, but a report is being prepared. The promise of information later almost makes me gag, but we really don't have a choice. We can specifically promise to deliver it within ten days. A copy will be sent to Doctor James Elbert and every member of the Board the day it's finished."

Before turning to go, she looked at him and whispered, "The evening was great, Pitkin. Thanks."

"Same to you, Jenny. When this thing is over, we're going somewhere far away and staying a long time."

"Where I won't have to do the dishes, set out the trash, and be a slave housekeeper?" she teased, as she squeezed his arm and headed away down the hall.

Pitkin returned to his office and listened while Niwot continued describing the security network around the plant and detailing the additional measures he had instituted. Stanley listened, nodded, and asked an occasional question. Hatch had managed to find two steaming cups of coffee, one for Stanley and one for Pitkin.

"Have you been told what we're looking for?" asked Stanley with a sidelong glance at Pitkin.

"Late yesterday afternoon, after we had started calling up reserve people, Pitkin called a meeting and said we were looking for one or more terrorists. He guessed they were probably experts at infiltration and surprise attacks. He said our information was pretty sketchy, but a suspect vehicle had crossed into the United States from Canada and was last seen in Rapid City, South Dakota. That's about the size of it, and I must say, it isn't much to go on."

"I hoped he had briefed you, and I'm glad he did. He told you everything we knew as of last evening. Unfortunately, we never do have enough information in these situations," said Stanley, "but I can add a little to what you already know. We're pretty certain there are two men in this terrorist team. One was driving a dark blue van with a New York license. Here's the plate number. You can distribute it to your men." Handing Niwot a slip

of paper, the agent added, "beyond that we are shooting in the dark. The van driver has a heavy moustache and olive complexion. We think he's from a Middle Eastern or North African nation. The second man will be meeting the first somewhere in the area, and they will team up for the assault."

"Then you're certain there will be an attack?" asked Pitkin.

"As certain as we can be, operating on information from informants who have to use some convoluted ways of getting their information to Washington."

Pitkin swept up the telephone and punched three numbers for an internal extension. The call was answered instantly. "Marshall, this is Pitkin. Close all operations in the processing building. Retrieve all Special Nuclear Materials in the plant and secure them in the central vault. Call me when you've finished."

Three more numbers brought another instantaneous answer. "Jenny, is Harvey there? Fine. Put him on the line. Harv, drop the work on the report I just assigned to you two. I want you to get your rad teams out away from the central complex. Put them on standby near the east and west gates. Oh, yes, Harv, take Jenny with you. One more thing, I want you to go the west gate and wait there for the Sheriffs from Jefferson County and Boulder County. Sign them in and bring them to my office yourself." A pause. "Yes, things are beginning to move pretty fast, Harv. I appreciate the thought."

Again three quick numbers brought a prompt reply. "Poudre, call the fire squad leaders the minute I hang up, and get the fire trucks out of the buildings. Disperse them on the parking lots away from the buildings, and keep the crews close to the vehicles." Pitkin listened for a moment. "Poudre, I don't give a damn about the pickups and vehicles Henry Niwot has checked out. Just get those trucks dispersed? Okay? Good, thanks, Poudre."

Turning back to his office group, Pitkin addressed himself to Niwot. "Henry, get a couple of men and sweep the plant. Everyone is to get out. I don't want to sound the alarm, because we've got a few men working in recovery and processing. Begin your sweep with recovery and tell Perry to clear his people out of there. He should only have a half dozen-line operators and a couple of foremen there. On your way out, tell Ollie Kutch to pull out also but to stop by here first. I don't believe any of his people came in to today, but if they did, get them out." Catching Hatch's

questioning glance, Pitkin added, "Take Hatch with you. If you have any problems that need my attention, and if you can't locate me by phone, send him."

When the two men had cleared the door, Stanley with raised eyebrows voiced his approval with a sham offer to leave. "I think I'll catch that jet back to Washington. You don't need me around here." Smiling his admiration, he went on, "That was fast work, Pitkin. You make me wonder how often you have these emergencies."

"We've had a couple, and plutonium isn't forgiving. You never have the time or opportunity to correct a mistake once it's been made."

"I've been in a lot of sticky and unpleasant situations," said Stanley, "but to tell you the seat of the pants truth, this one sends a chill down my spine like nothing I've felt before. I think it's the radiation. I'd be happier if your rays had a strong odor or a bright color. Invisible and deadly aren't high on my list of acceptable risks."

"I'll take it over the unpredictable and malevolent minds of dedicated terrorists," countered Pitkin. "With plutonium you know how it will behave and what it will do in given circumstances. It'll kill you if improperly handled, but you know its properties, and that gives you a better than even chance. With human killers you simply don't know."

"Pitkin," called Kutch from the doorway, "Henry said you wanted to see me."

"Yes. We're clearing the buildings, Ollie. Have you accounted for and secured all classified documents in your safe?"

"Closed and locked, Pitkin, per alert procedures."

"Fine. Did any of your people come in this morning?"

"No."

"Okay, I'm expecting an assistant chief from the state patrol to be checking into the east entrance any time now. He'll need someone to sign him in past security. I'd appreciate it if you'd pass him through the gate and bring him here."

"Glad to," agreed Kutch.

As Kutch turned to leave, Pitkin called after him, "Ollie, have you seen Hugo this morning?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I haven't. He had some classified material checked out, and I went to his office looking for it. The

document was locked in his file cabinet, but the office was dark. It didn't look like he had been in yet."

"How long ago was that?" asked Pitkin frowning.

"Probably two hours."

"All right, thanks, Ollie."

As the man hurried away through the reception area, Pitkin's frown deepened. "It isn't like Hugo to be late," murmured Pitkin, as much to himself as to Stanley. "He agreed to meet two people from the State Board of Health today and I know he planned on attending this meeting. I certainly hope he remembered. It's kind of strange he hasn't even called."

"Strange things in these situations make me very nervous, Pitkin," said Stanley. "Could you call his home and find out what the problem is, if there is a problem?"

"I can try," said Pitkin, already punching the numbers into his telephone.

Pitkin waited, listening to the unanswered ringing of the phone. Finally he sighed and hung up. "No answer. Well, it could be one of a hundred things, I suppose."

For the next half-hour, Stanley asked questions about the plant and its emergency operational procedures. Pitkin briefly described the procedures for securing radioactive materials and how they could be kept in a storage vault in the processing building.

Before Stanley could pursue the matter in detail, Harvey Flagler entered the office behind two men wearing badges stamped with the large visitor V. The first man wore a dark brown uniform and wore a gold badge of his own on his shirt pocket. The second wore a light summer business suit.

Pitkin rose and greeted them. "George, Ward, good morning. Harv, pull some chairs in from out front. Three should do it." He proceeded to make the introductions; "This is Mark Stanley, FBI, from Washington. Mark, this," nodding at the uniformed man, "is George Bergen, Sheriff of Jefferson County. And this," indicating the second man, "is Ward Raymond, Sheriff of Boulder County."

As the men seated themselves in a wide circle around the coffee table, Pitkin explained for Stanley, "The plant is located in George's county, but its northern boundary lies along the southern edge of Boulder County. Ward and his officers have always been

a full party to our security arrangements, and he has supplied a full component of deputies whenever we've needed them."

Bergen, the uniformed Sheriff from Jefferson County, accepted a cup of coffee from Harvey Flagler. Setting it on the table, he asked, "What are you up to now, Pitkin? This doesn't look to me like another Hiroshima day march. Your security guys are downright serious."

Ward Raymond added his impression. "Hell, they made me climb out of my car and kept me there until, Harvey showed up. You guys expecting an invasion?"

"Something like that," replied Pitkin. "I invited Del Norte to come up from Denver. He should be here any minute so we'll hold the details until he gets here."

Bergen turned his attention to Stanley. "You must know, Pete Bethune. He's the agent in charge of the Denver office."

"I know Pete very well," said Stanley. "As a matter of fact, I talked to him last night. He's chasing some leads down for me, and will be driving out here later today."

The two sheriffs and Stanley lapsed into talk about FBI and local law enforcement relations. Pitkin leaned toward Flagler and asked, "Harv, have you heard from Hugo this morning?"

"Not a word," said Flagler shaking his head. "I'm kind of surprised, too. He's always here with the early birds."

Looking up, Pitkin saw the third officer he had invited to the meeting. "Del," he said, "you know George and Ward of course, and I believe you've met Harvey Flagler."

Norte, wearing the characteristic blue uniform of the Colorado State Patrol, shook hands around the table. When he came to Stanley, Pitkin identified the agent and invited Norte to take the last empty seat in the circle. To Kutch, who had provided the required escort for Norte, Pitkin said, "Thanks, Ollie. I'll be responsible for him from here on. You can go back to the gate area and see what develops. I'll be in touch."

The conversation halted as Pitkin resumed his seat. "My part of this will be short," he told them. "Hugo was supposed to be here and outline what's going on from the plant's standpoint, but he's apparently caught up in something, so we'll go ahead. Based upon information supplied by Mark Stanley, I have placed Rocky Flats on a full security alert. That explains why you were rather abruptly stopped at the gates and not admitted without

signed approval of a plant official. Mark will brief you on the reason for the alert, but simply stated, we are the target of a terrorist group which is somewhere in the area."

Stanley immediately picked up the briefing. "I'm sure you've read the routine bulletins and information sheets the Bureau has distributed to local law enforcement offices throughout the country. We've had some terrorist activity, and for the Bureau, it's not a new experience. We, of course, work closely with the Central Intelligence Agency because domestic terrorism usually has foreign origins. Infiltration of such groups either here or abroad is, as you might imagine, difficult under the best of circumstances. However, a very reliable source has been feeding us information for some weeks now about a plan by one cell of a terrorist organization to attack a nuclear weapons facility. One by one we've managed to check our installations off the target list. Los Alamos is still a question mark because of its proximity to Mexico. But our best lead developed in New York. An agent picked up on a prime suspect who drove up to Canada and crossed to Winnipeg. He tailed the suspect down through Rapid City, but lost him in Wyoming. The agent hasn't checked in, and he's more than twelve hours overdue."

"Anything else to point the arrow at Rocky Flats?" asked Bergen.

"The man we were tailing has a confederate, a known terrorist. We followed him from one of their New York 'safe' houses to La Guardia. He took a commercial flight to Chicago. There he transferred to another commercial flight to Kansas City. He gave us the slip in the traffic around the terminal, but we're checking a good lead he was seen in Salina, Kansas. That has him headed this way. Both suspects seem to have targeted this area and Rocky Flats is the only nuclear weapons facility in the state."

"No reflection on the Bureau, but you're saying you managed to lose both of them," said Raymond with a scowl.

"I don't want to make excuses, but we think their overseas base began to think the idea for the attack had gotten out, which it had, of course. The group in New York was ordered to accelerate the schedule. We simply hadn't expected them to move this fast," explained Stanley. "We didn't want to pick them up. We just had no specific evidence. Rather than make an arrest that wouldn't hold up, we decided to follow them until we at least identified

some of their contacts along the way. I might add, we had some success with that part of the operation. But you're right Ward, we gave them too much rope, they lost us."

"Tailing someone along an empty road in Wyoming is tougher than down a street in Denver," observed Raymond. "If you're close enough to see your subject, he can see you for lots of miles."

"We do have a description of the van and a rough description of the driver," said Stanley. He repeated the information he had recited for Niwot and gave them the license plate number."

"Just how serious is the threat, in your judgment?" asked Norte, addressing himself to Stanley.

"This same crowd, blew up an embassy in London and a trade center in Bonn, in just the last six months," replied Stanley. "The West German Government had almost six hours notice, but failed to stop them. I'd say this is quite serious."

"Tell us what you need," said Bergen.

"Right," agreed Raymond, "everything we've got we'll use. Name it."

"This thing will happen today or tonight," said Stanley. "They have their orders from their base, and they'll push right along, especially since they know we're only a step behind. We just need a break of some kind to catch up." Turning to Norte, he asked, "Can you put a couple of helicopters in the air over the routes between here and Wyoming?"

"I'll give you 'copters and roadblocks," said Norte promptly.

"Does the City of Denver have a squad which could handle a bomb situation?" asked Stanley.

"Yes, I'm sure it does," replied Norte.

"Could I ask you to give them a call and ask them to standby?"

"Be glad to," agreed Norte, "but before we go any further, will you be here at the plant coordinating?"

"Yes, you have Pitkin's number. Use it or any of the plant's administrative office numbers to reach me. Sheriff Raymond, I think we have to operate as though these people are skilled and trained in what they're doing. I would imagine they have maps of the immediate area and would, when they get close,

use back roads, especially if they get any idea they're expected. If you could put some patrols out with that thought in mind, it might be helpful."

"I'd expect we'd be able to do a better job if we stayed within a few miles of the plant. Otherwise we'd get spread pretty thin."

"I agree, Ward," said Bergen. "We need to focus our effort around the Flats."

"I'll accept your judgment and will leave the details to each of you to work out," said Stanley. He was pleased to find the three officers were entirely professional in their response to news that might have sent others into a panic. They were also acquainted with one another, having worked together before. That, too, was a plus for the defense of the plant.

"Are you covered inside the plant perimeter?" asked Bergen looking from Stanley to Pitkin.

Pitkin fielded the question. "Henry has his reserve force dispersed, and we're in the process of evacuating the buildings as quickly as possible. Henry would be here now but he's making an inspection and sweep of the entire facility. The only people left will be Mark, Henry's men, and myself. Since we have the guards, and since we'll have your patrols nearby, I can't imagine how we'd use you inside the fence unless Mark has some ideas."

"No, I believe Pitkin's right. We're pretty well set as soon as his people are away from the buildings."

"Pitkin," asked Raymond, "You said you were evacuating. How long will it be before you're clear?"

"Right now we're securing the Special Nuclear Material. It'll probably be another hour or two."

"Special nuclear material, what's special about it?" asked Norte.

"It's really only a term from the Atomic Energy Act," explained Pitkin. "It's plutonium and certain forms of uranium which has been enriched to a degree substantially more pure than its natural state."

"It's the stuff that explodes then," concluded Bergen.

"No explosions, George," Pitkin assured him. "Under extraordinary circumstances or in an accident, we could have a criticality, but not an explosion."

"One thing I'm not is a radiation expert," said Stanley, "I was briefed by our technical division, but what I really learned is to ask you for information on such things. Just in case we had a satchel of TNT going off near your vault, could it cause a criticality?"

"Yes, it's possible if the wall was breached and a given amount of plutonium, for example, was disturbed and placed in too close a proximity to more plutonium."

"Sounds ominous to me, Pitkin," said Stanley. "Could you give us a one liner on what a criticality is?"

"Perhaps an example would serve best," replied Pitkin. "You know what happens when a firecracker is set off. Yet, when the same powder is removed and dumped onto the ground and ignited, you get a rapid burning, but no explosion. We have a nuclear detonation only when fissionable material is properly aligned in the proper quantities and is properly triggered. Failing those conditions, you can have a criticality, a flare or instantaneous discharge of radiation, but no detonation."

"The place wouldn't go up then and leave a crater between Wyoming and New Mexico?" Concluded Norte, relieved at hearing there wouldn't be a nuclear explosion.

"Nothing that spectacular," Pitkin assured him. "I hope you're not disappointed, Del. I don't believe anyone else is."

"Hardly," smiled the patrolman.

"Gentlemen, that's all I have for the moment," announced Stanley. "I'll be getting back to you if I learn anything, and I'm sure you'll call me if anything develops in your areas."

"Harvey, would you ride out to the gate with George and Ward? Mark and I will take Del out the other way. Oh, yes, take a few minutes and have the guards issue O badges to them. They may need to get in and out of here in a hurry. The O badge will get you in faster but you'll still have to get out of your car, Ward," said Pitkin, referring to Raymond's surprise at being ordered out of his vehicle when he had come in. "During an alert, everyone gets the exercise of climbing out to give the guards a closer look."

The meeting ended with the Sheriffs and Flagler headed for their cars and the west access road that led to State Highway 93. Pitkin, Stanley, and Norte were on their way outside through the reception area when Henry Niwot and Hatch Baldwin met them.

"The place is like a tomb, Pitkin," said Niwot. "The only people left are Marshall and his crew. It looks like a couple of hours before they'll be secure. If you don't need me right now, I'm going to take another tour of my perimeter patrols."

"We just finished talking with Del, Ward Raymond and George Bergen," said Pitkin. "I was going to sign Del out, but I think I'll have you do it for me. After you finish, you can take Mark with you on your trip around the perimeter. He can fill you in on our meeting and let you in on what the sheriffs and the patrol will be doing. Hatch, you might as well stick with Henry."

As the door closed behind the four men, Pitkin recalled Niwot's words. The reception area, the halls leading away in both directions were silent like ancient catacombs. There had been many nights when the place had been as empty, but on those occasions, there was the certain knowledge of full shifts of active working people in nearby buildings, and there were always one or two people in the administration building on duty.

He turned and started to walk back toward his office, but his glance caught the sight of Hugo's door that looked to be slightly ajar. On an impulse, he stepped over to it and swung it open. The lights were out and the room was in the semidarkness of pulled shades.

Hugo Chase was sitting at his desk staring vacantly into empty space. The heavy framed glasses which seldom left Hugo's face had been thrown down onto a stack of papers, and his ever neat suit coat had been dropped into a rumpled heap on the floor. His shirt collar hung open around the heavy neck, and there was no evidence of a necktie anywhere.

For a moment Pitkin was too surprised to speak, His mind flashed thoughts of stroke, of heart attack, perhaps suicide. The pudgy frame was silent enough for any of those thoughts to have been reality. He stepped closer, and even in the dim light could see distress on every feature. The jaw hung slack, the thin wisps of hair were tangled and askew, and the heavy circles under Hugo's eyes were dark and red.

"Hugo?"

Pitkin's soft call was rewarded by a slight turn of the head and an answering look from the weary, heavy eyes. Yet, there was no immediate sound from the lips. Pitkin tried again, "Hugo, what in God's name..."

As Pitkin paused in astonishment, Hugo's voice came flat and toneless. "Shamballa's got leukemia." The voice rose and became harder, "Pitkin, did you hear me. My daughter has cancer. I've given my child leukemia."

"Hugo, you can't blame yourself. If it's the plant, we're all to blame. You've been simply doing a job."

"And a damned fine one, effective, so damned effective," said Hugo, lowering his head.

Desperately hoping to get him thinking and hoping to break the depression, Pitkin asked, "What in the world are you doing here, why aren't you with Paonia and Shamballa? They need you more than this place."

"They're gone. The doctor said we should try the Freidel Institute in San Francisco. He said we might buy some time with early treatment. I put them on the plane this morning."

"Well, why didn't you go with them? Why would you come here?"

Hugo's voice carried a hint of new strength and resolve, "Remember, Pitkin, I said we'd run this places our way, or I'd close it down?"

"Sure, but there isn't anything you can do now, today."

"It can't be run without killing people. I'm going to shut it down ... forever."

"Hugo, there isn't any way, not today, not now. Even if you ordered it closed, the Department would send someone else to do the same jobs we've been doing. What could you possibly accomplish that would be meaningful and effective?"

The Director's head fell to his chest, "I don't know," he murmured. "But I'll find a way, I must, but if I fail, Pitkin, you've got to promise me, you'll close it." His head had come up sharply, and his demand became instantly shrill and strident. "You can do it, Pitkin, you know you can."

"Sure, Hugo. We'll do it together."

At that moment, Pitkin would have promised Hugo anything. He was convinced the man was near hysteria and not thinking straight. The first thing had to be to calm him, but the question was how. Drugs were forbidden at the plant, but he knew Lamont took tranquilizers. Hoping there might be some in the PR man's office, Pitkin asked, "Hugo, I'm going down the hall for just a minute. Will you be all right?"

Hearing no answer and seeing the head droop back down to the chest, Pitkin decided to chance it. He turned and stepped quietly out of the office. He then raced down the hall to Lamont's office and threw open the door. He began with the top desk drawer, but finding nothing except the usual assortment of pencils and paper clips, he proceeded to the side drawers and searched each one. Coming up empty, he slammed the last drawer shut with a desperate curse.

He was ready to abandon his search when he thought of the filing cabinet. It was worth a try. He pulled the top drawer open and sitting in a small open box was an assortment of brown prescription bottles. Pitkin seized the box and began examining the bottles. Most were empty, but in one he saw a half dozen long white capsules. The label on the bottle read, "Lamont Wellington. Valium. Take one capsule every eight hours or as needed for work related tension."

Sprinting back to the reception area, Pitkin found an empty cup, spurted it half full of water at the water cooler, and returned to Hugo's office. Apparently, Hugo had not moved. Pitkin went around behind the desk and spoke to him. "Hugo, you're in no condition to do anything but rest. I've found something to relax you. Here, take a couple of these."

Pitkin held two capsules in one hand and the water in the other. He wondered about giving double the prescribed amount, but instantly decided this situation was more than a Lamont type of headache. Looking down at the capsules in his hand, he suddenly had the perverse and vagrant thought that, given Lamont's tendency toward hypochondria, the pills were probably placebos. He dismissed the notion and forced the capsules into Hugo's pliant hand.

"Pills?" mumbled Hugo, bewildered and uncomprehending. Then his mind lapsed back to the one thing that seemed to occupy his mind. Clenching his fist and banging it on his desk in time to his words, he rasped, "I want to close this son of a bitch down cold, Pitkin." Tears welled in his eyes as he went on, "as cold as Shamballa will be..." his voice faltered, ".... Cold..." His head lowered.

Again, Pitkin tried the tranquilizers by forcing the water into Hugo's hand. "Take these, and we'll talk about how to do it, Hugo. But first, take the capsules."

Somehow, the words seemed to generate understanding. Hugo fumbled the capsules into his mouth and swilled them down with a huge gulp of water. At Pitkin's gentle insistence, he finished the cup of water. Letting himself be lifted and steered like a helpless incompetent, Hugo soon found himself deposited onto the office couch, where, disconsolate and disheveled, and he slumped into silence.

Pitkin paced the office throwing frequent glances at the human tragedy he had encountered. The news itself was shocking, but the totality of the episode had been devastating to him. The thought of the child stricken with the deadly cancer distressed him more than he would ever have thought possible. It may have been the staggering blow the disease had delivered to Hugo that added to the impact on Pitkin. The singular experience of coming upon the distraught man so suddenly had been unsettling almost beyond anything he could remember.

It could not have come at a worse time. The pressures on the plant from every point of the compass had been steadily mounting for months. Charges of environmental degradation had been rising to a chorus in the Denver area. Politicians finding fertile ground for demagoguery had begun to decry the presence of the facility. Thoughtful scientists had begun to frown during lectures and seminars when the plutonium levels were discussed.

The discovery of the long hidden barrels had seemed to be a cap to the procession of incidents. But the recovery building emissions had rocketed events to a new level. The Washington experience had injected the note of human iniquity.

Overshadowing it all was the immediate threat of violence. The prospect of injury to property was perhaps incidental. It was the profound implication of harm to the people who worked in the plant and to people who lived nearby which had purged Pitkin's mind of other concerns. But now it wasn't threats of mass personal injury or bombs killing people which filled his mind, it was the unseen, silent destruction of one small child that he couldn't stop thinking about.

Pitkin recalled Hugo's words that the plant couldn't be operated "without killing people." As long as the plant was in the Denver area it would be a threat. The only conclusion possible was also Hugo's; the place had to be shut down "cold." But his own mind told him it was not possible. A half-hour passed, and

another began. While waiting for the tranquilizers to take hold, Pitkin used the phone to check the status of the gates, the patrols, and Stanley and Niwot, but nothing had developed. The waiting continued.

As Pitkin walked, he looked down into the carpet of Hugo's office. It was a repetitious display in subdued colors of fine lined loops and curling figures, each interlocking with another. He had looked at it often during visits to Hugo's office. There seemed to be no order in the arrangement, and the illusion was one of curving vectors flowing, weaving, running, repeating, and competing. The pattern had always taunted him and defied any logic he might try to apply. Even now as he stared down, the loops, the curls, the winding coils remained as mysterious as ever, and they were so bewildering, Pitkin might have imagined they were stirring and moving, coming to life even as he paced, trying to trample them down.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The wings and the fuselage of the two-engine plane were their canvas. Red paint was their only color, and slogans in their minds the only models as the pilot and his single crewman carved their Arabic scrollwork symbols boldly and defiantly on every exposed surface of the white plane. The looping and flowing lines were everywhere, and to the eye unschooled in their meanings, the plane had become wrapped in white and tied with hundreds of red, flowing, curving inscriptions.

Earlier, the contents of the trailer had been transferred to the plane. The pilot and his assistant had each made more than a dozen trips from the trailer and each time the cargo being transferred was the same? The square boxes were either very heavy or the cargo quite fragile because the boxes seemed to be carried with exaggerated care. Finally, there was room enough in the plane for only the pilot and one passenger.

As the two climbed into the plane, and the pilot became a pilot again and the road worker-crewman became a copilot, they

seemed uncaring about their little airport. Extra seats and nonessential items had been ripped from the plane's interior and thrown randomly about. The paint cans and brushes had simply been left upon the ground to stain the grass, and the door of the trailer left open to become a toy of the Wyoming winds. One might have imagined they had no intention of returning.

As the plane came to life on its airstrip, some distance away on a lonely road, the seed salesman, apparently preferring the role of federal agent with badge and gun, had found a ride in a pickup. He had jounced along for some time, but finally a paved road had appeared and soon after that, a combination small bar, grocery store, and gasoline station.

Obviously in something of a hurry, he leaped from the truck the instant it stopped. He sprinted into the little establishment, threw some paper money on the counter and demanded coins. A bewildered proprietor had counted with agonizingly slow precision the exact change requested. When queried, the same tri-dimensional businessman had usher-shuffled the impatient agent to the rear of the building and pointed to the wall telephone. Ignoring the curious entrepreneur who stood by, listening, the agent inserted the requisite coins and began dialing as rapidly as the return of the clicking disk would allow.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Pitkin's pacing was interrupted by the ringing of a telephone. He realized it was the private line in his office. A quick look at Hugo persuaded him there was no likelihood the sagging figure would move. He walked quickly through the reception area, through the door and to his desk. He caught the phone on its fourth ring.

He identified himself, "Pitkin Waay."

The voice on the phone was tense, "Is Special Agent Mark Stanley there?"

"He's not in the room now, but I can reach him in a few minutes."

"I'll hold. Find Stanley and do it fast, this is urgent."

Pitkin didn't take the time to answer. He pressed the hold button, and punched three numbers. The response came with the first ring. "Gate Security, this is Pitkin Waay. I need to talk to Henry Niwot immediately."

The phone popped while the connection was made with Niwot's portable set. Niwot's voice was strong and clear. "Yes, Pitkin?"

"Henry, is Stanley with you?"

"Yes, he's standing right beside me."

"Give him the phone."

"Stanley here."

"Mark, I have a call here for you. The caller says it's urgent."

"Pitkin, can you put him through and at the same time keep the call coming into your phone?"

"I'm not sure, but I'll try."

In a few seconds, Pitkin tested the connection. "Mark?"

"Yes, I'm on. This is Mark Stanley, who is calling?"

The caller identified himself. "Mark, this is Tom Andrews in Washington. We just received a call from Nelson. He's been wandering around Wyoming all night looking for a phone. His message is this. The van picked up a trailer in Newcastle, Wyoming. It proceeded on to a ranch about a hundred miles from Cheyenne. He went to the ranch house and got a rude shock. The man posing as the manager is in our terrorist mug books, an American, but a known sympathizer with our suspect group. Next item, the follow-up on our Salina lead may or may not have picked up something. A two engine Cessna turned up missing and a mechanic thinks he saw someone like our missing terrorist in the area about the same time."

"What time do you figure the plane was taken?" asked Stanley.

"We don't know exactly, but it was after dark last night. We've got a man talking to the tower right now. One of the controllers may be able to remember something we can use."

"Tom, we need to move fast. I'm not positive, but I think I know what's developing. I want you to call the Director give him a quick update, then have him call the Pentagon, and confirm my authority with an Air Force General who can act without running up and down the chain of command for a half a day. I want you to

call me back at this same number in five minutes with that General's number. Pitkin, I'm on my way in. Could you put in a call to our state patrol contact?"

The Washington voice had already clicked off the phone. Pitkin was almost as fast with his clipped, "I'll place the call now."

The timing of Stanley's return to Pitkin's office and the completion of the call to Captain Del Norte were perfect. Stanley walked through the door and Pitkin spoke into the phone, "Here he is now, Del."

Stanley took the handset, "Hello, this is agent Mark Stanley. Have you managed to get those 'copters in the air? Good. I have a priority request. Order them to forget the roads and begin looking for any low flying planes coming in from Wyoming. The only information I have is that our suspects may be flying a two engine Cessna, no other identification. I suggest you direct them to work along a line from Cheyenne to the plant. If they see anything, call me immediately."

Hanging up the phone, Stanley addressed his next comment to Pitkin. "I don't know the status of your efforts to put your plutonium in the vault, but I would recommend it be finished pretty damn soon."

"You're expecting an air attack?" asked Pitkin.

"I don't know any other reason they'd steal a plane and rendezvous in the middle of a ranch in Wyoming."

"It could have been simply a way one of the terrorists used to get where he wanted to go, transportation, if you will."

"Could be, but they could also have decided long ago, there wasn't any real way to mount an attack on this place from the ground. Pitkin, I've been around this place a couple of times now. With the security we've got on station and the other forces only a call away, it would take an army to storm this facility. You've got sensors out there that will register small rabbits that trespass. There are laser devices, infrared scanners, and other devices that make an approach by ground, day or night, virtually impossible. I've got to go with my best bet and my hunch is they'll come by air."

"But when?"

"You just asked the big ticket question. I don't know exactly, but I do know it won't be long."

Instantly, Pitkin was back on the phone. "Marshall, where do you stand on retrieval?" The explanation was obviously brief. "Okay, you've done all you can. Get yourself and your people out of there now."

Baldwin and Niwot had followed Stanley into the office, and they stood listening to the conversation. "Henry," said Pitkin, "you and Hatch go into Hugo's office. You'll find him on his couch, sleeping, I hope. There isn't time to explain, but, if he's awake, he may be incoherent. Drag him if you have to, but get him outside and away from the buildings."

The ringing phone marked their hurried departure. Pitkin seized the receiver and barked into the mouthpiece, "Yes?...He's right here."

Stanley took the instrument, listened and scribbled on a piece of paper. "Tom, it would save me dialing if you could transfer me, but before you do, has he been briefed and has my authority been confirmed by the White House? Good. Transfer the call.... General Farley? Yes, this is Special Agent Mark Stanley. I have three requests and would like for you to execute them in the order I give them to you. Item, scramble six jets from Lowery Air Base near Denver. Instruct them to define and protect an air pocket over Rocky Flats. If they've lived in the area a while they'll know where it is, but it's about fifteen air miles northwest of downtown Denver. Instruct them to divert all aircraft away from this zone and shoot down any plane that fails to follow instructions. They should look especially for a two engine Cessna that may be coming in from the north. Second item, use your military authority to order the air controllers at Stapleton and Jefferson County Airports to hold all flights on the ground, and to land everything else in the area. Third item, this may be too late and too little, but direct Lowery to load some of their short range, ground to air missiles and a squad that knows how to fire them onto a helicopter and send it to Rocky Flats. I have no further requests, General, other than to say your immediate action is essential and to tell you that an air pocket is our best hope. I don't want any plane flying near or over this place."

Before Pitkin or Stanley could speak, Baldwin and Niwot came trotting into the office. They were panting and out of breath, "Hugo wasn't in his office, Pitkin," heaved Niwot. "We started

looking, and we've covered every office up and down both corridors. We didn't see any sign of him anywhere."

"Damn," said Pitkin, "After you left to take Norte to the gate, I found him in there alone, rambling and almost hysterical. He found out last night that his girl had been diagnosed as having leukemia, and he was in there fifteen minutes ago on his couch, and an hour ago he was raving about shutting the place down."

"Any thought on where he might have gone, if that was still his idea?" asked Stanley.

"None. If he was still thinking straight, he might have some notion of destroying the classified files. In a lot of ways those files serve as our brains; they contain design specifications and detailed information which is essential to the whole operation."

"Are those the same files you asked your records man about?"

"Yes."

"Then they've been locked in a safe, but Hugo would know how to open it."

Pitkin and Stanley both started for the door, but Pitkin halted him with a reminder, "Mark, you've got to stay by the phone, besides, I know where it is and you don't. Henry, you and Hatch try the switchboard and the corridor leading to the standby power room. Come on back here if you don't find him, and we'll try to figure something else."

Pitkin's long legs carried him quickly through the central administrative office area and into the accounting and records section. Passing through the first office, he entered the second where he was confronted with a heavy wire cage that was the documents check out area. Adjacent to the little window through which classified materials were passed was a double locked door. It appeared to be secure and resisted his attempt to pull it open. However, it was built to be locked from the inside as well as from the outside, and it closed and automatically locked if not held open. Pitkin pulled his key ring from a trousers pocket, found his master key, and shoved it into the first lock and disengaged it. Using a different key, he unlocked the second device. He swung the door open and stepped inside and around the protective partition. The door of the walk-in safe was wide open, and the inside, overhead light was on. There were documents and files on

the floor as though some had been hastily grabbed while others had been rejected and thrown to the floor or simply been dropped in haste.

The full interior of the safe could be seen in a glance, and immediately Pitkin knew his guess had been correct, but late. Reopening the wire door required the second use of Pitkin's two keys. Once back in the corridor, he sprinted down the hallway to his office.

Inside, he found a frowning, puzzled Marshall Hinsdale. Pitkin's first reaction suggested Hinsdale had encountered a problem with the retrieval of the plutonium from the glove boxes where the work on the radioactive metal was performed and from the conveyor system which carried the material around the processing building from one work station to another. It was evident that Pitkin had interrupted Hinsdale in mid-sentence.

"Pitkin, I was just telling Mister Stanley here...."

Stanley interrupted him, "He saw Hugo going into the processing building."

"When?" shot back Pitkin.

"Just now," replied Hinsdale. "We finished securing all the SNM and I sent the crew out. I was leaving myself when Hugo came charging in and almost knocked me down. He didn't say a word. He went running down the hall carrying an armload of classified documents. Pitkin, he looked awful, no glasses, his eyes were sort of wild looking, and he was panting like he'd just run the mile. It seemed funny to me, so I came looking for you."

"You did the right thing, Marshall. Which way was he headed when you last saw him?"

"Down corridor E, toward the storage vault. And one more thing, Pitkin, he was leaving a trail of classified behind. I picked this one up in the yard on the way over here."

Hinsdale offered the package to Pitkin. It was a thick white envelope stamped with bold, bright red letters declaring to the world that it contained RESTRICTED DATA and SECRET DOCUMENTS. The red lettering was on the front, the back, the flap, everywhere.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Cessna, white with its garish red emblems, flashed low over the green, irrigated fields surrounding Longmont, Colorado. Inside the cabin, the radio scratched and snapped, and faint snatches of faraway voices could be heard over the drone of the powerful engines.

Suddenly the cabin was filled with a nearby voice that had apparently found the plane's radio frequency. "This is Jefferson County air control calling the unidentified aircraft bearing 240. Acknowledge and identify yourself."

Inside the tower, an air controller stood staring intently at his green radarscope. He tried again, "This is Jefferson County air control calling the unidentified aircraft on our heading 240. We have a military emergency, repeat, and a military emergency. You are ordered to identify yourself and change your heading to 090. Acknowledge."

"That's got to be the one they called about, Cal," said the Controller to the tense supervisor standing nearby.

"I think you're right," agreed the supervisor as he dialed a number he had been given by Lowery Air Force base.

"Hello, Lowery control, this is the Jefferson County tower. We have an unidentified aircraft approaching this tower on a heading of 240, speed 180 knots, altitude 2000 feet. At my mark he's three miles out and closing. Mark."

From the sky east of Rocky Flats, a gleaming Air Force jet dipped its wing and flashed into the airspace over North Denver. "I copy, Lowery," said a white helmeted figure into his microphone. After a short minute, he spoke again, "I have your bogey in sight, Lowery, and will intercept and attempt to divert."

With a thundering roar, the jet flashed within a few feet of the Cessna's nose. The near collision pass was ignored and the Cessna's twin engines continued straining at full throttle as the aircraft began a steep decent.

The air controllers in the Jefferson County airport ran from their scopes and instruments and peered out the west window where they could see the flowing, Arabic lines on the underside of the wings as the plane roared almost directly overhead. Proclaiming its fiery slogans to the sky, it passed over the west end of their main runway. At that point the intruding Cessna was only a long mile from its target and dropping rapidly in a screaming dive directly at the buildings of Rocky Flats.

The jet fighter rocketed through a tight turn and the pilot saw the Cessna slide back into the crosshatch of his sights. He triggered away a hissing, smoking, heat seeking missile.

The Cessna, like the white tip of an arrow, fragmented by hundreds of red cracks, plunged at the building complex. From above, the missile, with its billowing white tail, followed the suicide dive.

The missile caught the plane less than fifty feet above the roof of the processing building. The slim dart speared the death plane directly on its starboard engine releasing a bright round hemorrhage of fire and debris. The momentum of the plane carried the exploding wreckage down full onto the roof of the building below.

The mushrooming fire of the plane, even as it splintered into an untold number of fragments, slammed into the processing building, engulfing it in fire and rocking it with a crushing shock wave.

The giant hammer blow of overpressure collapsed partitions and walls. The roof of the building went crashing in upon itself, and the entire structure was covered by the flame of the explosion.

CHAPTER TWENTY

There was a stunned silence. As with all calamities, natural and man made, when accumulated energy is suddenly and violently expended against the frail surface of the earth and against the trivial bulwarks of man, the shocked heart of the nearby world gives pause. Then, the fine line of the balance begins to right itself as nature puts healing on the compensating side of the scale and man contributes his spirit, for whatever weighing value it may have.

With any passage, small and large, there is the matter of the toll. The reckoning. The accounting is as various as the victims. Order is exchanged for confusion, entirety for its fractions, living health for instantaneous decay, and all the fears of night must have their day. And inevitable, but uncertain, is the levy of transition, from what was not to what some had thought could never be.

Pitkin himself was spared the full force of the blast. He had turned from Stanley and Hinsdale and had started out the door intending to find Hugo. The doorframe protected him from the devastating effects of the explosion but he had been thrown tumbling and rolling into a desk in the outer office.

Some unseen fragment had ripped a small chunk of flesh from his cheek and his first reaction to the blood that trickled into his mouth was to gag and retch. The involuntary movement caused him to roll to a different position and he spat the blood onto the dust-covered floor. His head began to clear, and he discovered he could move and even sit up.

Comprehension was beginning to return, and he fought and struggled his way to his feet. He coughed again and spat more blood, but began to feel alive. He heard faint moans from his office and began to walk in that direction, but his path was blocked with large sections of the temporary wall which had once afforded some privacy to the secretarial pool. Chairs and other pieces of furniture littered the floor, and Pitkin had to negotiate his way over and around the wreckage.

Pitkin saw that the two men in his office had been less fortunate than he. Hinsdale had apparently been slammed into the concrete wall and had sustained, at a minimum, a compound fracture of one arm. The white bone of a forearm bone protruded through the flesh that was ripped and bloody. Hinsdale was only partially conscious and was just beginning to feel the pain, and his low moans came more from the shock than the injury.

Stanley had taken the force of Pitkin's desk on his head and shoulders. His unconscious form lay tangled in the wooden fragments and his legs were twisted at grotesque angles and seemed not to belong to the nearly hidden body.

Remembering his intention to go to the processing building, Pitkin looked in that direction, but the hallway was filled with rubble and seemed impassable. He wiped and dabbed at the annoying blood that continued to trickle down his face and neck. Leaning against the wall, Pitkin forced himself to think and to concentrate.

He saw water bubbling from the water cooler that had been twisted away from the wall. Pushing his way to it through the broken furniture, he found his handkerchief and soaked it in the water. The cool cloth helped clear his head; he repeated the process, liberally mopping his face and neck. Rinsing the handkerchief again, he pressed it against his cheek and with his other hand caught more of the escaping water and splashed it into his face. He rinsed his mouth and spat the waste away. Then he took more water and swallowed a few gulps of the welcome liquid.

Logic began to return. More water and deep breaths of air aided the process. He returned to the wreckage of his office and began clearing a space near his chief of processing. With a few gentle pulls and tugs, he was able to straighten Hinsdale's body and get the mangled arm laid alongside in something of a straight

line. He was attempting to tie a tourniquet around the upper arm to stem the blood from the gaping fracture wound, when he heard voices in the outer offices.

"Try Pitkin's office," said one voice.

"Yeah, if we can find it," said another.

"Holy mother!" cried a third voice. "This place is a disaster."

"Aid team in here," hollered a man looking into the office.

Soon, capable hands relieved Pitkin of his fumbling attempts to help Hinsdale. Other firemen cleared the rubble from Stanley and began working over his still form. The fire squad chief looked around the room. "Pitkin, were there any others in here with you?"

"Henry Niwot..." he was interrupted by his own coughing, "Henry was somewhere in the north corridor, and Hatch Baldwin was somewhere in this area."

An order was issued to begin a search for the two men Pitkin had named. The fire chief found an unbroken chair, set it upright for Pitkin and ordered him to sit down. A medic knelt down and began working on the cheek wound. Pitkin felt the bite of antiseptic and gave the attendant a faint grin. "It feels good to feel," he quipped. To the nearby chief he said, "Was it a plane?"

"Yeah," replied Bud Haxtun, the squad chief, still impressed and awestruck by the mental image, "the damn thing came in from over the Jeffco airport and came down like a dive bomber. A jet fighter took a pass at him, trying to scare him off, I guess. Christ, I thought they were going to collide. Anyhow, that terrorist bastard just kept coming. The fighter turned and on his second pass got him with a missile, but the whole thing, the missile and the plane together, went off right above the processing building. From the way the explosion rocked this place, I'd say the plane must have been loaded with a couple of tons of TNT. With the plane's fuel, the explosives it carried, and the detonation of the missile, that was one helluva blast."

Bandaged and feeling stronger, Pitkin pursued his inquiry. "What happened outside?"

"Too early to tell, Pitkin, but my guess is the roof of the whole processing area came down. Other buildings around will probably have shock damage. I came directly in here, but it looked to me like we also had a fire going back there."

"Bud," said Pitkin, "I don't want your people getting too close to any places where they could get into radiation. Harvey and his rad teams will have to sweep the area before we can do anything else. Damage assessment can wait."

"I think Harv's crew is ahead of you, Pitkin. He was on the first truck to move after the blast," said Haxtun.

"Pitkin..." The cry was one of discovery and relief. Jenny's eyes were brimming with tears, but she was smiling as he stood up and swept her into his arms. After a moment, she leaned back and looked up at his face. "Your cheek?" she said touching the bandage.

"Just a scratch," he said, "I was pretty lucky. Marshall's been hurt pretty badly, and I think Mark Stanley may be dead. They're still looking for Henry and Hatch Baldwin."

"My God, it was awful, Pitkin. The explosion was right over processing. There was a ball of fire wider than the building itself, and the whole thing just dropped straight down. Some of the guards as far away as the gate were knocked down. I knew you were in here and..." The release of nervous tension brought more tears.

"Hey, I'm the one who got scratched," he chided. "Do you feel up to doing some work?"

She brushed at her eyes, "Sure."

"I'm going to need some kind of office or command post. A telephone line is a must. Draft a couple of Bud's men to help you, but whatever you do it'll have to be quick. We're going to be awfully busy around here for a while."

Bud Haxtun, was still standing nearby and watching the scene, and he had heard the directions. "Almont," he called to a fireman, "you and Milner are assigned, as of now, to Jenny Gilpin. Top priority is a working phone line. Hop to it."

Jenny needed no further direction. With her assistants in tow, she headed off toward the adjacent offices.

"Bud, get another man and come with me," said Pitkin, as he started toward the hallway which led to the processing area.

By shoving some wreckage aside and climbing over the rest, Pitkin and the firemen were able to reach the door leading into the compound. The door had been ripped from its hinges and the way was open for them to get outside.

The scene was one of devastation and ruin. Located a couple of hundred feet from the administration building, the concrete rubble which had housed the plutonium fabricating operation was an awesome sight. In the days of its existence, the edifice had been a one story, windowless structure whose essential component had been concrete.

A few pillars and walls jutted their ragged outlines higher than the sea of broken concrete. The semblance of a wall stood where it was joined and supported by the long conveyor building which had connected fabrication operations with the new recovery building.

What had been the roof lay in fragments and chunks, broken by the force of the blast, the ensuing fall, and the resisting strength of interior walls. The overall impression was one of broken concrete, re-enforcing rods twisted and menacing, and there was an almost total absence of a sense of the pattern or layout of the building.

If there had been a fire, it had been the explosive material and not the building. A few flames were licking at what had been the walls of the building and still other flames were flickering through the broken sections of the roof. Firemen, wearing full-face masks were systematically extinguishing the flames using hoses strung from the sides of the fire trucks.

The three men were speechless. The destruction was the more impressive to them because they had worked in and around the facility for years, and the processing building had simply been a part of their environment. Any other observer would have been impressed, but Pitkin and the firemen were thunderstruck, a part of their familiar world had been obliterated.

"Sweet Jesus," breathed Haxtun, "would you look at that!"

"Incredible," said Pitkin, "I never imagined anything like this could happen."

With the silence thus broken, they began to point and identify the general contours and identifiable features of the wreck. "The south entrance was there," said Haxtun, pointing. "That must be the air lock there under the galvanized conduit sticking up."

"That heap in the middle must be the storage vault," suggested Pitkin, beginning to pick his way through broken concrete as he walked toward the crumbled fringes that marked the

general outline of the disaster. He stopped and picked up a torn sheet of aluminum. One side of it was a dull silver color; the other side was white crisscrossed by curving red lines. He puzzled over it wondering where it had come from.

Haxtun gave him the answer. "It has to be part of the plane. I remember it was white with some kind of red lines all over it. Of course, we only saw it for a few seconds, but I thought at the time it looked kind of odd. The paint looks fresh, but I think my kid could do a neater job of drawing or lettering whatever it's supposed to be."

Pitkin realized that walking and sorting through the broken slabs of concrete was going to be a laborious and time-consuming business. "Bud, I wanted to see what we were dealing with out here, but I also had an idea we could try locating Hugo. He's in there somewhere."

Haxtun was immediately concerned, "Mister Chase was in that... the building?"

"I can't believe anyone could survive," said Pitkin quietly, "but I'd like you to get a crew busy trying to find some sign of him. I have the feeling you'd have the most luck working around the SNM vault."

"Consider it done," said the fireman already looking around for extra men.

As the firemen started walking away, Pitkin called to Haxtun, "Bud, I'd appreciate knowing the minute you find...well, the minute you find a sign."

Haxtun nodded and began moving away calling for more men and for equipment. Almost as he spoke, fireman in the vicinity seemed to become more animated at the hint a life might be at stake. Since there hadn't been a sustained fire and the incidental small fires were already under control, they welcomed Haxtun's urgent orders and directions.

As Pitkin stood watching what he hoped would be a rescue effort take shape, Harvey Flagler came rushing from where he had been consulting with a group of radiation monitors. "Pitkin, what's Haxtun stirring up?"

"Hugo's in there somewhere, Harv. I told Bud to see what could be done about locating him."

"It's going to be more complicated than just digging. We're picking up traces of plutonium around that heap in the

middle. We got close enough to identify it as the storage vault, and I'm wondering if we haven't got a breach of some containers in there."

Pitkin was instantly alert. "Could it be incidental scraps from a glove box? There's bound to be a few hot spots wherever they were crushed, and we know there will be residuals there and from the conveyors."

"Could be," agreed Flagler, "but I want those fireman wearing masks, and I want at least a couple of monitors standing by."

"It's your call, Harv. I think you'd better be over there with them when they start lifting some of those roof sections."

Pitkin watched while Flagler headed toward the growing group of fireman gathered around Haxtun. He called out, "Harvey."

Flagler halted and waited for Pitkin to speak. He became puzzled when no words came. Pitkin's eyes seemed to be looking at the remains of the plutonium storage area. Returning a few paces and seeing Pitkin's set face and staring eyes, Flagler had the feeling Pitkin was transfixed by something he saw there in the wreckage. Yet, another silent moment told Flagler that Pitkin was seeing only with his inward eyes and the image was of something beyond, something deeper and farther away than the nearby rubble.

"Pitkin?" Flagler asked tentatively, reaching out to touch one of the arms that were tightly locked and crossed over Pitkin's chest. "Pitkin, are you okay?"

The arms suddenly dropped from their clenched position. The broad, tanned face turned full upon Flagler, and Pitkin's blue eyes were filled with determination and purpose. "Sorry, Harv, I lost you for a moment. I wanted to tell you that from now on, I want you personally to collect all radiation monitoring data. Bring it to me. We're setting up an office inside; bring it there. Remember, I want the raw data, every damn scrap of it, and I don't want you relaying radiation readings or data to anyone else, or discussing them with anybody, regardless of who they are."

Flagler opened his mouth as if he intended to ask a question. Thinking better of his impulse, he shrugged, "You're the boss, and if Hugo was in that building, you're the only boss this place has. Raw data you shall have."

"If anyone has a question, I'll be in one of the offices in the administration area. And thanks for the cooperation, Harv."

Pitkin found immediate evidence of Jenny's efficiency. The reception area had been generally cleared by the simple expedient of throwing the wreckage up against the outside walls. The water bubbling from the broken cooler had been choked off, a number of chairs had been righted and placed around a desk, and someone had even put a pad and pencil on its dusty top.

Henry Niwot, battered and dirty, greeted him. "Oh, Pitkin, I was about to come looking for you. Jenny said you had gone outside. How does it look?"

"The processing building was absolutely crushed, Henry. Just think of a doll house pressed by a steam roller and you'll have the picture."

"Must have been a plane?"

"Yes, Bud Haxtun said he watched it dive. Apparently it was completely loaded with TNT or some of the newer exotic and more powerful explosives. We're probably lucky this building didn't come down. Where were you when it hit?"

"I had just stepped into the auxiliary power room. If I hadn't, I'd have been crushed. About fifty feet of the corridor's roof came down right where I'd been a second before. Hatch Baldwin wasn't quite as lucky. I saw them leading him out with what they thought were a mild concussion and some scratches. But is there any word on Hugo? I talked to Marshall before the medics carried him out. He said Hugo was out there, probably somewhere in the building when we were hit."

"There's been no sign yet, but if he was in that building, only a miracle could have saved his life."

Niwot's face-hardened. "It's a nasty business, Pitkin. I'll pray for that miracle. But as I was saying, I was coming to find you. Jenny's got the phone working, and she says it's ringing constantly." Almost apologetically, he added. "They have it set up in Hugo's office."

It appeared, upon first glance, that Hugo's office had sustained noticeably less damage than Pitkin's. The relatively good order, however was in large measure a result of a rapid and effective cleaning job. The windows had been blown in upon the carpet, but the worst of the menacing glass shards had been thrown into a corner with the disarray of odds and ends that had been

blown from the walls, off the table and desk, and out of overturned cabinets.

Jenny was slapping dust from Hugo's chair when Pitkin came into the office. She glanced up, but before she could speak, the telephone issued an insistent ring. "It's been like that since Almont got it working," she said. Taking the handset from the cradle, she answered, "Department of Energy...No, sir, we have no information about the origin of the suicide plane...No, we have no data on radiation escaping from the plant...I'm sorry, sir, this is an emergency line and I'll have to ask you to call back later." Without a lady's grace and with more than a trace of irritation, she replaced the telephone.

Pitkin walked to the desk and picked up the tablet, which lay by the telephone. "This a list of the `should be answered?"

"Most of them. Some came in before I could find anything to write with or on. They're almost all media people. The one with the check mark is the Governor's office. I think they're pretty nervous. I don't know how any of them got the news so fast, but I'd guess the police called it in on their car radios."

"Jenny, I just talked to Henry. He's probably still just outside. Would you mind giving him a call while I look at this list."

The security chief appeared promptly and stood waiting while Pitkin deciphered a few of the scribbled notes on the pad. Impatiently, Pitkin tossed it onto the desk. "Henry, what's our status on people inside and outside the fence?"

"I was on my way to find out when Jenny called."

"Okay, I want you to maintain the seal around this place. We'll be flooded with cars and people unless we keep them off the access roads. Get in touch with Sheriff Raymond and Sheriff Bergen, and ask them to keep as many deputies as close as possible. Traffic control alone will be a headache. On top of that, we may have a radiation problem. Therefore, I don't want anybody inside the security fence, including employees."

"You don't even want essential personnel admitted?"

"That's right. We've got enough people already exposed and we still don't know how much vagrant plutonium we have out there. I'm going to rely pretty heavily on you, Henry. Use your judgment, but stick by the rule, no one inside without my express approval."

Niwot was a dogged and efficient security officer. Pitkin knew his directions would be followed to the letter. If the man had any questions about denying admittance even to plant personnel who had been designated by regulations as critical in an emergency, he kept them to himself.

After Niwot had left the office, Jenny, who had listened to the orders, reminded Pitkin that at least four dozen employees had standing orders to report to the plant following the occurrence of any life threatening event. "I know, and if I'm not mistaken, most of them will be reporting within the hour. But, for right now, Jenny, I want to keep the people inside to an absolute minimum. To do that I want to review the list of critical personnel and then send Henry a refined list of those who are essential to this particular situation. That brings me to my next request. Do you think you could come up with our critical personnel list from that mess out there?"

"I'll try. As a matter of fact, I might make file clerks out of those two firemen of mine." With a plan already forming in her mind, Jenny left Pitkin to his thoughts and to the telephone that rang even as she went out the door.

"Department of Energy...Oh, hello, Deke...Yes, one hell of an explosion. It was a suicide plane filled with high explosives...So far we've got a couple of wounded and two missing...yes, a press conference would probably be a good idea, but you'll have to hold for a couple of hours. I haven't even talked to Washington yet. Call me back in about an hour...yes, if you could pass the word to some of the others, it would save us a lot of phone answering, and I'll take questions on radiation danger then."

Before the line could be captured by another incoming call, Pitkin punched in the numbers for the office of Secretary of Energy Stewart. He identified himself when the call was answered. "This is Pitkin Waay, Rocky Flats, Colorado. We have an emergency, condition here. It's imperative that I talk to the Secretary immediately." Apparently the Department's system for continual and instant communications with the Secretary operated because it was less than two minutes before Stewart's voice came booming through the phone.

"Pitkin? This is Stewart. What's your situation?"

"About a half an hour ago the processing building here was totally destroyed by an explosion. Eyewitnesses confirm the

cause as being a suicide plane loaded with explosives...Yes, we had the air cover Stanley ordered, but it apparently arrived about the same time the terrorist did. Mark Stanley was critically injured, we're almost certain Hugo was in the building when it came down, and Hatch Baldwin sustained at least a minor concussion...I have a crew searching for Hugo right now...The building was totally destroyed and we sustained blast damage to surrounding structures, including the administrative offices."

Stewart, perhaps better than any other official in the federal government, would understand the enormity of the news he had received. "Pitkin, this sounds like the worst we could have expected. I guess, I thought of a sack of dynamite knocking down a wall, something on that level. This is monstrous. I'll have to call the White House, but I need as much information as you can give me right now...I understand... Excellent thinking...keep the place absolutely sealed off. If you need federal troops to maintain security, I'll get the President's approval and get that started right now...I see...You make a good point. The Governor should be brought into that decision. He may want to use the National Guard if local forces can't handle it, but from our point of view we've got to keep in mind it is a federal facility...Okay, we'll put that on hold until you've talked to him. The President will be calling him, too, since some delicate questions of federal-state relationships are involved. And, we've got to remember that your Colorado operation is critical to the entire nuclear weapons program."

Pitkin could understand how Stewart's first impulse would be to inform the President and to express concern for the integrity of the nuclear weapons program. A successful attack on one weapons facility made the others vulnerable, if not in fact, certainly in the minds of a nuclear sensitive public. On Stewart's level and on the President's level, the reactions and thoughts would naturally channel into considerations of the effects of the Rocky Flats event on nuclear weapons policies and national security.

As the matter progressed, the media would begin its usual campaign of second-guessing. The commentators, self-appointed experts on every important subject which came onto the national stage, would begin the litany of bemoaning failed security,

inadequate protection for weapons facilities and condemning the national and international policies of the administration.

The process had become ritualized. Under the thin guise of news, the media had perfected its power broker image, believing itself to be the nation's kingmaker and keeper of conscience and morality. The avenue to such a position had been paved by a warped interpretation of the First Amendment that read into freedom of the press a necessary hostility to the status quo. Thus positioned, the media would jockey with the administration while each side defined a position on the Rocky Flats calamity with the slower, irrelevant Congress chiming in later.

The terrorist attack on Rocky Flats, in the context of national events, would be an instrument only to be used by each side in the perpetual clash of Washington factions. The physical destruction of a building, the injury to a few government employees and the death of another, perhaps two, would be abstractions in the struggle for power in Washington. Defenders of the administration, advocates for deterrence, and the defense complex would use the event to make the case for a new program to defend the defense installations and a larger greater program to defend against terrorism. Opponents would hail the Rocky Flats experience as proof of vulnerability, of the impossibility, the insanity of reliance on nuclear weapons for defensive purpose.

The political orientation of any given administration had long since lost relevance to the debate. The underlying purpose of the contending groups was to gain and hold power. There would be defenders and detractors of Rocky Flats in the Congress; there would be power plays within the Administration and by-plays among groups within the Defense Department and the Energy Department, and there would be the sardonic oversight of it all by the press corps. Along the well-worn course, defined by past traumas of recent American history, the meaning, the significance of Rocky Flats would be ground into a thousand different interpretations, yielding nothing.

Thus, Pitkin knew the entire matter would become simply an interesting yawn, a building destroyed by a terrorist, a building, which happened to be in Colorado at a weapons facility. That would be the end result of a succession of occurrences unless...unless there was an intervention. A circumstance perhaps,

one which would fall upon another, and it upon still one more until...

"Mister Secretary, we haven't yet talked about possible radiation from the processing building."

"Radiation?"

"Yes, you will recall that the processing building was really the heart of our plutonium fabrication and handling operations. It also contained the central storage bay for all Special Nuclear Material. The real possibility exists for significant contamination of this entire site. We know the glove boxes were crushed, as was the conveyor system. Just the residual plutonium from those sources will create hot spots. In your briefing to the President, you would probably want to mention the potential radiation hazard."

Stewart's otherwise loud voice came back noticeably subdued. "Pitkin, this magnifies the matter substantially. The President will ask more questions than I can answer, but tell me first. Is their danger of an explosion, a detonation?"

"Not in the sense of a nuclear detonation, no. But the radiation hazard could be as damaging to the population. The inhalation of plutonium, Mister Secretary, in even the most minute quantities is life threatening."

"Then we should immediately activate our radiation emergency team and get it out there."

"If I could make another suggestion, Mister Secretary. I would hold that for later. To make such a move at this time could cause a public panic, and I'm sure the administration wouldn't want to be accused by its critics of overreacting and causing harm to anyone."

"Again, Pitkin, you're right on the mark. I'll put further response of that kind on hold until I talk to you and get a better idea of your situation."

"We're in the process of making an evaluation which should answer a lot of the questions you and the President will be asking, but I agree with your decision, sir. Everything on your end should be held in abeyance for the moment."

While Pitkin was talking, Flagler and Haxtun came into the office. Seeing Pitkin was on the telephone, they made a move to leave, but Pitkin waved them back and held up his hand signaling to them his phone conversation was about over. "Yes,

Mister Secretary, I'll be waiting for your call, and I'll try to keep this line open. It's the only one operating at the moment, but we're trying to string another one right now...Thank you, our people here really get the credit. I'll talk to you later then."

"We didn't mean to interrupt," began Flagler.

"You didn't," Pitkin assured him. "What have you got for me?"

Haxtun was an uncomfortable and hesitant messenger. "There isn't any easy way of saying it, Pitkin. We found Hugo's body just where you said it would be. Right at the base of the storage vault. He was crushed pretty bad."

The room was silent, each man alone with his thoughts. There had been much friendly humor among plant employees over some of their director's habits and mannerisms, but he had always been fair in his dealings with them, had stoutly defended them in public, and had fought for their rights in Washington. While he was not personally known to every employee and had not actively sought their affection, he had won their respect.

Pitkin found irony in the fact that Hugo's death had been declared to him while he sat in Hugo's office and in his chair. During the last few weeks, and especially in the last few days, Pitkin had watched the collapse of Hugo's world. On the verge of surrender, Hugo had declared defiance, and Pitkin knew his memory of Hugo Chase would not be of a man broken and bereaved. He would remember a man who had been capable of seeing himself honestly. By crossing the chasm from what one has long believed he to be to a more objective acceptance of himself, any man can lessen the tragic dimension of his life. For Hugo, the step had been long and precarious, but he had made it, and Pitkin would always associate Hugo with the declaration that he, not unseen hands from afar, would run the plant, or he, Hugo Chase, would close it.

"One more thing, Pitkin," said Haxtun quietly; "the body is pretty badly contaminated. We think there's a crack in the wall of the storage bay right where we found him. I'd defer to Harvey, of course, but I think we'll have to put him in a container of some kind and use some shielding. Even at that, no one will be able to handle him without wearing a respirator and gloves."

"I understand, bud. Would you see to it?"

"Sure. We can use some material from the recovery building. But before I go, I have to tell you we've had a few flare-ups. They're small and transient. We can fight them with retardant, but I think there's more plutonium exposed to the air than we might have thought."

Flagler, who had remained silent, joined in Haxtun's assessment. "I've got some preliminary notes, but in general Bud's right."

Haxtun waited a moment while Pitkin scanned Flagler's notes before speaking. "If you don't need me, I'll get back to my fire watch."

Pitkin looked up, "Fine, Bud. And keep me informed about those flares. If they get worse, we may have another problem entirely."

As the fireman left, Pitkin studied Flagler's impassive face. "Harv, I'll be surprised if we don't develop a significant radiation danger out there. I'm not concerned about oxidation flares. I'm sure there's enough plutonium in the cracks and crevices of those glove boxes and conveyor chains to light up that wreckage for days."

"Agreed."

"Our real problem is the storage area. Do you think Bud is right about a crack?"

"Hard to say, Pitkin. I'd be more concerned about the roof of the vault itself. It was triple the strength and thickness of the building roof. I know the design specifications called for it to be strong enough to withstand the direct crash of an airplane, but I've always been suspicious and never believed it could take that much of a jolt. In order for the automatic retrieval system to work, we had to allow a free span of 150 feet. I wonder if a direct thump smack in the middle might not have popped it like a ripe melon. I managed to get right up on top of it, and it looked okay, what little I could see. But we could have a hundred breaks bad enough for radiation to leak out."

"Did you try instruments anywhere on the roof?"

"Some, but even if we had some readings, I wouldn't trust them. And even if we had a crack with some plutonium leaking out, I couldn't say what that might mean."

"I know. The atmosphere in there is bound to be contaminated. Our best bet would be to test for nitrogen. The great

unknown is whether or not any of our containers inside the bay were breached."

Flagler understood the unspoken concern. "If we have criticalities, in there, it'll be too hot to open for a couple of hundred centuries," he said. "There's an awful lot of plutonium in there, Pitkin. More than I like to think about."

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Governor Franklin Pagosa was on the ninth green at Cherry Hills Country Club when his aide found him. The accompanying members of the foursome waited while Pagosa listened to the aide, asked him some questions and finally handed the aide his putter and pointed toward the nearby golf cart. To his companions, now a threesome, Pagosa made his excuses.

"Something's come up." In the best tradition of politics, and because his golfing friends were also political associates, Pagosa could not resist the impulse to drop a hint of the affair of state which was taking him off the links. "I have a call coming in from the White House and since they say it's urgent, I'll have to take one of the buggies."

Pagosa quickly removed his partner's bag from the cart, leaned it against the nearby second cart, climbed into his "buggy" and, with his aide beside him, sped away. In his haste and preoccupation, Pagosa committed the unpardonable sin of driving across the green, and worse, managed to cut across the putting lines of the three men who glared at his departing cart.

When he had begun the day, Pagosa half expected a call from Washington. He had talked to the Secretary of Energy the day before and had been told there was some kind of bomb threat being made against Rocky Flats. Earlier in the day the highway patrol had told him it was more than an idle bomb threat of the type they occasionally received. It was a terrorist operation and was being specifically directed at Rocky Flats. The call from the White House was a dramatic political escalation, and Pagosa had no doubt something significant was afoot at the federal weapons facility.

The plant had long been a political bramble bush in Pagosa's gubernatorial life. On the one hand, he had been required to accept its presence and laud the general goal of strong national defense. At the same time, environmental forces and antinuclear groups had laid siege to his governor's chair and forced him to make statements favoring decommissioning and removal of the offending plant. Recently, the discovery of the barrels of contaminated oil had raised new outcries against the facility. And only a few days ago, his Director of Health Services had told him of further radiation leakages. Pagosa had ordered Doctor Elbert to go to the plant personally and drag some answers out of the secretive bureaucrats who ran the place.

As Pagosa entered the magnificent clubhouse and hurried toward a small office that was reserved for members who had to conduct small items of pressing business, Pagosa was again interrupted, this time by the uniformed state trooper who drove his car. "Governor, I just received a call from the Capitol office building. It seems Captain Norte called in a while ago and reported an explosion at Rocky Flats. Your staff has been trying to get through to the plant managers but haven't reached them yet. I just talked to Captain Norte myself, but he didn't have any details; he was going to investigate and call back."

"So that was it," thought Pagosa. "The terrorists had managed to set off their bomb. It must have been pretty big to

have caused enough damage to get the President personally involved."

Aloud to the trooper, Pagosa said, "Stand by the car phone and keep in touch with Norte. Let me know the minute he reports more details."

Pagosa left his aide outside the little office and took the waiting call alone. "This is Governor Pagosa...Yes I'll hold...Hello, Mister President...I'm fine and it's good to hear your voice, too, sir. It's a beautiful day out here...Yes, Mister President, my staff just informed me there had been an explosion of some kind... I see... a building destroyed and the possibility of some radiation leakage. Well, I must say, Mister President, I've always known that something like this was a possibility. Colorado certainly wants to do its part in the defense effort, but the feeling out here is strongly disposed toward some sort of relocation of at least the radioactive materials work...Oh, we've had experience with the radiation leaks before and with the destruction of one building, I see no reason whatever for troops, Mister President. I haven't received any details from the plant yet, but I would be surprised if the local police couldn't handle the traffic problems, and as a fallback, I could activate a Guard unit. I realize it's a federal facility, but I think your point is well made, sir. We want to avoid overreaction and panic which is the very thing the terrorists have tried to create. We've had much worse disasters than a building blown down...Yes, I'll certainly keep your office and Secretary Stewart's office informed...Good by, Mister President."

An entire building blown down. Pagosa had been shocked, but not enough to be stampeded into doing anything, which might be ill advised politically. "Even such massive destruction at a federal facility was thin justification for the offer of federal troops, and the President had sounded much too strong a note," thought Pagosa.

The Governor knew the White House was already moving to set up a defense of the nuclear weapons program against the critics who would attack it with the rocky flats incident. Pagosa had determined he would not lend his office to furthering the President's cause. The explosion at the plant was essentially a federal problem and Pagosa wasn't inclined to let it become a state problem. In any event, the Governor knew he had to have more information.

Rather than wait for Norte or the highway patrol to report back, Pagosa decided to take the most direct route and try a call directly to the plant himself. Pagosa called his waiting aide and directed him to try and raise the plant on the telephone.

While he was waiting, Pagosa reflected on his past experience with the managers at Rocky Flats. He remembered the Director as being something of a stickler for efficiency and the rulebook. Hugo Chase had always been quite stiff and cool with the Governor and other state officials. There had always been the problem of security, and state functionaries had often been denied information, being told such data was classified.

Some progress toward better cooperation had been achieved in the last year or two, but not without political pressure being applied by way of the State's congressional delegation. The passing thought of Congress made Pagosa wince. The business of Senator Moffat and his contractor cronies was going to be unpleasant since he had endorsed Moffat during the most recent campaign. The stories of Moffat somehow influencing a Department of Energy purchase of equipment were incomplete, but from what Pagosa had heard, he was able to conclude that the Senator would fry in a fire of his own making.

With an effort, Pagosa shook off the thought. Moffat and his dealings were another problem for another time. At the moment he had a problem, and perhaps an opportunity, facing him.

"I have Doctor Waay on the line, Governor."

Pagosa took the phone almost reluctantly. He would have preferred talking to Chase, the Director. Pitkin Waay had a knack of making Pagosa feel uncomfortable. The Deputy Director never tried to conceal his low regard for politicians, and he had an unerring ability to anticipate the purposes underlying political statements and positions. That was disconcerting in itself, but Pagosa had also discovered that Pitkin Waay had no hesitation when it came to airing such views.

When Pagosa had made a vague public statement about how Rocky Flats was a credit to the State of Colorado, Pitkin had, in response to a question at a press conference, described the statement as a bow to voting workers. On another occasion, Pagosa had cited figures from a study showing damage to the environment caused by Rocky Flats. Pitkin's response, again

before the press, had been only to note the study had been done by a contractor at no small expense to the state, and the contractor just happened to be a former aide of the Governor. It would have been no exaggeration to say that Franklin Pagosa never welcomed an exchange with Pitkin Waay.

"Hello, Pitkin. I'm glad I was able to get through to you. I was afraid the phones might be out. I just got off the phone with the President. Can you give me some more detail about what's happened out there? I see. I'm sorry to hear about Mister Chase; he was a fine man...I quite agree with your decision to seal the entire plant area off. We'll have a mob of people trying to drive out there and there's going to be a lot of concern about radiation. I'm sure you'll do everything possible to contain it. I'm prepared to activate our State Emergency Unit if you believe it's necessary...I agree it could create some false impressions. I think a press conference to reassure everyone would be a good idea...Yes, I think holding it right there would be useful and would go far toward letting people know the situation is under control. I'll make a few calls first. Let's plan on my coming out in about two hours, and if there's any change I'll have someone call you. Fine, I'll see you then."

Pitkin replaced the phone and leaned back reflecting on the conversation with Pagosa. The publicity hungry politician had leaped at the suggestion they have a live press conference at the plant. It was evident; Pagosa was treating this as another Rocky Flats incident.

Pitkin knew that previous radiation scares at the plant had conditioned Pagosa into putting all such events into the same category. The Governor thought them to be a nuisance, but each time managed to capitalize by building such occurrences into news copy.

Pitkin had been trying to reach the Governor when the call had come in. He would have preferred getting his call in ahead of the President's call to Pagosa, but from what he could gather, the President had been pretty low key and had only suggested the potential for radiation contamination. Pitkin felt that his immediate call to Stewart had paid off by sounding an alert but a quiet one. The message had gotten through to Pagosa indirectly and the effect of restraining against overreaction had been achieved.

He called to Jenny, who was rummaging through disordered files. "Could you find Henry Niwot? We're going to have to arrange for a press conference and I don't want his guards shooting down the Governor's helicopter."

With Niwot, Flagler, and Jenny in the office, Pitkin explained the need for precautions to be taken at the press conference. "The last thing we need is to expose his Excellency, Governor Pagosa to an unhealthy dose of alpha radiation. Therefore, Harv, I'll need you to find an area where we can get a good view of the wreckage, but still not get into a hot spot. Henry, there'll be a dozen reporters, and I want them kept together and kept from going off on excursions of their own."

Flagler, in his unflappable way, thought the precautions could be managed but wasn't sure they were as necessary as Pitkin seemed to think. "As long as we keep them a decent distance back, there shouldn't be any problem."

"I don't want to keep them back," replied Pitkin. "I want them taken right up to the edge of the damn thing. The whole idea is to show them, first hand, what happened."

"I guess I follow some of that, Pitkin," said Flagler, "but there will be some greater risk, if we let them stand around for more than a few minutes."

"Then we'll have to protect them from such a risk. Whatever is necessary, I intend to give them a good look. Oh, yes, I'll want instruments there where they can be seen and I want them to show radiation."

"You want to register radiation?" asked Flagler with a frown. "Pitkin, I don't believe I'm tracking you. I get the feeling you're going to emphasize the presence of plutonium. If I'm right, you've reversed the only policy I've ever known around here, which has been to talk as little and say as close to nothing as possible about radiation."

"You're right. The policy is changed. If we proceed as usual, this entire matter will become a political football with no greater impact on the real issues than the uncovering of one more barrel out by the east fence. If the three of you will cooperate with me, I intend to give our leaders a lesson on how they can get burned by playing with fire." Let me explain.

The meeting continued for a full two hours. At the end of it, each one had agreed with the others. Finally, they rose and

stood looking at one other for a moment. Then by a strange and sudden impulse they shook hands around.

"I'll never understand all of it, but I agree utterly and completely," said Flagler.

"Harvey just said it all for me," grunted Niwot.

Pitkin walked with them to the door. "If you two will begin making your arrangements for the arrival of Pagosa, I'll make a couple of phone calls while Jenny goes through her list of critical personnel to figure out who would be the best people to help us with this project. When she finishes, Henry, she'll bring it out, and the ones we select can be admitted after you've explained the situation to them, assuming they want to come aboard. Let her help explain the situation to them. If we pick our people carefully, it shouldn't take too much to bring them around."

Pitkin's first call was to Deke Prowers. "Deke, I wanted to talk to you about the press briefing we agreed to have out here...Yes it's still on. I only wanted to touch bases with you to see whom you've called. Governor Pagosa is coming out with his helicopter, and I thought it would be best if you put your pool together and came out at the same time. I know a couple of the television stations have helicopters and you could work together. With the roads crammed with spectators, you'd have trouble getting through the traffic anyhow...Okay, I'll leave the arrangements to you, but it looks like we're going to be running later than we thought. In fact, it may be evening before we can get everybody together. I'll call Pagosa's office and set a firm time and have them call you. Good, I'll see you then...Yes, your source proved to be a good one. I just wish they had been more specific about the type of security we needed to increase. No one here expected an air raid. Yes, I can confirm for you that Hugo Chase was killed by the attack, but the rest will have to wait for later. But before we ring off, Deke, there is another matter I'd like to explore with you. Let me begin with a couple of questions..."

Next, Pitkin called Pagosa's office and talked with the Governor's aide. The delay Pitkin suggested met with initial resistance, but when he explained the reason, the objections were dropped. Without further comment, the press briefing was firmly set for eight o'clock. The Governor and his party, along with two press helicopters, would arrive shortly before that time in order to

give the television crews a chance to set up for their remote, live telecasts.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

The raucous thrashing of the helicopters made speech impossible. First to settle to the broad surface of the parking lot was Governor Pagosa's official helicopter. It gleamed in the emergency landing lights, and the sight of the Colorado Flag with its sunspot nearly surrounded by a red ring confirmed the arrival of the State's Chief executive.

Close behind were two more of the great roaring birds. Pitkin saw they were not the smaller machines often used for covering news events in the metropolitan area, but instead were larger passenger helicopters, obviously chartered for this trip. The larger helicopters was a Deke Prowers touch, and it brought a grim smile to Pitkin's face. With great wind gusts, they settled respectful distances from the slightly smaller helicopter carrying the Governor.

At first, Pitkin thought something was amiss. The door of the Governor's helicopter remained closed, and the engine continued spinning the great rotor at a high idle. When he saw the newsmen peel out of their machines and the cameramen rapidly adjusting and kneeling and aiming, he almost smiled. Pagosa was waiting for the cameras. It was a grand photo opportunity, the Governor arriving at the scene of the disaster. "They never step off stage," he muttered to himself as he watched the politician, "grim faced," the news copy would say, depart from his helicopter.

Pitkin stepped forward through the photographers and newsmen and greeted Pagosa. "Governor, thank you for coming," he said loud enough for the microphones.

"Pitkin, I'm glad to be here." Straight into the cameras, he continued, "I want the people of Colorado to have every assurance that matters here at Rocky Flats are under control. I came myself to see the damage, to talk to plant officials, and to let the bloody

terrorists who are responsible for this atrocity know that the people of Colorado are not terrorized. They have not been frightened and never will shrink in the face of this kind of cowardly act. I spoke with the President this afternoon and assured him of our State's determination to deal with this matter as proud Americans and not as victims of foreign terror."

Pitkin turned his head away from the lights and cameras as he spoke in conspicuous confidence to Pagosa. "Governor, before you take questions, I think we should talk for a few moments."

Pagosa nodded and spoke again for the cameras, "Gentlemen, Doctor Waay and I are going to consult for a moment, I suggest we adjourn and reconvene nearer the blast site."

The Governor's suggestion fell flat, however, because the immediate area around the helicopters was surrounded by Niwot's security forces who were firm about keeping the media crowd behind the ropes which had been strung around the landing site. Pitkin led Pagosa through the security ring and toward the administration building.

When they were alone and well out of hearing, Pitkin halted. "Governor, just a couple of small matters. I thought it best to brief you in advance so there wouldn't be any surprises."

"I appreciate your concern, Pitkin. I hope it's nothing terribly serious."

"It could be, but I'll let you be the judge of that. First, I must tell you I talked to Secretary Stewart after talking to you. I suggested and he agreed there would be no holding back by the Department of Energy of information. Every question will be answered to the best of our ability. We consider this to be an extreme emergency and the public interest is paramount. The only thing we would not give is design information on nuclear devices, and I'm sure you yourself would agree with that single reservation."

"Certainly, and I find this a refreshing turn of events."

"The next item of information will be less so, I'm afraid. We can discuss the details later, but as a precaution I'm going to recommend that we remove some of the nearby residents until we get this situation under better control." Before Pagosa could react, Pitkin went on. "Since the first moments after the explosion, our radiation monitoring teams have been keeping constant watch on the building. They have been picking up some strong radiation

readings, therefore, I would recommend the press conference not be unduly extended. And as a precaution, I have ordered that all personnel going out of the landing area be required to wear protective garments and, while we're actually near the building, respirators should be worn as much as possible."

Pagosa frowned, "You didn't mention this kind of radiation problem on the telephone. I must consider the risk to my staff and to these reporters." Scowling even harder, he asked, "Do I have your personal assurance the radiation is not a serious threat?"

"Governor, those of us who work with radiation are, by nature, cautious. The measures I have ordered are precautions, but there isn't any way I can issue written guarantees of personal safety. If we keep the visit reasonably short, there shouldn't be any appreciable danger. If you would like to simply hold the briefing here in the parking lot, I'm sure everyone would understand."

"No," said Pagosa, determined to go ahead with the visit to the bombed building. "Just you make sure we don't overstay any reasonable safety limit. This whole thing is a bit more than I had anticipated, and I do not take kindly to the Energy Department not having better measures for protecting against this sort of thing."

"Perhaps confining this to the parking lot would be better, Governor. You could answer questions, then remain here while I took some of the photographers around for quick pictures. We owe the public a look at the scene, I think you would agree we'd be remiss in doing anything less."

"No," shot back Pagosa angrily. "I said I'd go and I will. I just wanted you to understand my concerns for the reporters and for my staff. Now let's get on with it. I don't want to stand around here all night talking about it." As they walked back toward the waiting reporters, Pagosa growled to Pitkin as an aside, "I'll make the announcement."

Standing in the lighted circle, Pagosa raised his hands for silence. "Upon the advice of Doctor Waay, you will be required to wear protective clothing into the blast area. You will be issued respirators which Doctor Waay recommends you use. He has assured me this is strictly a precautionary measure. I see the protective clothing is already here, so I suggest we proceed."

There was a period of disorganization during which members of Flagler's radiation team helped the reporters don protective coats, booties, and head covers. As a last item each member of the group was issued a small cloth respirator shaped to fit over the nose and mouth of the wearer.

Pitkin had put on a pair of white coveralls and wore a skullcap of the type worn by surgeons. A heavy and conspicuous respirator hung by a strap around his neck. Pagosa wore the white coat, booties, and the wide head cover issued to the visitors. The head cover was made in one size, and to accommodate women and others with lots of hair, it was large and baggy. It was held around the forehead by a thin strip of elastic sewn to the inside edge of the thin cotton. It was really a loose bag much like those seen on the heads of women in beauty shops. Had the occasion been less somber, there would have been much joking and laughter about the caps, coats, and booties, but this night hardly a word was spoken as the group proceeded along behind the tall strolling figure of Pitkin and the shorter bagged head of Franklin Pagosa.

A rope had been strung along the line where the heaviest concentration of rubble began. The assemblage halted at that point. At a signal from Pitkin, huge floodlights, which had been mounted on temporary stands, were turned on.

The jagged chunks of concrete were garish under the lights. Their white sides and twisted daggers of re-enforcing rods stood out against pockets of darkness. No better or more dramatic display of devastation could have been imagined.

The response was appropriate to the scene. There were gasps of astonishment and surprise. The exclamations, "My God," and "Incredible," were involuntary. There was a momentary pause before flashbulbs began popping. They were followed by the introduction to the scene of glaring lights from the hand held television light bars.

Pitkin stepped up onto a particularly large section of broken wall and reached down and assisted Pagosa who joined him. Outlined there against the night sky the two white clad figures faced the reporters. Pitkin gently nudged the Governor and indicated he should be wearing his respirator. Pagosa quickly fitted the cloth device over his nose and mouth not thinking how effectively it silenced him or thinking it strange Pitkin did not

follow suit. Thus facing what was a nationwide television audience, the press conference began.

The first question came from a short man whose white gown nearly dragged the ground. The dark eyes winked in the bright television lights. "Juan Ouray, freelance," he said by way of identification. "Was this all done with one bomb?"

"One large bomb," said Pitkin. "The employees who were outside at the time agree it was a two engine plane. I have no confirmation on the type of explosive used, but one of our firemen who has had some ordinance training guessed it might have been one of the new compounds which has appeared recently. One such compound called `dyrad' has substantially more explosive power than TNT. But whatever it was, the plane could have been carrying as much as a couple of tons of it, perhaps more."

"Any information on who the terrorist was or where he was from," continued Ouray.

"Only this," answered Pitkin, "the FBI knew a religious oriented faction was planning such an act. The only information we had suggested it be based somewhere in the Middle East or Northern Africa. For anything on identification, you'll have to talk to the FBI."

"Can you be specific on casualties?" asked Ed Walsenburg.

"The Director, Hugo Chase, was killed. FBI Special Agent, Mark Stanley was critically injured. The first report we received said he had sustained multiple internal injuries and was in the intensive care unit at Jefferson County Hospital. But just a few minutes ago, I was informed that Agent Stanley died from his injuries. Deputy Assistant Secretary Hatch Baldwin received a concussion. Other than that, we had only a few people with minor scratches."

"Including yourself?"

Pitkin had forgotten his own bandaged face. "Yes, but it's not worth mentioning. Not what you call attention grabbing copy, Ed."

"What building was it?" called a reporter who didn't bother to identify himself.

"It was the building we used to process plutonium. By process, I mean we machined and shaped plutonium according to specifications for use in nuclear weapons."

"Then the place was full of plutonium," cried Jess Lyons accusingly, through his mask.

"Not full, Jess," came Pitkin's correction. "Because of the lead time, the advance warning given by the FBI, we were able to store the plutonium in our central storage vault. The radiation that is spread through the wreckage is from the small residues left in the glove boxes and on the machinery, such as lathes and handling equipment. It is a comparatively small amount, really just traces."

"You said, 'comparatively small amount', Pitkin," said Deke Prowers, drowning Lyons' follow-up accusation. "Compared to what?"

"Compared to the bulk amounts in the central storage vault."

"Where is the vault?" asked Prowers.

"Over there," Pitkin gestured at the rubble, "under a couple of hundred tons of concrete."

"It was in this building?" yelled Prowers above a half dozen other voices.

"It was."

Pitkin continued to recognize Prowers whose questions seemed almost designed to invite awesome revelations. "Was it damaged in the explosion?"

"We've been trying to find the answer to that all afternoon," said Pitkin. "You've really asked a key question, Deke. If the integrity of the vault has been breached, we could have some intensely serious problems. The plutonium in the vault is kept in stainless steel containers. If any of those containers was damaged, we have the possibility of experiencing a criticality."

"An explosion?" Cried Shelia Montrose, dropping her respirator away from her face.

"Not a nuclear detonation of the type most people think of as a bomb. Not even an explosion of the type which destroyed this building, but one which is potentially more dangerous. A criticality is a quick flash of radiation or more technically a fission reaction. It produces intense radiation in only a tiny fraction of a second. It can occur when certain quantities of fissionable material come into critical juxtaposition."

"You referred to bulk amounts," boomed the strong voice of Deke Prowers again. "What do you mean by bulk? A few pounds?"

"More like thousands of pounds, Deke."

"You mean to say there may be a ton of plutonium under that heap, and it takes only a few pounds to make one bomb," asked an astonished Franklin Pagosa, forgetting his mask for a moment.

"Yes, Governor, we also have some smaller amounts of uranium and tritium, all intensely radioactive."

Pagosa returned the mask to his face and yielded to Frank Watkins, a wire service reporter. "Doctor Waay, is there a possibility such radiation could escape if the vault is in fact broken?"

"Yes. And if we had some small explosions inside, the possibilities would become much greater. The atmosphere inside the vault is nitrogen, but if we lost the nitrogen and the interior were invaded by ambient air; we could have plutonium fires. As you may recall hearing me say on previous occasions, plutonium burns spontaneously in an open-air medium. In fact, we've had some plutonium flares bursting out since the detonation. As you know, our press conference was postponed from the afternoon until now. The reason was a bad plutonium fire over near the far wall. If we had such a fire inside the vault, Frank, we'd probably have significant releases of plutonium into the air."

"What are you doing about it?" Demanded Estes Weld a television commentator with KRAY TV.

"We're continuing to spray a neutral retardant agent on the fires as they occur, Estes. We're also attempting to get some more valid data on the condition of the vault. But working around it is extremely hazardous. For example, we could unknowingly remove just the wrong piece of debris and open an otherwise closed breach in the wall. I'm sure you can imagine the difficulty in digging into this mess knowing what's underneath."

"Couldn't you simply cover it, the way you did the barrels," asked Ouray.

"Not as long as we have fires breaking out. The plastic would melt and we'd be back where we started."

"Pitkin," called Ed Walsenburg, "can you tell us how much radiation has been released already? There must be quite a bit, or we wouldn't be wearing this get up."

"I don't want to alarm anybody, but, yes, we have radiation in the immediate area. But you can see we are

monitoring it constantly." Pitkin gestured at the hooded radiation team members stationed around the building and around the press corps.

Leaning to one side, Pitkin summoned one of the monitors. The man held a bulky instrument close to Pitkin and stood supporting its weight while Pitkin took the meters, which were on long cords, and held them up for all to see. "Our air sampling data is still incomplete, but as you can see we're getting significant readings."

The large white dials flashed like glass-covered eyes in the television lights. Those closest to the front could see the swinging hands on the meters, and in the silence, everyone could hear the metallic stuttering of the machine.

"Clearly there has been a significant release. With the total destruction of a building that has been used as a plutonium processing facility for over twenty years, there's bound to be a release of radioactive material to the atmosphere. I haven't discussed the specifics with Governor Pagosa yet, but I'm going to recommend a limited evacuation of a small number of people who live in the immediate vicinity."

"Evacuation?" The word tumbled out of a half dozen mouths at once. It was the first time it has been mentioned, and it came as more of an announcement than an idea to be discussed.

Pitkin raised his hand to quiet the clamoring reporters. "First, I want to emphasize as strongly as possible, there is no cause for alarm. The evacuation would be limited and would be carried out over the next day or two to give the individuals involved time to proceed in an orderly and deliberate way."

"How can you be orderly and deliberate, if there's a radiation threat?" called Shelia Montrose.

"Shelia has a good question," said Pitkin. "The plutonium which has us concerned is like a fine, invisible powder, like dry road dust. If undisturbed, it would lie where it is forever. However, it won't be undisturbed. The slightest breeze can spread it around and increase the area of contamination. But the spread will be relatively slow, especially if the weather holds. The worst thing for us now would be a strong wind, but none is predicted for the immediate forecast period."

"Couldn't you just cover the whole damn area with dirt? A dozen bulldozers could do the job in a few hours," asked Weld, a note of frustration and perhaps fear edging into his voice.

"Heavy equipment might be the answer, Estes, but what happens if we jar something loose in that vault. We might end up creating a problem where none exists. The further problem is the fine and transient nature of plutonium oxide. The slightest movement stirs it up and disperses it into the air. I for one am not yet willing to begin shoving dirt over the top of a couple of thousand of pounds of unstable plutonium. We could, by jarring the vault, cause massive criticalities. The only way we can proceed is with calm and deliberation."

Prowers, again with his script-like questions, brought the focus back to the startling admission that for the first time the government was talking about evacuation. "Given the fact the evacuation can continue in a planned way, how large an area are you talking about?"

"As I said, Deke, the details haven't been discussed with the Governor. There simply hasn't been time, but as a preliminary estimate, I'd say we'd have to be concerned about everyone between here and the Jefferson County Airport to the east and all the families as far south as 64th Street. We would make a circle and clear an area the same general size to the north and west. However, this is preliminary. I imagine we're talking about three of four hundred families."

"But the area could expand?" Prowers was persistent.

"It could, but we shouldn't get ahead of ourselves. Further evacuation would be indicated only if we experienced more plutonium releases."

"Wouldn't it be advisable for others to leave also?" asked Ouray. "By that I mean pregnant women and children."

"I'm not recommending that now, Juan, but as I said, if we have additional releases, I'd consider such a recommendation for Arvada certainly and perhaps Golden."

A blue flame resembling clean burning natural gas burst forth from the rubble. It burned low and danced over the broken concrete covering an area a few feet in diameter. Firemen in full facemasks began scrambling toward it. From tanks mounted on their backs, they sprayed white foam on the flame that seemed to

die only to reappear. Renewed efforts to quench it finally prevailed, and the flame disappeared under the foam.

The reporters stood in fascinated silence during the operation that consumed perhaps three minutes. There was more than a noticeable edging back from the rope barrier.

Pitkin explained, "You just witnessed a small plutonium fire. The others we've had have been somewhat larger."

"Doesn't the fire burn the plutonium," asked a nervous Jess Lyons.

"No," replied Pitkin. "Plutonium is plutonium until it decays into a form of uranium. No process known to science, combustion, chemicals, the presence of other materials, anything, changes the process of radiation, except nuclear fission. Since a criticality is a fission event that will convert plutonium into other radioactive materials, we could find ourselves dealing with both gamma and beta radiation. That creates many new kinds of problems. The fire only spreads it around."

"I wonder if we haven't covered the essential points and given the press quite a sufficient view," said Pagosa through his mask to Pitkin.

"Yes," said Pitkin to the group. "Governor Pagosa makes a good point. There's no need to prolong the exposure. Just follow the guards back to the parking lot. But before you go, let me make a housekeeping note. You will find packing boxes along the side of the parking area. Please deposit your protective gear and your respirators in those cartons for disposal. There will be some radiation on them and they are unfit for reuse. You then may pass through the checkpoint to the helicopter landing area. Our radiation monitors will check your clothing as you go through the check station."

The undressing was performed under the same television lights and in front of the same shoulder mounted television cameras that had been in almost continuous operation since the Governor had stepped out of his helicopter. They continued to record events as the reporters trooped between the radiation monitors who wielded detection devices. Occasionally the monitors would halt the line to examine more carefully a trouser leg, a shoe, a collar, and a hairline.

Jenny, who was working the check station with Harvey Flagler, held up her hand as Pagosa began to walk by. She scoured

him with the hand-held detection device. Pagosa looked the part of an airline passenger who has set off a metal detector. Jenny walked around him frowning at the meter. Flagler walked over and joined in the procedure. Finally, Flagler said, "Governor, I'm sorry but we're picking up a heavy reading on your sleeve. Would you remove your coat please?"

Pagosa did as he had been directed. The offending suit coat was laid on the asphalt of the parking lot and scanned with a detector that clicked loudly. Satisfied, Flagler picked the garment up on the end of his probe and carried it to one of the disposal cartons. Without hesitation or ceremony, he tossed the coat in among the discarded booties, gowns, hats and respirators. Jenny continued her sweep of the Governor, and finally with another frown passed him through to the makeshift heliport.

Pagosa was relatively lucky. His aide lost both coat and shirt. A number of reporters lost suit coats, one lost both shoes to the dump cartons, and another had his trousers cut off at the knees when he hesitated at the request to remove them altogether. Shelia Montrose lost a handful of hair to the scissors and Jess Lyons had to surrender his vest, note pad and old fashioned ink pen, but he demanded and received a fresh respirator that he wore like a giant white beak into the helicopter.

Pitkin, still wearing his white coveralls, walked up to Pagosa, as the Governor edged closer to the helicopter steps. "Governor, I'll be calling your office about the evacuation. I believe it's absolutely necessary that we proceed with it as quickly as possible. I didn't want to go too far with the press people, they exaggerate enough as it is, but our radiation people say the situation justifies prompt removal of those nearby residents."

"Yes, we can work out the details over the phone. My God, this whole thing is worse than I ever imagined. Are you quite sure you don't want some assistance from our state people?"

"No, my staff and our radiation teams are familiar with the situation. They're experts and any more people here now would only require more management and coordination. In addition to what we have here, we're in constant communication with radiation experts in Washington and in our other weapons facilities. One of Secretary Stewart's top men happened to be here, and although he was slightly injured, he has agreed to stay with us

and keep the Secretary personally advised of the situation. Any more experts would simply be in the way."

"Well, what is your next step," asked Pagosa, still eyeing his helicopter.

"We're going to begin limited excavation around the storage area. By tomorrow morning, we may even know whether or not the vault has been breached. If it's intact we may be able to begin removing our casks of plutonium sometime next week. But if the wall's been broken and if we've had criticalities inside..."

Pitkin left his sentence unfinished, and Pagosa did not ask him to complete it. Instead, the Governor decided that further conversation was unnecessary. "Call me personally, Pitkin. I want to be kept fully and currently informed about your situation here. I'll go from here to my office, and we can talk over the phone at our leisure about your recommendations for evacuation."

Without waiting for a reply, Pagosa turned and climbed into the executive helicopter. As the roaring machines rose into the night air, Pitkin stood on the lighted parking watching them fly away to safety. One press helicopter swung over the demolished building which was still illuminated by the spotlights. The aircraft hung there, in nearly the same place in space where the great explosion had burst from the suicide plane.

Then perhaps noticing the rotor was stirring up dust and perhaps remembering Pitkin's words about the spread of plutonium, the helicopter suddenly roared away. After a time, the makeshift landing lights were extinguished, the spotlights were switched off, and the plant was left sitting under its rows of yellow security lights.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

The television covered every detail of the evacuation that began at dawn of the Sunday morning following the press conference. The area for complete evacuation turned out to be somewhat larger than Pitkin had originally estimated and thousands of families found themselves packing close personal belongings into pickups, station wagons, and family cars and being directed away from their homes by grim faced police officers.

At midmorning, continuous television coverage abruptly shifted back to Rocky Flats where Pitkin Waay, the Acting Director, announced further plutonium releases from the radioactive materials storage vault. The message, delivered from the east gate of the facility by Pitkin in full-face mask and white overalls, was chilling. The picture was a bit unsteady due to the fact the lone television cameraman allowed on the scene was apparently more than a little nervous, and the sound was slightly garbled since Pitkin spoke through the portals of his facemask.

"At approximately nine A.M. we discovered that a corner section of the main plutonium storage vault had been torn away by large internal eruptions in the storage bay," he announced. The statement continued, "I have already talked to Governor Pagosa and recommended further evacuations. The Governor has activated units of the National Guard to assist in the removal and to maintain order. Nose and mouth respirators have been distributed to Guard Units and to Police. Residents in the evacuation area should wear these devices until they clear the area. When evacuees reach clean areas they should package and bury their clothing and take extensive soapy showers. As an added precaution air passages should be cleaned with cotton swabs and all open sores or wounds should be thoroughly washed

immediately. Further directions will be made available through your radio and television stations."

The television picture shifted to the Governor's office and a hollow eyed Franklin Pagosa. "The radioactive contamination from the explosion at Rocky Flats has spread more rapidly than we expected. Accordingly, I have activated all National Guard Units in Denver, Boulder and Jefferson counties. Before going on with my statement, let me give you this assurance. This evacuation shall be orderly and controlled. I have already signed an order to General Logan, the Guard Commander, declaring martial law in the evacuated areas. Any looters or vandals in these areas will be shot on sight. There will be no toleration of disorder or resistance to military control."

Anyone listening to Pagosa would have heeded the warning. There was no equivocation, no political compromise, no half way tone whatever. It was straightforward, cold, precise, and it fairly rang with determination.

"I have been in contact with both the President and the Secretary of Energy. The Secretary has an open line into Rocky Flats and the Department of Energy is maintaining constant control of the situation. At the time of the explosion a personal representative of the Secretary was at Rocky Flats and was slightly injured. However, he is working with Doctor Waay and they are keeping Washington advised of developments as they occur. The President has given me his personal assurance that the federal government will provide us with whatever assistance we need. I have ordered the discontinuation of flights coming into all area airports, and incoming automobile traffic will be diverted so that all lanes of every interstate and major highway will be available for people leaving the contaminated area. The area to be evacuated includes the Cities of Golden, Arvada, Wheat Ridge, Westminster, Broomfield, and Thornton. Again, let me remind you this evacuation need not be rushed or done in panic. Doctor Pitkin Waay, who is in charge at Rocky Flats, assures me the drift of plutonium is being contained by every possible means. I would ask that every citizen in this area keep his television and radio tuned in order receive the most recent information."

The fact that the evacuation was begun on Sunday morning, at a time when families were together, made the process more manageable for the displaced residents and for the

guardsmen. Even with that small plus, the civilian soldiers were ill-at-ease ordering people out of their homes on what should have been a tranquil and sleepy Sunday morning.

Some citizens donned the cotton respirators handed to them, others did not. The little masks impaired speech and made breathing more difficult, and they added to the surrealistic atmosphere of people standing in their yards trying to talk, of others carrying possessions to their cars, and the attempts to remain calm amid the growing tension.

People wondered what to take and how long they would be gone. They complained bitterly to one another, to the soldiers, and to their neighbors, but their common knowledge about Rocky Flats and the work done there kept them from seriously questioning the threat or the need to flee from the encroaching plutonium. Then, too, the fact that the neighborhoods were filled with people all doing the same thing gave the evacuation an underlying communal drive.

Where to go? The answers were as various as the questioners. Some took the matter lightly, thinking they would be home by evening. To them it was a day in the country. Others tried packing everything and worried about ever seeing their houses again. To them it was despair at the prospect of a long journey to a relative, to another state, to any place other than the plutonium-contaminated neighborhood.

Official Colorado was everywhere. In addition to the Guard units, all police forces were at full, emergency strength, fire stations were fully staffed, and even a few civil defense helmets were seen. Hospitals called in staff and went on alert, Red Cross units were activated, and volunteers, official and unofficial, were in abundance. Schools and churches throughout the uncontaminated Denver area were thrown open for refugees.

The evacuation continued throughout the day and into the night. Monday arrived, but without the confusion of morning rush hour, because Governor Pagosa had ordered all Denver area stores and businesses closed. The only exceptions were food stores and gasoline stations. The Governor was explicit. Denver area residents were to remain in their homes and neighborhoods. Patrols would be in the streets and non-emergency driving would not be allowed.

A news bulletin was promised for eight A.M. It was postponed until nine. Governor Pagosa appeared on television screens at nine, but walked out of the office without uttering a word when an aide handed him a note. The aide returned to say the Governor would address the state in ten minutes. A half hour later, a haggard Franklin Pagosa appeared and made an announcement.

"I have been on the telephone with the officials at Rocky Flats. The Acting Director, Doctor Pitkin Waay is on the telephone and will describe their situation out there. Go ahead, Pitkin."

The connection was good and the voice coming through was strong. While he spoke, the television displayed a file picture of the wreckage of the plutonium processing building. "Governor, the situation here is quite serious. As you, of course, know, our processing building was totally destroyed by the terrorist suicide plane. Our immediate concern and our continuing concern have been the main plutonium storage vault that was located in that building. We had hoped it had survived the explosion. It was of much heavier construction than the surrounding building and was designed to withstand fire and explosions. Unfortunately, it did not remain intact."

"In the past twelve hours, there have been a series of explosions inside the vault. Some of our workers have sustained massive doses of radiation attempting to contain the plutonium that is being released. I must report, however, that despite our best efforts, massive amounts of plutonium have been exposed to the open air."

"Permit me to illustrate. Our past experiences with emissions have been concerned with micrograms, invisible and almost infinitely small. In fact, over the years, Rocky Flats has emitted only a finger pinch of plutonium to the atmosphere. Now, tragically, we are talking about thousands of pounds of raw plutonium which will be picked up by the wind and carried for miles. We have been using earth-moving equipment to try and cover as much of the plutonium as possible, but, unfortunately, that has had the effect of increasing the dispersion. To make matters worse, the plutonium is now coming out of the vault in ever-greater quantities. A few moments ago, we had two major criticalities in the storage area. Both had the effect of fracturing

the integrity of more containers. We can only expect more of the same."

"The amount of vagrant plutonium already spread around the destroyed building by the events of the last few hours is easily enough to be fatal to millions of people and to induce genetic damage to millions more. Distributed among a congested population it would cause an untold number of cancers; it could accelerate the aging process; and it could cause numerous other diseases in sensitive organs and tissues of the body. I must stress that the inhalation of plutonium will cause death in only a few days."

"In effect, this plant is a giant radiation bomb exploding in slow motion, and there is no earthly force which can stop it. By any standard or measure, the circumstances which confront us are nothing short of catastrophic."

"Governor Pagosa will be conveying to you the details of the plan we have agreed upon to protect the safety of the public. But before I hang up, I want the citizens of Colorado to know that our staff here is made up of volunteers. They are professional and totally dedicated. We will do everything technically possible to contain the flood of plutonium that is being released from this facility, but in all candor, I must tell you the situation here is out of practical control. But until we have wind, you have time to evacuate safely."

"Some of the workers here have already sustained such massive doses of radiation that they can live only a few days. They have, through their sacrifices, managed to purchase for you, the citizens of Denver, some precious time. I hope you use it wisely."

"Finally, one word about the Rocky Flats plant and its mission. This facility has a long history as a vital link in America's system of nuclear weapons production. In that role, it has served honorably and well, but it has now become a relic of history. When the final chapter on nuclear armaments is written, we should all pray that the lesson of Rocky flats will have served to instruct our leaders and the leaders of other nations on the compelling need to direct that history to a positive conclusion."

The line connecting the television audience with the voice from Rocky Flats clicked and fell silent. It was a moment before Franklin Pagosa could collect himself and his scribbled notes, but

when he spoke it was with simple eloquence. "Our time for deliberation has passed. The City and metropolitan area of Denver must be evacuated. The plutonium contamination is of such massive proportions and the problem has such immediacy that I have devised the following plan. The evacuation will be in stages. Those areas nearest to Rocky Flats will be evacuated first. Priorities are as follows. Families with pregnant women and women with small children should leave immediately. Next priority will be given to hospital patients and other bed ridden and confined individuals. For those purposes, we will use city buses and school buses. People needing institutional care will be taken to centers in Salt Lake City, Oklahoma City, Cheyenne, Lincoln, Albuquerque, and Kansas City. Numerous smaller cities have also volunteered their facilities."

"Necessary and vital services will be maintained until...until they are no longer needed. Radio stations will continue broadcasting until the evacuation is complete. The National Guard units and police will be the last to leave the city."

"Before beginning this broadcast I talked with the President. He will address the nation later today. He will declare that an area fifty miles in every direction from Rocky Flats to be a closed zone. Our evacuation will be followed by a thorough sweep of this area by United States Army forces who will take such action as they deem necessary to neutralize the area and prevent any hazard from developing which would threaten people and cities outside the zone. The troops will then set up a perimeter around the contaminated zone."

"Our evacuation will be completed over the next three days. Again, it will be orderly and under strict military supervision. The area will be entirely vacated. The only exception will be the federal force of volunteers at Rocky Flats. That group, under the direction of Doctor Waay will continue their efforts to contain the spread of plutonium. Department of Energy headquarters in Washington will continue to monitor the spread of radiation from the reports being forwarded to Secretary Stewart."

"I will now leave Denver and set up governmental offices in Colorado Springs which I have designated the Capitol of the State of Colorado until the legislature can convene and select that city or some other as the permanent capitol. Given the amount of time we have, governmental records can be preserved intact and

the government should continue to function. Over the next three days I will be speaking to you again from Colorado Springs. God be with the people of the city and this state."

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Three days and three nights to evacuate a city - to find transport for the helpless - to load cherished possessions - to call relatives-to maintain order on the very doorstep of chaos - to care for the injured - to comfort the distraught - and through it all, to enforce the decree of total evacuation.

Three days and three nights of police, soldiers, fireman giving orders, directions, and assistance.

Three days and three nights of news bulletins on routes, procedures, locations of emergency stations, and the almost hourly reports on the progress of the insidious, deadly wave of plutonium.

Three days and three nights of the city growing ever more desolate, of the streets becoming vacant, of all the creations of man being abandoned.

Three days and three nights to test the veil of civilization which keeps all but the most unstable and irresponsible from reverting to bestiality.

Three days and three nights for every road to become an exit for the seemingly endless procession of cars, pickups, trucks, vans, and buses.

Three days and three nights for the refugees to find their way to the rural communities of Kansas, into the deserts of New Mexico and Arizona, onto the hot plains of Oklahoma and Texas, to the open grassland of Wyoming and Montana, the fields of Nebraska, and through the mountains to Utah and the west coast.

Three days and three nights for the citizens of a nation to react, to open there hearts, their homes, their minds to the victims of their collective folly.

On the fourth day the City of Denver sat silent and empty. Already the awful effects of neglect were becoming evident. Smoke pillars rose into the sky from fires which knew no resistance. Streets, lawns, and open areas were strewn with the litter of haste and the scraps left by a million absent people.

As if it had been mercifully staying itself, waiting for emptiness, the wind began to blow. It picked up dust and whatever else it could carry from the high plateau of Rocky Flats and carried it throughout the city and across the surrounding land. It encouraged the flames of the spreading fires, and it began to

explore the deserted houses and the vacant buildings of commerce. Seeming to revel in the emptiness, it raced down every street and alley and across every open place. The searching wind found no humankind, no life at all, save ground vermin and a few deserted pets who blinked at the rushing air and waited for owners who would never return.

The place was no longer a city. Its life had departed with its people. The only measure of its existence would be its decay, its eternal and inexorable decay.

AFTERLOOK

Rocky Flats had long since become a symbol, a byword and a rallying cry for the rising crusade against nuclear armaments. The movement had shed its image of being a voice for shrill extremism and had included in its numbers powerful voices of all political persuasions. The march had tramped the world

around and knocked with authority on the door of every powerhouse on the planet.

Impressed with the intensity and dimension of the movement and frightened by a dead zone in Colorado, incrementally expanded to 100 miles, the leaders of the superpowers had met. With only pro forma propaganda and a few empty slogans to decorate the proceedings, a meaningful nuclear arms reduction agreement had been signed. Verification had been easily agreed to, mutuality was acclaimed, and the supers then joined together to pull the nuclear teeth of their smaller friends and surrogates.

However, hostility and suspicion were foul and clever cats, not so easily skinned as their nuclear cousin. Conventional arms building had continued, with even more determination than before. Rumors of non-nuclear conflict between the super powers had become rampant, and the seizure of central African chromium deposits by Soviet inspired and led indigenous forces had produced vague and dreamy United Nations pronouncements, dramatic Congressional resolutions, White House statements, and much wisdom from the media.

The Rocky Flats plant itself had, during the days of the evacuation and immediately following, established a radio link with the Department of Energy headquarters in Washington. It was finally decided that monitoring reports would be forwarded on a regular basis to an office in the Forrestal Building on Independence Avenue. Responsibility for receiving the Colorado reports had descended rapidly from the Secretarial level to a clerk in the basement who kept the log in a desk drawer.

It was generally known in Washington that the plutonium exposure would manifest itself in the Department's few remaining personnel at Rocky Flats at which time the reports would stop coming. The recording clerk had a bet with a fellow worker that they would receive the last report within a year. His wager had been made only after a friend in another section had assured him such massive doses would kill most within months and even the very strong within a year or two. Even now, the monthly report was overdue.

The battered jeep pulled to a halt on a small rise overlooking the Rocky Flats plant. From their vantage point, the

occupants of the vehicle, a man, a woman, and a boy, could see the abandoned structures outlined against the summer prairie.

Inside the compound where a building had once been, a great mound of earth had been built. It lay like a grave in the heart of the desolate facility.

"Aren't you going on in, Dad?" asked the boy.

"No," replied Pitkin. "Not this time. I just wanted to stop here for a minute."

After a time, another vehicle came down state highway 93 and turned off to join the jeep. It was a battered and ancient pickup, quite appropriate to its old owner. It wasn't until the driver shut off his roaring unmuffled motor that conversation was possible. "Gettin' ready to try peddlin' some more of yuhr damn 'tonium to them folks in Washington, Pitkin?"

"No, Cope," smiled Pitkin Waay, "I think they've bought about all they need."

"Well, folk here sure hightailed it out of the country when yuh offered it to 'em free. I don't see much of a market fer the stuff myself. Say, I'm headed up to Flagler's pond. He says them fish is gettin' too big to handle and he needs help. Old Niwot, Deke, Hatch, and some of the others'll probably be there. Why don't yuh join us?"

"How about it, Jenny?" asked Pitkin.

"Sounds great to Me." she said.

"Dad, I'll ride over with Cope," offered Breck, whose secret agenda was to coax the old man into letting him drive.

After the pickup containing the old man and the boy had bumped away, Pitkin sat for a moment longer looking down at the plant. "I guess the weeds will take it in time," he mused.

"The way they do with all graveyards," said Jenny.

"I suppose," agreed Pitkin. "Hugo's got quite a tombstone though. And the inscription is one he wrote himself."

"Yes," she said, "Closed down cold."