

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 is 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 answereds?'"

"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."