

The Ransom of the Phoenix



By Michael R. Ault

THE RANSOM OF THE PHOENIX
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PROLOGUE:

March 13, 8 a.m. The Phoenix Site, near New Hanover, Ill.:

The cold stainless steel pipe lay in the construction holding yard as the sun burned the morning frost from its gleaming surface. A skeletal shadow obscured the sun's rays as an immense Manitowoc crane, like some primordial beast reaching for its prey, lifted the pipe to the waiting transport dolly. Union laborers used man's oldest machine, their backs, to wheel the loaded dolly into the elaborate machine shop of the nearly complete nuclear plant. The pipe had lain in the holding yard as the abode for spiders and other creatures, for nearly five years and now was near to fulfilling its destiny in the shiny, twisting cooling system of the nearly complete reactor.

Skilled machinists cleaned, cut and dressed the pipe, preparing the ends for the butt welds that would join it to its many siblings that comprised the rest of the reactor system. Once prepared, the pipe was placed once again on the transport dolly and wheeled into the deep recesses of the reactor containment structure, an immense concrete edifice dictated by law to be one of the strongest structures built by man.

As the siren blast signaled morning shift change the laborers moved the pipe section into its proper location. Wiping the sweat from their tired brows, they returned to the "gang" boxes to don their hats, coats and pick up their lunch boxes (if a meal eaten at four o'clock in the morning can be called lunch). Tiredly they made their way through the frost's remnants to their various vehicles for the high-speed trip home (called by some "The Construction 500").

Talking and joking noisily the morning shift removed their coats and hats and placed them with their lunchboxes into the just vacated gang boxes. They then donned their hard hats and safety glasses in preparation for a days labor.

One group, the welders, also retrieved welding rod warmers, leather gloves, leggings and coats and their other-worldly welder's masks that they used to protect themselves from the bright arcs and sparks that were the trademark of their profession. Moving slowly, doing the construction shuffle, they walked through the noisy corridors to their assigned areas, after all, they were on the job now and paid by the hour.

Sam Jeffries, called "Big J" by almost everyone, had one hell of a headache. The headache was undoubtedly due to the copious quantities of beer he had consumed at the construction "drag-up" party the night before. He nonetheless carefully checked the positioning of the pipe. Satisfied that the midnight shift hadn't screwed it up, he then verified that the ends were properly prepared for the welds that he was to use to join the pipe section into the system. He ensured his assigned fire watch was nearby and then began the tedious job of

welding the pipe ends together so that the system would be complete. The weld operation was almost complete when the lights flickered and then died. With them also died the electric "juice" that fed Big J's welder.

Being the articulate type Big J flipped up the welding hood and was heard to say, "Damn electricians!" then he promptly sat down and had a smoke to wait for the electric blood of his welder to return.

Several minutes later, an eternity in the almost absolute darkness of the deep recesses of the containment structure, the lights blazed on, blinding Big J for several seconds resulting in a second heart felt "Damn electricians!" Prior to re-setting his welder, re-donning his hood and completing the weld.

Unknown to Big J, during the several minutes of darkness during which the weld cooled, a small chunk of welding rod flux, called slag, had dislodged itself and fallen into the nearly completed weld. With the passing of Big J's arc it was entombed within the structure of the joint.

Several days passed and the NDT (Non-Destructive Testing) crew used high intensity beams of gamma radiation to "photograph" the welds. A minor flaw in one of the photoplates caused the piece of contaminating slag not to be seen...

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March 17 09:30 am Central States Power Boardroom
St. Louis, Ms.:

Even as the faulty x-ray was filed with its better pedigreed cousins at the site's Quality Assurance office, several middle age men of varying backgrounds and abilities stood talking around a large, polished meeting table, twenty miles from the object of their discussion. The electrical utility's Vice-President of Nuclear Operations opened the meeting.

"Gentlemen, please sit down so we can get this meeting over with."

Glancing around the table, he frowned at the large boned man with the once hard body, a body that was now going to fat, John Petrod. Petrod, the Union Representative, who had to be at every board meeting, made a point of smiling back with his bad teeth.

Looking away with slight feeling of guilt at getting caught staring the VP cleared his throat and began the briefing.

"This is an important moment, even as we sit in this meeting the final NDT work at the Phoenix Nuclear Plant is being accomplished.", he looked expectantly at the other men around the table.

"With this milestone met we can finalize our schedule for the receipt of nuclear fuel at the site."

Most of the other attendees were giving their full attention to the VP and you could almost see the dollar signs in their eyes.

"The first shipment is due to arrive six months from today, I am holding you men here at this table personally responsible for an intensive program to ensure all systems, and required procedures, are in place and that if there are

any delays in fuel receipt they are not due to Central States Power"

The VP looked at John Westwood sitting to his right. Twenty years of Spartan naval bachelorhood had left the ex-submarine commander slim and stern looking. His greying hair and the net of wrinkles around his blue eyes gave him a fatherly appearance. The men around the table would have been surprised to know he played Santa Claus each Christmas for a local orphanage.

"John, brief us on the remaining milestones on the schedule." The VP sat down as John Westwood stood.

"Be glad to Mr. Kilarity." Being an ex-navy commander John Westwood found it difficult to call his superiors by anything other than "Sir" or "Mister". As Reactor Plant Manager of the Phoenix Plant he was responsible for virtually all phases of construction overview. John broke into his best briefing style.

"The remaining milestones can be broken down into two major areas, these being systems and procedures. The critical path systems consist of the Computer Controlled Radiation Monitoring System, the Security Computer, the Fuel Pool Cooling System and the FeedWater Cleanup Ion Exchange System.

"On procedures; the review of fuel receipt procedures is in its final stages and we don't expect any significant delays in this area." He glanced around the table, "Any questions ?".

With a loud clearing of his throat, the union representative raised his pudgy hand. John Westwood looked over at him.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Westwood, I have to say I don't understand all the hoopla about fuel receipt. Shoot, we got three other nuclear plants, none of them had these problems."

With a look of infinite patience John sighed, " Well, this reactor is a bit different from our other plants. This reactor is a thermal-breeder reactor."

"A thermal-what?"

"A breeder, it uses a much higher enrichment in its fuel, and produces plutonium which we can turn back into fuel using our closed loop reprocessing system."

"Sounds to good to be true, like we're getting something for nothing! How can I believe that?" He looked around the table, not finding an ashtray, he spit a thin stream of tobacco juice into his water glass.

With a look of distaste, John Westwood answered him. "Not quite, we have excess non-fissionable uranium and thorium isotopes in the fuel. In this new design the non-fissionables absorb neutrons and change into plutonium. We recycle the plutonium and sometimes get back more fuel than we started with."

"Sounds like a bit of alchemy to me."

"Oh, it is, it is. Any further questions?"

Mr. Smithers, one of the accountants, raised a nervous hand.

"Yes Mr. Smithers?"

"It seems with all this added enrichment this fuel could be rather dangerous stuff. What precautions are being taken to see to it it gets here safe?"

"Good question. We have a specially constructed fuel truck tractor that is the only vehicle capable of hauling the fuel trailer. The truck will have a driver and an armed guard. There will be required checkins every hour. The fuel is shipped in special fuel canisters that protect it from moisture. If the fuel would go off a bridge the fuel canisters would float. Once here the fuel will be stored in specially constructed fuel pools full of heavily borated water."

"I hate to show my ignorance, but what is the boron for?" The accountant looked puzzled.

"It absorbs excess neutrons, it poisons the nuclear reaction and keeps the fuel from going critical until we want it to. Any more questions?"

No one voiced anymore questions so he sat down. He had actually been enjoying himself.

The VP stood and called upon the other attendees in turn to make reports on their areas of expertise. Other than minor problems, for once, the meeting unearthed no major fires that had to be put out and few "cans of worms" to be taken care of. Indeed, for once it adjourned on time.

Over budget by almost a factor of three and past completion date by nearly two years the plant was nearing 95% completion. The utility, who had been absorbing the immense cost overruns, was looking forward to finally being able to regain these lost millions by increasing rates. As soon as fuel arrived and was loaded into the reactor that is....

The fuel itself consists of long rods containing tens of fuel pins. The fuel pins, only a little larger than a first grader's pencil, contain an alloy of uranium and plutonium. These pins, silvery yellow in color, each hold the energy equivalent to a hundred barrels of the finest crude oil. These and thousands custom constructed like them were given birth in a plant in Virginia. After creation and careful inspection they are carefully placed into stainless steel tubes, 4 feet in length, each rod containing several pins. The rods are then combined into cylindrical configurations of 60 rods each called a sub-assembly. In a single reactor there are hundreds of these sub-assemblies. The safe and careful handling of the assemblies is critical. Therefore the completed assemblies are loaded into transfer containers and carefully loaded onto special transfer trucks to await shipment. Much of the fuel for the Phoenix plant was already packed and only required the trucks to reach its planned destiny...

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March 18 11:25 pm New York City:

As Government vehicles went, it wasn't bad. Shoot, it even had a radio. Kevin Matthews, lately of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, actually felt proud driving it. His superiors wouldn't have been proud of where he was driving it however. The area was run down, the hang out of hookers, pushers and petty thieves. Just what Kevin wanted in this area, at this time of night, wasn't clear.

Kevin pulled up next to a tall, black girl dressed in skin tight, neon colored licra from just above the nipples of her well endowed chest, to just below her trim ankles where gold ankle chains glittered. His motivations were now clear. After a hurried conversation, Kevin parked the car around the corner and hurried with the girl into a rundown hotel.

It didn't take long, just a quick smash with a tire iron, the sudden breaking of the passenger side window into thousands of granules, and the snatch of Kevin's briefcase from the back seat. Just like Kevin, it was finished in a couple of minutes. Needless to say, Kevin accidentally neglected to report the lost briefcase. After all, what if it was found in the area he had been? What would his pregnant wife say...

April 2 6:15 pm New York City:

The battered car chugged noisily as it pushed its way through the early evening fog. As if sensing its impending death, it shuddered in the throes of dieseling after struggling into the parking space in front of the ancient brownstone. The building that would mark its final resting place was in little better condition. It didn't take an engineer to see that it was beginning the sure, slow slide into oblivion on New York cities lower east side. The neighborhood, once respectable, was now the hangout for the less savory of the cities inhabitants. Those who could afford to move, had, those that couldn't held on with a grim determination in the face of the gangs, pimps and pushers that slowly strangled the life from the area.

The driver of the mobile wreck, a young looking Hispanic called Juan Martinez, quickly scurried into a nearby alley, concealing himself in the shadows between the buildings. The residents of the neighborhood ignored all of this, they had learned from rough experience to ignore anything not directly related to their own survival.

As Juan waited, his mind replayed the events that had led him to this spot, on this day. The humiliation of the gang induction ceremonies, the equally humiliating drop from the gang. Not good enough was he, he would show them. Soon a custom painted van pulled in next to the old car. The vans ownership was proclaimed with the word "SKULLS" in lurid red paint diagonally across the side, with the same thing on the rear doors above a leering skull with flames for eyes. Several gang members piled noisily out, cursing in fluent Spanish. With yells of rage they commenced to batter the car that had had the audacity to take the best parking spot near their headquarters. Satisfied with breaking the glass from the windows, smashing the fenders and slashing the tires they proceeded with their business. In the alley Juan smiled.

The Skulls, recognized by their colors, black leather vests with the leering skull emblazoned on the back, red tee-shirts and tight black trousers, quickly scanned the area for observers. Finding none, the leader gave a few low commands in spanish. One of the gang members opened the locked door to the brownstone while the others unloaded boxes from the van. Once the unloading was finished they took some cases of beer and several bottles of liquor from the van and entered the brownstone. They had something to celebrate. This had been the most profitable week yet for their prostitution rings, drug deals and protection rackets.

Inside, the leader yelled and several pretty, though hard, looking girls in various states of dress joined the gang. Smiling a shark-like grin the leader squatted down next to the largest of the boxes and removed the lid. Taking a handful of tens and twenties he stood and threw them up into the air with an even louder yell than before, as the girls grabbed for the money, the other gang members laughed. Grabbing the prettiest of the girls, who was wearing a cut off sweatshirt and tiger striped bikini briefs, he roughly fondled her breasts as he took a long pull from a bottle of tequila.

Juan waited tensely for almost 30 minutes, until the loud music and noise of a gang party in full swing could be heard. He removed a small black box, which looked something like a garage door opener, from his pocket. As he flipped a toggle switch on its side a small red tell tail glowed balefully in the darkened alley. He turned a small dial at the top of the box. The light changed to green. Smiling he pushed the top one of two visible buttons.

The effect of the button being pushed was hardly spectacular. A small wooshing sound came from under the hood of the now wrecked car. Shortly a small explosion occurred which sent the hood of the car pivoting on its hinges to lay peeled back against the broken windshield like a discarded banana peel. The engine compartment was covered in bright orange flames which sent black, oily looking smoke roiling skyward. It was only seconds until virtually the entire gang was outside watching the wreck burn. The leader pushed at one of the newer members and said disdainfully in english, "Go move the fucking van, we don't want it to go too."

He shoved the keys into the obviously scarred boys hand.

Juan waited until the boy had moved the van and rejoined the others, he then twisted the small dial one click further and pushed the second of the two buttons. The results this time were several magnitudes greater than the last. The entire car erupted in a huge fireball, engulfing the staring gang members in its firey embrace even as it slammed them against the wall of the building with concussion waves. Several dozen windows shattered. After a quick look most of the other inhabitants of the street pulled their curtains closed and turned off their lights.

After waiting for the flames to die down Juan ran to the front of the building, gingerly stepping over the smoking, charred bodies of the now defunct gang. Pausing over the slowly smoking body of the gang leader he aimed a savage kick at its head, sending it smashing into the wall.

"Not good enough, eh asshole? You're not saying much now." he said and laughed.

An old oil burning van with bald tires and more rust than paint screeched around the corner and stopped in front of the brownstone. The driver, a slim white named Jim O'Conner, leapt out and handed Juan a small automatic pistol, together they rushed into the building.

Inside, the girls were crying hysterically. The leaders girl friend tried to attack them with her small fists as they entered the room. Jim pistol whipped her savagely, sending her smashing into the wall to fall senseless to the floor, her face viciously slashed and bloody. He looked down at her exposed breasts and slim, darkly attractive body and considered rape. Realizing he didn't have the time he tipped an imaginary hat and said, "Maybe next time, when I have more time".

Callously, he moved over to the unconscious form of the one gang member who had been left inside. He had been watching through the window apparently, his face was a mass of cuts from the concussion shattered window. Lifting the boys head, he stuffed the pistol into the mouth and fired a single shot into the brain. The body jerked once.

As the other girls tensed to attack, several pulling knives, Jim pulled the wicked looking automatic pistol from the bloody mouth and pointed it at their de facto leader. Juan, who had stood and watched with a sardonic grin, barked a terse command in Spanish and they dragged their fallen companion into the back room, pulling the door closed behind them. Without further delay Juan and Jim carried out several of the boxes that the gang had taken in, stuffing them into the old van. They repeated the trip twice more. Soon the sound of sirens could be heard approaching. The two jumped into the van and sped off into the night, leaving the smoking wreck, the sound of crying and the smell of burnt meat behind them.

An hour later the two thieves sat in a decrepit motel room and counted the ex-gang's money.

"Shit Juan, nearly half a million." Jim smiled broadly.

"Ya, and no one to report it missing." Juan waved a wad of twenties under his friends nose.

"Let's take it and go to Mexico."

"Let's not, I have a plan to change it into several million."

"So tell me." Jim leaned back onto the worn sofa and took a pull from a beer that was clutched in his right fist.

Juan reached behind the sofa and pulled out a briefcase, Kevin would have recognized it. Juan opened the case and pulled several sheaths of documents from it. Opening a folded set of drawings, he explained his plan. As Juan explained the plan his dark eyes flashed and his hands moved animatedly. While he appeared on the outside to be a street punk, he had almost completed a degree in computer science with a minor in nuclear technology before being thrown out of school. They discussed the various aspects of the idea until well past midnight. With a final comment his friend smiled, he could almost see the easy money that would result from successful execution of his friends plan.

Shortly after dawn, they loaded the van with the money, now in a large brown suitcase, along with their few meager possessions, and left New York heading west. They had figured it would take a couple of months to bring the plan to fruition, first they had to find a good custom truck shop...

CHAPTER ONE

May 3 07:30 am New Hanover, Ill., six miles from the Phoenix site:

With an almost audible snap! Frank Harris's eyes popped open. He immediately noticed that his bedroom, usually dark when he awoke, was flooded with the diffuse light of early morning.

"Oh Shit!" he moaned loud enough to wake his wife.

"Late again. I'll get your coffee." She rolled out of bed, nude, she always slept that way, and quickly donned a silken robe. With a sensuous wiggle she left the room.

With another groan, Frank got out of bed and rushed into the bathroom. In less than fifteen minutes he was on his way to operators class at the Phoenix Plant.

The class had already begun when Frank Harris bounded up the flimsy "temporary" wooden steps that led into the training trailer. It didn't help matters any that this was the third time this week that he had been late for the training class that was to lead to a "better" future, as his wife had not been at a loss to tell him. As he hurried into the classroom he gave an "I'm sorry" look to the instructor, a fellow member of the after hours softball league.

"Nice you could join us Frank." Sam Gilmore, the instructor, kidded him as he sat down.

"Ah shit Sam, that old alarm clock crapped out again." Frank got out his pocket computer/notebook.

"As I was saying before I was interrupted by the arrival of our wayward compadre, the Reactor that you will be operating is a new breed of thermal-breeder reactor that uses fuel at several times the enrichment level of a standard PWR reactor, about 15%. Frank, what does this mean to you as an operator?" He smiled to indicate that this was Frank's penance for being late.

"Well, the increase in enrichment means that for a given power change, in relation to a standard PWR, our control rods will have to move further or we will have to use more or less chemical shim due the higher neutron flux." Frank smiled back to show he understood.

"Good answer Frank. Frank has brought up another question, What is chemical shim? Sam?"

Sam Kiloski, a tall gangling man with red hair and a nervous manner looked up and, hiding his embarrassment, answered,

"Ch-Chemical shim is the method by which we make small adjustments to the reactor power level without the use of the control rods. We add or remove boron, a nuclear reaction poison, in the form of boric acid." He cleared his throat nervously and looked to the instructor for approval.

"My aren't we all exceptional today? Another 4-0 answer, keep this up and I'll be out of a job. We will be using a new form of highly soluble boron. This boron will dissolve at virtually any water temperature and will remain in solution at high concentration levels.

"With our higher enrichment level and correspondingly higher power density our core will be slightly super critical at all times. What this means is that without the boron in solution in the coolant to absorb the excess neutrons the core could overheat beyond our control and initiate a rather nasty accident if it were not for what? Bill?" He looked at the brown haired man sitting near the window who just happened to be admiring the legs of one of the new secretaries.

"Ah, say the question again?" He responded with embarrassment.

"If we lost the boron in the coolant how would we prevent a meltdown?"

"Oh, yeah, the boron injection tanks at 10000 ppm boron would dump into the system and flood the reactor cavity providing cooling and reaction dampening." He smiled as he gave the correct answer.

"O.K. but please pay more attention, the secretaries will still be there later." Looking at his watch Sam said, "Class, take a break, be back in about fifteen minutes." He turned to the podium in the front of the class and began to pick up his lecture notes.

As the rest of the class stood and made their way to the break and snack area Frank stood up from his desk and walked to the front of the room to talk to Sam.

"Did I miss much?" He asked.

"No but I can't continue to cover for you if your supervisor comes in."

"I know, as soon as that operator pay comes in I'll get rid of that damn clock and get some dependable hardware. Anyway this whole week is review for the exam."

"And brains here don't need that eh?" He tapped Frank's forehead.

"Ah shit Sam you know that's not what I meant."

"O.K. I know, but be damn sure you're not late next week for the exam. From what I hear this one's a ball buster."

"Then the female operators should do great." He smiled, "Anyway, I was reading in an old book I found that in the seventies they were really worried about fuel at our enrichment level being stolen. It seems that you can make crude nuclear bombs with the stuff."

"Shoot Frank, the thieves would have to be a whole lot smarter than the normal terrorist to do that; besides it's not that easy to steal. You ever try to lift a several ton container holding a dozen sub-assemblies? Most of the security stuff is secret, but I do know they are required to have an armed escort in the truck and the truck is special built."

"So? They could hijack the truck. Anyway I'll sleep better when the stuff is in the new fuel pool." Frank watched as Sam placed the neatly stacked notes into his briefcase.

"Ya, me too. Besides, once it's all here we get our rate increase, which means they stop bitching about money and raises"

"So says you, I wish you were in management. Well, see you after classes at practice."

"O.K."

During the next six weeks Frank and his class were subjected to an intensive period of training prior to obtaining their Operators Licenses from the Nuclear

Regulatory Commission. The training covered all phases of reactor operation, including chemistry, physics, radiation physics and the plants mechanical systems. In no other industry save perhaps aviation is such intensive training required. Most of Frank's class had passed their examinations and qualified as operators for the new plant. Some had not and were either undergoing remedial training or had opted to try some other field of endeavor.

The entire plant had undergone a dramatic change. It no longer looked like the orchestrated chaos of most large construction projects. Most of the construction operations had been completed and were shutdown. The hallways had been smoothed, sealed and painted. A majority of the plant's systems had been tested and were ready for operation. The new pipes shined in their stainless steel insulation jackets and a feeling of expectancy was felt wherever one went. The new fuel was due, that is, it would be once the Radiation Monitor System (RMS) computer was working...

Bill Faddy, the plant's computer group supervisor was in a very poor frame of mind, in fact, he was down right pissed-off. The RMS computer, the state-of-the-art system used to monitor the numerous radiation monitors throughout the plant was not functioning as it was supposed to. Indeed, it wasn't functioning at all.

"What the hell do you mean you don't know? Find out or you're out of a damn job !!!" Bill Faddy slammed the receiver of the phone into its cradle.

"I'm Surrounded by frigging idiots! Martha!" He bellowed at his secretary. "Yes sir?" She responded timidly as she hurried into his office.

"Get the manufacturer of that damn RMS computer on the phone and I mean NOW!" Bill Faddy's face was flushed with anger.

"Yes SIR!" She scurried back to her desk and punched a call through to "Nuclear Trends Inc" the hapless manufacturer of the system that was the cause of the supervisor's apoplexy.

"They're on line five sir." She called out as soon as the connection was made.

"Thanks!" He picked up the phone and punched the button marked line five. "Hello? Let me speak to your service department pronto." He chewed the end of the cheap cigar that protruded from his mouth as he waited.

The company switchboard operator patched the call through. As soon as the Customer Support secretary came on the line Bill began to speak.

"This is Bill Faddy at Phoenix Nuclear Plant. I want one of your boys up here pronto, YOUR system is holding up our fuel receipt and I don't have to tell you what that means. We have a blanket service Purchase Order and we want someone ASAP!" He paused to pick pieces of shredded tobacco from his lips and tossed the cigar into the ashtray on his desk.

The pretty secretary at the other end finally got a word in, "Yes Mr. Faddy, let me connect you to our Service Group Supervisor, please hold on." She lowered the phone and, placing Bill Faddy on hold, used the intercom to inform Dave Proctor of the call, "Dave! Hot one on line three."

In his office Dave Proctor turned off his disk player and, taking a drink from his coffee, picked up the phone and touched the contact for #3.

"Hello? Dave Proctor here, can I help you?"

"Damn, I hope so Dave"

"Mr. Faddy, what can I do for you today?" Dave switched his terminal to file retrieve.

"Dave, that damn computer still isn't working and we need it for fuel receipt."

"Mr. Faddy, I thought we agreed that you were going to send a couple of operators, ah," Dave leaned over and looked at his screen. "Ah, a Mr. Harris and a Mr. Kiloski, for training."

"Shit Dave, you know we can't spare anyone for training 'til after fuel receipt."

"Then it seems we have a catch 22 here doesn't it, you can't receive fuel until you can operate the system and you can't learn to operate the system until you have the time after fuel load. What you should do is have us come up and train you onsite."

"Good idea, that's covered under the blanket too, how about it?"

"How about what? We need at least a two week lead before we can send someone"

"Dave, I don't need to tell you how big a customer of yours we are do I? Get me someone, and fast. We need the system up and running by the first of next week. I know I can depend on you. I'll expect him here tomorrow." Faddy hung up the phone not waiting for an answer.

After Bill Faddy had hung up, Dave slowly put down the phone and rubbed his temples.

"What an asshole" he said to himself, he then straightened his tie and headed for Rex Franklin's office.

Rex was a Customer Support Engineer, a fancy title that meant he was head trouble shooter and the one who got the jobs that nobody else could or wanted to do. Reaching Rex's door Dave knocked and then went in.

Rex's office was in its usual state of ordered confusion. Several computer printouts were stacked on the edge of his desk, his overflowing in-basket appeared ready to avalanche at any time and his briefcase lay in disarray on the only other chair in the room. Numerous posters and pictures decorated the walls. Noting Dave's entrance Rex looked up from his terminal.

"Be with you in a moment Dave. As soon as I finish this test run." He typed for several seconds while Dave cleared the chair and sat down. Rex typed a few more keystrokes.

"Damn it."

"Problems?" Asked Dave looking over Rex's shoulder at the screen. A complex table of information and a slowly changing three dimensional graph suspended over a three-d representation of a reactor core were displayed. Rex studied the display and then cleared it.

"Oh, not really, doing these specials on old versions of the core optimization software is the pits." He turned to Dave. "What can I do for you?" He asked as he picked up a chipped cup holding what looked to be coffee, it wasn't steaming and appeared to be several hours old.

He took a sip of coffee, sat the much used cup on a tile with the company logo on it. He stretched out his legs and put his hands behind his head.

Dave looked thoughtfully at Rex for a few seconds. He saw a middle aged man, around six foot tall with light brown hair, a well trimmed goatee, and green eyes that on a woman would have been stunning. Dave cleared his throat and said, "We've got a problem up at the Phoenix again." He let the sentence drop into the silence.

"What now?" Rex sat up and touched the "Open File System" contact on the company's computer system terminal. The terminal beeped and started displaying the pertinent information of the Phoenix projects file. Problem report after problem report flickered by, Rex scanned them with a practiced eye.

"They can't get the system up and they need it for fuel load. Naturally they're panicking."

"Of course, the plants usually have two modes, sleep and panic." He studied the screen for a second. "Didn't a guy named Harris take our operators course?" He turned back to Dave.

"No, they cancelled at the last minute."

"Figures." Rex updated the display and then blanked the screen. "When do they need me?"

"Yesterday."

Groaning Rex said "Damn it, Lucy's birthday is on Friday, I really wanted to be there." He looked at the picture of the pretty, smiling, 10 year old, blond girl on his desk. Rex's ex-wife, who was standing beside the girl in the picture, was strategically hidden behind a compact disk player, the companies Christmas gift to its employees for this year.

"Well it's only Monday. You should be back before Friday. I shouldn't have to tell you that most of the problems are due to their not reading the documentation and cockpit error. I know you can get it fixed pronto." Dave said apologetically.

"Famous last words." Rex looked doubtful, but resigned.

"We really appreciate this Rex." Dave stood up to leave. "Of course there will be a bonus due to the short notice."

"Okay" Rex said resignedly, "get the onsite arrangements made, I'll get Carol to do the travel arrangements."

"Thanks again Rex." Dave said as he left.

Rex looked again at the smiling child and vowed for the hundredth time not to miss the birthday party. Not this year.

The travel was what had driven the final nail into the coffin. The coffin that held the cadaver of his first and only marriage. It seems that his ex-wife couldn't understand his needs and he couldn't understand hers. Unfortunately Lucy ,their only child, got stuck in the middle. Luckily the divorce wasn't messy and he got liberal visitation rights and co-custody.

Rex grabbed his handkerchief and dabbed at his eyes as he turned back to the terminal he had been working at.

"Damn hay fever" he said to himself.

Recalling the program he had been working on into active memory, he finished the code corrections, saved them, and then turned off his terminal. Grabbing a worn leather jacket from the chair back he left his office and walked across the hall to his secretary's desk.

"Carol, I need you to make the standard arrangements for a trip to the Phoenix Plant."

"Right Rex, let's see, that's near St. Louis. How long are you going to be gone?" She smiled at him.

"God only knows Carol, God only knows. Make the fly back for Thursday night, With a little luck I won't have to miss Lucy's birthday on Friday."

She pouted.

"What about our date on Saturday?"

"We'll just have to see Carol, I'll do my best to get back." Part of him hoped he wouldn't make it. He guessed it was because he still felt married.

Rex went down the hall to the accounting department and got an expense advance request form. Not knowing how long the trip would last, he filled in an amount suitable to last a week. He took the form to Dave who approved it without a glance. He then returned it to the accounting clerk who dutifully encoded the plastic credit voucher card for him.

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Several hundred miles away other money was changing hands. A rusting van sat over a pool of its own oil. Looking at it, you had the feeling that a good washing would demolish it. Juan Martinez was arguing with the owner of the chop shop that had just finished a large "custom" job for him. With a final expletive in Spanish Juan handed over a large wad of bills, a hundred was showing on top. The owner quickly counted the money and then locked it in an old safe. Juan took out a map of the area and circled a location, he then laid another hundred on the counter which the shop owner quickly picked up as he nodded yes.

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With card in hand Rex wrote his name on the "Out" list in the receptionist's office and then walked out to his car, a classic Barracuda. The car was one of the few things his ex-wife hadn't got in the settlement. He started the powerful engine and shifted into reverse. Although the car was over forty years old, it ran smoothly, and, thanks to some modern technology, better than it had when it was new. The body and interior were restored to new condition; the leather of its upholstery was rich looking and dark Cordoba in color. The entire car sparkled midnight blue in the late afternoon sun. The car was Rex's pride and joy and he had spent many hours restoring it. He had sweated blood over conversion of the fuel system to burning hydrogen with the recent ban on the burning of fossil fuels in the larger cities. With the other improvements, it hadn't changed the engines performance profile, much to Rex's relief.

He drove to the nearby computerized teller machine and carefully parked the car. As he got out a crowd of teenagers dressed, or rather, almost dressed, in the latest style, came over from the bus stop and admired the vehicle. One even knew what it was. Rex, almost embarrassed by the admiring glances of the scantily clad young ladies in the group, made his way over to the line in front of the teller. One of the girls blatantly sat on the hood of the Barracuda. Rex thought of asking her to move and then noticed how much leg was exposed when she sat down. He decided it probably wouldn't hurt the polymer finish.

When his turn to use the machine came Rex slid his card past the reader and then entered his code. He stood still as the computer teller holographically scanned him, and, satisfied that he was indeed Rex Franklin asked him,

"How may I serve you today Rex?"

"I would like to get this voucher card converted to Traveller's Checks please."

When the first teller machines had been equipped with voice synthesizers, Rex had felt stupid talking to a machine, now it was old hat.

"Please insert the card."

A small opening appeared in the front of the machine. Rex carefully inserted the card, which was scanned, the magnetic account number and encoded amount recorded. The teller then cleared the cards onboard computer chip and sending it to a storage bin for reuse, issued the appropriate number of Travelers Checks.

"Thank You Mr. Franklin, please sign the checks as soon as possible, have a nice day." The machine said in its pleasant contralto.

"You're welcome, I will." Rex said as he walked away. He often thought he would like to meet the woman whose voice the teller company had used for the model for their synthesis. He had then decided she was probably sixty and fat.

He noticed with some disappointment that the girl was gone from his hood. He watched as she wiggled her way up the stairs onto the hover bus and wished he were that age again. Getting into the Barracuda Rex reached over to his CD player and pushed the classic "Mister Mister" disk into the machine. He drove to the sound of "Kyrie" radiating from the state-of-the-art sound system.

Back at the office Carol had his tickets waiting for him.

"What time do I leave?" He asked as he picked up the red and blue ticket folder.

"Six tomorrow morning." She smiled.

"Wonderful." Said Rex sourly, then he smiled. "You doing anything tonight?"

"What's the matter? Can't you wait until Saturday?" She asked coyly.

"Well, I just thought that in case I don't get back in time..." He trailed off and smiled.

"Sorry Rex, I've got an aerobics class to teach tonight."

"Oh well, I guess I'll do my laundry then." He felt slightly relieved, in her near perfection she tended to overwhelm him.

"Sounds wonderful." She made a face at him.

Looking at his watch Rex decided that he wouldn't be able to get anything more accomplished at the office, and, he did have some wash to do if he was leaving for the Phoenix site in the morning.

"Well, I guess I'll call it a day Carol. I'll see you later in the week."

"O.K. Rex, you'd better!" She admonished as he left.

As he got into the Barracuda he vowed again to get back in time for Lucy's party. After all, then he would make it for the date too. He drove the classic car to his small condo and parked it in the space assigned to him. He flipped the switch for the car's security system on and got out. He climbed the stairs up to his condo two at a time and was only a little winded when he got to the door. He unlocked the door and then entered his home. Walking quickly across the small living room he inserted his encoded key and flipped the switch for the home security system to off. There was a ten second time delay before the alarm went off. Once he had forgotten and had almost been arrested before he had convinced the police he owned the place.

He tossed his leather jacket into the chair by the Holovision, and, after switching it on, fixed himself a gin and tonic with a twist of lime. There was nothing but nude mud wrestling and news on so he switched it off. Had the wrestlers been women he might have watched. Finishing the drink he went into the small bedroom.

With obvious pleasure he removed the stylish slacks, tight collared shirt and tie and placed them in a pile of clothes that lay next to the bed. He stretched a bit to get the kinks out and then donned a workout suit that was draped over the end of the bed. Moving to the wall across from the bed, he folded down a complex combination of cables, pullies and weights, a workout machine.

For the next half hour Rex worked out his frustrations. With each set of exercises he imagined one of his problems dissolving, being sweated out, and disappearing. When he finished his routine he felt the comforting ache of well worked muscle and the lightening of his concerns, if only for a while. Catching a whiff of himself he removed the sweaty workout suit, revealing the sweat slick

body beneath. He looked at himself in the mirror that was hung on the back of the door.

"Not bad for an old fart" he said to himself as he sucked in his gut.

He entered the attached bath and, kicking off his jockey briefs, stepped into the shower stall. He carefully adjusted the water so that the temperature was just past the comfort zone and then vigorously scrubbed himself, once again imagining the problems flowing with the sweat down the drain. He finished the shower with an invigorating blast of cold water and then stepped out into the steamy room to towel off.

Once he was dry, he took an old, faded, comfortable pair of jeans, fresh shorts and a torn tee shirt that proclaimed "Disco Still Sucks" and put them on. He then picked up an armload of clothes that lay next to the bed. Grabbing the book disk he had been trying to get read and the paperback sized reader, he headed for the building's laundry. He hoped the cute blonde from the condo above his would be there.

The laundry room, in its usual state of linty disorder, was empty. Rex sighed a regretful sigh and set his laundry on an empty machine. Fishing in his pockets for quarters he inserted eight into the washing machine, loaded the machine and started it. He pushed himself nimbly onto the top of the dryers that faced the washers and began to scan his book. Just when the action was at its best a voice asked, "Would you mind getting off my dryer?"

Coming back to Earth from what had literally been millions of miles away (he was reading science fiction) Rex slid off the machine and looked embarrassed. Of course it had to be the blonde that had caught him unaware.

"What you reading?" She asked as she leaned over to remove her clothes from the dryer, exposing most of her attributes due to her tight shorts.

"Oh, just a little Science Fiction. Been addicted to the stuff since I was a kid." Rex smiled.

"Oh." She sounded disappointed. "I just finished "War and Peace" by Tolstoy. You read anything but Sci Fi?" She looked at him critically.

"No I'm afraid my job keeps me pretty busy." He paused to clear his throat. "I travel quite a bit. I trouble shoot computers at Nuclear Plants."

"That's nice." Her voice had become cold. "Don't you realize those things are dangerous?" She sounded perfectly sincere.

Knowing he'd lost anyway Rex decided to push back a little. "Oh, you're an expert? Where did you get your degree in Nuclear Physics?"

Now she was perfectly glacial, and a not little intimidating "My degree is in child psychology thank you."

"Oh, by the way you were talking I thought you were a physicist or somebody who knew what they were talking about."

Suddenly she smiled and laughed. "You know, we sound like a couple of the kids I council."

Looking a little sheepish Rex answered. "I don't know about that but we both sounded a little stupid. Let's start over. My Name is Rex, Rex Franklin. I live upstairs in Condo 212." He put his hand out.

"Nice to meet you Rex. I'm Viki Highfell, I'm in 314." She shook his hand. Her hand was soft but she had a firm grip, for a woman.

"Maybe you'd like to talk this over a little more civilized? How about over some cheese, crackers and fruit at my place?" Rex smiled at her.

"Sorry, I've got a meeting to go to tonight, maybe tomorrow?" She smiled back at him.

"Now it's my turn to be sorry. I've got to go out of town for a couple of days. Oh well, I'll come by when I get back." He looked into her eyes, they were deep blue green, with a tinge of amber at the center. "I'll even listen to your reasons against nuclear power if you'll listen to my reasons why I believe in it."

"It's a deal. Well, got to go." She waved as she walked out the laundry room door.

"Might be a fun argument." Rex said to himself and smiled.

The rest of the evening was uneventful.

The next morning Rex was jarred awake by the noxious noise people called music.

"Oh for good old acid rock" thought Rex as he got out of bed and stumbled across the room to his clock radio.

He had put it across the room because he had a tendency to turn it off and go back to sleep if it was too easy to get to. He then went into the small bathroom and trimmed his moustache and beard and then brushed his hair. After his morning rituals he got dressed in comfortable traveling clothes.

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June 16 05:00 am, Atlanta, Ga.:

Several miles away, another man twisted slightly in his bed and grimaced. Beneath his eyelids his eyes roved in the REM of deep sleep . . .

The dream always began the same. He was in the old single bed that creaked and rattled with each movement. He is five years old. The noises from the front of the dingy apartment had wakened him from a fitful sleep full of nightmares.

Voices. Loud, angry voices and the hard sound of breaking glass. He carefully got out of the bed to minimize the noise, not that his step-mother and father could have heard him over the sound of their own rage. He peeks out of the dark bedroom into the dimly lit hall and can just make out the shapes of his step mother and father in the small dining room - kitchen at the other end. Their faces seem to glow with the rage that seethes beneath the surface.

With an equal anger that was odd for one so young the boy wishes his dad would never have married the bitch. He watches as his father raises one massive

fist and strikes his step mother a glancing blow to the side of her head. She falls noisily outside of his field of view and he smiles, that will show her for arguing with my dad the boy thinks. There was the squeak of the drawer in the living room bureau being opened, he recognized the sound from when his dad told him never to get in it, boy would she get it now. He opened the door further to watch, the dream slows like the special effects in the movies that his father always took him to see as a loud blast and flash lit up the living room. His father falls, clutching his chest as blood sprayed from his back where the bullet had exited, finally to bury itself in the wall. His father is thrown against the refrigerator and leaves a red trail, like some giant slug, as he slides to the floor. The boy runs down the hall screaming.

"You can't do that to MY dad!" and falls sobbing on his fathers dying body.

"Make her pay, make them all pay.." his father rasps and dies in a heap on the cold linoleum floor.

With eyes cold as the arctic sky the boy turns to look at the woman, his step mother.

"You bitch, you dirty bitch, you killed him!" he rages, but she is quiet and staring. She slowly raises the gun to just under her chin and with a final smile pulls the trigger. A fountain of gore spatters the ceiling as her head snaps back from the impact and she falls. The gun, dropped from her lifeless hand, turns end over end as it falls. He awakens before it hits the floor.

With the end of the dream Packard Stone opened his blood shot eyes and rolled out of bed. Casting a contemptuous glance over his shoulder at the unconscious teenage girl lying in exhausted slumber on the other side of the bed, he walks into the small bathroom to splash water on his face and relieve himself.

"Damn dream." He said to himself, momentarily his face echoed the lost and disturbed face of the boy in his dream, he stares into his own eyes for a few seconds and then the cold, cynical mask slips back into place.

The girl, one of the many who frequented the truck stop nearby, woke at the sound of the toilet flushing. When she rolled over the bruises around her eyes and covering her young breasts and nipples, livid against the paleness of her complexion, became visible. She quickly stood and dressed, showing more of the bruises and scratches that had resulted from Packard Stones "passion" of the night before. While Packard finished his business in the bathroom the girl hurriedly dressed and let herself out. She swore silently to herself that this was the last time she would ever date a trucker.

As he heard her let herself out Packard smiled a cold smile. She hadn't been half bad, though he did prefer them younger. His face no longer showed anything but hard, cold anger. He shaved and slowly dressed. He wasn't due to be at the airport for an hour or two.

Leaving the small bathroom he checked his wallet that was lying on the bedside table. As usual it was untouched. The girls usually left in a hurry after a night with him. He smiled again. He stuffed his clothes into a knapsack and duffel bag. He thought he might get a new pack with some of the advance that his latest job had provided. He felt slightly uneasy about the job; he always hated working with amateurs.

Outside, the girl stumbled to the curbside and was thoroughly sick. The bastard had done things and made her do things she hadn't known existed. His savagery in bed had been almost horrifying now that she thought about it. She shook her head and started straightening her hair. She would never be ready for her first period class. She frowned, she hadn't even cleaned out his wallet as she usually did to the men she let pick her up.

Packard started to leave the room when he had a thought, "Amateurs sometimes make mistakes ", and with that thought running through his mind he started unpacking the duffel. There was something he might need later. Once he found and put on what he was searching for Packard re-packed the duffel.

Tossing the room key onto the rumpled bed, he closed the door and walked over to the beat up looking rent-a-wreck he was driving. He loaded the bags into the trunk and drove off. Passing through the sleazy section of town, he passed by several XXX rated movie houses, Packard pulled into one offering "Snuff" films 24 hours a day.

"What the hell" he thought, "might be fun." Smiling he got out of the car.

Ninety minutes later he came back out, squinting in the early morning brightness. He stood still for several seconds as his eyes readjusted. Looking toward his car he saw two punks trying to force open the trunk. Quietly he walked over behind them and said in a gruff voice "Need some help boys?"

Startled, they turned quickly toward Packard, the one nearest the car didn't even have a clear look at his killer as Packard's extended fingers shattered the cartilage of his nose and his elbow drove the jagged pieces into the soft brain tissue behind. The other boy voided his bowels as he watched his friend die and then turned to run. Packard's heavy work boot slashed around in a vicious round house kick that literally exploded the boy's left kidney before it smashed his spine, severing the cord, and with it, his life. The boy's body crashed boneless to the ground and lay quivering. Packard leaned over and wiped the blood from his fingers onto the first boy's shirt. He then picked him up and carried him to the dumpster that sat, engulfed in a cloud of flies, at the side of the lot. Packard dumped the body into the mass of congealing popcorn, coke syrup, soiled prophylactics and decaying hotdogs at the bottom of the dumpster and then did the same with the boy's companion.

"Nighty - night boys." He said softly as he slammed the dumpster's lid. As he got into the car for the trip to the airport Packard came as close as he ever had to a true smile. Today wasn't turning out half bad after all....

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After Rex was dressed he went into the small kitchen and fixed himself a cup of instant coffee, which he loathed. He couldn't make himself fix a whole pot of fresh for just one cup. He then went back into the small bedroom and packed a hanging bag with a weeks worth of clothes. Turning off all the lights and switching on the security monitor Rex left the condo. He made sure to lock the door and then walked down the steps to the parking lot. Kneeling at the front wheel well he passed the magnetic card key across the hidden sensor, disabling the alarm system. He carefully put the hanging bag into the back seat, laid his briefcase on the passenger seat and got into the car.

Starting the car and then pulling out of the lot Rex made his way to the airport through the light, early morning traffic. Parking in the economy lot Rex

got his luggage out of the car, closed and locked the door and turned on the car's security system. Removing a tarp from the trunk, he covered the vehicle, locking the tarp in place with several small padlocks. He always hated to leave the car exposed like this but had little choice. He walked to the moving sidewalk which whisked him to the airport terminal.

Inside the terminal Rex dropped his bag off at the ticket counter, and carrying his briefcase, went through the security checkpoint and then to the transportation mall to catch the train to concourse "D". There were few other passengers aboard the small, automated train. One, a rough looking bald man, was cleaning what appeared to be red clay from under his fingernail with his thumb nail. The train stopped at concourse "G" and Rex got off. Rex rode the escalator up into the concourse proper and walked to the departure lounge to await his flight. While he waited to board his flight he had a second cup of coffee and read the specification of the Phoenix computer setup. He had just finished when the announcement was made to begin boarding his flight. He put the spec sheets back into his briefcase and, going through the gate, boarded the plane. He quickly found his assigned seat and, after placing his briefcase in the overhead compartment, sat down.

Shortly, the large, rough looking man took the seat beside him. Rex wondered if the man's completely bald head was a medical matter or if the man choose too have it that way. As he pushed back into his seat Rex turned to the large, bald, swarthy complexioned man beside him.

"Where are you going?"

"I got to go pick up a truck, not that it's any of your business." The man frowned and turned away.

"Well up yours asshole." Rex said to himself and turned to the window.

The plane slowly taxied to the runway and, a few moments later, the engines roared to full throttle and the huge mass of the jet accelerated down the concrete ribbon. Smoothly the jet strained the bonds of gravity and lifted into the morning sky. Climbing rapidly the plane soon broke through the patchy cloud layer and leveled out at its cruising altitude. The clouds beneath looked like a lunar landscape and Rex was soon lost in thought.

Putting the unpleasantness of his seat partner out of his mind he drifted down the corridors of his memory to the Senior High dance where he met the shy, pretty girl whom he had later married. He thought of the marriage and the concurrent Navy years when everything was new and shiny in the relationship. He couldn't help probing the painful memory of the separation and subsequent divorce which followed his discharge and taking of the traveling job. He opened his eyes and stared again at the clouds. Trying to think of more pleasant things he hoped he would return in time for his daughter's birthday, he had gotten her a year's worth of riding lessons as a gift. He thought of his upcoming date with Carol and hoped he wouldn't make a complete fool of himself. It had been over twelve years since his last date. He sighed, and closing his eyes slept.

Rex was jarred from a fitful doze as the plane bounced to a landing on the airport runway at Lambert/St. Louis International. He worked his jaws and yawned to equalize the pressure between his inner ear and the planes interior. His seatmate had already stood, disregarding the admonishment of the flight crew to wait until the plane had stopped, and was reaching into the overhead compartment. He pulled out a worn foul weather jacket, and as the plane stopped

and the other passengers started getting up, crowded his way rudely to the front of the plane. As the steward opened the door the rude fellow hurried off the plane.

Rex unfastened his seatbelt and then lifted the armrest between his and the just vacated seat, he then slid over and stood up. He stretched and then retrieved his briefcase from the open overhead compartment. Snapping the compartment closed he stepped to the end of the line of deplaning passengers and made his way off the airplane.

Following the directing signs he made his way from the Concourse to the transportation mall, where he had only a short wait before the computerized train arrived and, with a pneumatic whoosh, opened its door. Rex waited until the rushed, harried looking passengers aboard it got off and headed up the escalator to the concourse. As soon as the car was empty Rex stepped in, put his briefcase down and grabbed the vertical rail put there for that purpose. He preferred to leave what few seats there were for those who needed them. Rex was always amused when the computerized voice announced the stops and warned passengers not to block the doors as they opened or closed. He wondered why with all the technology that was available they didn't make them sound more human instead of the flat mechanical voice they produced. Of course, maybe they preferred it that way.

The train ride lasted only a few minutes. Rex picked up his briefcase and got off at the baggage claim area. Once there, he made for the baggage carousel that was to handle his flight. He noticed his unpleasant seat partner standing on the far side of the carousel, away from the crowd. He considered going over and trying to talk again, but thought better of it.

He watched as the man grabbed a worn looking backpack with a bent aluminum frame and a worn green duffel bag. Rex lost him as he pushed his way through the crowd. Rex picked up his own folding bag and went over to the rental car booths.

"Rex Franklin." He told the girl behind the counter.

She took his rental car card, slid it through the card reader, and then handed it back to him. The compact laser printer whirred and then spat out a multi-part form which she had Rex sign and initial in various and sundry places. Finally she handed him a set of keys that more closely resembled plastic sticks than the keys Rex was used to.

"Space ten Mr. Franklin." She smiled prettily at him, "It's one of those new Star Dusters, I hope you like it."

Rex turned the keys over in his hand examining them curiously "Thanks, I think. Is your lot out the north or south doors?"

"The south, I hope you enjoy your stay." She smiled as she watched him examine the keys.

"I hope so too. See you in a couple of days." He placed the keys in his jacket pocket.

He picked up his briefcase, shrugged the folded hanging bag strap further up on his shoulder and made his way out of the main terminal. Carefully avoiding the traffic, he walked over to the rental company's section of the lot. The vehicle in space ten more closely resembled an airplane than a car.

Rex put down his briefcase and hanging bag and walked around the car looking it over. It had only two wheels and a faint hum could be heard when he put his ear to its body. It was seemingly supported by magic as it had no kickstand or other visible means to keep it from toppling over. "Must use a gyro to stabilize it" Rex thought to himself. He gently but firmly pushed the vehicle's side. It canted to the opposite direction then stood straight back up.

"The miracles of modern technology" Rex mumbled as he used the magnetic key to open the baggage compartment. After placing the hanging bag in he touched the contact that closed the compartment door. It quietly shut with a faint hiss. Rex walked to the drivers side and touched the key to the indicated spot on the body. The door for the driver's side gull winged open with a faint hiss. Rex carefully put his briefcase into the single backseat and then climbed into the driver's seat. The seat conformed to his body in a most pleasant way. Pulling the door shut he used the key to start the external combustion Sterling that was the vehicles main drive. It was as quiet as it was powerful as Rex found as he backed out. He could really get to like this he thought to himself as he smoothly accelerated onto I-70 and headed southeast.

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Packard stood against the pillar marked 3B in the economy lot, just as the instructions in the letter had said to do. He watched coldly as the rusted van pulled up beside him. Jim leaned out of the passenger side window and compared Packard's grim features with a picture he held in his hand.

"You Stone?" Jim asked.

"Yep."

"Get in."

"Show me the color of your money first."

"Don't trust us man?"

His cold stare answered that question. Juan showed him a wad of twenties.

"Ride in the back."

"I intend to."

Packard opened the vans side door and tossed his duffle in. Slung his backpack off, he climbed in and closed the door with a loud squeal.

Belching out black smoke, against the pollution laws, the van sped off.

Rex's drive to the plant was fairly pleasant. He took I-70 to I-55, crossed the Mississippi and got on Illinois State 50 heading north. The Phoenix plant was located on an isolated stretch of the Mississippi valley surrounded by rolling hills. The road had numerous turns and twists and Rex enjoyed the instant responsiveness of the vehicle as it seemingly soared from one turn to another. He was almost disappointed when the huge hyperbolic cooling tower of the Phoenix plant came into view, even though the panorama of the river valley as it spread out below the bluff was breath taking. Following the direction signs, he decelerated and turned onto the plant's access road. Following the

somewhat cryptic signs, he found the parking lot that was designated for visitors and contractors. To his dismay it was over a half mile from the gate to the plant proper. "Oh, well", thought Rex "I need the exercise".

He stopped the Star Duster and slid open the driver's door with the touch of a contact. He then got out and, retrieving his briefcase, closed the door. He hummed an old song to himself as he walked the half mile to the gate. At the gate he entered the security building and went over to the bullet proof glass enclosure where the security guards stayed. He pushed the intercom button.

"My name is Rex Franklin, I'm with Nuclear Trends Inc. I'm here to see Mr. Bill Faddy."

The guard on the other side of the glass pushed a form out through the slot that was provided for that purpose.

"Please fill this out Mr. Franklin while I call Mr. Faddy for authorization." Rex could see him pick up the phone and dial an extension number.

Rex walked over to a couch and sat down. Using the top of his briefcase as a table he filled out the form which dealt with his past history and other things that security people the world over had been asking for for years. Rex took the completed form over to the slot and slid it through.

"Thanks." The guard grabbed the form.

"Your escort will be here in about ten minutes." The guard then sat down at a computer terminal and began entering the information on the form into the plants security computer using the one finger typing method.

In about twenty minutes Rex's escort finally showed up.

"Sorry for the delay Mr. Franklin." The escort said as he exited the security portal. "Please follow me."

He led Rex over to a metal detector and then through an explosives sniffer. His briefcase was X-rayed and exposed to a weak neutron flux to see if it contained any of the more exotic explosives. He was then subjected to a "Pat Down" search by a female security guard who was old enough to be his mother. Getting a clean bill of health from security he was issued a temporary I.D. magnetic card that was linked through the computer to his escorts. This meant that his escort had to use his card on any controlled door before the door would accept Rex's.

His escort led him across the open area inside the double security fence. As they passed the fences Rex looked for the intruder alert laser system that guarded the area. The beams, being infrared, were not visible. The escort took Rex into the Administration building and up a set of stairs to Bill Faddy's office. Exactly eighteen hours after his phone call Bill Faddy was shaking hands with Rex.

"Good to see you again Rex. It's been a long time since that user's meeting in Los Angeles. When you get back tell Dave that I'm sorry about being such an ass on the phone but the higher ups are really on my butt." He turned to Rex's escort "You can go, I'll transfer him to me." The escort left. Bill sat down and picked up the phone, he typed a computer access code then typed his badge

number, Rex's badge number and his authorization code. He then hung up the phone.

"What's the problem?" Rex said as he sat down.

"We just can't seem to get the system to function at all, no matter what we do it won't talk to the monitors."

"Alright, first I need to see the system log and get me an assistant to watch, I don't want to have to come back next month."

"O.K. any preference?"

"Give me that Harris guy, his background sheet looks the best"

"You got him." Bill again picked up the phone and gave the necessary orders.

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June 16, 09:00 am, Off of Sandbank Rd.:

The worn van pulled into a deserted farm several miles from the plant. The three riders got out and went into the large barn behind the house. In the dim light filtering in through the partially broken roof you could see a slow smile spread across Packard's rough face.

"Perfect" He said as he lovingly ran his hand along the side of the big rig that filled the barn. "Just fucking perfect." He walked around the huge truck and examined the trailer and all the hose fittings. "You followed the specs perfectly, we might be able to work together."

Juan and Jim turned and smiled at each other, after months of planning the theft was on!

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Later that evening Rex and Frank sat down and at a table in the plant break room. A slim young man with an acne ravaged face gathered up the dated snacks from the vending machine, he looked carefully at Rex and Frank and then quickly left the room. The man, leaving his cart of dated snacks in the hall, took a small case from its bottom shelf. Looking around nervously he placed a magnetic jammer against the lock plate on the computer room door. With a click it opened.

"Do you understand what was wrong Frank?" asked Rex as he sipped his coffee.

"I think so Rex. The site configuration file wasn't set properly so the computer didn't know where the monitors were, right?"

"Correct. You use the instrument tech manual and our instruction manual to enter the control and communication vectors into the file, then you re-boot the system and the automatic polling program takes care of the rest."

"Damn, I wish I could get the full training"

"I wish you could too. Let's give Bill the good word and get out of here." Rex stood and yawned.

"I'm all for that, my kid is calling me Uncle Daddy lately." Frank stood and smiled. "You going to be back in the morning?"

"Well, I guess I could for a bit, why?"

"I'm not to sure on some of this, I want to go over it. In fact, I asked Bill to get you to stay here 'till Friday." He smiled uncertainly at Rex.

"Well, I need to fly out early on Friday."

"Great! I mean after all, you wouldn't want to have to come up here again would you?"

"No, not that you're not sparkling company, but I do have other interests."

"Right. Let's get you checked out with security. This is the second time this week I've been late for dinner, and it's only Wednesday."

Several miles away, along a fairly isolated stretch of State 50, the long sleek form of the nuclear fuel transport truck rounded a sharp turn and pulled into a long straight away. Far up the road, the large orange sign of a truck stop glared in the early evening twilight. The transport driver and the required armed escort both tiredly scanned the landscape for anything of interest.

The rifles laser sight cross hairs, automatically centered on the laser aim points red dot on the drivers forehead, moved smoothly to the tractors rear right set of tires, as the truck drew abreast of a freshly painted mark on the road, the rifle let out a muffled pop. The rifleman, Packard, watched as the driver fought to control the speeding truck. He was almost disappointed when the truck straightened and sped down the highway, the tractors rear right tires smoking and shredding on the road. Placing the rifle into a hard plastic case Packard stood and, lifting the case, jogged over to his car. Throwing the case into the trunk he jumped into the driver's seat and, after starting the car, sped off into the gathering dusk.

"What the hell is wrong?" asked the guard as he rubbed the swelling lump on his head were it had connected with the side window during the wild maneuvers.

"Looks like we lost a set of tires on the tractor." The driver peered through the gathering darkness at the sign the marked the truck stop. "Glad that truck stop's close."

"What could have done that?"

"Probably that muffler we ran over back a couple of miles."

"Oh."

The driver clutched the wheel tightly as the tires began to howl and the rig started tipping to the right. With a relieved sigh the driver pulled the rig into the truck stop and shifted the engine into neutral, setting the brake, he opened the door and climbed down. The guard did likewise and they both examined the shredded, smoking tires.

"Damn, lost both of 'em" The driver hunched down and looked closely at the tires. "Must have been a bolt or something, look here" he pointed to a neat round hole that punctured the sidewall near the edge of the tire.

"Looks like it to me." The guard looked around and then said "What now?"

"Well, help me get the trailer un-hooked and I'll take the tractor over to the garage." He started cranking the landing gear to the trailer to the down and locked position, "landing" the trailer. Then both the men detached the various hoses and interlock cables that snaked between the tractor and trailer, carefully deactivating the alarm system. When the myriad connections were properly undone the driver climbed back into the rig and shifted into low. He lowered the window and called to the guard "I'm going to grab a shower and then I'll relieve you to get something to eat."

"O.K. don't be long."

"Right." The rig slowly pulled free of the trailer and limped over to the garage. The driver got out and talked to the mechanic and then got back in and drove the rig out of sight into the garage.

The guard walked around the trailer a couple of times and then found himself a comfortable position and sat down to wait. Just as he was drifting off there was a muffled WUMP! and a huge cloud of black smoke enveloped a small cafe that sat on a lot next to the truck stop. In the distance someone yelled "FIRE!" The guard leapt to his feet and looked at the burning building, looked back at the trailer and then ran over to see if he could help. Etched into his memory was another fire, several years past, where he had lost his only son. Of course he had no way of knowing that the cafe had gone out of business a year ago...

Half an hour later the driver and the guard, both soot encrusted, met back at the trailer. "Well, I won't tell if you won't" said the guard.

"Tell what?" The driver sat tiredly down and leaned against a tire, he sat back up quickly "Damn, you would think these things would have cooled by now." He rubbed his shoulder where the hot tire had almost burned him.

"You know it's against regulations for us both to be gone from the shipment." The guard slowly sat down.

"Shit, we were only gone a few minutes, besides, with the interlocks engaged this baby ain't going no where."

Neither noticed that the trailer was one space further out than when they had left it....

At the plant Rex and Frank went back to the computer room, put away the system manuals and shutdown the system terminals for the night. After speaking with Bill, clearing security and walking the half mile to his car Rex tiredly drove out of the contractor lot and headed for his motel. About ten minutes later Rex was cruising easily at 65 mph when a large rig blew by and forced him off the narrow country road. Struggling with the steering yoke Rex yelled, "Damn asshole!" And gave the trucker the finger through the open moon roof.

Catching the odd outlines of streamlined canisters on the trailer as it faded from view Rex said to himself "Strange, that looked like a nuclear fuel transport" as he brought the Star Duster back on the road. The rest of the return drive to Rex's motel was uneventful.

The fuel truck arrived onsite just after the evening shift change. The on duty Radiation Protection Technician grabbed his survey log and a couple of survey meters and rushed out to do the receipt survey so the driver and guard could go to their motel for a much deserved rest.

After almost an hour of taking the repeat measurements required by law the R.P Tech waved the truck through. The gate guard triggered the electric gate and the fuel rig rumbled into the restricted area. The rig pulled around to the side of the containment building and then into the truck bay of the fuel handling building. There, the driver and guard stood by as the fuel canisters were carefully unloaded and placed into the receipt inspection area.

The driver and guard went down for a cup of coffee and a snack while the fuel receipt inspection was started. They had barely sat down when a security guard came looking for them.

"You the guys that brought the fuel in?" He asked.

"Yes. What's the problem?" Answered the driver around a mouthful of ding dong.

"You better come with me."

"Why?"

"It's the shipment." He paused. "The canisters, they're full of frigging rocks!"

Looking incredulous, and not a little bit worried, the driver and guard followed the plant security guard back to the fuel building.

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June 16, 7:00 pm, Columbia, Ill.:

After parking the car Rex walked the short distance to the motel lobby and entered the brightly lit interior. He sauntered over to the desk and asked,

"I'm Rex Franklin, got a room for me?"

"Yes sir." Answered the clerk. "Room 112" He handed the keys to Rex. "Your company has an open credit voucher for five nights. Oh, here's your free drink card sir."

"Thanks, I think that would just hit the spot." Rex responded, taking the key and the drink card.

Leaving the lobby, Rex went back out to the car and got his hanging bag. The room was right across the patio from the lobby, so he left his car parked were it was. After he unpacked Rex went back out to look for the motels bar.

Yes, thought Rex, a nice cool drink was just what he needed. He looked around the lobby and spotted the door to the motel's bar. Waving to the clerk he walked over and entered the dimly lit room.

Once inside the bar Rex had to stand for several seconds to allow his eyes to adjust to the dim interior, then he moved over to the bar and sat on one of the stools. He dropped the card on the polished bar and asked for a single malt scotch and water on the rocks. The barmaid smiled and quickly filled the order. Slowly sipping the drink Rex was soon lost in thought.

"Do you have a light?" The soft voice beside him almost made him jump. He looked to his right and saw an attractive woman holding a slim marijuana/tobacco blend cigarette and smiling coyly.

Rex reached for the pack of house matches and almost spilled his drink. "Sorry" he said apologetically and carefully lit the match. She lightly held his hand and guided the match to the tip of the cigarette, her hand caressing his, her eyes watching his the entire time. Feeling slightly embarrassed at the intimacy of the situation Rex looked away and shook the match out.

"Did anyone ever tell you that you have bedroom eyes?" She said softly.

Rex looked back at her and replied. "Yes, and it embarrassed me then too." He smiled back at her.

"Well it shouldn't, buy me a drink?" She tilted her head and looked invitingly at him.

"Sure," he said as he signaled the barmaid. "What's your name?"

"My friends call me Liz. You are a friend?" She smiled at him again.

"I'll try to be." He smiled back. "My name's Rex." Just then the band returned from their break and started playing. They opened with a slow oldie from the seventies. "Dance?" Rex asked.

"Sure, I always dance with friends." She gracefully stood, held her hand out to him and tilted her head looking mischievously at him. He looked at her standing there with her white silk blouse and clinging dark skirt and smiled.

Rex pulled a twenty from his wallet and dropped it on the bar signaling to the barkeep that it was to pay for the drinks when they arrived. He stood, and taking her hand, followed her onto the small dance floor. Several other couples had already beat them to the floor and they had to dance very close to keep from being jostled by the other dancers.

Liz didn't seem to mind, if anything she seemed to be trying to mold herself to Rex's body. The feel of the firm flesh of her back beneath the silk, the light perfume she wore, some type of musk, and the closeness of her very soft yet firm body intensified Rex's feelings of loneliness. The six months of celibacy, an unconscious mourning for his marriage, weighed heavily. After the third dance he said almost breathlessly, "Let's get our drinks and move to a table."

Liz showed her agreement by taking his hand and leading him to one of the back booths. Rex again waved to the barmaid who brought their drinks over. She smiled as Rex waved away the two dollars in change as a tip.

"Are you married?" Liz asked taking a drink from her Mai Tai and looking at him over the edge of her glass. Her eyes, pale blue in the faint light, searched his face as he answered.

"No, not any more." He said softly, the loneliness almost overwhelming in intensity. He quickly took a drink to hide the wetness in his eyes. She took his hand.

"How long since the separation?"

"Divorce" He said hoarsely, " Six months." He took another sip.

"Any kids?"

"Yes, a daughter, Lucy, she's ten, going to be eleven on Friday." He took out his wallet and showed her a picture, a smaller version of the one on his desk. He felt kind of stupid, showing someone he was thinking such thoughts about, pictures of his kid.

"Very pretty, she has your eyes." She held the photo up to the light and looked closely at him. "You are going to have real problems in a couple of years." She handed his wallet back, not commenting on the women also pictured.

"Don't I know it. Look at me, here with an absolute dream and showing her pictures of my kid." Rex smiled.

"I asked, I want to know more about you." She took another sip of her drink.

Rex glanced down at Lucy's picture and then quickly put the wallet away. "I hope to get back for her birthday. It will be the first time in three years if I make it. My job keeps me on the road. Maybe too much on the road. Were you ever married?" Rex raised the glass for another drink, the loneliness once more reaching into his eyes.

"No, I never found the right guy." She looked deep into Rex's eyes, he looked away in embarrassment.

With a knowing look she took the drink from his hand and lightly kissed him on the lips. The loneliness suddenly turned to desire for this saving angel beside him. Rex pulled her closer and kissed her fully on the lips, his desire plain. When he finally slackened his grip she sat back into her chair. Pushing back the long chestnut hair which had become disarrayed during the passionate kiss and embrace. She said softly "Let's go to my room?"

The half-statement, half-question burned in Rex's mind and a moment of indecision came and went. Then he smiled and, taking her hand, let her lead him from the bar. Watching the entire scene the barmaid smiled.

At the room she was the one who now appeared nervous, she almost dropped the key as she attempted to place it into the lock. Rex gently took the key from her and opened the door. Handing the key back with a gentle smile he followed her into the room and shut the door.

Looking more like a trapped fawn than the bewitching temptress she had been in the bar she slowly pulled off her top and started to unzip her skirt. Rex gently took her hand away from the zipper and asked, "Are you sure you want this?" She nodded and putting her arms around him kissed him passionately.

Picking her up Rex carried her to the king sized bed, gently laid her on its soft surface and slowly finished undressing her.

While she hungrily watched he removed his shirt exposing the still firm muscles of his chest, for a fleeting moment he was glad he had kept up his workouts. He removed his watch and class ring and laid them on the bedside table, it was an old habit, he did it without thinking. Unfastening his trousers he removed them and the jockey shorts underneath revealing his stiffened manhood.

Her eyes flamed with passion and desire as she drank in the sight of his nakedness. He then laid down beside her on the bed and, caressing the length of her thigh up to her soft, curly bush with one hand, turned out the light with the other, as he started to kiss her puckered nipples . . .

Awakening early the next morning to the gentle beeping of his watch alarm Rex sat up and then looked down at the sleeping form of Liz. Her chestnut hair spread out like a fan on the pillow. Her hand trailed off the side of the bed like a small child's and her face was relaxed and beautiful in sleep. Not wanting to awaken her, he carefully got out of the warm bed and padded over to the small desk across the room. Picking up his watch he silenced the alarm.

He searched the top of the desk for a piece of paper, finding none, he opened the drawer. He winced as the drawer squeaked as he pulled it out. He got out the motel pen and a piece of the stationery and closed the drawer. He quickly wrote Liz a note and gave her his name and number with a "Please call, collect". He quickly gathered his discarded clothes and dressed.

As he looked over at her one more time she opened her eyes and stretched, catlike and sensuous. After a petit yawn she asked "Leaving?"

"I'm afraid I have to." He smiled at her. "I'll be back tonight?" He let the almost question hang in the air.

"Now it's my turn to be sorry. I have to be in Maberly by this afternoon, but I will be back later in the week." She stretched again, even more sensual than before.

"Well, maybe I'll be here too." He moved over beside the bed and clutched her naked form to him. Rex savored the feeling of her nipples hardening, he felt it even through the cloth of his shirt. He brushed the hair from her face and kissed her. "Damn all early morning appointments!" He said with great feeling.

She smiled and answered "I agree, you sure you don't have a couple of more minutes?" She seductively tossed the sheets aside, exposing the full length of her slim body.

"Oh Lord give me strength!" Rex said softly. Trailing the finger tips of his hand across her taut belly he moved away. "I really wish I could."

"Spoil sport." She giggled and covered herself, poking her tongue out playfully.

"Tease! Listen, if I'm here on Thursday I'll meet you in the bar."

"O.K. It's a date. Leave word with the desk if you can't make it."

"Right. Oh, here's my address and number, just in case." He gestured to the note.

"Bye you big stud." She smiled at him.

"Not bye, just so long for now. Here's looking at you kid." He gave her his best Humphrey Bogart impression.

"Curly, right?" She teased.

"Everyone's a critic." He opened the door. "Be careful, I want to see you again."

"You too."

He turned and walked out of the door, closing it softly.

After he had returned to his room and had a shower, he called Bill to ensure that he had to come in. After several attempts the line rang through.

"Hello Bill? Yeah, this is Rex. Is everything OK with the system?"

"Yes everything is fine, you getting ready to come in?" Bill sounded tired.

"Yes, but I hope to catch my daughters birthday on Friday." He let the hint hang. "Oh, congratulations, I think I saw your first shipment last night. If it was, you might tell the trucker to be more careful, he blew me off the road."

"What did you say Rex?" Bill sounded more alert.

"Congratulations on your new fuel, I saw the truck last night." Rex recognized the empty sound of a phone put on mute as Bill spoke to someone who must have been in the room with him.

"Ah, Bill, Frank just said that there's a problem on the system could you come in right away?" Now, he sounded alert.

"Sure, I'll be right there" Rex hung up and swore softly to himself.

CHAPTER TWO

June 17, 07:30 am, the Phoenix site:

A half hour later Rex grabbed his briefcase and got out of the rental car. He firmly closed the door and looked toward the plant. The heat waves shimmered off the road as he began the walk to the gate. The dust formed a thin coat on his polished shoes as he walked the half mile. An occasional company pickup passed, but other than that there was little traffic. As he approached the gate he thought "It sure is quiet for a work day". He would soon find out why.

He entered the security building and walked over to the bullet proof glass enclosure. Pushing the button on the intercom he said "Mr. Franklin to see Mr. Faddy." A guard actually came out from the enclosure.

"Yes sir I've been asked to personally escort you to the plant manager, please follow me."

Taken by surprise, usually you waited up to half an hour for an escort, Rex followed the guard. They hurried through the security procedures and the guard led him into the service building and upstairs to a large office. The guard knocked on the door and waited until a voice answered

"Come in."

Opening the door the guard said, "Mr. Franklin is here sir."

"Send him in. That will be all." John Westwood said bluntly.

"Yes sir." The guard threw a mock salute once he was out of sight.

"Go on in Sir they're expecting you" He almost gratefully turned and walked away.

Entering the office Rex didn't know what to make of all the attention, but he was sure it wasn't due to his sparkling wit and personality.

"What's the problem?" he asked as he caught sight of Bill sitting across the room.

"Ah, sorry to get you here on false pretenses Rex but what we really want to ask you about is about the truck you saw. I believe you have met Mr. Westwood our plant manager" Bill indicated the general direction of the head of the meeting table.

"Yes, during the initial contract negotiations." Rex shook John Westwood's hand.

"Please sit down Mr. Franklin and tell me what you told Bill on the phone." He sat forward in his expensive office chair and looked directly at Rex.

"Well, I was just asking about the fuel truck I saw last night. I thought it might have been one of the ones from the shipment you're expecting." Rex sat down.

"Well Mr. Franklin, we were expecting a shipment yesterday evening, and that shipment arrived, at least we thought it had."

"What do you mean?" Rex asked, and leaned forward expectantly.

"When the transport truck arrived it contained mock-up canisters, no fuel. Somewhere between here and the last weight station a party or parties unknown switched trailers with the transport. We believe it occurred at a truck stop a couple of miles from here."

"Holy Shit." Rex sat back. "At your enrichment level it could be real serious if the fuel fell into the wrong hands."

"I see you understand."

"Any calls or demands yet?" Rex asked.

"None. To prevent a leak we let most of the workers off today. We have notified the NRC, FBI and the State Patrol."

"Well." Thought Rex. "That explains the quiet." Out loud he said:

"I see. Of course I'll be happy to help in any way I can."

"Good." He handed Rex a security pass. "This will allow you unescorted access. We'll need as complete a description of the truck you saw as you can give. You see, the transport wasn't on that highway last night. What we think you saw was the rig that did the swapping."

"I don't know what help I'll be, I didn't get a good look at it. As I told Bill it ran me off the road. I was too busy getting back on to notice much."

"Well right now we have a big fat zero, and anything you can add will help. The State and Federal Forensics are going over the real truck but they don't expect much from it." Westwood stood up. "I guess that's all for now Mr. Franklin. Oh, before I forget Faddy will be shepherding the Federal people around, you will report directly to me until this is over." Recognizing a dismissal Rex stood and shook Westwood's hand again and then left the office.

As Rex left the office a feeling of dread stole over him. "Shit" he thought, "stolen fuel, stolen, enriched fuel."

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June 17, 07:45 am:

At the aging barn, a few miles away, Packard, Juan and Jim examined the shipping canisters on the transport rig. The canisters resembled huge fiberglass coffins, each was securely closed with an elaborate locking mechanism.

"Think you boys can get them open?" Asked Packard. His tone indicated what he thought of their abilities. He leapt down from the trailer and walked over to where they stood.

"You let us worry about that. Go with Jim and he'll pay you." Juan said with a smile that didn't quite reach his dark eyes.

"Come on, we ain't got all night." Jim grumbled to Packard. He turned and started out of the open door.

"Okay I get paid, I don't ask questions." Packard said over his shoulder as he followed Jim out into the barnyard.

"Good bye." Juan mumbled, then he smiled.

"Good bye to you schmuck." Packard answered. Juan's smile changed to a frown for a moment, but then with a shrug he turned and walked towards the rig to examine the canisters.

Packard followed Jim to the rear of the barn. At the side of a long, shallow hole Jim motioned Packard closer. With a quizzical expression twisting the sharp planes of his face Packard moved to the end of the hole.

"Hey, what the fuck we doing out here? You assholes keep your dough in a hole or something?" He laughed at his cleverness.

"Or something." The cold in Jim's voice was glacial. He quickly pulled out a small caliber pistol from his coat, the same he had used to kill the unconscious gang member, aimed, and pulled the trigger. The small pistol, making a series of coughing sounds, stitched a line of red, weeping holes across Packard's chest. "Shmuck", he added.

With an astonished look Packard grabbed at his chest and, twisting from the force of impact, fell face first into the pit and lay twitching as Jim covered him with dirt.

"Sweet dreams asshole." He chortled as he shoveled the last spade full into the pit. Planting the shovel like a tombstone at the head of the unmarked grave, he went back to the barn.

"That's one problem out of the way." Jim said casually as he entered the barn. "The terminal in the car?"

"No, it's in the house. Let's go." Juan answered as he leapt down from the trailer.

They quickly closed the huge barn doors and carefully padlocked them. Against the aged wood the new hasp looked odd. They walked the short distance to the old farm house. Juan opened the back door and entered, returning almost immediately with an attaché case.

"Here it is." He lifted the case slightly to emphasize his words.

"Good, let's get going."

The two re-checked the lock on the barn, got into the dirty van and drove away. Behind the barn the dirt in the hole slowly moved, perhaps settling around Packard's body . . .

When the van reached the main road it turned left and sped down the country road toward the nearest town. Several minutes later, the van, trailing a cloud of oily smoke, pulled into a convenience store lot. Juan got out carrying the attaché case and walked over to the pay phone at the side of the building.

Opening the attaché case he removed a small computer complete with a built in modem. He connected the modem to the connector provided on the pay phone.

After sliding a small optical storage disk into the computer and punching a few of the touch pads that comprised the keyboard he picked up the handset from the phone. Depositing some change he dialed a number and then pushed the modem connect button on the phones control panel. After waiting for the computers at either end of the link to finish their handshake protocol he touched a few more of the contacts and waited. The small LED over the disk drive portal blinked and then came on for several seconds. After a low beep from the computer Juan unplugged the connector and it retracted snake-like into the portable computer, he then hanged up the phone. He placed the computer back in the case, which he closed with a snap. He walked back to the van.

Handing him a beer Jim asked "all done?"

"Yes, it worked like a charm, I was afraid they would find the modem you set up at the plant. I guess they didn't. After all, they're so cock sure of their security, who would dare such a thing?" He smiled and took a long pull at the beer.

"What now?"

"Now we wait." He finished the beer and with a satisfied belch, crushed the can with one hand. Rolling down the vans window he tossed the can contemptuously to the ground.

Spitting gravel from the tires, the van swung onto the back road and headed toward town.

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The rest of the day passed quickly. Rex was interviewed by several officials and was then released. After a several hour training period with Frank, Rex was ready for a steak dinner, a glass of wine and a good night's sleep.

After dropping his security pass into the bin provided for the purpose, Rex started to push through the exit turn style.

"Mr. Franklin!" The guard ran after him, his black leather shoes beating a tattoo on the pavement. Badly winded, the over weight guard wheezed to a stop and grabbed his arm.

"What now?" Rex impatiently turned back to him.

"Mr. Harris says he needs to see you before you go, he says something has happened to the system." The guard removed his cap and wiped his forehead with a red checkered handkerchief.

"Great." Rex turned and went back into the plant, the guard waddling behind him.

In the computer room Rex was met by a distraught Frank Harris.

"Shit Mr. Franklin, I was just getting ready to get some monitor readings when the thing went nuts! It beeped, the screen blanked and I couldn't do anything at the terminal."

"O.K. Let's have a look at the transaction log and error file." Rex said as he sat down at the terminal and began pressing keys. A few minutes later he looked up at Frank.

"You better get your boss and the plant manager."

"Why? You find the problem?" Frank said as he looked over Rex's shoulder.

"No, no problem, the system is functioning fine. What I found is a ransom note."

CHAPTER THREE

June 17, 4:45 pm, Phoenix plant meeting room:

The security guard at the door of the meeting room looked as though he wanted to be anywhere but where he was. He kept fingering the buttons on his crisply pressed shirt and glancing around the room. Each time his eyes met Rex's he would find something to look at on his right shoe and then his idle hand would stray on and off the butt of his service revolver. He snapped to attention as John Westwood entered the room.

Westwood sat down and got directly to the point. "Mr. Franklin, would you mind explaining how that demand got onto the Nuclear Trends RMS computer system?"

"To be quite honest Mr. Westwood I don't have the foggiest. I checked the equipment out and found a fairly sophisticated, home built modem hooked into one of the spare ports on the system. Whoever put it there and spliced it into the phone could probably answer your question."

"Would you mind translating that to something I can understand?" Westwood asked in a frustrated tone of voice, today was not going well.

"Well, someone attached an unauthorized modem, which allows access to the system from outside the plant. They sent in a series of control codes to the system which set off its internal alarms, and then sent a file to the storage unit with a message to access it in the transaction log. As soon as I accessed the log it flashed to the screen and to the printer."

Looking thoughtful Westwood signaled to the guard that he could leave, looking relieved the guard left the room.

"Could just anyone do this?"

"No, it would have to be someone with specific knowledge of the Nuclear Trends system." Rex paused "In order to install the modem and make the phone splice it would almost have to have been someone with plant access. I know that that equipment wasn't installed before we sent the system. I did the factory test and initial cabling." He sat back in his chair and waited for Westwood to assimilate the implications.

"Do you have a copy of the note?" Westwood passed a hand over his eyes, pausing to rub the space between them.

"Yes. I ran another copy off as soon as I realized what it was. Luckily I got it before the guard dragged me up here."

"Sorry about that I'm afraid we overreacted. I hope you understand."

"No sweat."

Looking at the note Westwood read:

"To the Management of the Phoenix Nuclear Plant:

You Know by now that you have lost something of great value. We have the fuel. We will be contacting you with further instructions. Do not disconnect the

modem or otherwise tamper with the system. The fuel can be disposed of elsewhere. We hope you take our point to heart. This is the end of the message."

Westwood lowered the note and looking shaken pondered "Dear God, what can they want?"

"No telling, but it seems to be a precursor to a ransom note, we'll have to wait until the next message to find out. Of course I'll stay until the thieves make direct contact to ensure the system operates properly." Rex answered.

"Good, the State and Federal investigators will want to question you again. As a matter of fact the local NRC rep wants to talk with you now."

"When?"

"Right now." Westwood stood and walked over to the conference room's door. Opening it, he allowed a short, balding man to enter. The man stood impatiently and waited to be introduced.

"Rex, this is Mr. Lochridge, the NRC resident inspector. Mr. Lochridge, this is Rex Franklin, he's the Tech Rep from Nuclear Trends computer company."

Rex shook Lochridge's hand. It was soft and uncalloused. Lochridge's grip was limp. Lochridge then proceeded to sit at the head of the meeting table in the chair just vacated by Westwood. Giving Lochridge a hostile look Westwood sat across from Rex.

"I'll get right to the point Franklin." Lochridge's voice was sharp and unpleasant, setting Rex's teeth on edge. "I don't know if I believe that you are not involved. Standing outside I couldn't help but hear your explanation. Personally I find it a little lame. You arrive just in time for the first nuclear fuel theft in history, are the only person to see the supposed theft truck, and then the ransom note just happens to appear on the computer system for which you are the only expert currently onsite. Don't you think that there is just too much coincidence in all this?" He steepled his fingers and looked over the top of them at Rex.

Feeling the heat rise into his face and neck Rex said, bristling "Just what are you accusing me of Mr. Lochridge?" Rex sat up and scowled.

"Nothing, officially, not yet. I just want you to know that I'm going to be watching you. You technical types are always the weak link in any organization, living beyond your means, driving fancy cars, always needing money. I don't like you technical types and never have. If you've anything to do with this you're in big trouble." With that he stood and frowning, left the room.

Taking a deep breath and forcing himself to relax Rex sat back into the chair. "Is he always so understanding, non-judgmental and compassionate?"

"No, sometimes he's worse." Answered Westwood. "I wish I could have spared you that but we here at the plant are pretty much at his mercy."

"I understand. He reminds me of some of the Naval Reactor inspectors we used to get on the sub when I was in."

"Funny you should mention it, he's ex-NR. Anyway, pressing on, is there anything we can do to monitor the system?"

Rex looked thoughtful for a moment then snapped his fingers.

"I'll activate the watchdog program in the operating system."

"The what?"

"The watchdog." Rex explained. "Back a couple of years ago, right after that movie about computer hacking came out, we had a rash of hacking at several of our customer's sites. Nothing significant mind you, mostly just kids goofing around. At one college a kid destroyed the computer's operating system. Anyhow we wrote the watchdog program then. It keeps tabs on all system activities and alerts the operator of anyone who gains, or attempts to gain, unauthorized access. I had forgotten about it until you asked."

"But the note specifically said not to tamper with the system." Westwood looked at Rex questioningly.

"I know. The watchdog has two modes, active, where it shuts down the unauthorized user and reports the break-in, and passive. In the passive mode it simply watches and reports the terminal number of the unauthorized connection, or, if the contact is through a modem as this one was, the phone number of the location where the caller is calling from."

"Great, and they can't tell it's on?" Westwood was very concerned on this point.

"Not in the passive mode."

"Do it." He said simply.

"Okay. Am I free to go?" Rex asked quizzically as he stood up.

"Yes, sorry about all this." Westwood opened the door and reiterated, "you'll be dealing through me until this is over."

Rex stretched then he smiled at Westwood and said:

"You know, this would make a good book."

"To bad it's real."

"Right." Rex turned and left the room. He made his way back to the computer room and sat down at the main system console. After he Pressed the return key the computer asked for a user name.

"SYSTEM" he typed.

The screen displayed:

"PASSWORD:"

Rex responded with:

"AZTECS" The password that had been randomly selected by the computers operating system for that week. It wasn't echoed on the terminals screen.

"SYSTEM ACTIVE: " The computer responded.

"ENTER AUTHORIZATION:"

Rex typed:

"MASTER USER: CODE: 99-9"

The system responded:

"GOOD EVENING MASTER USER."

"DATE:17-JUN-09"

"TIME:17:24:34"

"ENTER ACTIVITY CODE:"

To which Rex answered:

"RELEASE:WATCHDOG-ON CHAIN"

The system responded:

"WATCHDOG ACTIVE:PASSIVE MODE" And the computer emitted a sharp "BEEP", followed by:

"ENTER ACTIVITY CODE:"

Rex typed:

"TERMINATE SESSION"

The screen displayed:

"MASTER USER"

"LOGOFF 17:25:45 17-JUN-09"

"Sic-um Fido." Rex said to himself and sat back to wait.

Several miles away Jim and Juan sat across from each other in a dingy motel room. Juan was typing on the keyboard of the portable computer while Jim picked his fingernails with a wicked looking stiletto.

"You done with the second message yet Juan?" Asked Jim with annoyance.

"Almost, it's got to be right."

"Shit, just tell them to get the cash and deliver it to the drop off."

"What if they've activated a watchdog?"

"What the fuck you talking about?"

"When I was in college we hacked one of these systems at the school lab, and some asshole had a watchdog program that caught us. Got my ass thrown out for it to." He neglected to mention the damage the prank had caused to the systems operating files before they had been caught.

"So? From what I heard when I put in the modem they don't know enough to turn it on, let alone activate anything." He remembered how easy it had been to install the modem after he had gained access as a food vendor from the company who serviced the Plant's vending machines.

Juan worked several more minutes, switched the computer off and closed the cover.

"Let's go, I'm ready." He said as he picked up his fatigue jacket.

Juan and Jim left the cramped motel room and got into the van. The engine sputtered noisily to life and they drove away in a cloud of dense, black smoke. An old man rocking outside the motel office looked after them and said to no one in particular,

"Damn hippies." And promptly fell asleep.

Rex was just coming back from the coffee room when the control terminal let out a short series of beeps and numbers starting scrolling up the screen.

"Shit, look at that." He said to himself as he picked up the in-plant phone and dialed Westwood's extension.

"You better get down here, there's a Balrog in the woodpile." He said as Westwood answered. He then hung up as his fingers began to dance on the keyboard.

Up in his office Westwood stared at the dead receiver and carefully placed it on the cradle. "Balrog?" He asked himself. "What the hells a Balrog?" He got up from the chair and hurried toward the lab.

CHAPTER FOUR

June 17, 6:30 pm, Phoenix plant computer room:

"How many numbers?" Asked Westwood incredulously.

"Over a hundred all over the State." Rex answered, still typing at the keyboard.

"But how's that possible? I thought you said that the watchdog program would tell us where the call came from?"

"I did, and it will, I'll just have to work a little bit more at it. Some kid did something similar in the eighties, he routed his call through so many exchanges he actually got a time delay. This guy's done something similar."

"Great. Some watchdog you got there, what did they send this time?"

"Here." Rex ripped a printout off the printer and handed it to Westwood.

"It's the ransom request, they want several million and will give us the delivery instructions tomorrow." He lowered the paper. "Shit, see what you can do to get the phone number out of that mess. I've got several calls to make." Westwood left the room.

"Find the damn number he says, shit" Rex mumbled as he typed at the console.

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June 17, 8:30 pm, a back road in Monroe Co. Ill.:

The van sped into the gathering dusk along the almost deserted country road. Its brake lights, or at least the one that worked, glowed balefully as the blinker came on and the van turned onto the dusty dirt road which led to the deserted farm. The van pulled up to the barn and Jim and Juan got out. Juan reached into the dark space behind the seat of the van and grabbed a beat up flashlight. Switching on the weak beam he walked to the barn. At the doors he paused, the locked padlock hung from a broken hasp. He swore and then swung the large doors open. As he played the light into the open door his face went pale.

"FUCK!" He yelled and then ran into the barn.

The fading light of the setting sun filtered through the damaged roof and nudged the dust motes in their mindless dance. The empty barn echoed Juan's cry of disbelief as he stumbled across the shovel that had been used to bury the driver.

"IT'S FUCKING GONE" He screamed as he ran out and behind the barn. Jim caught up to him as he stood beside the shallow pit staring open mouthed at the empty hole.

"But...I saw him die! The bullets cut his damn chest in half!" Jim shouted.

"The dead don't steal trucks man, the dead don't fuck you over." Juan said as he turned to Jim, his face flushed with anger.

"What are we going to do?" Jim looked scared.

"Nothing, as far as those assholes at the plant know we still got the shit." Juan turned back to the hole and angrily kicked some dirt in.

"What if the damn trucker turns in the stuff?"

"Shit, if he was going to do that he would have already, I don't know what the hell his game is and I don't want to know. After the drop tomorrow we are history, let them worry about the damn fuel."

"Shit man, I don't..."

The small automatic looked quite deadly in Juan's hand. He pulled the slide back and aimed it at Jim.

"I know how to kill shithead." Juan said coldly. His eyes empty pits of anger.

"Shit Juan, I'll do what ever you want, don't shoot." Jim fell to his knees by the hole.

Juan looked down at his friend and the anger drained from his face he looked at the gun in his hand. He lowered it and uncocked the hammer.

"Shit Jim. stand up." He put the gun away. "Let's get the hell out of here. Juan turned and walked toward the van. Jim stood and stumbled after him.

They quickly walked to the van and drove off. Several hundred yards away the driver lowered his binoculars and smiled.

"Schmucks" He said. He walked a short distance to his rented car and starting it, followed them.

.

June 17, 8:45 pm, Phoenix plant computer room:

Rex swore mildly as his fingers stabbed at the terminal.

"Clever bastard, I'll give him that." He said.

"Any luck?" Asked Frank who had just come in from taking some readings, he put his clipboard down on the table.

"No, not yet. I've got a recursive sort routine going trying to trace the call to the originating station, but I don't know if it is going to do any good." Rex glanced at the terminal, took a sip of his coffee and made a face.

"Shit, cold coffee is worse than panther piss. Could you get me another cup?" He handed the cold coffee to Frank.

"Sure, I'll be right back." He turned to go to the break room.

Just then the terminal beeped to signal the end of the sort.

"What's this?" Asked Rex as he looked at the screen, he smiled. "Bingo."

He picked up the phone and called Westwood as Frank looked over his shoulder.

"That's a local exchange." He said as Rex waited for Westwood to answer.

"We have a phone number at a local exchange Mr. Westwood." Rex said into the phone as Westwood answered.

"Local?" Answered Westwood.

"Yes, Frank said it's local, you have a pen? O.K. here it is: 555-7788"

"Great, I'll give the Sheriff a call and have him check it out."

"I have the watchdog program set to record all incoming transactions."

"Good work. And Rex...Thanks."

"All part of Nuclear Trends service Mr. Westwood. I don't think that anything else is going to happen tonight, If it's alright, I'm leaving, I'll be at my motel, if anything comes up give me a call there."

"Alright, but stay where we can reach you." He hung up the phone.

Rex hung up the phone and stretched, then he turned to Frank.

"See you tomorrow, like I said, give me a call if anything comes up."

He turned and put on his sport coat.

"Don't worry, I will." Frank answered.

Just then the phone beeped. Frank answered it.

"Computer Room, Frank speaking."

On the other end Westwood spoke quickly:

"Frank, has Rex left yet?"

"No, he's just putting on his coat."

Rex looked pained as he took the phone.

"Hello."

"Rex, glad I caught you, the Sheriff just called, they think they found where the truck was hidden. You feel like tagging along?"

"Sure, I'll be right up." Rex put the phone down.

"They found where they think the truck was, Westwood and I are going out there."

"Have fun."

"Right, my idea of a great evening." Rex left the room.

Rex made his way to Westwood's office, on the way he ran into Lochridge. Lochridge had a smirk that looked like he had just swallowed a canary, his expression hardened as he saw Rex.

"What are you doing here?" Lochridge said with a sneer.

"Westwood invited me, you going?" Rex did not look pleased.

"Yes, I guess it's true what they say." Lochridge said with a sarcastic smile.

"What's that?"

"That the criminal always returns to the scene of his crime of course."

Before Rex could formulate a suitable reply Westwood came out of his office. He smiled.

"Good, you're both here, we'll take my company car, come this way."

He turned into a side staircase that led to the company parking area. Once he reached the lot he walked to a dusty, beat-up looking blue Chevy with the power company Logo on the side.

"It's not much, but it's free." He said as he opened the driver's side door.

"Can't argue with that I guess." Answered Rex as he climbed into the back seat.

"You should keep this car cleaner Westwood." Snapped Lochridge as he got in the passenger side of the front seat and dusted off his hands.

Westwood started the car. The engine turned over several seconds then caught as a cloud of grey smoke blossomed out the exhaust pipe.

"Sorry about that, we peons at the plant get the company seconds." He said as the transmission slammed into reverse and the car jerkily backed up.

The drive to the deserted farm was uneventful. As they drew near they could see that the once peaceful farm was the hub of an immense amount of activity. Portable generators roared as they supplied the power to the batteries of floodlights that gave the semblance of day to the barnyard.

They could see the investigators from the State and Federal agencies combing the area for any clues as to the how's and who's of the theft.

They pulled into the yard and parked where a uniformed officer directed them. As they got out he came over.

"I'm sorry, but I'll have to ask to see some identification please." As he talked he shined his large flashlight into each of their faces.

Rex got out his company I.D. card and showed it to the guard. The guard then scrutinized each of the others identification and then lowered the light.

"Sorry about that Mr. Westwood, we were told to expect you. The Sheriff is over by the barn."

As they got out of the car, Westwood responded, "We know that you're just doing your job officer. They find anything yet?"

"I don't know, tonight I'm just a parking attendant, you'll have to save your questions for the Sheriff."

"O.K. officer, thanks."

They turned and walked to the barn. A heavy set man with a Sheriff's badge was standing near the barn door examining the broken hasp that hung loosely on the old wood.

"Sheriff?"

"I told you dumb shits to look..." He turned and stuttered to a stop.

"Oh, sorry, I thought it was those worthless deputies of mine, they can't do a lick of work without direction. You that Westwood guy?" He asked Rex.

"No, my name's Rex Franklin, this is John Westwood, and this is Mr. Lochridge, the Phoenix plant's NRC Inspector."

The Sheriff shook each of their hands and then pulled a checkered handkerchief out of his back pocket and wiped his brow.

"What can I do for you folks?" He said as he stuffed the dirty handkerchief back into his pocket.

"Well Sheriff," began Westwood. He was interrupted by Lochridge.

"We want to see the scene of the crime Sheriff, if you please."

"Well first off Mr. er..Lochridge ain't it? Well first off, we're not sure if this is a crime scene, however you're welcome to look around, just don't get in the way."

"Thank you Sheriff." Said Westwood as he looked with annoyance at Lochridge who was walking off toward the house.

"Quite the little piss ant isn't he?" Said the Sheriff.

Westwood only smiled in reply. Rex and Westwood entered the barn and looked around. Rex walked over to the center and crouched down to look at a stain on the dusty floor. He touched the spot and brought his finger to his nose.

"There was a big rig here, and it's got a leak in it's hydraulic system, here take a smell." He held his fingers out to Westwood who sniffed at them.

"You're right. You don't miss that smell once you've lived with it on a submarine for months on end."

"Right. Let's look around outside. I don't think there's too much more to see in here." Rex dusted his hands off on his slacks. As he turned he kicked the

shovel, it skidded loudly across the floor. "Wonder where that came from?" He asked no one in particular.

They left the barn and walked around behind it. The Sheriff was kneeling near a shallow pit. They walked over to him as he stood up and dusted off his knees.

"What's this Sheriff?" Asked Rex as he looked into the hole.

"It appears to be a grave. There's no body in it, but there is blood under the cover dirt." He took his handkerchief back out and wiped his hands.

"Blood? Are you sure?" Asked Westwood.

"Well, at least it's a reasonable facsimile." The Sheriff smiled.

"May I?" Rex motioned to the pit.

"Be my guest, we've got everything we need."

Rex took off his coat and handed it to Westwood. He then jumped into the shallow pit. After a short bit he took out his handkerchief and dabbed at a dark spot on the bottom of the pit. He then climbed out of the pit and put his coat back on.

"Is this the blood Sheriff?" He held his handkerchief out to the Sheriff.

"Yes, that's it." The Sheriff said as he examined the handkerchief. He handed it back.

"Better check again, it isn't blood. By the way, we have the phone number that the call was made from."

"What? Why wasn't I told?" The Sheriff said impatiently.

"Mr. Westwood, didn't you call?"

"Yes, they must not have called you with it yet, here." Westwood handed a slip of message paper to the sheriff. After looking at the number a moment he looked back up.

"Damn, it's a pay phone."

"Thought it might be, I wouldn't use my own phone if I were them would you?" Rex asked.

"True, I'll get this out to the phone company and get a location, be right back." He turned and moved toward the house, he had only gone a few steps when he turned and looked quizzically at Rex.

"What do you mean, the blood's phony?"

"Think about it Sheriff, it's been hot and dry all day, blood dries pretty fast, this is still wet." He held out his handkerchief.

"True, I hadn't thought about it with all this going on."

"The lab report would have told you."

"Ya, but you've saved us some time. You come up with anything else you call."

He turned and walked to the house.

"Shit Rex is there anything you don't know?" Westwood asked.

"I read a lot and have a suspicious mind."

"What do you think happened?"

"Who knows, probably a double cross, I imagine somebody's pretty pissed." He folded his handkerchief and put it back in his pocket. He took his coat back from Westwood and shrugged it on.

CHAPTER FIVE

June 17, 9:00 pm, A small motel, New Hanover, Ill.:

The cheap door leading to the motels only claim to class, a patio, slammed inward, waking Juan and Jim from a troubled sleep. Packard leapt into the room and deftly kicked away the small automatic which Juan was bringing to bare on him. He savagely pistol whipped Juan to the floor beside the bed. Jim chose that moment to attack by leaping onto the drivers back and pummeling his head and shoulders with mostly ineffective blows. Like an enraged elephant shouldering aside a sapling the driver shrugged Jim off on to the floor, then, he turned and grabbed him by the throat.

"Wimp, I should kill you. Do you know how much those damn .25 cal slugs sting at close range?" He tightened his grip until Jim's face was dark and congested with blood. He slowly relaxed his grip.

"But you were dead!" Choked Jim through his tortured throat.

"You ever hear of third generation Kevlar schmuck? Great stuff, even stops .45's, leaves a hell of a bruise though." He rubbed his chest with his free hand.

"But the blood! I saw it all over you!" Stuttered Jim.

"Three fifty a jug at any good makeup place, you just fill the bladders in the vest, they use it in the fake snuff movies. I figured you creeps for cheaters from the first call. You might call the vest a little insurance."

He slowly stood and turned, Juan was groaning over on the floor beside the bed. The driver picked up the automatic and stuffed it in his belt.

"That wetback planned the cross didn't he?" He gestured toward Juan.

"I told him it was a bad idea." Jim was almost whimpering.

"Go get a washcloth, your friends going to need it."

The driver sat down on the bed while Jim stumbled to the bathroom. The driver reached down with one hand and lifted Juan onto the other bed.

"Wake up asshole, I didn't hit you that hard." Juan groaned and looked at the driver, his left eye was almost swollen shut.

"We're going to talk a bit. First, what are you asking them for?" He leaned back and lit a filter less cigarette. His eyes burning into Juan's.

.

Back at the barn the Sheriff met Rex and Westwood at the car as they were getting in to leave. He leaned into the window at Lochridges side and deliberately belched.

"That pay phone is about ten miles from here. A couple of my men are checking it out. The lab gave me a preliminary report, and you were right Mr. Franklin, that blood was movie stuff. How does it figure? You tell me. Anyway have a nice day gentlemen." He stood and walked over to his cruiser, before he got in he waved.

"Not too bright, is he?" Asked Lochridge.

"He might fool you." Responded Rex, watching the Sheriff thoughtfully.

The drive back to the plant was quiet. The night sky was full of stars with an occasional wisp of cloud that drifted across the moon. Westwood dropped Rex off at his car in the contractor lot.

"See you tomorrow John, I'll be in early to check on the system."

"Thanks Rex, maybe we'll get the bastards tomorrow."

"I hope so, when's the drop?"

"The note said they would send another message at ten tomorrow morning. I guess we'll find out then."

Rex waved as they drove away towards the plant. He looked up at the sky and a momentary shudder went through him. He opened the door on the Star Duster and climbed in, thinking of Liz he smiled and started the car.

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June 17, 9:10 pm, Phoenix plant NRC office:

After checking his desk for messages, Lochridge checked out for the day. With anticipation he rushed through the security checkout and to his car. Being the onsite NRC inspector, his parking place was right beside the security building. Lochridge opened the door to the immaculate car, he treated it as an extension of himself. He usually bathed at least twice a day, the car was washed and waxed several times a week.

Taking his keys from his pocket, he started the car and drove quickly from the lot. He sped down the blacktop and into town. He cursed as he slowed to go through a speed zone, though he did eye the scantily clad teenagers lounging outside the local hangout with lust in his small piggy eyes as he went past. On the other side of the zone he pressed the accelerator down and shot up to ten miles per hour over the posted limit. Soon he saw his objective, J.B.s Bar.

He carefully parked the car and locked it. Pocketing the keys, he slicked his thinning hair back and entered the seedy looking establishment. Lochridge stood just inside the door and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim interior.

As soon as he could see, he looked around the room hungrily. There she was! The girl he had been told would meet him tonight. She was wearing the red belt, just as he was told that she would be.

She stood against the wall near the jukebox. She was wearing a midriff top that exposed her flat tummy. Her hip hugging skirt was worn low on the hips, and barely covered the area from the top of her thighs to her hips, if another inch was exposed, she could have been arrested for indecent exposure, as it was, she was merely indecent. Her tan legs were bare of any adornment, save a delicate ankle chain around her left ankle. She had on a pair of at least two inch heels that had straps that laced up across her taunt calves. Her hair was dark and

worn in a page boy cut. She looked at him with hard brown eyes and smiled with lips painted red.

"You John?" She asked, she didn't sound, or look for that matter, eighteen, but that suited Lochridge. "You're late."

"I'm anyone you want me to be." He had begun to sweat in the muggy, smoke filled room. "Let's go to a place I know, just the two of us."

"Sure, but anything kinky will cost you more."

"No problem." He figured tonight would cost him plenty. He was right.

Sam Jeffries watched as they left the bar. Picking up his drink he walked over to the payphone in the corner. Dropping two quarters in the slot he dialed a number and waited for an answer. A male voice answered.

"Anderson?" Sam asked.

"Yes, who the hell is this?" The voice was gruff.

"A friend. Guess who I just saw take Francis for a fuck?" Sam smiled at the crudeness of the sentence.

"What? Who the hell is this?!!" The voice sounded angry now.

"Just a friend who hates to see a minor corrupted. She just left J.B.s with that asshole Lochridge. Well got to go, have a nice day." Jeffries hung up and humming, walked back to the bar and ordered another beer.

.

June 17, 9:45 pm, Columbia, Ill.:

Rex almost felt human by the time he reached the motel. He was humming as he walked into the lobby and checked the desk for messages, there were none. He walked around to Liz's room and noticed that the shades were open and the room empty. After a steak dinner at the motels restaurant he went back to his empty room and went to bed.

CHAPTER SIX

June 18, 08:30 am, Rex's motel room.:

The phone's loud ringing jarred Rex from a dream of a quiet beach, a tall cool drink and a woman whose face he couldn't remember as he awoke. He almost knocked the cheap lamp off of the bedside table as he fumbled for the phone.

"Hello?" He said sleepily through a yawn.

"Rex? That you?" Frank asked, disgustingly awake sounding to Rex's sleep fogged brain.

"Ya, I think so, let me check my I.D." He reached over and picked up his watch and looked at it through blurry eyes.

"It's almost 08:30 Rex, they're having a briefing at 09:00 and want you there."

"Damn, I didn't hear my alarm and forgot to give a wake-up request, I'll be there as soon as possible. Anything happen yet with the system?" He climbed out of bed and holding the phone between his ear and shoulder reached to pick up his pants.

"No, for once its acting like it's supposed to."

"What's this 'supposed to' crap? Why don't you hang up so a guy can get dressed?" He grabbed the phone as it started to drop from its precarious perch.

"O.K. see you when you get here. By the way, they're going to hold the meeting for you."

"Great, just what I always wanted." He reached for his shirt. "See you soon" He hung up the phone and walked to the small bathroom.

About thirty minutes later a slightly disheveled Rex was sitting in a room full of police and security types. They where all listening to the Sheriff, who looked slightly better than Rex, as he briefed the corporate types and police officials from the area on the findings so far.

"We think that the rig was switched here." He gestured to a crude but recognizable map of the area around the plant, his pointer indicated the crossroads of two highways. "The rig developed tire problems about a mile the other side and just made it in. The lab boys think the tire problems where caused by a small caliber jacketed slug." He paused, looked around the room and then spit into a small can he was holding in one hand.

During this episode one of the State police asked:

"But how could they switch trailers, I thought those rigs had special security arrangements?" He looked smug.

"Be patient." The Sheriff wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "The rig had two drivers for security. One went in to get a shower while the other stayed with the trailer. Well, it seems one of the suspects started a pretty respectable fire on the other side of the lot. We found a pin from a thermite grenade near the scene. Anyway, the security driver disregarded procedure and went over to help put it out. While he was gone the trailer was stolen and the

mock-up substituted." He paused to spit again. The same officer spoke up again.

"But what about the special fittings and interlocks? I thought the trailer wheels were supposed to lock up if the wrong tractor is used to try and pull it?"

"You stay up last night and think these up boy?"

The Sheriff wiped his mouth again.

"Mr. Franklin, tell this gentleman what you saw the night of the theft."

Rex, looking somewhat uncomfortable, stood and cleared his throat.

"I saw what appeared to be a fuel transport, but as Mr. Westwood informed me, the real rig was somewhere else at the time." Rex made to sit down when the Sheriff gestured toward the map.

"Could you show us on the map Mr. Franklin?" He smiled apologetically.

Rex made his way to the map and pointed to a place about five miles from the crossroads.

"About here, heading east, it was about eight at night. The driver ran me off the road." Rex turned and looked at the Sheriff.

"Thank you Mr. Franklin. While you're up here could you tell these gentlemen about your computer and how it's related to the case?"

"Sure," Rex took a breath, "I'm a consultant with the company that makes the RMS system, the plant called me up here to get it running before the fuel arrived." He paused for another breath. "I was preparing to leave after getting the system up when the first contact was made. The contact consisted of a message sent in over a phone line to the computer system. Whoever sent it is using a modem and I would guess a portable computer to send in their messages. We got a phone number for a phone booth from the last contact." He looked over to the Sheriff. "Is that all Sheriff?"

"Thanks Mr. Franklin you can sit down now." The Sheriff moved back to the map. "The phone booth is right here." He pointed to a small town on the map about two miles east of the location Rex had indicated.

"And the barn where we think they stashed the rig is right here." He indicated a place about another five miles east. "Any more questions?"

"When is the public going to be told, I've been hearing all sort of rumors that aren't doing our credibility any good." One of the plant security asked.

"Mr. Westwood, would you field that one?"

"Sure Sheriff." Westwood stood and turned to face the group. "We have prepared a statement to be released after this meeting. It will give the basic information that there is a stolen fuel shipment and that arrangements are being made for its safe return." He paused and then added. "Of course copies are available so that we are all talking from the same base." He sat back down.

The State patrolmen piped up.

"I still don't understand about the rig."

Looking pained the Sheriff answered, "We think we have a suspect on the driver." He walked over to a battered briefcase and pulled out an equally battered file. "We think his name is Packard Stone, he was enrolled in the nuclear transport driver's school that the DOE sponsors, that is, until a background check uncovered a tie to known terrorists. We have the FBI to thank for this." He held up the file and waved it in the general direction of a well dressed man in a dark suit sitting near the front. He continued.

"Here is a picture taken for his security file several years ago." He handed a worn looking 8X10 to one of the men in the front row.

"After he was found out, he disappeared for several months, then we think he was involved with that armored truck heist in California. We feel he is our best suspect for the simple reason that we can find all the other drivers with similar training, except him." He dropped the file on the briefing table. "As for the rig, it seems the NRC "misplaced" a set of the plans. With those, anybody could outfit a rig to haul the fuel trailers."

By now the picture reached Rex. He looked at it a moment then slowly stood up. The Sheriff looked over at him.

"You have something else Mr. Franklin?"

"Yes, this is definitely your man." Everyone looked at him, the State patrolman asked, "How do you know, at nine at night its dark. Besides, it seems to me you had more than seeing the driver on your mind, like trying to get back on the road." He smiled at Rex like the cat who got the canary.

"You're quite right officer." Rex smiled back. "I saw him when I sat next to him on the flight down. He told me he was "Picking up a truck.""

"Well now, you're turning out to be quite useful Mr. Franklin." The Sheriff smiled. "I'm sure the folks in charge will want to talk to you again, the rest of you can go."

With a sigh, Rex walked to the front of the room once again and was surrounded by questioning police.

CHAPTER SEVEN

June 18, 09:45 am, Monroe, Co. Ill.:

The van drove quickly down the deserted country road. In the front seats Juan and Jim sat sullenly. Behind them Stone held the large caliber pistol loosely as he talked.

"So you boys decided you didn't need to pay me, even though you couldn't drive that damn rig without me." He smiled. "I should kill you both and take all the money myself."

Jim turned and looked at him.

"I told you it was his idea."

"Shut up and turn around, you sure enjoyed killing me for being so against it asshole." He continued. "When is the next message due out?"

"Ten this morning." Juan said sullenly. "About ten minutes from now."

"Don't sweat it punk. There's a phone booth about two miles from here."

.

Meanwhile the briefing had broken up at the plant and Rex and Frank had gone to the computer room with the Sheriff to await the next message.

"So where is this computer?" The Sheriff asked as he poked around the room.

"This is it." Rex gestured to a small, flat box that stood next to the terminal stand. "Not much to look at is it?" Rex said as he sat down at the terminal.

"No, I expected tapes and lights and lab coats." The Sheriff sat on the table that was against the wall.

"Nope, no more of that stuff. Went out with the invention of these." Rex tossed a small clear cube to the Sheriff who snatched it out of the air with a sweep of his meaty hand.

"What the hell is this?" He asked as he held it up to the light to see the multitude of diffraction grating like lines which went through the entire block.

"That is a crystal memory unit. It stores about a gigabyte of information in that lattice you're looking at. The lattice is a special long chain molecule which has atoms that flip-flop according to how they're charged."

"Easy for you to say." The Sheriff tossed it back.

"The thing's virtually indestructible and can store the information forever. Nope, no need for tapes and disks when you got this." Rex held it up to the light. "Kind of pretty too." He put the cube back on the table. "Of course this one is flawed, it's only good for a paper weight."

Sniffing several times the Sheriff asked "You smell something?" getting down from the table he began looking around the room.

"Now that you mention it..." Rex stood up and quickly looked over the equipment. He moved around to the rear of the cabinet and opened a small panel.

"FUCK!"

"What's the problem?" The Sheriff and Frank hurried over to where Rex was standing. He held up a still smoking circuit card.

"Damn homemade piece of crap, the power supply is shot." Rex unplugged the connection to the phone circuit and carried the now useless board to the table.

"You think you can fix it?" Asked Frank. He opened a drawer, removed a small tool kit and handed it to Rex.

"I'll tell you in a minute, you got another modem?" Rex quickly scanned the back of the board with a magnifier from the tool kit as he talked.

"No, it's not allowed, security you know." Frank looked thoughtful. "The people in accounting use PC's, they might have one to talk to the main computer with."

"Well, this one's shot to hell, the damn asshole didn't fuse the power supply, the circuits are blown." Rex looked at his watch. "Damn, we don't have enough time."

They looked on helplessly as the digital wall clock flicked past ten.

At the phone booth Juan opened the attaché case and removed the small computer. He hooked up the modem and after depositing some change started the program that dialed the plant's number. He looked up with scared expression after his third attempt.

"They've disconnected the modem, we can't talk to them." He looked at Packard.

"Well, I guess we have to convince them you're serious." A cold fire had come into Packard's eyes.

"What do you mean?" Asked Juan as he disconnected the equipment and packed it back into the attaché case.

"Let me handle it. Get me back to that piece of crap you call a motel then go to this address."

He handed a slip of paper to Juan and walked back to the van with Juan and Jim following.

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June 18, 11:00 am, Phoenix plant computer room:

At the Plant Lochridge had shown up at the computer lab. "What now Franklin?" Lochridge looked almost pleased with the way things were working out.

"Well, we've got a new modem installed that we got from accounting. I guess we wait." Rex stood and handed the burned out modem to the Sheriff. "Here, I hope you can get something from it."

"The forensics will have fun with it, I've already got a trace going on some of the parts. Well, I've got to shepherd the feds around, I'll see you all later." He stood to go, placing the modem in his battered briefcase.

"Why haven't the FBI people taken over the investigation Sheriff?" Asked Lochridge challengingly.

"After the briefing today they did Lochhorn. I'm just a driver for the feds now." The Sheriff looked angry.

"Good, maybe something will get done now." Lochridge looked smug. "And the name is Lochridge, Mr. Lochridge to you."

"Just do me a favor Mr. Lochridge" The Sheriff said levelly as he snapped the locks on the case, "stay out of my and my men's way." With that the Sheriff put on his hat and left.

"What are you doing Franklin?" Lochridge looked over Rex's shoulder as he worked at the keyboard.

"Typing in a message that will be transmitted to the thieves when and if they re-establish contact explaining what happened." He continued typing as he talked.

"Well, that hasn't been authorized Franklin, until it is, I forbid you to do it." His voice held a note of triumph. "And remove that unauthorized equipment." He pointed at the new modem.

"Sir, I think that the thieves should be told we didn't break communications deliberately." He turned and looked at Lochridge. "If they don't know they might do something stupid."

"I think they should stew for a while. If you do anything I'll have you removed from the site." With that Lochridge left the room.

"Damn piss ant." Rex said to himself as he disconnected the modem. He picked up the phone and dialed Westwood's number. He fumed as the phone rang. As Westwood answered he said "John what the fuck is going on with Lochridge? Can you put a muzzle on that asshole?" Rex's eyes flashed with anger. "He's forbidden me to touch the system, threatened to throw me off site if I do."

"I'm sorry Rex but he's within his rights." Westwood's voice sounded strained. "As soon as the government took over the investigation Lochridge got almost unlimited powers where control of site access is concerned. I'll talk to him."

"Well, I hope they hold off trying to call, he made me disconnect the modem."

"Damn, I'll get right back to you." Westwood hung up the phone.

"Shit." Rex said as he hung up and sat back with folded hands.

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June 18, 11:15 am, Juan and Jim's motel:

At the motel Juan had talked Stone into one more chance at contact.

"Shit." Said Juan as he hung up the phone. "It's still disconnected, what are you going to do.?"

"Convince them we mean business." He picked up his jacket and headed out toward the door. "I gave you your one more chance, now it's my turn. Get your shit packed up and go to that address. I'm surprised they haven't caught you assholes yet." He started out the door, then turned and looked at Juan.

"Don't even think of crossing me again, next time you and your friend get very dead." The door banged as he left.

"Shit Juan, what are we going to do?" Jim sat down and put his head in his hands.

CHAPTER EIGHT

June 18, 3:30 pm, Phoenix plant, Westwood's office:

"You've got it re-connected?" Asked Westwood.

"Yes, the modem is reinstalled, fat lot of good it will probably do. It's almost four hours after contact time. If they tried again we probably missed them." Rex sounded dejected.

"Do you think they will use the computer for contact again?" Westwood asked.

"Who knows? They probably think we disconnected it deliberately, no thanks to Lochridge." Rex looked like he wanted to spit.

"After the talk I had with the Region Director he talked to Lochridge and jerked a knot in his tail. I don't think he will bother you again, at least for now." Westwood smiled. "But I think we're both on his list now."

"Go ahead, make my day." Rex said gruffly.

"What?" Westwood looked puzzled.

"Oh, nothing. Just a line from an old movie."

"Oh." At that particular moment there was a knock on the door to Westwood's office. Rex got up and opened it.

"Yes?"

The attractive female security guard at the door was holding a cubical brown paper wrapped package, it was about a foot long.

"This was just delivered for Mr. Westwood at the security gate." She handed the box to Rex and smiled. "Please give it to him."

"Sure thing." Rex smiled back as he closed the door. He walked across the office and handed the box to Westwood.

"Sweet girl." Rex said to no one in particular.

"Ya, her husband's a mechanic down in the machine shop." Westwood answered with a smile of his own at Rex's obvious disappointment.

"Figures, you get packages here often?" Rex asked as he sat down.

"Come to think of it, no." Westwood examined the package carefully. "Strange, there's no return address." He leaned over and picked up the phone, dialed Security's number.

"The package that just came in, did you X-ray it?"

"Yes sir. It's standard procedure for all packages to be X-rayed and passed through an explosive sniffer. That particular package has nothing but a box with some sort of solid rod in it." The guard paused then said. " I figured it was some sort of promotional package or something. Anything else Sir?"

"Yes, who delivered it?"

"A local delivery service sir. Anything else?"

"No that's all." Westwood hung up the phone and looked at Rex. "You thinking the same thing I am?"

"Yes. We better get the Feds up here." Rex said.

"Yes. I agree." Westwood said as he picked up the phone and began to dial.

Several minutes later, after the Federal agent arrived, Westwood unwrapped the brown paper from the package. Inside was a small, clear, thick walled, tightly sealed plastic container filled with a clear liquid which appeared to be water. Suspended in the exact center by a plastic brace was a silvery-yellow metallic rod.

"Holy shit." Rex said softly. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Sure looks it to me." Said Westwood as he dropped the wrapping paper on his desk and held the container up to the light. A small piece of paper fell out of the wrapper. Rex picked it up and read it out loud:

"Think about it, fuel and water don't mix. Re-connect the modem." He lowered the paper. "I guess they've re-established contact."

"May I see that sir?" The FBI agent held out his hand.

"Certainly, here." Westwood handed the container to him.

"How can we be sure that this" the FBI man held up the container, "is what it looks to be?" He looked thoughtful. "Is this thing dangerous?" He set the container down and wiped his hand on his pants.

"Not singly like this." Westwood gestured at the container. "But if the several sub-assemblies in the shipment were immersed in cold water together it could theoretically cause a prompt criticality."

"A what?" The FBI man looked concerned.

"An uncontrolled nuclear chain reaction." Rex answered. "You see, this type of nuclear fuel needs water to act as a moderator." The agent looked puzzled. "A moderator is used to slow the neutrons that cause the nuclear reaction to what is known as "Thermal" speed where they can react. If the water is too cold, and no reaction poison like boron is present, then too many neutrons react and the process is uncontrolled."

"You mean this stuff could go up like an atomic bomb?" The FBI man really looked concerned now.

"No, to get a nuclear explosion you need the compressive action of the high explosives that surround the reaction mass in a bomb. What you would get would be the generation of a lot of radiation, the excess neutrons would activate anything they collided with, and the fuel would probably rupture. Taken all together the heat and radiation would probably cause a rapidly expanding steam bubble to form which would blow the sub-assemblies out of a critical configuration. This would halt the reaction. However, it would also cause a

cloud of radioactive debris to contaminate several square miles. Not quite as bad as a nuclear explosion, but in some ways, a lot messier."

"Damn, is that what you think they're threatening?" He picked up the container and examined it again.

Westwood answered, "Yes, it would appear they have opened at least one of the fuel canisters and sawed their way into one of the rods. The intent of the water is obvious." Westwood turned to Rex. "Would a gamma scan confirm if this is a fuel pellet Rex?"

"It should. Although the Uranium itself has too low a level of gamma rays, there should be some in growth of Thorium and other, more radioactive, decay products."

"I'll call the Counting lab and have the technician on duty scan it. Rex, would you take it down and lend a hand since it is another Nuclear Trends system?" Westwood picked up the phone and dialed the lab number.

"Sure, glad too." He carefully picked up the container. "You'll need this for finger prints won't you?" Rex asked the FBI man.

"Please, call me Rogers. Don't worry, with our new fluorescence methods we can get the fingerprints even after it's been handled. Mind if I tag along?" Agent Rogers answered.

"No problem with me." Rex opened the door and then turned back to Westwood. "Where is the count lab? I've only been in the computer center?"

"It's right down the hall from the computer room on the right. You can't miss it, it's the only one with a Radiation Area sign on the door." Westwood answered.

"O.K. I should be able to find it. I'll bring the results up as soon as I get them." Rex turned back to the door and gesturing to Agent Rogers went out into the hall.

"I hate to show my ignorance, but what is a "Gamma Scan"?" Agent Rogers asked.

"Well, you know that virtually all the super heavy elements are radioactive?" Agent Rogers shook his head yes. "The reason they are is their disproportionate proton to neutron ratios. In order to reach a stable internal configuration these and other unstable isotopes make internal adjustments that result in particle or photon emission. The Photons are the same as light, only at a much higher energy. Anyway, these photons are called gamma radiation when they come from a nucleus. Each isotope gives off its own unique set of gamma rays. With special instruments we can sense these gamma rays and identify the isotope. It's like the isotope's fingerprint."

"Interesting. I never knew it was so complicated. You can use a prism to break light into its spectrum. Is that how you do it with gamma rays?"

Rex smiled, "No, I wish it were that easy. We use a precisely machined piece of ultra-pure semi-conductor, usually germanium. By super cooling it with liquid nitrogen to eliminate thermal interference. We collect the charge deposited as the gamma is absorbed into it and identify the gamma ray's energy with sensitive

electronics." Rex stopped by a door with a yellow and magenta symbol on it. "Here we are." Rex opened the door. Agent Rogers, as puzzled as ever, followed him.

A attractive women in a lab coat stood up from the chair were she had been sitting, and greeted them.

"Hello, my name's Linda. You must be Mr. Franklin." She held her hand out to Rex. "Mr. Westwood called and said you'd be coming."

"Er, yes, I am, er, Mr. Franklin that is, this is Agent Rogers from the FBI, are you the technician?" Rex stammered and looked puzzled.

"Yes, I am. Why? Don't I look it? I assure you I'm well qualified. This isn't the eighties you know." She stuck out her chin and looked angry.

"I'm sorry, I was just brought up a little old fashioned. I'm sure you're qualified. I just haven't seen that many females around the plant." Rex apologized.

"Well I know what you mean, the management around here is still in the eighties. Where is the sample?" She walked over to a chair near a terminal on the lab bench and sat down.

"Here it is." Rex held up the container. Trying to recover lost ground Rex asked:

"What is your degree in Linda?"

"Physics with a minor in computer science." Her fingers rapidly typed on the terminal bringing the system to readiness.

"Well, I don't think I really need to look over your shoulder, I'll put this on the detector." Rex gestured to Agent Rogers who had been watching the exchange with amusement. Across the room two cylindrical lead shields stood on steel racks. "Which detector Linda?"

"The one on the right, number one." She said over her shoulder as she concentrated on the terminal display.

Agent Rogers followed Rex over to the shields. "These are the shields that house the gamma detector assemblies." Rex said as he opened the cantilevered doors on top of one of the large, cylindrical lead shields. "And this" he gestured to a shiny cylinder that stuck up in the middle of the shield's center compartment. "Is the cryostat that holds the detector." He placed the plastic container on the detector housing and stepped back. He pointed to a large thermos bottle-looking cylinder under the shield. "That is the dewar that holds the liquid nitrogen that cools the detector."

He walked back to Linda's side.

"All set, let'er rip" He sat down in a chair beside Linda and signaled Agent Rogers to take the chair on the other side so he could watch the screen.

Linda pressed the terminal's enter key and a series of closely spaced horizontal dots appeared on the screen. The left side of the display began

showing peaks and valleys as the dots moved up the screen, the right side looked fairly flat, except for a few isolated peaks.

"So that's a spectrum." Agent Rogers said, he sounded disappointed.

"Yes, and I'm afraid it confirms our suspicions. Linda, do you have a gamma spectrum catalogue?" Rex asked.

"Yes, hold on a moment." She stood and went over to a wall mounted bookcase. The two men divided their attention between the screen and the sight of Linda's legs and shapely bottom as she stretched to reach the catalog.

"A gamma catalogue, what's that for?" Asked Rogers.

"It's a collection of typical spectrums that are given off by the different isotopes. You use it to check your results and help identify unknowns." Rex answered. "We'll need it to confirm this spectrum is from Uranium and its daughter products. The system library doesn't need the Uranium series in it."

"Oh."

"Here." Linda returned holding a large blue paper bound book, she handed it to Rex.

"Thanks, you would think they would bind these things better." Rex said as he gingerly opened the fragile book and laid it on the lab bench.

"What do you expect from the Government? Oh, sorry Agent Rogers, I didn't mean anything." Linda looked flustered and embarrassed.

"No insult taken Linda, I've said the same thing many times." He smiled at her.

"Here, look at this." Rex pointed to a picture of a spectrum near the back of the book. "This is the spectrum from natural refined uranium."

"Why are the peaks higher here on the display than they are in the picture?" Agent Rogers pointed to the central part of the spectrum on the screen.

"Good eyes, they're higher because this is enriched fuel. That causes the decay products that give peaks in that area to be higher in concentration." Rex closed the book and turned to Linda. "Get me a printout of the peak report will you Linda?" He asked.

"Sure, it will only take a second." She punched a few keys and the laser printer beside the terminal hummed to life. In a few seconds the printout was done. Linda removed the crisply printed sheets from the printer and handed them to Rex.

"Here Mr. Franklin."

"Linda, you can call me Rex. What are you doing for dinner? I want to make up for being rude."

"I'm cooking meatloaf for my husband." She said as she held up her left hand to show him her wedding band. "Sorry." She said and smiled.

"Oh, it's alright, par for course today." Rex shrugged.

"Well, let's get the results to Westwood." Urged Agent Rogers.

Rex walked over to the shield and retrieved the container holding the fuel pin.

"Right." Answered Rex. "See you around Linda." He followed agent Rogers into the hall.

"Nice girl, and smart." Said Rogers as they moved down the hall toward the steps that led up to Westwood's office.

"Ya, it seems the best ones are always taken."

"So true."

Back in Westwood's office Rex set the container and analysis results on the desk.

"This confirms it. It is a fuel pin. Those bastards have cut up one of the rods." Rex said with disgust.

"Damn, well I hope we make a more concrete contact with them soon." Westwood answered.

"We think we have a lead on their identity and we have located the motel they stayed in the last couple of nights." Agent Rogers volunteered. "There are three of them, two young men and Stone who we have a positive ID on." He nodded towards Rex in acknowledgement

"Great, then it's only a matter of time before you get them."

"Right. I just hope we have the time." Agent Rogers looked down at the fuel pin. "Well, I have to get word of this back to headquarters. Keep me posted of any further developments."

"We will Rogers, if we can be of any further help in the investigation don't hesitate to give us a call."

"Don't worry Mr. Westwood, I have your number committed to memory." He smiled and shook Westwood's hand. "Well, I've got to add this to my report and then check out that motel room." Agent Rogers stood and turned to go. He paused and reached into his pocket. Removing a business card he wrote a number on the back.

"Here" He handed the card to Rex. "Call me if anything else comes up." He turned and walked out after shaking Rex's hand.

"Rex, could you baby sit the system for the rest of today? If you can instruct Frank in operations while you're at it, all the better."

"Sure thing."

"I've called your company and told them how much help you've been. I suggested a large bonus."

"Great, thanks Mr. Westwood." Rex shook his hand.

Rex returned to the computer room. It was deserted. The equipment let out a low hum. The room was cool, some would say cold. Rex took off his coat, he liked it cool, it helped him to think.

The door opened to the hall and Frank entered.

"Well, hello. What's going on?" Frank dropped his clipboard on the table and sat down.

"You hear about the package?"

"What package?"

"The thieves sent Westwood a fuel pin."

"A what?" Frank asked in surprise.

"A fuel pin. They seem to have cut open a bundle and removed a pin."

"Some balls."

"Either that or they're stupid. They sent it immersed in a container of water."

"Why?"

"We figure they're threatening to dump the fuel into water."

Frank's horrified expression showed he understood the implications. "They must be crazy."

"Sure, like a fox. You ready to learn something about this thing?" He gestured to the computer.

"Never thought you'd ask." Frank smiled and pulled his chair closer.

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly. Rex was a good teacher, and Frank an eager student. By the time both had had enough, it was well after quitting time. Rex yawned and looked at his watch.

"Well it's near six, and I for one am pooped out." Rex stood and stretched. After he had relaxed from the stretch he picked up the phone and punched in Westwood's extension. After a few rings Westwood answered. "You need me for anything Mr. Westwood?" Asked Rex.

"No Rex, I was thinking of leaving myself. Thank you for all your help. Oh, you may want to use the construction gate. The press release has newspeople two layers deep at the main security gate. Somehow they got word that you had seen Packard, they want an interview." Warned Westwood.

"Shit, leaving by the other gate would add another half mile to my walk. I think I'll risk it." Rex said as he shifted the phone from one ear to the other as he put on his jacket. "Well, I won't forget the wake-up tonight. I'll see you early tomorrow."

"O.K. we'll be expecting you at 08:30 for the situation briefing."

"Right." Rex hung up the phone. "Come on Frank, let's go."

Together, they left the computer room. Frank walked with Rex to the outside door, took one look at the crowd of reporters and decided to use the other gate. Rex hesitated and, gritting his teeth, headed for the door to the security building and the waiting reporters.

An attractive young reporter thrust a microphone at Rex as he stepped out of the security building.

"Mr. Franklin, you are live on the six o'clock news, channel 7, we understand you have seen the terrorist. Do you have any comment?"

Rex looked into the lens of the small camcorder that the camera man pointed at him.

"There are no terrorists as far as I know. I suggest you talk to the plant management."

"But Mr. Franklin, you are the only person to see Packard Stone, surely you have additional comments you would like to make?"

"I sat next to the man on the plane flight here, that's all. I have no further comments." Rex looked away from the camera and began pushing his way through the crowd of reporters.

He made it to his car in a few minutes, after giving several more "No Comments" and "I'm sorry I can't answer that" responses and smiling to several video cameras. He got in and drove quickly back to his motel.

"Damn." He swore mildly as he pulled into the motel lot. An aging, oil leaking van was parked in the space in front of his room. He parked in the only other space available and walked the several hundred extra feet to get to the motel lobby. Inside he went to the desk. The man behind the counter looked up from a newspaper.

"Can I help you sir?"

"Yes, I'm in room 112, I would like to leave a 07:00 wake-up call. Make sure I'm up, I have an important meeting to attend." Rex answered.

"Yes Sir, didn't I just see you on T.V. out at that Nuclear Plant?" The clerk asked as he made an entry about the wake-up on the motel's computer.

"Probably, I had the misfortune of being waylaid as I left today."

"Those reporters can be real assholes." The clerk said sympathetically as he finished the entry. "I put a priority one on your wake-up Mr. Franklin."

"Thanks. Oh, if I get any calls in the next hour or so I'll be in the bar." Rex said as he turned to go.

"Yes Sir Mr. Franklin, I'll transfer any calls you get to there. Have a pleasant night."

"Right, you too." Rex said as he walked across the lobby to the entrance to the bar.

As he entered he paused to allow his eyes to adjust to the dimly lit interior. He then made his way to a corner table, took off his jacket, and hanging it on the coat hook provided, sat down. The waitress came over in a few moments and Rex ordered a Black Russian. When his drink arrived Rex loosened his tie and sat back to try and relax. The T.V. over the bar had just switched from the local news to the national news, Rex watched a piece concerning the new cold fusion research and then looked around the bar. He watched as two casually dressed young men came in and sat down. One had a painful looking black eye and a recent looking cut that was red and puffy looking. Soon a larger older man entered and sat with the two at the bar. Rex took a drink and looked at the older man. Like a light coming on in a dark room recognition blossomed in Rex's memory. He stood quickly, almost knocking over the small table. The trio at the bar looked over at him. The Juan and Jim looked back to their drinks, Packard did after looking at Rex a fraction longer. Rex dropped a ten on the table and made his way out of the bar. He paused at the door and looked around the area. Finding what he was looking for he walked across the lobby to the pay phone.

Out of the corner of his eye Packard watched Rex as he left the bar. Once Rex was gone he stood up.

"I think I'll get some air. See you at the room later." He walked out of the bar, leaving the drink he had just ordered for them to pay for.

Across the lobby Rex had just finished punching in the number that was on the back of Agent Roger's card. A large meaty hand took the receiver from him and hung it up.

"You looked good on T.V. Mr. Franklin." Said Packard as he used his other hand to move aside his coat and show Rex the .45 cal pistol in his belt.

"It's good to see you again, let's go to my room and talk over old times." The driver smiled with crooked teeth as he led Rex toward the door.

CHAPTER NINE

June 19, 08:30 am, Phoenix plant meeting room:

Westwood turned as Frank entered the briefing room carrying a Styrofoam cup of hot coffee. As Frank sat down Westwood looked at his watch Westwood and said, "Frank, you'd better go give Rex a call and ensure that he's up."

Looking with desire at the fresh cup of coffee Frank set it down on the meeting table.

"Yes sir. If it's alright I'll use the phone in your office. I sure wish he would remember his wake-ups like he remembers everything else."

"I'll second that. I guess that might be asking to much though." He smiled and turned back to the notes that he was going to use for his section of the briefing.

Frank picked up the cup, took a sip of the too-hot coffee, grimaced as it burned its way to his stomach, and set the cup back down. Leaving the meeting room he walked quickly to Westwood's office. Entering and closing the door, he sauntered over to the plush office chair and sat down. With a grin he put his feet up on the desk. He rummaged through the desk drawer and found a telephone book. He looked through the listings in the yellow pages until he found the motel's number. Picking up the phone, he dialed the motel.

"Rodeside Inn" the clerk said curtly.

"Hello, this is Frank Harris with the Phoenix nuclear plant. I would like to speak with Mr. Rex Franklin please." Frank opened the center desk drawer and removed a rubber band, taking a careful aim, he shot it at the picture of the company president that hung on the wall beside the desk.

"I'm sorry sir" the clerk said after several rings, "he doesn't seem to be in his room."

Frank sat up and, assuming his best official tone, said,

"Could you please send someone to check on him please? He has a very important meeting to attend this morning." Pleased with the forcefulness of his delivery Frank sat back in the chair and put his feet back on the desk.

"Yes sir, he had a priority wake up call for this morning but didn't answer. I'll have one of the staff go round and check on him." The clerk signaled to the maid who was taking her morning coffee at the free coffee stand in the lobby. She came over to the desk and leaned over to look questioningly at the clerk. He covered the mouthpiece.

"Please be a dear Mary and go over to room 114. See if there is anyone there. This pompous ass doesn't believe me." She pouted, but went to do his bidding. Smiling he uncovered the mouthpiece.

"I should have an answer for you straight away sir, please hold." Not waiting for a response he placed Frank on hold and went back to sorting the mail. On the other end of the line Frank waited impatiently until the clerk re-connected.

"The maid says that no one is in the room sir, and the bed has not been slept in, anything else sir?" The clerk said pointedly.

"No, thank you." Answered Frank as he hung up. To the air in the office he said, "I don't think Mr. Westwood is going to like this." He put his feet down, stood and left the office.

He returned to the meeting room and, sitting down in front of his now cold coffee, informed Westwood of the information gleaned from the call.

"He's not there sir, the maid they sent around said the room hadn't been slept in. He had a wake up in but wasn't there to get it."

"Damn, he probably got lucky with some skirt and went to her place." Westwood managed to portray a smile and a frown at the same time.

"I don't think that he would sir. He knows how important this meeting is. Maybe we should have one of the Sheriff's men go by and check on him." Frank looked concerned.

"You're right, go ask the Sheriff to check on it. He can have someone go by and ask after him."

Taking a sip of the cold coffee Frank answered, "Yes sir." Half to himself he said "Rex was right."

"What's that?" Asked Westwood, distracted from his notes.

"Cold coffee is worse than panther piss." With that, he picked up the cup and went over to where the Sheriff was standing.

"Sheriff?"

Turning away from one of his deputies the Sheriff said "Yes, er, I don't think we've met?" He looked closely at Frank.

"I'm Frank Harris, Sheriff" he held out his hand, "I've been Rex Franklin's onsite assistant."

"Nice to meet you Mr. Harris, what can I do for you?" He shook the offered hand.

"Well, I don't know if there is a problem, but we can't seem to locate Mr. Franklin."

"Where was he staying?" The Sheriff signaled to one of his deputies standing near by.

"At the Rodeside."

"Figures, we have a report that the suspect's van was seen there last night." Moving his chew around in his mouth the Sheriff looked for a place to spit. Not finding any he swallowed with a grimace.

"Do you think they got Mr. Franklin?"

"Frankly sonny, I don't know what to think." He turned to his deputy.
"Jones, go over to the Rodeside and check on Mr. Franklin."

"Yes sir." Jones turned and left the room.

"Well, I'll let you know what we find out Mr. Harris." The Sheriff went to his place at the meeting table and sat down next to Agent Rogers.

"Thank you Sheriff." Called Frank. He returned to his place by Westwood.

"The Sheriff is sending a deputy over to the motel, he says the suspects van was seen there last night."

"Trust Rex to be in the middle of it again." Westwood frowned.

Several miles away, the van, with Rex tied up like a Christmas turkey in the back, sped along an overgrown country road that was little more than two ruts through the undergrowth. If you looked closely you could see where a large vehicle had passed through recently. In the front seats, Juan and Jim sat nervously Juan was driving. Packard gave directions.

"Pretty soon you'll see a large pine with an X painted on it, turn onto the path there. It's on the right."

"How the hell did you find this place?" Asked Juan as he recovered from a particularly bad bump.

"Something you boys wouldn't understand, research." Packard smiled. "As soon as you told me the location of the job, I got some landstat blowups of the area. This place stood out like a sore thumb. After you killed me, I checked it out and moved the rig. You shits where pretty stupid." He shook his head.

"Shit, who planned this and got the copy of the plans for the rig?" Juan said in their defense.

"Ya, O.K. you did alright there, but do you realize that they found that barn less than ten hours after we snatched the rig?" He smiled.

"No, we didn't, how did you find that out?" Juan looked surprised.

"Let's just say I've got connections." His tone indicated the topic was closed. "Let's see how our guest is doing." Packard turned to look at Rex. "How you doing Mr. Franklin?" he asked sarcastically.

Rex raised his head and looked miserable over the gag. Packard turned back to the front. "He's fine."

"I don't know about this." Jim whimpered "This is kidnapping."

"So?" Packard almost snarled.

"It's just that, what the hell do we do with him," he gestured at Rex, "after the drop?"

"Well," Packard smiled, "We either kill him, or leave him with the fuel."

"I don't know about this," Jim said again.

"You sure didn't mind killing me. That was murder, comparatively this is peanuts."

"That was different, we knew that you deserved it, this guy is innocent."

"I deserved it? You say much more, and I'll deserve it one asshole more." He shoved the gun up under Jim's chin, forcing his head back painfully.

In his first, and last, act of true courage Jim jerked his head to the side and grabbed for the .45. Almost casually Packard pulled the trigger. The .45 bucked as the huge slug, at hypersonic velocity, left the end of the muzzle. It traveled the few inches between the gun and Jim's left ear in a period of time too short to measure, and, kicking Jim's head up and to the right, entered his skull.

The velocity of the slug imparted it with great energy, the minimal resistance offered by Jim's skull was enough to force the unjacketed slug to mushroom and then splinter, driving dozens of deadly fragments completely through the soft brain tissue and shattering the bone on the opposite side of the entry point.

The exiting fragments blew out the passenger side window and splattered blood and brains across the door frame.

"Holy FUCK!" Screamed Juan as the van swerved from side to side, bumping over and across the rutted pathway. Finally, it slewed crazily and slammed into a large oak, finally coming to a stop. Juan cursed and leapt toward the driver who brought the pistol to bear on the exact center of his chest.

"Go ahead." The driver smiled. "Join your friend. With him," he gestured at Rex. "I don't need you."

Juan sat back in his seat, looking over at the still twitching remains of his only friend.

"This thing still run?" Asked the driver coldly. Juan, with glazed eyes, didn't seem to hear him, he just stared at Jim's corpse.

"I said, this still run?" Grabbing Juan's collar, he gestured toward the dash with the gun.

"No, I don't think so." Juan's voice was cold. His eyes never left the gun.

"Then we walk. It's not much further." Sitting back, Packard reached over and jerked the van's side door open. "Untie the asshole's legs." He said as he grabbed a worn backpack and climbed out.

Juan moved unsteadily back to Rex. A gash, from a collision with the door frame during the accident, bled copiously on Juan's forehead. He wiped at it with his hand as he untied the ropes binding Rex's legs. He then stood and unsteadily made his way to the front of the van.

"Come on, I don't know what he'll do if we don't do exactly what he says." He stepped out of the side door as Rex stood on numbed legs and then joined him.

The driver stood a short distance down the rutted path, as he heard Rex step out of the wrecked van he turned.

"Untie his hands and then both of you carry the meat." He gestured to the partially visible body in the passenger side of the van. "We don't want to leave our "friend" behind do we?"

The driver stood impatiently while Juan untied Rex's hands and they both removed Jim's body from the van. With Juan carrying the arms and Rex at the legs they moved down the path. The driver covered them from the rear with the .45.

Rex was nearly exhausted when they rounded a curve and came upon a deserted gravel quarry. In front of them stretched the edge of a cliff which overlooked a black pool of deep still water, the site of the old pit excavation.

"Drop him here." Ordered the driver.

Rex and Juan carefully laid Jim's body at the edge of the cliff.

"Here." The driver reached back into his backpack and tossed them a coil of rope. "Tie some of these blocks to him." He gestured to the loose cement blocks which littered the area.

"Shit Packard, please let us bury him." Juan pleaded.

"You want to join him? Tie the damn blocks to him NOW." The driver threatened them with the pistol.

They gathered several unbroken blocks and tied them to Jim's torso. When they were finished the driver gestured them away from the body. Walking over to its side, he smiled as he kicked it over the edge. The body hit with a splash the driver called out to it:

"Good-bye schmuck." He waved and then turned away from the edge with a cold smile.

"Come on, we've got unfinished business."

Forcing them to walk ahead of him, Packard followed them down the road which wound around the top of the cliff and into the quarry.

The quarry itself consisted of the larger, deep, water filled pit and a more recently excavated second pit. The second pit had been dug when the plant was pouring its foundation, and during the construction of the massive containment structure. Now that the plant was nearly complete, the pit had been abandoned.

The second pit was shaped like a huge swimming pool, with a ramp for the gravel trucks to pickup their load at the end farthest from the old excavation. A crude but effective earth berm dam kept the water from the older pit from flooding the new. In nearly the exact center of the second pit the fuel transport trailer sat deserted. There was no sign of the tractor. The trailer itself had been effectively camouflaged with the judicious application of spray paint and old canvas. Additionally, the tires had been slashed and the bright connecting hoses torn from their mountings. The entire effect was that of a rusting, abandoned derelict, overflowing with refuse.

Juan did a double take as the trailer came into view. He looked around the quarry and asked, "I see what's left of the trailer, where's the tractor?"

"With your friend at the bottom of the old pit. No need for it anymore, just attracted attention."

"Shit, you know how much that rig cost us?"

"No, and I don't really give a damn. Once the Utility pays off I don't plan on worrying about anything." He smiled and looked thoughtful. "I guess Jim won't need his share so I'll take it, any objections?" He gestured with the pistol.

Juan sat down sullenly on an old oil drum, Rex sat beside him. Packard reached back into the backpack for another length of rope. He tossed it contemptuously at Juan.

"Here, re-tie his hands."

Juan complied, when the last knot was tied Packard motioned for him to sit beside Rex and then tied them both back to back. He stood back to admire his work.

"Now you boys won't get into any trouble while I get my insurance ready." He smiled, it never reached his eyes.

Rex and Juan watched as he walked over to the edge of the dam. Removing the backpack he set it carefully on the ground at his feet. He knelt down in front of it and thrust his hands inside. When he stood he held a lump of something that looked like clay in one hand, and a coil of wire attached to a small box in the other. He carefully pushed a small cartridge about the size of an old fountain pen's refill into a piece of the lump he broke off, attached one of the wires to it and, kneeling, buried it in the side of the dam. He repeated this series of actions several times. Once he had dispersed the entire lump he connected the several wires to the small box he held in his hand. With a smile he pushed a button on the top of the box, an antenna rose from its center and a small green LED lit. The driver buried the box with just the antenna poking up through the soil. He stood and, brushing off his hands, walked back to where they sat.

"Best plastique money can buy. I push this" He held a small box with a push button on it and a second green LED "and the entire dam blows, I don't need to tell you what that means do I?"

"You're crazy." Rex said calmly.

"You're right, I wouldn't forget it if I were you." He smiled again.

He untied them to the point where they could stand, and then, roughly shoving Juan, had them enter an old shack. Once inside he securely tied Juan to a rusting potbellied stove. As Rex started to sit down against the wall Packard jerked him up.

"You're coming with me." With that he half led, half shoved Rex out of the shack.

They left the shack, walking toward the opposite end of the quarry from where they had entered only an hour or so before. Behind an old crane sat Packard's rental car.

Opening the rear passenger side door he pushed Rex into a sitting position with his feet still outside the door. Placing the heavy automatic pistol within easy reach he knelt and tied Rex's legs together. He then re-gagged him and made him lie in the back seat. He covered Rex with a dirty tarp.

"We've got a phone call to make. Don't try anything or you'll join Jim in the pool." He slammed the car door and then got in on the drivers side. Starting the engine he pulled away from the crane. Heading away from the overgrown access road that was now blocked by the wrecked van, they left the quarry by its main access road.

"Figured those assholes would try it again, fooled them the first time with a kevlar vest and some movie props. Didn't figure that wimp Jim for the one to do it though, thought it would be Juan. What the hell, both are going to be dead meat when this is all over. Play your cards right and I might let you live." Rex couldn't see him, but could imagine the smile on his face as he lied.

Packard drove silently for a few minutes and then pulled into a parking lot near a phone. After checking the area for any spectators, he leaned over the seat and roughly pulled the tarp from Rex.

"Time for our phone call Mr. Franklin." He smiled evilly

CHAPTER TEN

June 19, 09:30 am, Phoenix plant meeting room:

The briefing, delayed due to Rex's no-show, finally started. Agent Rogers opened the meeting with an update of what had been uncovered since the last meeting.

"We have a tentative ID on two more suspects based on fingerprints, witness descriptions and on one of them, a blood type." He looked around the room and then continued. "We have confirmed that the suspects stayed at a small motel here in New Hanover." He indicated a location on the map not too distant from the site where the truck had been hidden. "It appears that some type of struggle occurred. We found blood stains on the carpet in the room they stayed in. Their names are Juan Martinez and James O'Conner. As far as we can tell they have no ties to any terrorist groups, or other subversive organizations. There are some indications that they were involved in a gang mass murder in New York several months ago. Here are blow-ups of their student ID's." He passed copies of the pictures around the room. "These have been distributed around the area to motels, gas stations and any other place that they may be seen."

The deputy sent to check on Rex's whereabouts came in the room and hurried over to the Sheriff. After a whispered conversation the Sheriff stood and cleared his throat.

"Yes Sheriff?"

"Agent Rogers, we have a new problem."

"It seems Mr. Franklin has been abducted. I sent a deputy around to check on him when he didn't show this morning. The deputy confirmed that Mr. Franklin had not been at his motel all night. He also found out from the night clerk that he was last seen in the company of a man whose description matches that of Packard Stone. The clerk says that Mr. Franklin appeared to be under duress when he left the lobby with Stone. It seems Stone stopped a phone call that Mr. Franklin was making and then about dragged him from the motel. They were joined in the lot by two men whom the clerk didn't get a look at. They drove off in the suspect's vehicle." He paused, "It looks like we add kidnapping to grand theft and extortion. If you gentlemen will excuse me I'm going to go check this out." He turned and left the room.

The noise level increased to the point where Rogers had to shout.

"Gentlemen, please quiet down!" Agent Rogers tried to regain control of the meeting after the Sheriff's announcement. "Gentlemen, please. I assure you the Sheriff can handle this until after we finish." He signaled to one of the other Agents who hurried after the Sheriff.

"The suspects are to be considered armed and dangerous. Yesterday a package was received by Mr. Westwood. It contained a section of one of the fuel rods. The section was immersed in a container of water. This seems to be a threat that the thieves will deliberately immerse the fuel assemblies in water causing a prompt criticality and a nuclear incident.

"Since the package, there has been no further contact." He paused. "Are there any questions?"

Lochridge stood and cleared his throat.

"Yes Mr. Lochridge?"

"Have you considered that Franklin may be working with these thieves? After all he has been in the middle of it all since the beginning." He continued to stand after his question.

"We do not suspect Mr. Franklin in any way. In fact his background checks out better than yours does Mr. Lochridge." Agent Rogers couldn't help but smile as Lochridge turned slightly red and left the room. "Any further questions?"

There were none.

"Mr. Westwood, do you have anything further to add?"

"Yes, if I may." He stood and walked to the front of the room.

"I just wanted to ask that nothing be released to the press except through official, approved releases. Several rumors to the effect that terrorists have stolen the fuel and are making a bomb have surfaced. As you have heard, this is not the truth. It appears that, with the exception of Stone, these are not hardened criminals, but first timers looking for big money. So please don't say anything to anybody about the facts of the case. The less the thieves know that we know the better off we are." He turned towards Agent Rogers. "If there is nothing else, let's adjourn and get back to work on catching these assholes before anyone gets hurt."

As the attendees filed out of the room, Westwood signaled to Rogers who followed him to his office.

"What can be done about Franklin, Rogers?" He came to the point immediately as he closed the door.

"As soon as we find the location of the fuel we will do our best to get him back safely. You have to understand that public safety is of top concern. We will do what we can, but first priority is getting that fuel back."

"Yes, I understand. I just feel responsible since he was up here at our request." He sat down at his desk and looked at his phone for the first time. "What is that?" He asked as he examined a black box with wires running from it to his phone.

"Oh, that. It's a trace back box. If the thieves call you it locks onto their phone until we get a trace on it."

"What makes you think they won't have contact through the computer only?"

"We're just covering as many bases as we can, that's all."

"Well, better to be safe I guess." He looked distastefully at the small black box. "God, I wish this were over."

"Me too Mr. Westwood, me too."

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June 19, 10:30 am, Lochridges Office:

Lochridge sat in his office. Humming tunelessly he was looking over the last weeks operating logs for any sign of a possible violation. It was what he enjoyed most, finding other peoples mistakes.

As he read the entries he thought about what he would do after work. Perhaps he would go back to the bar at the edge of town. He remembered the girl there, for just a few bucks...

The phone rang, jarring him from his daydreams and his zealous pursuit of un-initialed crossouts and improper entries.

"Yes, this is Lochridge" he said sharply into the telephone as he jerked it from its cradle.

"Mr. Lochridge, I have a Mr. Anderson on the line, he says it's urgent."

Laying the logs aside he said "O.K. put him through."

A rough sounding nasal voice said "Mr. Lochridge?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"I wanted to discuss a mutual acquaintance with you."

"Yes, yes get on with it. I'm quite busy you know."

"Well, you might want to take a little time Mr. Lochridge, this concerns my daughter Francis."

Lochridge turned pale and clenched the phone tightly "Who? I don't know any Francis." Beads of sweat where forming on his upper lip.

"Well she sure knows you Mr. Lochridge, and quite well from what I beat out of her. She's just had her fifteenth birthday you know Mr. Lochridge."

"Who are you talking about, I don't know any Francis. Come now you're wasting my time." His voice cracked at the last.

"Yes Mr. Lochridge, let's not waste any time. Drop the damn act and listen. Statutory rape, contributing to the delinquency of a minor, sodomy. Remember her now Mr. Lochridge?" If a voice could sneer this nasal one was doing it. "She says you met her at J.B.'s, took her to a cheap motel, and paid for certain favors."

"What do you want?"

"Well I would hate to see you locked up Mr. Lochridge, I've heard what they do to child molesters in prison."

"Child molester! She told me she was eighteen!"

A note of triumph crept into the voice at the other end of the line. "I thought you didn't know her?"

Broken now Lochridge asked "Surely we can talk this over?"

"Like I said, I wouldn't want you to go to jail, so let's just say you never heard of Francis and she don't know you and to show you're repentant, throw in fifty thousand dollars."

"Fifty thousand!" Lochridge almost shouted, then he repeated lower "Fifty thousand? How can I get that much money?"

"That's your problem Lochridge, it's either pay or go to jail, you decide."

"O.K. I'll try to get it when?"

"I'll call you tomorrow, have a nice day." Anderson hung up.

Staring at the phone as if it was a serpent Lochridge carefully placed it back on the cradle. He slowly lowered his head into his hands, what was he going to do?

Several miles away at the payphone Packard, had just completed dialing the Plant's main number. As the switchboard answered he covered the mouthpiece with a filthy handkerchief.

"I wish to speak with the government representative on-site."

"Yes sir, can I tell him who is calling?" The operator asked politely, straining to hear the muffled voice.

"Ya, tell him it's Mr. Franklin." Packard smiled at Rex who glared sullenly back at him.

"Hello? Is that you Franklin?" Asked Lochridge as he belligerently answered the phone call the operator had sent to him, the Federal NRC rep on site.

"No, hold on." Packard handed the phone to Rex.

"Now tell them just like I told you. No shit Franklin or you're dead."

Taking the phone Rex said "Hello, this is Franklin."

"Franklin? What the hell are you up to?" Lochridge managed to sound puzzled and belligerent simultaneously.

"Lochridge, listen and don't talk. The money is to be delivered tonight at six. Put it into an attaché case and drop it at the side of the road on highway 29, exactly ten miles outside of Brinkman. They have the fuel set to be flooded if the money is not delivered on time with no tricks. They mean business." Rex started to hang up, then quickly pulled the phone back.

"Lochridge, tell them the fuel is in an aband..." At that moment the heavy barrel of the pistol smashed into the side of his head, knocking Rex to the ground. Packard picked up the dangling receiver.

"Just get the money or this asshole" he kicked Rex, "gets wasted along with the fuel." He hung the phone up and turning with a snarl kicked Rex again. Then he dragged him to the car, tossed him into the back seat, got into the drivers side and drove off.

Across the street in a small roadside diner, Liz, who was returning to the motel from the sales call in Maberly, watched as Packard drove off. She lowered the hand she had raised to stifle the scream that had almost broke forth when Rex had been struck down. Dropping a ten to pay for her lunch, she ran out to the now deserted phone booth and, looking quickly through the directory, called the Sheriff's office.

Back at the plant Lochridge contemplated the phone a few seconds before setting the receiver back into the cradle. He then stood and walked to a wall size map of the ten mile emergency planning zone around the plant. The map had the virtue of being a geodetic survey map overlaid with a ten mile radius grid with the plant at the center. With small red pins Lochridge marked the locations mentioned at the briefings. Standing back to admire his work he could be heard mumbling the word "abandoned" to himself. After staring at the map for several minutes he placed a yellow pin into the map and smiled. Messing his hair and then putting on his best "I'm worried" face he ran from the room towards Westwood's office.

Lochridge burst into Westwood's office, he looked disheveled and out of breath. Startled, Westwood looked up from the report he had been reading.

"I just got the final ransom call!" Lochridge was almost shouting.

"What?" Westwood stared at the trace back box on his desk as if it had betrayed him. "What did they say?"

"It was Franklin, I told you he was involved!" Lochridge managed to sound smug "He said to get the money and for ME to bring it."

"Where are you to take it?" Westwood picked up the phone and dialed security.

"He said to go to the phone booth from were the second call was made and we would get the instructions. He said that if I didn't come alone they would flood the fuel!" Lochridge was virtually breathless.

"Okay, Okay slow down. Sit down while I get the money. We got it together after the last call." Security finally answered. "Hello?, yes, this is Westwood, bring the case to my office and notify Agent Rogers." He listened for a moment and then hung up the phone. "It shouldn't be long." He said to Lochridge.

"Good, they want me at the phone booth in an hour." He looked down at the expensive watch on his wrist and then back up at Westwood. At that moment there was a knock at the door and a burly Wells Fargo guard came in with a large briefcase.

"That all of it?" Asked Westwood.

"Yes sir, I'll have to stay with it until it is taken to the drop off point."

"Good. Lochridge you ready?"

"I guess." He managed to sound scared.

Agent Rogers entered the office carrying a metal briefcase.

"Lochridge, take off your coat." He started unpacking small pieces of electronic hardware.

Lochridge took off his charcoal grey jacket and asked "What's that for?"

"This" He held up a small piece of black plastic with a trailing wire, "is a tracer so we can follow you at a discrete distance. This," he held up another chip, "is a small transceiver that will allow us to communicate with you."

Lochridge looked concerned. "They won't see it will they?" He looked at the two chips as if they were bird droppings.

"Not once I install them." He took them from Lochridge. "Lift your shirt."

Lochridge, looking embarrassed, untucked his white shirt to reveal a pot belly and a sunken hairless chest.

"Good, at least the tape won't bother you." Agent Rogers taped the two chips to Lochridge's chest, about level with his collar bone. "The acid in your skin activates them."

Not sure if he should be insulted, Lochridge lowered his shirt and tucked it into his dark trousers. Agent Rogers re-opened the metal case to reveal a complicated transceiver/direction finder.

"Let's test them out." He flipped a switch on the set and a high pitched whine filled the room, putting a hand over one of his ears Rogers twisted a dial on the set. "Damn gain, sorry about that, feedback from the bugs, it happens when the receiver and transmitter are too close together." He picked up a small lapel mic and clipped it to his collar.

"Stand over there Lochridge." He motioned to the other side of the room. Moving slowly Lochridge obliged.

"Testing, testing, 1, 2, 3, shake your head if you can hear me Lochridge." Rogers whispered into the mic.

Lochridge slowly shook his head. "Yes, I can hear you." He said out loud. A small speaker on the set echoed his reply.

"Alright, it checks out. Lochridge, we will be a few miles behind you all the way, don't be a damn hero." Agent Rogers turned off the set and closed the case.

"That's the last thing I plan to be." Lochridge said low to himself.

"What?" Asked Westwood.

"Nothing." Lochridge smiled at him.

At the quarry the rental car was bumping along the access road. Rex came to, after a particularly bad jolt, and lay in pain as the car skidded to a halt behind the crane. Packard looked over the seat at him.

"I thought you were smarter than that Franklin, I guess I'll have to kill you too." He smiled.

Packard got out of the car and loudly slammed the door, sending a burst of pain through Rex's head. Packard jerked the door, against which Rex was leaning, open and let him fall to the rocky ground. "You should be more careful, you might get hurt." Packard laughed as he dragged Rex by the feet to the shed and unceremoniously dumped him through the door. Rex lay in a heap in the middle of the room as Packard re-tied his feet and hands, rolled him over beside Juan and tied him to the stove.

"Now don't go away." Packard said as he closed the door.

"You don't look so good amigo." Juan had managed to loosen his gag enough to talk.

Rex spat blood, a tooth chip and dirt from his mouth and said hoarsely "No shit." the effort of speaking left his head aching.

"Listen, can you use your hands?"

"What?" Rex mumbled through the haze of pain.

"Your hands, mine are to numb, can you use your hands?"

"I think so." The pain had centered behind his left ear, he could feel a warm trickle of blood moving down his neck, a fly droned over to feast.

"Look, down here." Juan lifted his hand, which was beginning to turn purplish from the lack of circulation. Under his hand, Jim's switchblade gleamed dully.

"Where...?" Rex got only part of the question out before a wave of blackness almost overwhelmed him.

"It was Jim's, I took it from his pocket before we dumped the body." He looked fearfully at the door as Packard moved around outside. Once they could no longer hear him moving around, Juan continued. "If I push it into your hand can you cut our ropes?"

Through the haze Rex answered "I think so" It felt like his head was being used to crush gravel.

"Here" Juan's cold hand pushed the knife into Rex's.

"Got..." Rex lapsed into unconsciousness from the concussion caused by the pistol whipping.

"Fuck asshole, don't pass out now!" Juan said through clenched teeth as he watched Rex's head loll to one side, a thin stream of blood leaked from his mouth onto his shirt, joining the one that meandered around his neck from the wound behind his ear. "Fuck" Juan said again and closed his eyes.

June 19, 11:50 am, The Rodeside Motel, Columbia, Ill.:

The Sheriff was just leaving Rex's motel room when the radio in his pickup crackled to life.

"Unit one, see the woman at Stricklan's Crossroad, she reports seeing kidnap victim Franklin and suspect. Respond."

The Sheriff hoisted himself up on the side of the huge four wheel drive vehicle and reaching through the open window grabbed the microphone. Depressing the mic switch he responded. "10-4 base, this is unit one proceeding to Stricklan's Crossroad."

He then threw the mic onto the passenger seat, and opening the door, climbed into the drivers seat. He pulled the keys from his pocket and shoved the ignition key into the ignition switch. The over-sized engine rumbled to life and the tires threw gravel into the parked cars as he put the big truck into gear and sped towards the crossroads. The Sheriff pushed a tape of the old group "Alabama" into an equally old cassette tape player and then switched on the police beacon.

At the crossroads, Liz paced nervously by the payphone, she had begun to chew her nails, something she hadn't done since grade school. The phone rang suddenly and made her jump. She nervously picked up the receiver, almost dropping it. "Hello?" she said cautiously.

"Is this the lady reporting the abduction?" A female voice on the other end asked.

"Yes, yes it is." Liz responded.

"Good, this is the Sheriffs office, he is on his way to your location, will you wait there?"

"Yes, of course." Liz bit her lower lip.

"Thank you mam'." The phone went dead as the Sheriffs operator disconnected. Liz stared at the phone a minute then carefully hung up. She decided that after this was all over she would have that nervous breakdown she had promised herself.

Several minutes later, seeming like hours to the distraught Liz, the Sheriff's truck pulled up. Liz rushed over toward it. The Sheriff climbed down and crossed over to meet her.

"You the lady that saw Mr. Franklin get abducted?" The Sheriff asked as he pulled out a worn notepad.

"Yes, I was in that diner getting lunch" she pointed at the restaurant across the road "When I saw this rental car pull up."

"How do you know it was a rental car?" The Sheriff looked up from his writing.

"They all have a sticker on the windshield, I rent quite a few for my business trips so I recognized it." She explained. "Anyway this huge bald guy got out and dragged Rex over to the phone, he was tied but the big guy untied him and let him talk on the phone. Then he, he slugged Rex with this huge pistol and kicked him, then he talked on the phone a bit, hung up and kicked Rex again. Then he picked Rex up and put him in the backseat. He got in the front and drove off that way." She pointed down the road.

The Sheriff opened the flap on his shirt pocket and pulled out a smaller version of the picture of Packard that had been circulated at the briefing. "This the guy you saw?"

Liz took the photo and looked at it, after only a second she answered, "Yes. Definitely."

"You've called Mr. Franklin by his first name, where did you meet?"

Liz colored slightly and answered "At the motel, night before last."

Seeing her obvious embarrassment the Sheriff said "Okay, anything odd about the car? Distinguishing marks? Dents? How about a model?"

"It was a Chevy and a recent model, blue, it had scrapes in the dirt on it, like it had been driven in the woods or something. Not much help am I?" She sounded almost ready for tears.

"It's more than we had before, anything else?" The Sheriff said kindly.

"Well, let me think, one thing, the mud was a strange color, almost a blue rather than the normal red in this area." She twisted her head sideways, "any help?"

"That might just be," he looked thoughtful, "blue you say? Could be the old gravel pit, it's the only place that gets down to that layer in these parts."

He turned to leave, she ran over to her car and grabbed a large sample case.

"Where do you think you're going mam?" The Sheriff stopped and put his hands on his hips, his pad of paper fluttering in the afternoon breeze.

"With you, I've got more than a casual interest in Mr. Franklin." She smiled bravely.

"I suppose you'd follow me if I just left you?" He scratched his head.

"You suppose right." She said defiantly.

"Alright, but you stay with the truck, what is that?" He pointed to the sample case she almost had to drag.

"My samples, they might come in handy, besides I can't leave them in the car." She pushed her long hair out of her eyes.

"Just what is it you sell?" The Sheriff asked as he opened the passenger side door on the truck and helped her lift the case into the truck. "This weighs a ton!" He spit and then said "Sorry about that mam'."

"That's alright, I've seen worse." She opened the case and lifted out a chrome plated 9mm berretta semi-automatic pistol, she reached in with the other hand and grabbed a jeweled clip, ramming it home into the butt of the pistol.

"I sell these." She said as she expertly worked the slide to chamber the first round and then uncocked the pistol. She then removed an ornate holster from the case and, using its belt clip, fastened it to the belt of her skirt.

"Figures." Said the Sheriff as he walked around the truck to get into the drivers side.

They slammed the big 4X4's doors almost simultaneously and the large engine roared to life. The truck sped off in the direction taken by Packard an hour before. The dust settled onto the open pages of the phone book and the wind blew the pages shut.

As Liz and the Sheriff sped towards the quarry, Lochridge turned to the Wells Fargo guard as he neared his car in the parking lot in front of the security building.

"Well, it's up to me now." He stressed the me until the comment was almost an insult.

"Yes sir" the guard restrained an impulse to punch the little asshole out. "Just sign here that you received custody." He pushed a clipboard with a crisp looking white form on it. Lochridge quickly scribbled a signature and got into his car, waving to the FBI vehicle across the lot.

"I hope you don't do that later." said a small tinny voice, the com chip was obviously working.

"I won't." Lochridge waved again and started his engine.

"Hold back about two miles." Rogers told the agent who was driving. "We don't want to spook anybody."

"Right, yes sir." The agent responded as he started the car's engine. They waited several minutes until they were sure Lochridge was well ahead.

"Alright, let's go."

The Wells Fargo guard looked over the form.

He glanced at the bottom of the page, his eyes widened, it was signed "Mickey Mouse".

They followed the direction finder and stayed back and watched. They had to fake engine problems and park at the side of the road while Lochridge apparently talked to the thieves at the payphone indicated and listened to his side of the conversation. It seemed overly loud and cocky, even for Lochridge. After Lochridge had started back down the road they waited a few minutes and then, with many smiles and backslaps, all got back in the car and followed. To the casual observer a group of friends who had just overcome minor car problems and were once again on their way.

In the backseat Rogers leaned intently over the direction finder watching the small blip on the liquid crystal display. "He's turned around, quick, pull over!"

The driver jerked the car over to the side and stopped it in a cloud of dust.

"What the hell is going on? The asshole is heading right for us!" He looked up and out the window "He should be coming over that hill any second." He pointed to the hill right in front of the car.

At that moment the front end of a farm truck hauling hogs lumbered over the side of the hill and passed, leaving a noisome odor behind. Rogers stared at the direction finder in disbelief.

"Damn, Damn, DAMN! That little asshole has run with the money!" He grabbed the microphone and yelled into it "Lochridge! What the hell are you doing?" he listened closely for a reply. Shortly he heard a tearing sound like tape being pulled, then a screeching crash and then nothing...

The car full of feds screeched onto the highway, almost sideswiping a second truck full of hogs. They fishtailed, straightened and then shot down the back road like a quarrel from a crossbow. Several miles down the road they came to a five-way stop near the town of Millstadt. They stopped and got out of the car.

In almost the exact center of the road, Agent Rogers leaned over and picked up the remains of the transceiver, it dangled from his hand by its antenna wire, looking like some dead insect.

"This just isn't my day." He said grimly. "Get a couple of backups in here and get me that damn map." He tossed the crushed transceiver into the ditch and, dusting off his hands, walked back to the car. Several miles away, and rapidly increasing the distance, Lochridge grinned and wished he could have made his attempted toss of the mic into that second hog truck. He concentrated on his recollection of the map, the path that led to the quarry should be right down the road.

In the aging 4X4 Liz and the Sheriff had pulled onto the back road that led to the quarry.

"This here is a short cut that I found last hunting season." The Sheriff paused to spit out of the window. "We should be able to see the entire quarry from the end of the road."

Liz just smiled back uncertainly as the trucks stiff suspension magnified every bump. They sped along the rutted path and rounding a sharp curve, almost rear-ending the wrecked van.

"Shit, look at that!" The Sheriff jerked the truck out of gear and got out. Liz followed him over to the van.

"Looks like I can cancel the APB on the van."

"This the van they were using Sheriff?" Liz walked over to the right side and, hiding her eyes, called out, "Sheriff! You'd better have a look over here!"

The Sheriff walked around to where she was standing and then over to the side of the van. He waved away the cloud of flies and examined the grisly remains of the right side of Jim's head where they lay spattered over the shattered window and door.

"Mam, you'd better stay with the truck." He walked back to the front of the 4X4 and grabbed the wench cable which was fastened there.

"Get into the cab and control the wench, we've got to move the wreck to get by."

Liz ran quickly over to the driver's side of the truck and climbed in, she gave a thumbs up sign to the Sheriff as she located the controls.

"Play out the cable!" The Sheriff called as he took the slack out of the line. Liz let out cable until the Sheriff signaled her to stop. He passed the hook around the rear bumper of the van and, looping the cable, fastened the hook to it. "Take up the slack!" he yelled. Liz retrieved the cable until it was stretched taut between the vehicles.

The sheriff ran back to the truck and as Liz moved over, climbed into the driver's seat. He shifted the truck into reverse and slowly let out the clutch. The cable stretched tightly, almost to the breaking point and then the van slowly pulled away from the tree and back onto the main path.

"You ever drive a stick Liz?"

"Yes, I learned to drive on one." Liz smiled nervously at him.

"Well, the clutch is a might hard, but I think you can manage it. After we unhook the cable and re-stow it, I'll get into the van and steer it, you use the truck to push it off the road. Okay?"

"I can do it Sheriff."

"Good girl, I'll signal you when I'm ready." He climbed back down from the truck and quickly unfastened the cable. Liz retrieved the cable until it clicked into place, and then waited nervously while the Sheriff got into the fly infested van. She carefully shifted into low when the Sheriff signaled her forward. The 4X4 crept forward until the bumper of the large truck was pushing on the body of the van. Slowly the trucks rear and front drive wheels dug into the soft soil as its engine revved and it pushed the wrecked van off to the side of the path. Liz shifted the trucks engine back into neutral and waited for the Sheriff to brush off the offensive flies and climb back into the truck.

"If it's any comfort Liz, I don't think it was Rex that got it."

A tear trailed down Liz's cheek as she answered "I pray you are right Sheriff." She turned and watched the trees go by as they sped towards the quarry.

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June 19, 2:10 pm, The abandoned quarry:

At the front entrance to the quarry Lochridge had parked his car out of sight and was slowly making his way towards the main section. He carefully moved up to where he could see the seemingly deserted shack and the broken down crane. He watched Packard moving restlessly around the area and moved closer. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out a small caliber pistol that he normally kept in his glove compartment. Taking careful aim at Packard, he slowly squeezed the trigger and the pistol cracked. The bullet wanged harmlessly off the side of the crane and Packard turned, cat-like, and drew his pistol. Lochridge let off several shots in a panic, one clipped Packard over the left ear, knocking him senseless to the ground, his pistol lay beside him in the dirt.

At the top of the quarry cliff the Sheriff stopped the truck and got out, grabbing a pair of binoculars. Liz got out of the passenger side and followed him to the edge. Putting the glasses to his eyes the Sheriff carefully scanned the area.

"Well will you look there, I think we've found the fuel. Here, look at that wreck." He handed the glasses to Liz who took them, readjusted the focus, and then looked carefully at the wrecked trailer.

"I think you're right Sheriff." She took a step forward to get a better look and almost stumbled. The Sheriff grabbed her arm and steadied her.

"Careful Miss, don't want you to fall."

She looked down at her feet and recoiled in disgust. A drying pool of blood and tissue with an accompanying cloud of flies was near by. The Sheriff knelt down and examined the surrounding area.

"Looks like a body was thrown over the edge here, let me see the glasses." He held out his hand as he looked over the edge. Liz carefully handed the glasses over to him. He scanned the dark, murky water in the top pit.

"I think I see the top to the tractor, no body though." He lowered the glasses. "I'll bet Rex and Packard are in the shack over there." He raised the glasses. "Paydirt, I see Packard, get down." He crouched and Liz did likewise. At that moment a single sharp crack! echoed up from below, Packard turned and drew his pistol, before he could fire several more shots rang out and Packard fell to lay still in the dirt. Several minutes later, a smaller figure crept out of the underbrush and moved towards the shack. The Sheriff raised the glasses.

"Damn, I don't believe it! It's the damn piss ant!" The Sheriff said with disbelief.

"Who?" Asked Liz peering over the edge.

"The wimp NRC guy from the site. He was always giving Mr. Franklin a hard time. Come on, something doesn't look right." He stood and moved back towards the truck. "I've got to radio this in." He reached up inside the truck and grabbed the microphone. "Unit one to base, unit one to base over." He listened and then reached up to fiddle with a knob. "Unit one to base, unit one to base come in base." He listened and then tossed the mic back into the truck. He looked back towards the rear of the truck. "Damn!"

"What's the matter?" Liz looked concerned.

"We knocked the whip off back there somewhere. Shit, we would be lucky to get a half mile." He looked thoroughly disgusted. "Well, looks like we've got to do it, you know how to shoot that pretty piece of yours?"

"Sure do, marksman grade at the pistol range." She looked proudly at him.

"Good, you stay behind and cover me, if there's trouble, I don't want you getting into the middle of it, you understand?" He looked stern.

"Yes Sheriff"

"Let's go."

Liz removed her pistol from the holster. "Right." She answered as they moved towards the path to the bottom of the quarry.

Back at the crossroads Agent Rogers consulted a map. "Alright listen up!"

The several backup personnel crowded around the dust covered government car where the map was spread across the hood. "Lochridge had to have taken one of the three other roads that lead away from this point." He indicated the crossroads were they stood. "A farmer down this fork told us that nothing had been by. We were back down this one. That only leaves these three. Graham, your group is to take this one." He pointed at the right road. "Keep in constant contact. Andrews, take the middle fork, check the sideroads. My group will take this left road. I've called in helicopter support, but it won't be here for an hour." He paused for a moment to catch his breath. "Any questions?"

"What do we do if we catch up to him?" Asked Andrews.

"Keep him under surveillance, he may lead us to the thieves." No one had any more questions. They quickly got into their vehicles and sped off. The bug lay beside the road looking very much like a crushed insect in the drifting dust kicked up by the departing cars.

The Sheriff and Liz made their way carefully down towards the shack, watching Lochridge as he poked around the area. He seemed to spend a considerable amount of time around the earthen dam that held back the water from the pit holding the disabled trailer. He knelt several times and closely examined the ground. The Sheriff watched him stand and wipe the dust from his hands and dust off his trousers knees. Through the glasses he could see Lockridge smile.

"Wonder what the little asshole is thinking about." Mused the Sheriff out loud as he lowered the glasses.

"Wonder what he's doing here." Added Liz as she wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand, leaving a dusty smear.

The sound of the gun shots had brought Rex back to consciousness. With hands now nearly as numb as Juan's, he fumbled with the shiny switchblade until it clicked open. Carefully Rex orientated the blade until it was in contact with Juan's ropes and then he began the slow painful job of sawing through the bonds.

After checking out the explosives placement at the dam, Lochridge moved towards the prostrate form of Stone. Reaching the body he rolled it over and felt the pockets, with a satisfied smirk he pulled the detonator switch from Stone's jacket pocket and stood over the body examining the remote control. Satisfied that he could work it, he turned towards the shack. If Rex was there he could take care of a few loose ends.

He had taken several steps when he turned and hurried back to Stone. At almost point blank range he fired twice in to the middle of Stone's chest. Satisfied with the spread of crimson left by the bullets, he pocketed his pistol and picked up the .45 that lay beside the body. With difficulty he worked the slide, cocking the huge pistol and loading the first round. With a grim smile he moved slowly towards the shack.

At the sound of the second series of shots, the Sheriff and Liz ran to a clear view point where they could see the area by the shack. They watched as Lochridge pocketed his pistol, retrieved Packard's and moved towards the shack.

"Can you cover me from here?" The Sheriff asked Liz.

She examined the distance from where they stood to the shack, about twenty five yards. "Yes" she answered simply.

"Good, stay here and watch me. If you can get a clear shot go ahead, otherwise, if the jerk gets lucky and nails me, go back to the truck and go for backup."

"O. K. Sheriff." Liz sounded scared.

The Sheriff moved quietly toward the shack and Lochridge. Lochridge, intent on the Shack didn't see the form of the Sheriff moving up behind him as he opened the door to the shack and went in.

Rex and Juan looked up from where they had been intent upon the knife and ropes.

"Well well, what do we have here?" Said Lochridge with a smile. He moved quickly over and picked up the knife from Rex's almost lifeless hand. "I had better take this." He placed the knife in his pocket.

"Never thought I'd say it, but it's good to see you Lochridge." said Rex hoarsely trying to focus his eyes.

"Good to see you too Franklin. Let's me clean up rather easily." He smiled.

"What do you mean?" Asked Juan.

"Well, I could have just left with the money, but that would have left all the fingers pointing at me. I decided that if I made it look like I delivered the money, but Packard killed you and blew the dam anyway, it would muddy the

water and not leave any loose ends. Especially since this area would be too hot to enter for several days after." He smiled, as with most amateurs his plan seemed perfectly logical to him.

Outside the Sheriff listened grimly and then stepped into the door of the shack.

"Alright Lochridge, put the gun down." The Sheriff said sternly as he drew his pistol.

Lochridge, startled, turned and fired, the bullet ripped through the Sheriff's left shoulder, spinning him halfway around. The Sheriff dropped to one knee and fired, impaired by the wound, the Sheriff's shot went wild, busting through the window and ricocheting wildly off of the derelict crane, whined off into the air. Lochridge fired a second time, the huge pistol virtually jumping from his hand, the shot, poorly aimed, hit the Sheriff in the lower right abdomen, knocking him sprawling halfway through the door to lay writhing in pain on the dusty ground.

Lochridge turned with a wild look and aimed at Juan, who tried to no avail to break the half sawed through bonds. As Lochridge's finger tightened on the trigger Liz stepped into the doorway, raised the sparkling showpiece 9mm and pulled the trigger. The slug entered Lochridge's lower back, shattering his spine. The splinters of bullet and bone scrambled his guts and then blew a huge hole out of the middle of his stomach. The impact, knocking the control for the explosives from his hand, threw him across the room, to lie in a bloody heap near Juan and Rex.

Liz, looking a little sick, lowered the pistol and then dropped it. She knelt by the Sheriff and lifted his head carefully.

"You kill the piss ant?" He said hoarsely.

"Ye-yes, I think so." She answered. "What do I do now?"

"Well I think I'll be okay." He looked down at his wound. "If I get some medical attention." He paused and coughed, a look that showed his intense pain flashed across his face. Then he asked, "Rex O.K.?"

"Yes, I'll go untie him." She helped the Sheriff to a sitting position in the door, then tore a piece of her blouse off to act as a compress for his abdominal wound. The bullet had passed through the soft tissue and exited, apparently without damaging anything vital. In fact, his arm wound was more serious. Liz left him and hurried over and untie Rex. Looking like some wild Amazon in her torn blouse and dust smeared face. Rex thought that she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

As she hurried over to him, her foot caught the detonator box that had dropped from Lochridge's lifeless hand. It slid across the floor and, catching on the uneven surface, rolled over to slam into the wall, tripping the switch. With horror they listened to the muffled thumps as the buried plastic explosive blew the dam.

"Oh shit, what was that?" Liz looked distraught.

"The fuel's being flooded, if the water covers it it'll be like Chernobyl, it'll spread radioactive contamination over half the state! Hurry and untie me."

She rushed over and fumbled with the ropes binding him. "Damn, the knots are too tight!" She was almost in tears.

"There should be a knife over by Lochridge." Rex said.

She rushed to Lockridge's body and gingerly rolled it over, of course the knife was under it. She picked it up and quickly cut Rex loose.

"Hey, what about me?" asked Juan.

"Just enough so he can stand." Rex gestured with his numbed hands. He winced as the circulation brought stinging sensations to his hands and arms. I'm going to go look at the damage." he stumbled outside.

The dam was still partially intact. The water was rushing through a gap about ten feet wide that was located in the crown. The in rushing water had spread in a shallow pool around the blown tires of the trailer. Doing a few mental calculations Rex hurried back inside.

"We have about a half hour before the water covers the trailer. Sheriff, can you walk?"

"I think so, help me up." Rex tried to help support him as he stood. Gasping in pain the Sheriff took a few faltering steps. Leaning against the wall he said, "I don't think I can make it to the truck."

"We can get you to Stone's car, it's by the crane."

Liz retrieved her pistol and covered Juan as he and Rex helped the Sheriff to the car. When they got there it was apparent that it wouldn't be going any where. One or more of the wild shots had penetrated the radiator, leaving a spreading pool of anti-freeze in the dirt.

"What about Lochridge? He had to get here somehow." Asked Liz as she looked at the ruined car.

"Right, I forgot about him, it must be down the road." He thought a moment. "Liz, take the Sheriff to the hospital. I've got to do something about the fuel."

"Rex, what can you do?" Liz asked as she cut Juan's hands loose.

"I don't know, but I've got to try, if the level gets too high I'll use the Sheriff's truck." He kissed Liz and turned away.

"Hurry, the Sheriff can't afford to lose much more blood."

"O.K. but make sure you get away, I've got an interest in you."

"Right." Rex smiled. "Sheriff, I'll need the keys to your truck." Rex held out his hand.

"I think you'll find them in the ignition." The Sheriff said weakly.

"Good luck you two, and be careful. Liz, keep Juan here covered with the pistol. and tie him back up when you get to the car."

Juan gave him a hurt look as if to say "Who Me?"

He watched as they moved away down the path, then turned and moved quickly toward the filling pool. He looked in vain for some means to block the rushing water. Already, the top of the cab of the tractor could be seen poking out of the upper pool. He gazed at the rising water level deep in thought and then smiled.

"It just might work." he said out loud as he made his way towards the path that led up to the truck.

He was winded and his head was throbbing when he made it to the truck. The spinning blackness threatened to engulf him as he leaned on the side of the truck and panted. He lifted his head and, opening the door, climbed in. Sitting for a few moments he waited until everything was back into focus and then started the big 4X4. With a grinding of gears he shifted the rig into reverse and turned the truck around, barely clearing the trees behind him. Shifting into first he started down the path to the main road, each bump sending a jolt of pain through his head. He felt nauseated when he passed the van with its contingent of feasting flies. Soon he reached the main road, and, switching on the siren and lights, sped towards the direction of the plant, at least he hoped it was the direction of the plant.

When he reached the area near the farm where the truck had been hidden, he relaxed, realizing that he was in fact heading in the right direction. He sped up. Reaching the main gate to the plant several minutes later, he slowed, then stopped, and shifted into neutral, allowing the engine to idle. The gate guard walked over to the truck.

"Evening sir, can I help you?" He looked suspiciously at Rex's bloody, disheveled appearance.

"Yes, we don't have much time, my name is Rex Franklin, I need to talk with Mr. Westwood now." Rex said impatiently.

"Just hold on a moment sir while I check on it." He walked back to the guard house.

Several minutes passed, looking through the windows to the guard shack he could see the guard talking with a female officer. Rex pictured the rising level in the pool holding the wrecked trailer and gunned the engine.

At the quarry the level had reached halfway up the slashed tires, in the upper pool the entire top half of the cab was visible, Jim's body was draped across the tractors hood, his shattered head face up toward the sky.

With a curse Rex shifted into reverse and backed up about fifty yards, then he shifted into first and floored the accelerator. The big truck spun its tires and then they caught, causing the truck to lurch forward. Shouting, the guard ran out of the guardhouse in time to see the huge truck smash the rollaway gate aside and hurdle into the secured area. Yelling he drew his pistol and aimed as the truck slewed around the corner and out of sight. Swearing, he ran back into the building for the keys to one of the security trucks. He hit the switch for the security alert siren. Then he ran to one of the blue pickups that were designated for securities use.

Rex accelerated down the dusty road to the building that was labeled "Chemical Warehouse C-1". With a screech of breaks he slewed the truck into the loading bay and shifted into neutral. Setting the parking brake he climbed down and ran over to the Gaitronics paging system.

Picking up the microphone/reciever for the Gaitronics Rex depressed the activator button and yelled "Westwood, this is Franklin, I need you at the Chemical Warehouse." The paging system boomed the message across the entire site. Rex repeated his message just as the security truck slid to a halt, half blocking the Sheriff's truck in the loading bay. With his pistol drawn the guard leapt out and ran over to where Rex stood.

"What the hell do you think you are doing!!?" The guard yelled at Rex as he aimed his service revolver at Rex.

"Listen, we don't have any time for bullshit, you flat footed excuse for a rental cop, I just called Westwood. Hopefully he'll be here soon. I've got to get a couple of drums of boron, I've just come from the fuel and it's in the process of being flooded with water, you understand?" Rex was waving his hands and looked wild eyed and desperate.

"All I know is that you just made a big mistake busting through the gate like that, lay down spread eagle with your hands behind your head!" He held the pistol menacingly.

"We don't have the time to fool with this!" Rex stepped closer to the guard.

"I said down!" The guard held his ground and raised the pistol aiming at Rex's head. Rex clenched his fists and had started to lay down when Westwood ran up.

"What the hell is going on!!?" He cried as he climbed up on the loading dock.

"Please explain to this gentleman what flooded fuel means Westwood!" Rex staggered as the shock from his injuries threatened another blackout,

"You mean they've flooded it!?" Westwood looked scared and then angrily at the guard and then back at Rex.

"Not yet, but if we don't get back to the quarry where it's at, it soon will be." Rex was grey and had started the shakes as shock took a firmer hold.

Noticing the guard with his drawn pistol Westwood snarled "Put that damn thing down and help us load whatever Mr. Franklin needs, NOW!"

Almost falling over himself and stuffing the pistol back into his holster, the guard quickly hurried to obey. Rex staggered as the blackness came back in a wave. He shook his head and ran into the warehouse. The guard followed behind Rex's staggered steps and Westwood's hurried tread.

Chapter Eleven

June 19, 4:00 pm, The abandoned quarry:

The black, dirty water swirled around the truck bed, playfully lapping at the canisters holding the fuel. As if aware of the damage that it could cause, it chuckled like a vandal as it rushed over the breached dam. The stray currents rushing around Jim's lifeless arms caused them to wave like Captain Ahab's as he drew his crew after Mobie Dick, only there were no witnesses to this grim signaling. The area around the shack lay barren and empty, Lochridge stared with his dead eyes at the floorboards of the shack, the flies were already starting to feast on his ruined flesh...

Several miles down the road Juan skidded to a halt as the federal officers blocked the road in front of him. Instructing him to keep his hands on the wheel Liz slowly got out and laid the pistol on the hood of the car.

"Come here quick" she called to the federal agents, "The Sheriff has been shot!"

Keeping her and Juan covered, Agent Rogers hurried over.

"Sheriff, you in there?" He called.

"Yes" came the weak reply "This fellow here is the one to worry about Rogers, that lady is O.K." Weak from blood loss, the Sheriff passed out.

Rogers signaled for Juan to get out of the car. Juan slowly complied and laid in the gravel with his hands on the back of his head and his legs spread.

"Where are the other two?" Rogers asked Liz as he handcuffed Juan, "and where's Rex?" He helped Juan to his feet and, holding his head, pushed him down into the back seat of the federal car.

"The other two are dead. Packard killed one and Lochridge killed Packard."

"What?"

"Lochridge killed Packard and shot the Sheriff, I killed Lochridge." She looked pale "I had to, he was going to kill Rex and him." she gestured weakly at Juan.

"Where's Rex?"

"Back at the quarry, the dam blew, he's trying to save the fuel."

"Holy Shit." He roughly slammed the door to the car and signaled one of the other agents near by. "You feel up to showing me the way Miss?" he asked Liz.

"My name is Liz, Mr. Rogers. I think I can."

"You take the Sheriff to the hospital. Liz and I are going to the quarry to help Mr. Franklin. Radio this all in and get the copter to us, we may need to get out quick."

"Yes sir."

They carefully moved the unconscious Sheriff into the federal car and it sped off. Agent Rogers and Liz climbed back into Lochridge's car and, doing a screeching turn, headed back towards the pending radiation storm at the quarry. The water had risen to cover the truck bed by an inch, through holes punched by Packard, it began to cover the first rows of fuel rods. The speeding neutrons slowed. A fraction, not enough to sustain a reaction, but just a few, were absorbed to cause fission, and produce more neutrons, and still the water rushed in...

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June 19, 4:15 pm , The Pheonix plant:

"Help with this last barrel Rex!" Called Westwood as he struggled with the fourth cardboard barrel of the new formulation boron that was to have been used to pre-treat the reactor water cleanup system. Rex limped over and helped load the clumsy barrel onto the truck. They stepped off the truck bed and slammed the tailgate shut.

"You think you can drive Rex? You don't look so good." Westwood looked with concern at Rex's pale, strained face.

"I got here didn't I?" Rex winced as his head roared with pain.

"You ride and give me directions, I'll drive." Westwood climbed into the drivers side while Rex eased into the passenger seat.

"Head out 29", he mumbled through the haze of pain.

"Right." Slamming the truck into gear, Westwood narrowly missed the Guard truck that still partially blocked the loading bay. "Assholes" he said to himself as he roared past the Guard shack and over the smashed gate. "So much for our million dollar security."

"What?" Rex asked blearily.

"Nothing Rex. How, far down the road?"

"A couple a miles, in an old quarry."

"I know the place, just rest and I'll get us there." He pushed the peddle to the floor and turned on the siren while the blackness once again engulfed Rex in painless oblivion.

"This the road Liz?" Asked Rogers as he pulled into the entrance to the quarry.

"Yes, I think so, see the old crane?" she shielded her eyes from the afternoon sun that struck blindingly through the trees.

"Yes, I think I do, let's go." He pulled into the road and sped towards the pool were the water was covering the last of the second row of fuel rods, the neutron population was still sub-critical, but ever so slowly increasing as more of the fuel was covered by the cold, dirty water.

Rogers and Liz jumped out of the car as it slid to a halt by the crane. Liz ran over to the pool and looked at the rising water level. "How do you tell if it's to late?" She looked at the rising level with horror.

"We're still alive, I guess that's something."

"Ya, I guess so. Do you see Rex? REX!" she yelled. Shielding her eyes as she examined the area.

"No, I don't, he's probably cleared out, I think we had better too, there's nothing we can do." He turned and walked back towards the car.

Liz turned, her eyes went wide as she looked towards the shack. "It's gone!" she blurted out.

"What's gone?" Rogers hurried over.

"Packard's body, I saw Lochridge shoot him twice in the chest, it was right there!" She pointed to where Packard had laid. "He was dead!"

"Well, he's not there now, if we don't want to be dead, we've got to get out of here."

Close by, the truck with the barrels of boron roared down the road. With each bounce Rex was slammed in and out of consciousness. Westwood tried to mix caution with haste as he drove the vehicle at break neck speed. In the back of his mind the picture of a Chernobyl accident caused by the fuel for his plant loomed large and ominous.

Feeling like a little girl in a dark basement Liz hurried over and got in the car, a feeling of cold eyes watching her made her shiver. Rogers got in and started the car, he turned it around and accelerated down the entrance road. Behind them the water was halfway up the third row of fuel rods, soon enough of the highly enriched fuel would be covered to sustain the reaction, if there would have been someone to measure it, the reactivity coefficient was nearing the critical level as more and more neutrons were slowed and captured in the fuel causing fission...

At the entrance to the quarry Rogers and Liz almost collided with the truck carrying the boron, Westwood and Rex. Both vehicles slid to a stop in the loosely packed dirt of the road. Westwood shifted into neutral and jumped down, leaving Rex semi-conscious in the passenger seat.

"Go back it's to late, the waters about halfway up!" Called Rogers out the window.

"We've got boron to stop the reaction!" Answered Westwood.

"Not enough time.." he broke off as the big truck slammed into gear, Rex sat groggily behind the wheel, he knew the fuel couldn't be allowed to reach critical mass. He had to stop it. Westwood jumped for the driver's side door as the truck roared past. Westwood managed to get the door open before a sudden jolt knocked him to the ground.

"STOP! Rex you can't make it! Come back!" He fell to land hard, the wind knocked out of him. The big truck roared out of sight down the road to the

quarry, swerving to smash over several saplings as it skewed around Lochridge's car and sped towards the promise of radioactive hell soon to be unleashed.

"Come on, we've got to help him! Can't you see? He's out of his head!" Liz was almost hysterical.

"I should have my head examined! Westwood, you coming?"

"Yes." He limped over, favoring the leg bruised with the collision with the truck, and climbed into the car.

At the end of the access road Rex stopped the truck and looked through bleary eyes at the rising water in the pool.

A good third of the fuel canisters were covered with the cold, filthy water. Inside the canisters the silent death of atoms undergoing fission was increasing to that magic point where nothing on earth could stop it from releasing its immense energy in a blast of steam and radiation.

Just as the car with Liz, Westwood and Rogers came around the crane into full view, Rex floored the truck and rapidly accelerated toward the pool with its waiting death. As the truck shot up the earthen berm at the edge of the pool Rex felt a falling sensation, the rush of cooler air, and lost consciousness...

The truck, with the immense inertia gained from its speed and great weight, rose gracefully into the early evening sky, turning a half turn in mid air it smashed into the surface of the pool beside the fuel truck, the canisters of boron compound smashing into clouds of white crystals as they slammed into the fuel canisters. Scant seconds before the deadly prompt criticality of the fuel bundles the dissolving boron greedily consumed the neutrons, slowing and then halting the deadly fission reactions.

The Sheriff's truck, now lying on its top in the muddy water, settled into its final parking place, the truck's wheels slowly coasting to a stop as the muddy water, now harmless, swirled around it.

EPILOGUE:

June 21, 09:45 am, City Hospital, St. Louis, Mi.:

The room felt chilly. The light, hurting his eyes, filtered in through the sterile white blinds. Blinking Rex tried to reach for his aching head.

"Careful Rex, you'll pull out your I.V." said a familiar voice.

Turning his head slowly Rex focused on the blur beside the bed, it slowly resolved itself into a grinning Sheriff with his bandaged arm in a sling and another bandage, wrapped around his pot belly, was visible through a gap in his shirt buttons.

"Gave us all quite a turn. I should punch your lights out for what you did to my truck, but all things considered, I guess it was worth it."

"You're a hero Rex." Said a female voice. Turning Rex saw Liz.

"So are you" He said hoarsely. "Where is some water?" The inside of his mouth tasted like old socks.

"Here." Agent Rogers poured a glass full from the hospital pitcher and handed it to him.

He drank and then carefully set the glass down on the bedside table. "Looks like a class reunion." he mumbled and everyone laughed. "What happened?"

"Well, we figure you either jumped or where thrown clear, you busted a few ribs, sprained your shoulder and sure didn't do your concussion any good, but you got the reaction stopped."

"Good. What about the others?"

"Juan is in jail awaiting arraignment, Jim's body is in the morgue."

"What about Packard?" He looked at their troubled faces. "Well?"

"They never found his body, but he's got to be dead! The Sheriff and I saw him shot by Lochridge."

"Kevlar, he said he was wearing a kevlar vest. He's still alive."

"Well, I'll have the area searched, not much hope, after all it's been two days." The Sheriff said.

"Two Days! That means it's Sunday. Damn, I missed Lucy's birthday." Rex looked dejected. The group around the bed looked at each other and smiled. Liz signaled to a nurse who opened the door to the room. Rex looked up in time to see a flash of blond hair and a glimpse of freckles before he was thoroughly hugged and kissed, catching his breath he said "Lucy! How did you get here?" The pain in his head and chest was worth it.

"Mr. Westwood called and Mommie said I could and Daddy you look terrible!" Her little girl's face was screwed up in a concerned expression.

"You don't baby, you look real good." He hugged her once more for good measure.

In a couple of months the investigations were over and the plant had resumed its startup sequence. The temperature and pressure in the main coolant loop climbed steadily as the pumps hummed and sent the water, like a heart pumping blood through a body, through the labyrinth of piping and valves. As reactor power rose the technicians made careful checks of the pipes and components and carefully monitored the slow, controlled reaction as the reactor neared the point where the new neutrons produced exactly made up for the one's lost due to leakage and the core reached criticality.

Deep in the bowels of the containment structure, the weld that Big "J" had made slowly started to bleed an invisible stream of high pressure steam as the hot, high pressure water inside leaked through the fault. In the control room a technician peered closely at his gages.

"Damn, leakage indicated in auxiliary equipment cubical A-4 " He reached over to the control rod drive switch and scrambled the plant.

"Shit, there goes the week end."

The joint, now isolated, slowly bled its pressure away and waited patiently for the repair crew...

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August 10, 6:10 pm, Pocatello, Id.:

Several hours later, and a thousand miles away, a dark figure switched off the holovision after watching the news about the shutdown. The rough hewn face, with a wicked looking scar over one ear, smiled.

"Teach the schmucks right", he thought as he packed a worn duffle bag. He had to be in Portland soon, he had another job to do.