

The Last Witness

“The best 'alternative history' I've ever read ... The idea is brilliant! ... My God! Perhaps it's true!” - *Arthur C. Clarke*

6 July 1945. The first atomic bomb is exploded. A young serviceman, half-dead and delirious, staggers out of the desert whispering enigmatically that Roosevelt has gone.

4 October 1950. American ex-Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson, writes to Truman that the demise of Roosevelt was an incalculable blow. Worried by breaches in national security, he advises the utmost vigilance.

27 May 1982. Sandra Lamont, an investigative journalist, suspects a major secret behind Stimson's words. She dies mysteriously.

What is the significance of the reference to Roosevelt and now, over half a lifetime later, is there still a need to exercise vigilance? The key to it all is *The Last Witness*.

Meticulously researched, this extraordinary novel is charged with electrifying realism and unbearable tension.

THE LAST WITNESS

Stephen Sykes

Foxfell

This eBook is copyright material and must not be copied, reproduced, transferred, distributed, leased, licensed or publicly performed or used in any way except as specifically permitted in writing by the publishers, as allowed under the terms and conditions under which it was purchased or as strictly permitted by applicable copyright law. Any unauthorised distribution or use of this text maybe a direct infringement of the author's and publisher's rights and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly.

eBook MOBI format ISBN 978-0-9570126-4-6
eBook EPUB format ISBN 978-0-9570126-5-3

First published in digital form in 2011 by Foxfell

First published in Great Britain in 1989 by Robert Hale Limited

Hardback ISBN 0-7090-3768-6

Copyright © Stephen Sykes 1989, 2011

Stephen Sykes has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

The quotation from *The Citizen Kane* Book
by P. Kael is given by permission of
Martin Secker & Warburg

With special thanks to
Jan Andersen

for
Janine

Contents

Prologue Monday 16th July 1945

PART I Thursday 27th May 1982

PART II Saturday 17th June 1995

PART III Friday 23rd June

PART IV Saturday 24th June

PART V Sunday 25th June

PART VI Monday 26th June

PART VII Two years later

Epilogue Monday 6th August 1945

The discovery of the nuclear chain reaction
need not bring about the destruction of
mankind any more than did the discovery of matches

Albert Einstein

PROLOGUE

Monday 16th July 1945

3.25am, Superstition Mountains, Arizona

The rain had started after midnight. By 1am it had developed into one of those summer storms which torment the great Southwest, threatening to wash away the fragile landscape.

"Burros'll be scared shitless," the old prospector dimly considered, consuming another large mouthful of whiskey. The isolation of the Superstitions was matched only by the solace provided in a bottle of liquor.

He'd panned for gold most everywhere west of the Continental Divide, or so he would say, but somehow the distant memory of his brief meeting with Jacob Waltz in 1890 drew him time and again to the Superstitions. Of course there was no proof that the old prospector had met Waltz, or if he had, that the man was really who he claimed to be. But to anyone within earshot willing to stand a few drinks, the prospector would recount with tantalizing seriousness the story of his encounter with Jacob Waltz. His dusty eyes would regain their youthful gleam as he relived that night at the saloon on Washington Street in Phoenix. To hear from Waltz himself the location of the Lost Dutchman Mine and its legendary mother lode.

The old prospector's embellishments were every bit as thorough as Waltz's own. Careful never to divulge details too precise, he would tell how Waltz confided *from the tunnel of my mine I can see the military trail below, but from the trail you can't see the entrance to m' mine*. That such confidences were for all to read in the *Phoenix Daily Herald* and other newspaper obituaries for Waltz the year after his encounter was of little concern to the prospector. Most of the dudes he lined up were ready to devour any lead on the Dutchman and the rest couldn't read.

Whatever the truth was of the mine, it died with the Dutchman. However, this had been insufficient reason to stop countless men and women tramping the arid peaks and gullies of the Superstition Wilderness, not least the old prospector. Human curiosity, endeavor and avarice would always ensure that the dry heat of the inner canyons would be tolerated, the electric storms of summer prove a mere inconvenience. Death was always ready to provide relief when the mettle gave out.

"Suppose I'd better see them burros is still tethered," he muttered to himself with no real enthusiasm. He squinted a soused and bleary eye through a hole in his ancient tent. His fire had hissed to a sudden and premature end when the storm blew up and the sky was as black as any mine he'd sweated and crawled his way down.

Now and again lightning strikes over Weaver's Needle flooded the landscape in stark colorlessness, the sheer vertical walls of rock standing defiantly against the wrath of any storm. The piercing white light startled and unsettled his animals, and the well-being of his animals in that broiling mountain desert assured his own well-being.

On such a night he wondered why at his age he didn't just stick to prospecting within reach of his old shack. But it was always possible that just over the next rise, maybe by the bank of a nearby arroyo he'd find the nugget that would lead him to his long-sought-after wealth. So he'd pack up his gear and head off with his burros for a few days and try his luck. But with daytime temperatures soaring to over 110 degrees the effort of the trips was now beginning to tell. It was much as he could do simply to survive in that environment, let alone prospect for gold.

As he peered outside, it seemed that the monotonous and incessant crashing of rain deluging canvas had changed. Though dulled by alcohol-bathed senses, the prospector sat motionless, straining to attune to the sound. Concern for his nervous burros was momentarily forgotten as he sat staring into the blackness, hypnotized by the sound at the threshold of his perception. Maybe it was the same noise he'd heard earlier when he was sure that a plane had come over and roused him from his fitful sleep. Or maybe he'd just dreamed of the distant drone of aircraft engines. What the hell

would a plane be doing at that time over the Superstitions and in such lousy weather?

If there had been a noise it was gone now. The mountains were always playing games. He wiped the rain from his eyes with his grimy shirt sleeve and shivered in the cool of the early morning as water found its way down his neck. He imagined, as he often imagined, the fingers of the Dutchman slipping around his wrinkled throat in those secluded crags, ready to wring the last breath from his victim in order to protect his secret.

He shivered again, though not from the cold. In all his years prospecting, he'd never thrown off the primeval fear of being alone. In the glaring light of day, he was concerned solely for his long-elusive fortunes. In the oppressive darkness of night, the looming mountains harbored the ghosts of earlier gold-diggers beckoning him to join them. Isolated with his phobias, he would think back to the partners he'd worked with, but you couldn't really trust partners. Strike it rich and you'd find yourself with a bullet or blade in your back. No, it was better to tolerate the burden of loneliness and die a natural death than end up sooner than expected with nostrils full of dirt and vultures tearing off your flesh. He'd long ago decided that the only partner he could rely on was called Jack Daniel.

He crouched back into the protection of his canvas. Putting down the almost-finished bottle, he pulled an old oilskin over his head and grimaced as he stumbled from the security of his tent. The dim light which spilled from the canvas flap was instantly dissolved by the downpour. With just enough occasional light from the receding thunderclouds he stumbled his way past the ashes of his earlier fire and across to where his burros were tied up. With only fleeting glances ahead, he splashed and squelched through the muddy ground, locating his animals solely by their commotion. Lifting the cape from his face, he ran a calming hand over his three burros and ensured that all the ropes were tight.

"We sure seen worse than this, ain't we girl?" the prospector soothed. "The old desert'll soak it right up and'll be dry b'day-break."

Deafened by the cloudburst on his oilskin, he turned to head back to the relative comfort afforded by his tent, content in the knowledge that at least his animals hadn't deserted him. But the dim glow of his oil lamp was gone.

"Fuckin' light," he growled.

As he started carefully in the direction of his tent the rain began to ease up. If only he'd stayed put a little longer, the storm would have passed over and he wouldn't have got drenched. He stepped slowly over the rocky ground towards his refuge in the now total blackness. The profound darkness, the entire elimination of a primary sense accentuated his primordial fears. Eventually his outstretched hands made grateful contact with a guy rope and an acute feeling of relief flowed through him.

In a single action, he lifted the cape from his head and entered the tent, leaving the oilskin on the streaming ground outside. He wiped a hand over his bristly face, clearing water from his eyes and sweeping his long white hair back from his forehead. Instinctively he groped for the bottle of whiskey. His calloused fingers sensed canteens, blankets, clothes, a plate with the congealed remnants of his supper, but no bottle. He wiped his fingers on his shirt and, pushing a hand deep in his trouser pocket, he extracted a crumpled box of matches. He took out one of the few remaining sticks and drew it along the abrasive length of the box. The sulfur sizzled and spluttered with intense illumination.

"Chr-r-r-ist!" was all the prospector could manage to utter before dropping the match. He reeled backwards as though hit square in the chest by a .45. The shock almost jolted his ancient heart to a dead stop before surging to an unprecedented rate. His head spun and he gasped for breath as he fumbled to withdraw another from the box, spilling the rest of the contents on the ground.

The match head struck the box ... Nothing. He desperately tried again ... Nothing. Once more. This time the second match grudgingly ignited and with enormous effort he managed to hold it steady enough to stop his shaking hand from extinguishing the weak flame.

"Christ al-fuckin'-mighty! You fuckin' son-of-a-bitch!"

At the back of the tent sat a soaking, huddled figure with the missing bottle of whiskey in one hand. His left arm lay outstretched and useless by his side. His face was plastered with blood and dirt, his eyes half-closed from obvious exhaustion. He raised the bottle to his lips and finished the contents, seemingly unaware of the prospector. His hand, still grasping the bottle, fell to the ground.

When the prospector could see he was in no immediate mortal danger he picked up his overturned oil lamp and touched his dwindling match against the wick. The lamp began to glow as the flame from the match licked his fingers and burnt itself out in a final wisp of smoke.

He held the lamp closer to the intruder, shielding his own eyes from the glare.

"Well, you sure as shit ain't no Dutchman," the prospector conceded, more to reassure himself than in conversation with the intruder. "Who the hell are you, boy?"

The intruder didn't hear him. His eyes rolled upwards, but before he slumped over into an anesthetized oblivion his lips opened as though to speak.

"What did y'say, boy? Say again." The prospector pressed his ear close to the intruder's mouth. "Speak up, boy."

"Roosevelt's gone!" whispered the intruder. "Roosevelt's go- ..."

"Well, hell, even I know that Roosevelt's dead! Boy?" The prospector gently shook his new companion's shoulder, but could evoke no further response. "Guess we'd both be glad o' some sleep."

He eased the empty bottle from the intruder's hand and tossed it to one corner, pulling a blanket over the young man. The rain had further chilled the early morning air. The prospector took out another bottle of liquor from an old leather pouch and shuffled to the entrance of his tent. The canvas flapped languidly in the gentle breeze as he sat gazing at the clearing sky. Occasional stars blinked through the clarity of the rain-washed atmosphere, between heavy clouds. With the intruder sleeping soundly, the prospector's adrenaline slowly resumed its normal level.

From the clothes left on him, he figured the intruder was maybe a deserter. Not exactly common in these mountains, but he'd heard there were a number hiding out, usually nearer the lakes. Still, who was he to condemn? He'd lived pretty well outside the events of the modern world most of his life. Why should he care about the reasons that brought the intruder to this remote place? The only thing that mattered was that he was alive. He'd better take a look at that arm, though, when the sun rose. Probably broken.

The old prospector leaned his back against some boxes and finally fell into a deep and peaceful sleep.

2

At 5.30am Mountain War Time, the far eastern horizon suddenly glowed with a light that no man had seen before and the highest peaks of the Superstitions were distant witness to the dawning of a new era affecting every living creature. Not the gentle diffuse appearance of a gradually rising sun, but instantaneous illumination as the energy locked within the nucleus of countless plutonium atoms was unleashed in a chain reaction that once initiated could not be stopped.

Within a few days, in the far off cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, thousands of men, women and children would experience the same terrible sight, but not merely as witnesses. They would be participants.

The old prospector and his young intruder slept, unaware of the irrevocable event that had occurred less than three hundred miles away in a remote desert region near the peaceful town of Carrizozo. A region which four hundred years earlier the Spanish conquistadores had named, now with exquisite irony *Jornada del Muerto*.

In that desert in New Mexico observers were stunned at the sight not quite six miles distant. Even the spectacular test explosion of one hundred tons of TNT two months earlier had totally failed to prepare them for what they were observing. From their various protective bunkers, they watched in gaping silence before the shock wave struck with a force equivalent to twenty thousand tons of conventional explosive. Then they felt the awesome power which they had released. For the first time, Man stood at the very brink of Armageddon.

As reality broke free, the men went wild in an uproar of jubilation. Years of effort had culminated in a stupendous detonation of atomic power. Hands joined hands, slapped backs, embraced colleagues. Tears openly flowed at the immensity of the technical achievement and brilliant confirmation of theoretical physics.

"Oppie, I won the bet!" shouted Kistiakowsky, as excited as a child on Christmas morning. "You owe me ten dollars!"

Robert Oppenheimer hardly reacted. Then, with unnatural calm, he slowly, mechanically took out his wallet and looked inside.

"I don't have it. You'll have to wait," he said tonelessly, neither sharing nor caring for his colleague's enthusiasm. Had he really laid an absurd bet that the bomb, his bomb, would amount to nothing? After the virtually superhuman effort to build an atomic device ahead of the Germans, the expenditure of two billion dollars of taxpayers' money, the creation in absolute secrecy high in the mountains near Santa Fe of a weapon of such destructive power that no one in the US administration would ever admit direct responsibility for having authorized its use against enemy forces, let alone civilians, was it really conceivable that the project's scientific director had bet ten dollars against the bomb working?

Amid the celebrations in the observation bunker at SOUTH 10,000, Oppenheimer replaced his wallet in his pocket. Incongruously, his tall gaunt figure remained transfixed while his fellow scientists congratulated themselves in an overenthusiastic manner which he abhorred. But even the aloof Oppenheimer could well understand the overwhelming feeling of relief at the momentously successful scientific achievement. However, such an accomplishment was tempered by the certain repercussions of success. If only Roosevelt had been there, thought Oppenheimer. But mere wishes couldn't change things now.

Now I am become Death, ran the grim line from the Bhagavadgita, *the destroyer of worlds*. The words struck gravely through Oppenheimer's mind. Could any man bear such ultimate responsibility? *Should* any man bear such responsibility?

In ebullient mood, starkly contrasting with his own, the test director jolted Oppenheimer from his morose reflections. "Now we're all sons of bitches!" he grinned as he shook Oppenheimer by the hand.

While differing in eloquence, both men were equally succinct in their philosophy. Within a

month, Oppenheimer thought, two billion dollars would buy the cessation of hostilities and atrocities in the Far East. Two billion dollars would be the price of annihilation for a quarter of a million human beings.

The consequences of losing a ten dollar bet.

7.00pm, Babelsberg near Potsdam, Germany

The WAC communications officer looked at the message which had just come in from the War Department in Washington and frowned at its contents.

Operated on this morning. Diagnosis not yet complete but results seem satisfactory and already exceed expectations. Local press release necessary as interest extends great distance. Dr Groves pleased. He returns tomorrow. Sorrow that Roosevelt could not attend. I will keep you posted.

"This one's for Stimson," said the operator turning to a courier. "Just news of someone he knows who's had an operation. Must be important. Seems he was a friend of old FDR, God rest his soul."

She knew full well that the message was in code as she slipped it into a small envelope and lightly licked the gummed flap.

"The future of the world hangs in the balance at Potsdam and the wires get choked with personal messages!" she joked. "Anyone know where the Secretary of War is?"

* * *

Henry Stimson sat at his writing desk, his shirt sleeves still crisply white despite the punishing schedule of the day. A long and distinguished career nearing its conclusion, he first served as Secretary of War years before during the Taft Administration. His current term had begun in 1940 under Franklin D. Roosevelt and now continued for its final few months under Truman. Ensuring a smooth continuity following the death of Roosevelt, that's where his priority lay.

He placed his pen down for a moment and pulled his gold pocket watch from his waistcoat. It was almost 7.30pm. He slipped the watch back in its place of safety and rubbed his tired eyes. For just a moment he sat in quiet contemplation. He was worried. Why hadn't word yet arrived about the test at Trinity? Had there been a hitch? Had the bomb failed to explode? Would Truman be able to play his ace hand and tell Stalin that the Americans had won the race to develop the atom bomb? Would he then be able to top even that?

But he was worried too about the use of the atomic bomb against the Japanese. If their plan hadn't worked out, then if the President could issue a statement that the Emperor would retain his throne if the Japanese surrendered honorably now, there would still be no need to use the new weapon in aggression. Or if the new bomb failed, no need for countless American troops to wantonly lose their lives invading the Japanese mainland in a final assault to halt the barbarism of an already defeated nation. But it was too late for such consideration. The bomb *had* to work. Their plan *had* to work. He and Groves had risked everything.

There was a gentle knock on the door and a WAC corporal entered.

"Excuse me, Colonel, a courier has just delivered an urgent communication from Washington." She handed Stimson the sealed envelope.

Stimson twisted around in his seat, still pleased, even impressed, that the pretty young woman had taken the trouble to find out that he liked to be addressed by his rank attained with the 3st Field Artillery during the Great War.

"Let's hope that this is the one we've been waiting for. Thank you, my dear." He ripped open the envelope and withdrew the contents. His face betrayed excitement as he read. "My God, it's worked!" Stimson said to himself in subdued reverence.

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"Mmm? Oh, let's just say that the days of fighting in the Pacific may be numbered, Elizabeth."

"Gee, that's just wonderful, sir!" The corporal forced a smile. How many times had the rumors buzzed that one before? Anything to keep the morale topped up as Truman, Churchill and Stalin decide what happens next.

But even as the corporal was speaking, Stimson's pleasure became attenuated. Never one to let his emotions run at anything above a pedestrian level, there was nevertheless a perceptible change in his aged face. Without hesitation he picked up the pen he'd just been using and carefully amended the message, the merest tremble evident from his normally sturdy hand. He dried the ink with blotting paper.

"Elizabeth, have this message retyped exactly as I've shown and both copies returned to me immediately," Stimson ordered.

"Yes, sir." She obediently took the paper and walked briskly from the room. No longer under Stimson's keen gaze she glanced down and unfolded the message. *Sorrow that Roosevelt could not attend.* Now why had he crossed through those words? The door to Stimson's office suddenly opened and the Secretary of War's head emerged, She looked around guiltily.

"Oh, and Elizabeth, please inform the President that I have the news we've been expecting and I'll join him at the Little White House directly."

"Right away, Colonel."

* * *

The corporal returned and handed Stimson the two sheets.

"Thank you, Elizabeth. I won't require you any more this evening."

"Very well, sir," and she quietly slipped from the room one final time.

He watched the door close and click shut, then picked up a cigar lighter from the desk. He took the original message and holding it above the bright flame, made sure that it caught well alight before dropping it into an adjacent ashtray. He watched carefully as the paper blackened and curled as it burnt. When the flames had extinguished he crushed what was left with the end of his pen to ensure that nothing but carbon fragments remained.

The Secretary of War put on his jacket and picked up his walking cane. He left the old summer home which had been seconded for his use and headed towards No. 2 Kaiserstrasse as quickly as his seventy-seven year-old frame would allow, clutching the retyped message.

At least the President would be elated.

PART I

Thursday 27th May 1982

3.10pm, Museum of Broadcasting, New York City

The room was totally silent except for the muted rustle of clothes against chairs, shoes against carpet. A dozen people sat mesmerized, their blank faces broken only by occasional smiles as they watched their monitors, listening through headphones. Most would inevitably be viewing old game or variety shows, two bucks buying them an hour's relief from the steamy streets outside.

Richard Powers sat at the console where the Sony videocassette player waited to engulf his requested tape. His eyelids felt heavy as he gazed around the semi-darkened room. He had never understood why people paid to spend an hour viewing ancient and embarrassingly dreadful TV shows. In a country satiated with television, why should any sane member of the public pay for the presumed pleasure of watching such dross? A country with all the sophistication of modern technology in almost every room of every house, and no one seemed to know how to use it. Truth to tell, he couldn't understand why anyone watched such garbage in the first place. In any case, most old series were endlessly rerun in some late night or early morning slot.

It seemed almost inconceivable to change stations in even the remotest town and not to be able to find an episode of *I Love Lucy* glowing pallidly on the phosphor screen. Yet that was what the guy at the console in front had chosen to view. *The Twilight Zone* he could just about have understood. But from ten thousand TV programs he'd selected *I Love Lucy*! There was simply no accounting for the irrationality of human behavior.

He was just at that point of consciousness which drifts between reality and dreams when he was jolted from his comfortable state. "Mr Powers? Pardon me, sir, I have your tape." The assistant pushed the cassette into the video machine. "Just give me a wave when you've finished and I'll come back and collect it."

"Thanks," Powers mumbled, stifling a yawn.

"Have you been here before?" asked the assistant in a low, excessively sensual tone which lifted the stupor from Powers' clouded brain.

"No, he hasn't, but it's OK. I'll show him the ropes," Sandra broke in before Powers could reply. She sat down at the next seat and propped two bags against the console.

"Oh, hi, Sandy! I didn't realize you were together," the assistant whispered.

"As there's always a queue here I took the opportunity to do a little shopping, It's Richard's first time at the Museum, Jo."

"Well, if there's anything you want, just let me know," said Jo.

"I might just do that," Powers replied with his most winning smile.

"Sure," Jo added and turned towards the desk where someone else was waiting with a tape request.

His eyes followed her rhythmic legs until they disappeared behind the desk, then turned to the TV monitor.

"Seen enough?" asked Sandra.

"Haven't seen anything yet. The tape arrived when you did," replied Powers.

"You know what I mean, you bastard."

"I see you've been researching my genealogical history," Powers replied and squeezed Sandra's thigh.

"OK, Richard, we've only got an hour. Playtime later. For now let's watch TV. I take it that this is the right program?"

"Well, let's see here. Bugs Bunny in *A Knight for a Day*. Is that the one?"

"Bugs Bunny! I told you Porky Pig. Can't you get anything right?"

Sandra grabbed the notes which Powers had transcribed from the card index reference.

T77:0362. Today with Mrs Roosevelt. Broadcast on NBC, February 2 1950, Sunday. 4:00pm NYT 30 minutes. BGW One in a series of interview programs hosted by Eleanor Roosevelt. Series subsequently titled Mrs Roosevelt Meets the Public. The discussion is on the controversy surrounding the H-Bomb and evaluates the promise and threat of atomic energy, and includes contributions from Robert Oppenheimer.

"Well, I guess this will have to do. But next time I ask for Porky Pig make sure it's Porky Pig." Sandra set the video machine to PLAY. "You know, for a professor of nuclear physics, you sure can be pretty dumb."

"Ex-professor. Remember?"

"OK. Ex-professor. But you're still pretty dumb. Now watch."

"How far into the program is the piece you want me to see?" Powers whispered.

"About fifteen minutes. But listen to the lead up. The sound quality is pretty bad. All they could do in those days was to film a TV screen as a program was broadcast."

"Thanks for the lecture, but I did know that."

"Sure," Sandra goaded. "Anyhow, all such programs have been transferred to tape in recent years by the Museum."

"And what exactly am I looking for?"

"I'll explain later," was all that Sandra would offer.

They put on their headphones as music introduced the program. The thin, hissing soundtrack was shattering. Powers' hand fumbled for the volume control, but could achieve only the inaudible or the ear-piercing. He looked at Sandra. By her relaxed concentration, he surmised that her volume control worked.

Time had taken its toll of the picture quality which now consisted of insipid shades of mid-gray. A bespectacled Mrs Roosevelt sat in the environs of the Colonial Room at the Park Sheraton Hotel, Manhattan, and introduced the program participants. First to speak was the President of Johns Hopkins University who had decided to no doubt astonish his viewing audience by displaying a cylinder of uranium metal and spoke of viable atomic power stations on a twenty-to-thirty-year timescale. His tone was even less exciting than the cylinder of uranium. Nevertheless, Powers found a certain fascination in watching a TV program broadcast live just a month before he was born.

After a few minutes attention turned to Oppenheimer, smoking and philosophizing on the use of atomic power. Choosing every word in a considered manner, he wore the hangdog expression which so characterized his later years, as though the future of the human race was dependent upon his very next statement. Perhaps five years earlier it had been. But was it now conceivable that this rawboned, quietly spoken man had been responsible for developing the most destructive mechanism then known to man? Was he really the scientific driving force behind one of the greatest technological strides that had ever been accomplished, and in an impossibly short timescale?

The contributions from all the interviewees were mechanical, stilted, as though each were reading from prepared notes. Maybe they were. Or maybe they were over-respectful of their interviewer. Eventually Mrs Roosevelt intervened with her serenely enigmatic, even matriarchal smile. Powers couldn't shake from his mind the impression that she was conducting a cozy meeting of homely wives. This was accentuated by the quietly reverential disposition of the eminent group. There could be little likelihood of any interesting spontaneity under such circumstances.

"There is a question in everybody's mind, Dr Oppenheimer," said Mrs Roosevelt in her considered, ever-polite manner. "Are we creating something we may not be able to control? We will now hear from the dean of all scientists today, Dr Albert Einstein from his home in New Jersey."

Einstein's familiar face appeared, but the soundtrack compounded with Einstein's accent proved almost impossible to follow.

Powers lifted the left earphone on Sandra's headset, aware of and aroused by her perfume. "Can't tell a word he's saying. Is any of this important?" he whispered. Then he kissed the lobe of

her ear. Goose bumps rippled down her neck. He knew that this never failed to arouse her nipples.

"For heaven's sake, not now. I come here regularly, remember."

"Sounds exhausting," Powers whispered.

"High school humor still lives," muttered Sandra, annoyed. "I can't make out the soundtrack either, but listen carefully after Einstein finishes. Hans Bethe is on next. Then there are some additional remarks from Oppenheimer. Listen very carefully to what he says."

"Yes, ma'am. Anything you say," and with a sigh of resignation, Powers forced himself to return his attention to the monitor.

The camera turned to Bethe who expressed concern over the misuse of nuclear weapons, agreeing with whatever sentiments Einstein had apparently expressed. Powers found the presentation about as interesting as an undergraduate tutorial, probably less so. But the program had an historical importance, coming as it did after the birth of the atomic bomb and before that of the hydrogen weapons. The doubts asserted over the future of nuclear arms were no different then than today.

"... and Dr Teller is quite convinced that the only way to retain dominance and avoid further international conflicts on the scale experienced in the last war is to build the super-bomb, the hydrogen bomb," Bethe carefully and deliberately explained, in a voice heavy with Germanic intonation. "In other words, he believes that arms control cannot successfully be achieved and the only solution is to be one step ahead of potential adversaries, or at the very least on an equal footing. If the United States fails to build a hydrogen bomb, then the USSR will certainly do so and this state of affairs cannot be allowed to happen. "Dr Teller and those he can influence believe that peace can only be maintained by military dominance. It is the threat of direct and devastating retaliatory action which maintains the effective balance of peace. Arms control or, in the extreme, total arms abolition, is simply impossible. There will always appear some psychopath bent on world domination who will not obey the rules, caring not one iota for the immense loss of life which he will inevitably cause. Interesting and valid though this point of view may be considered to be, it totally ignores the inherent dangers of building, testing and stockpiling increasing arsenals of these terrible weapons. There is the somewhat arrogant assumption that the United States of America is charged with the moral obligation to manufacture and retain such weapons for the peace of the world. *Guardians of Mankind* if you like."

"Dr Bethe has made a most interesting point, Dr Oppenheimer, on which I am sure you would like to comment," Mrs Roosevelt smiled.

"Indeed he has, Mrs Roosevelt, and it raises an even more interesting question. In the words of Juvenal, *Quis custodiet ipso custodes?* Who is to guard the guards themselves?"

"We have as yet not even five years' experience in the management of such weapons. The escalation in the stockpiling of these devices is already exhibiting an exponential trend and simply monitoring the ever increasing numbers of atomic armaments will become an end in itself. There will forever be the possibility of accidentally dropping or simply losing an atomic bomb, be it in the depths of the ocean or in some inaccessible place on land. After all, countless ships and aircraft have disappeared without trace. Whether such a device may forever remain dormant and undiscovered, or may be recovered by an alien group or country should not be a gamble undertaken by any civilized nation.

"From the time of the Trinity test, it has been clear that the inadvertent dropping or loss of an atomic bomb is a real and quite unacceptable risk. Future generations will judge whether the intrinsic risk precipitated those thousands of deaths in Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

Oppenheimer hesitated and exchanged but the briefest of glances with Bethe. The German physicist closed his eyes and barely perceptibly moved his head from side to side.

Sandra stopped the tape. "There! Did you hear what he said?" she asked excitedly.

"Which bit exactly?" Powers asked.

"Oppenheimer's last couple of sentences about the intrinsic risk of the bomb."

"Rewind the tape and play it again."

Sandra rewound a few seconds of tape and then pressed the PLAY button. Both she and Powers leaned forward, closer to the screen, following the synchronization of Oppenheimer's lips with the barely intelligible soundtrack. They concentrated on Oppenheimer's last words.

"From the time of the Trinity test, it has been clear that the inadvertent dropping or loss of an atomic bomb is a real and quite unacceptable risk. Future generations will judge whether the intrinsic risk precipitated those thousands of deaths in Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

Again she stopped the tape. "Did you hear it that time, Richard? Did you catch his final sentence?"

"Well, it's very indistinct. But yes, I guess I did. Now would you mind telling me what's so important about this? Why are we sitting inside in the dark watching TV when we could be making love?"

"Is that all you can think about?" Sandra whispered angrily. "Look, I asked you here to listen to this tape and give me the benefit of your expert opinion on what the hell Oppenheimer is getting at!"

Sandra had a way of making Powers seem like a foolish little boy which, although he found irksome, at the same time excited him.

"*Mea culpa*," Powers said with his most innocent, wide-eyed expression.

"Yeah, OK. It's enough with Oppenheimer coming the Latin expressions without you following suit." She kissed Powers lightly on the cheek. "Now what do you make of Oppenheimer's last remark?" Sandra replayed again the end of Oppenheimer's comments. "Notice how he looks across to Bethe and Bethe sort of shakes his head very slowly," she said.

"He's presumably disagreeing with Oppenheimer," offered Powers.

"Unlikely. Oppenheimer is simply expanding the points made by Bethe. No, I think Bethe is indicating to Oppenheimer not to say anything further."

"Bethe is warning Oppenheimer? Why? About what?"

"I'm not sure exactly. There must be something in Oppenheimer's last remarks which worries Bethe. Whatever it is, Oppenheimer says nothing further. I thought maybe Oppenheimer's words might mean something to you. After all, you did work at Los Alamos at one time."

"Sure I did, but that was in the seventies, thirty years after these events," Powers laughed.

"I know that, you dumb jerk. All the same, you're the award-winning science writer and I'm just the hack investigative journalist. As you happened to be in town I figured that such an educated brain as yours might conceivably be able to pull together enough gray cells to throw some light on this." Sandra was angry again. "I thought we might be able to work together on this one. You know, pool our varied talents. And that's not an offer I make every day of the week."

"I like the idea of pooling our talents, but I'm sorry to disappoint you, kiddo. Offhand, I haven't got the foggiest notion as to what little secret Oppenheimer and Bethe are trading, if little secret there is."

"Oh, I don't *think* there's a little secret here. I *know* there's a very big one," said Sandra in an over-confident manner.

Powers was impressed by her direct gaze which never faltered. "And just how do you know this?"

"Because it was sufficient to make Henry Stimson, then former Secretary of War, draft a letter to Truman warning him of a possible breach of security, only I don't think the letter was ever sent."

"And I suppose Stimson just happened to copy you in on all this!"

"I'm sure he would have, but unfortunately he died in 1950, the same year as this broadcast and only a few days after drafting the letter."

"Where did you ...?"

"I came across it in the National Archives in Washington when I was there recently doing some research on the Truman administration after the war."

"OK. just supposing for a minute I accept all you say, how do you know this little bit of the tape was what Stimson was referring to? How do you know it's even this damn program?"

"Because in the first place Stimson mentions this damn program." Sandra's confidence slipped just fractionally but was sufficient to be detected by Powers. "Well, not exactly by name, but I'm ninety-nine percent certain this is the program. And in the second place I've been through the tape a dozen times and there's nothing else that I can remotely connect with Stimson's letter."

"Maybe it's been edited out."

"I've already considered that possibility. Take it from me, there's no break in continuity throughout the entire program which would indicate any tampering of the live broadcast."

"You're taking all this very seriously, aren't you?" was all that Powers could think of to say.

"Not to put too fine a point on it, if I read between the lines do I detect a slight degree of skepticism?" Sandra asked.

"Well, let's put it this way. As I haven't got a clue what it is Oppenheimer is referring to, if indeed he's referring to anything, and the only person to get steamed up was Henry Stimson who died after writing his letter to the President, I doubt whether even your mother could take it too seriously."

Her excitement at getting Powers along to assist her had entirely drained away and been replaced by a simple and overwhelming feeling of tiredness. "I guess it does all sound a little tenuous." said Sandra dejectedly.

Powers looked into her eyes and in the dim light could see the glisten of frustration. Is this what it had come to? Humiliating a good friend and lover. Humiliating a top-rated journalist just because he was more interested in his own sexual desires rather than listening? He moved a finger to her face and gently stroked a tear which was beginning to trickle down her cheek.

"But that's not to say that when you've explained it all to me a little more clearly I won't change my mind."

Sandra smiled and kissed Powers again, but a little more passionately. Her feeling of defeat began to clear.

"Well, I can't start whispering an explanation here. There's a time limit at a viewing console of just an hour. What say we go for a coffee and I'll start at the beginning?"

Powers looked up at the clock. "Shit! I've got a meeting at the McGraw-Hill Building in less than twenty minutes. How about dinner tonight instead?"

"Sounds great. I've got to do some further research over at the Public Library in any case."

"To do with all this?"

"Just corroboration of something in Stimson's letter. If it ties in, I'll bounce an idea off you later. At least I will if you promise to try and pretend to humor me just a little more."

Powers held up his right hand. "I promise to give you my full attention and benefit of whatever it is you want benefit of," he said solemnly.

"Just your power of deduction will do for now."

"I was thinking of nothing else," Powers indignantly feigned. "I should be through by around 6.30. I can walk over to the library. What time does it close?"

"No problem. Tuesdays it's open until 9."

"OK, I'll see you there say between 6.45 and 7. Where will you be?"

"It's probably best if I meet you inside the building at the 42nd Street entrance."

They vacated their seats and made for the exit and the elevator.

The daylight was dazzling. As they stepped out onto East 53rd Street both silently regretted leaving the cocoon of the air-conditioned building, the heat and noise of a late spring day in New York once more urging refuge in some cool and quiet place.

They kissed and Sandra headed south down Fifth Avenue. Powers made his way west towards Avenue of the Americas.

The meeting hadn't gone as well as Powers had hoped. The idea for his book had initially been well received, but when it came to discussing some of the more detailed aspects the commissioning editor had exerted insuperable pressure.

Before leaving the academic world he'd written a number of standard texts on nuclear physics, but the degree of effort was rewarded only in prestige and not dollars. Ultra-specialization coupled with very short print runs and stratospheric pricing basically meant that the only market lay with libraries.

Popular science. That was where an author could find a profitable niche. And the long days of coaxing grants out of philanthropists and others had taken its toll of Powers' enthusiasm for his work. The coaxing was increasingly taking dominance over the actual research. So he took his most decisive step and gave up the comfortable life of an academic to become a freelance science correspondent. That was two years ago and while things hadn't gone all his own way, neither had they turned out bad. He had a syndicated weekly column in a number of leading newspapers and he was regularly used by some of the smaller mid-west TV stations for commenting on scientific events, discoveries and the like. And it was true that he had won awards, but not for his career as correspondent.

But whereas he could entirely control the contents of a heavyweight scientific textbook or his newspaper reports (after all, he was once regarded as a leading expert in his held - maybe the leading expert) many of the big publishing houses were long-versed in the ways of producing large, glossy coffee-table books for the average guy in the street who still retained a passing interest in things scientific. What Powers liked to call *the whys of the world*.

The format now imposed upon him was not as Powers had envisaged. In his mind, though, he satisfied himself with the thought that commercial publishing experience would undoubtedly create the most profitable product. And that was what this was all about, wasn't it? To produce a good seller and for once make some real money to pay for the sweat. If this one sold well and they commissioned another one from him, then he'd be in a better position to screw them for a better deal. Things didn't look so bad after all.

The temperature was now more bearable, even pleasant as he walked along. At 42nd Street he crossed over to the south side and turned alongside Bryant Park, towards the most grandiose monument to monumental, turn-of-the-century wealth: the New York Public Library.

Soon he was climbing the steps to the entrance. Inside, a clock showed it was only 6.25. He detested waiting. He'd had more than his fair share for the day at the Museum. Patience was a quality which Powers had never known. Another reason for leaving academe.

As the seconds ticked away he paced up and down a number of times before deciding to look around a little. The chances of finding Sandra were small, but it would at least ease the passage of time. He checked in his briefcase at the cloakroom.

Following instructions from one of the assistants, he eventually found a room with computer terminals. He walked over to the nearest which was available and chose to search the index of titles. It wouldn't do any harm to just check that they had copies of his own books. He chose from the screen options to search by author. He entered "Powers". After only a few seconds' delay the screen began to fill with titles all written by authors of that name. Eventually they appeared. Five books by Richard S. Powers.

Suddenly, he felt self-conscious.

So, Richard, this is what you spend your time doing. Looking up your own books in the New York Public Library!

Caught in flagrante delicto.

He could feel his face flushing as he'd almost convinced himself that one of his scientific colleagues - ex-colleagues - was standing behind him. He tried hard to resist it, but he just had to

look over his shoulder. It was with a curious mixture of surprise and relief that he found himself quite alone.

He ended the search. By now it was 6.45 and Powers supposed that Sandra, wherever she was, would be heading for the entrance. He began to slowly retrace his steps, along the over-opulent marble corridors. Few people were in evidence and the only sound was the sound of his own footsteps.

He turned a corner and at last in the distance he could see light from the street flooding the spectacular interior. He wondered whether Sandra would already be waiting for him. If she was, she'd be bound to complain about his taking a trip around the building. Still, he couldn't resist taking one last gaze around the magnificent Astor Hall on the way. He couldn't tolerate waiting around, but it was OK for Sandra. That's how she'd see it. For the sake of the status quo, he hoped she wouldn't be there.

A nearby jingling of keys caught his attention as a door was locked and a security guard appeared from the gloom of an alcove. Powers smiled a perfunctory smile, provoking a gruff *How're you doin'* from the guard who then strode his way in the direction from which Powers had just arrived.

He could hear the soft squeaking of the guard's shoes on the shiny floor receding behind him. Then screams tore through the tranquility. Screams which shattered his meditative mood and penetrated his very soul, cutting at his every raw nerve.

He was aware that the hairs on the nape of his neck had become almost instantly erect as involuntarily he recalled the time when he was just nine years of age. He was returning from a local store after running an errand for his mother. *Buy yourself some candies with the change, Richie. And mind the road,* his mom had said. Across the quiet street he saw his best friend Bobby Masterson walking his dog. *Hi, Bobby,* he could remember shouting, *would you like some candy?* Without a glance in either direction his friend broke into a run. Richie looked on, horrified at the spectacle which began to manifest itself before his widening eyes. As the first syllable of his desperate cry of *Watch out ...!* began to leave his lips in a futile effort to warn Bobby of the imminent danger, the little dog made contact with the wheel of a passing truck. His memory of the occasion would indelibly recall in gruesome detail the sickening way the dog was pinned by the tire and then burst in a bloody mess, instantly killed beneath the great weight. The screech of the tires as the driver fought desperately to avoid collision with Bobby. The enormous articulated truck swerving and snaking across the road. But the leash tethering dog to owner had ensnared itself with the truck's bumper and Bobby was irrevocably dragged along. And he was screaming. Screaming so badly that it simply froze little Richie to the very spot where he stood. As the truck driver tried to regain control of his vehicle, the same wheel that still had pieces of the dog wedged deep in its tread plowed its inexorable course over Bobby. The rupturing of his lungs brought the terrifying screams and Bobby's short life to an abrupt end. Powers could never forget the inhuman sound of those screams.

Except in his mind, he'd never heard a sound like it again. Until now. He began to shiver uncontrollably.

In the marbled interior of the building it was difficult to locate any sound quickly. The intensity of the screams seemed to echo from every wall, every recess, every floor and ceiling of the old building. Powers swung his head around.

Watch out for the truck, Bobby!

The words took shape in his mind. For Christ's sake, he just had to save Bobby this time. He could hear the squeal of rubber on asphalt, but he saw only the guard he'd just passed. The guard was already looking back and raising his arm, pointing beyond and above Powers.

"Hey! Behind you!" the guard shouted as his legs began to accelerate his large frame in Powers' direction.

The dreadful screams were getting nearer as Powers turned to the sweeping marble stairway a few yards ahead, his eyes racing upwards until he identified the source.

Tumbling over and over was the figure of a woman, just a helpless outline fleetingly visible through the open guilloche of the massive railing, momentum too great to enable her to arrest her descent, her head smashing again and again against the hard edges of the stone steps. Deep red stains indicated each contact her blood-smeared head had made as gravity pulled her relentlessly and mercilessly down, her screams diminishing as her fall progressed until she eventually reached the landing at a turn near the bottom of the steps. She lay awkwardly twisted and perfectly still. Her screams continued to echo through the galleries. Or was it just in Powers' mind?

He was paralyzed. The powerful evocation of his childhood memories took him almost to breaking point. *Hi, Bobby. Would you like some candy?* Why hadn't he just kept his mouth shut? Why hadn't he seen the damn truck? The death of his best friend was all his fault and he could never bring himself to tell anyone. It was his darkest secret and it haunted him every day of his life.

"I'll get some help!" said a voice overhead.

He wiped the sweat from his face and with all his self-control looked up to the bay arches of the second floor gallery. A man was leaning over the balustrade, his sun-browned balding head contrasting sharply with the white marble curving over him, metal-framed glasses sparkling. Had Powers passed him earlier?

"See how she is," the man shouted when he saw Powers. "I'll 'phone for an ambulance," and with that, he disappeared.

The spell was broken. Powers ran quickly over to where the woman lay, blood already forming a pool by her head. As the distance between them diminished, recognition of the woman increased.

"Sandra?" he whispered to himself and then to the woman, "Sandra!"

Powers knelt down and gently lifted her right wrist. There was no pulse. Tears began to form in his eyes.

"Don't move her, sir," advised the guard. "Wait for the medics."

"She's dead," was all that Powers could say, his emotions in a state of utter disbelief. Maybe this was a dream just like those recurrent nightmares of Bobby? But why wasn't he waking up? He always woke up at the bad part.

"Do you know this lady, sir? Did you call her Sandra?" asked the guard.

There was no response from Powers.

The guard crouched beside Powers. "Is this lady with you, sir?"

"I know her," Powers eventually answered in a barely audible voice. "We'd arranged to meet here."

"I really am sorry." The guard glanced up the stairs. "She must've tripped at the top there. It's a hell of a way to fall."

Powers just stared at Sandra's body and held her hand. His overriding feeling was one of anger. He was angry that she'd been so stupid to trip. Angry that he simply watched her fall, unable to help. Angry that she was dead and he was left with the agony of having lost a dear, irreplaceable friend. And far more than just a friend.

The guard climbed a few stairs and picked up a number of papers which were neatly clipped together. He looked at them for a few moments. "These must be hers. Photocopies by the looks of them," said the guard. "Maybe you'd better take them. They ain't going to be of use to your young lady no more." With that he pushed the papers into Powers' hand. "It'd help some if you could stick around until the cops arrive."

"Sure," said Powers and he folded the papers and pushed them into his inner jacket pocket.

A few people who'd heard Sandra's screams began to appear, gathering around but unable to provide any useful assistance. The situation was beyond assistance of any kind.

"Where the hell are them medics?" The guard looked towards the entrance. "Stay here with the young lady, sir, while I go and check on the emergency call." He half walked, half ran to the information desk where he picked up a telephone.

After a few minutes he returned to Powers who was still kneeling by Sandra.

"Jesus, but services in this city just get worse by the day," complained the guard. "They deny any

knowledge of having received any call from here. That's the problem. Nobody likes to get involved."

Powers looked up the stairs. A number of faces were peering down on the scene of the accident. For all the world they reminded Powers of scavengers just waiting for the crowd to disappear before picking clean the bones. But there was no sign of the guy who'd said he'd get help.

He turned back to Sandra's lifeless body, not daring to look at her face which had taken the brunt of the fall. As he gazed down, his thoughts returned to earlier that day. How he'd enjoyed the smell of her perfume, the feel of her skin. Her beautiful face concentrating on and illuminated by ancient images on the glowing screen.

I'll get same help.

In the unpredictable, discontinuous manner of memory recall, the face of Sandra was suddenly replaced by the man at the balustrade, the guy who'd witnessed her fall. The face turned and looked squarely at Powers.

I'll get some help, repeated the face. Then it turned slowly back to gazing expressionlessly at the TV monitor. And on the screen were the silent figures of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz.

It was the same guy who'd been at the Museum. The guy who'd been watching *I Love Lucy*.

* * *

It was almost closing time before the medics and police had finished their business.

The police had offered to take Powers, numbed by Sandra's death, back to his hotel, but he told them he'd rather walk.

"Good night, sir," said the guard. "I can't tell you how sorry I am for you."

"Yeah," Powers replied and then added with a weak smile, "Thanks."

"You take care now."

Powers left the office and completed his walk towards the entrance which had been so devastatingly interrupted just two hours before. At the cloakroom he felt in his pockets for the ticket he'd been handed earlier. In all that had happened since, he couldn't remember where he'd put it. He tried each pocket in turn until his hand clutched Sandra's papers which the guard had found on the stairs. Withdrawing them from his jacket, he placed them on the counter and resumed the search for his missing ticket.

"Thank you, sir," said the woman attendant.

Before Powers could speak she'd reached for a ticket which was attached to the papers and walked away from the counter. At the same moment, Powers' fingers located a second ticket. The ticket he'd been given on entering.

The attendant returned with two bags. They were Sandra's shopping. Neither Powers nor the guard had noticed her cloakroom receipt clipped to the back of the photocopies.

"Here's another," said Powers.

Out in the street, he decided to get a cab back to his hotel.

6

The taxi drew up outside The Plaza. Powers paid the driver and emerged onto the sidewalk. He started towards the hotel steps, immersed in the turmoil of his private thoughts.

"Hey!"

Powers' heart jolted. For just a fleeting moment he was back in the library. *Hey! Behind you!* and he once more saw the guard pointing up the stairs. His eyes automatically retraced their earlier ascent, anticipating the inevitable sight of the helplessly descending Sandra, tumbling, with the life being smashed from her. If he was quick enough, maybe he could save her this time. Save Bobby this time.

"Excuse me, sir, but I think the cab driver's calling you," said the green-coated doorman, the steps of the library instantly blending with those of The Plaza. "Are you all right, sir?" The doorman observed the beads of sweat which glistened on Powers' forehead.

"What?" replied Powers.

"I thought maybe you weren't feeling too well, sir."

"Oh, yes, I'm fine. Really." But Powers realized that from now on he would be haunted with two recurrent nightmares.

"The cab you arrived in. The driver's calling you."

"I'm afraid I was miles away," Powers offered and returned to the cab.

"You left somethin' on the seat," shouted the cab driver through the barely open window.

Powers tried to shake the starkly fresh images from his mind as he pulled Sandra's shopping from the back of the taxi.

"You should be more careful, mister. Not all drivers are as honest as me."

"I'll remember that. Thanks."

As the taxi pulled away with another fare, he stood in the still and warm night air. The smell of the horses pulling the hansom cabs alongside Central Park drifted in the light breeze as he gazed across the square to the elegant Hotel Pierre and then towards the towering bland functionality of the General Motors Building. New York was full of awkward architectural contrasts, but that was its attraction. That was what they both loved.

He remembered the time, a few years before, when he and Sandra had taken a ride through Central Park in one of the horse-drawn cabs. They both lived in the City then. No way, she'd said, would she go into one of those things. They were strictly for the tourists. So he promised to buy her something from Tiffany's if she'd ride in one with him. The limit would be \$100. Without a moment's hesitation she readily agreed, *but how about Bergdorf's?*, she'd argued. He stood fast. *Tiffany's. It's more romantic.* She'd screwed up her face in pained agreement. Without a trace of guilt she afterward admitted she'd enjoyed every minute.

Later that day they walked across the square and into Tiffany's and began a systematic search for an appropriate purchase up to the agreed limit. The assistants paid no mind to their browsing. A quarter million dollar diamond bracelet here, a hundred thousand dollar watch there. And finally they found them. A tiny pair of white and yellow gold ear studs. The salesman cooed appropriately over their find and extracted the display tray from beneath the glass counter. Only \$115 plus tax.

"Does your limit include the tax?" she whispered in Powers' ear.

"I'm feeling generous. Let's suppose not." Powers whispered back.

"But, mathematically speaking, I seem to recall that one hundred fifteen normally exceeds one hundred."

"I'll owe you the fifteen dollars."

"Plus tax," added Powers.

"Of course plus tax. What kind of girl do you think I am?"

Traveling, thought Powers. just like Holly Golightly. Never settled and never likely to. Sandra Lamont, *Traveling*. He never told her that though. He always feared that one day she would

disappear from his life and never return. just like Holly left her friends, leaving a great big emptiness behind. Sandra's similarity to Capote's character was uncomfortably close, and that had always inexplicably worried him. The urge to take her shopping in Tiffany's had been irresistible, but that was his secret. One day he'd tell her and they'd laugh about it.

She was wearing the same studs at the Museum.

God, there were so many things he never told her. So many things he never dared to tell her. And now he wanted to. More than anything in the world. But why should it matter? Sandra was dead. Nothing could change that. That was why death was so difficult to cope with. Nothing, but absolutely nothing further could be said or done.

"Would you like some help with your bags, sir?"

He looked around and saw the doorman.

"No, it's OK. I can manage. Thank you," Powers replied, and picking up his briefcase and Sandra's shopping he turned to face the hotel. He knew that back in his room the events in the library would replay endlessly in his mind. He would have no control over it. There would be no way to switch it off. His brain would go into automatic, considering all angles that could be changed to ineffectually redress the course of events. If only he'd found her earlier; if only she'd not tripped; if only she'd not gone to the library; if only the guy at the top of the stairs had grabbed her; *if, if, if*... So many ifs.

He collected his key from the desk and walked slowly to the elevators. The chinking of china and hum of conversation as he passed the Palm Court provided a continuum of noise which, for a few seconds, helped divert him from his grieving.

On the sixth floor he opened the door to his room and switched on the light. He placed Sandra's shopping and his case on the floor and sat on the end of the bed with just the distant incessant sound of traffic down on the street seeping in through the windows and overcoming the silence. He felt drained. The loneliness of a hotel room in a big city was overwhelming.

Eventually he reached down towards one of Sandra's bags and fingered through its contents. Just three or four purchases she'd made earlier that day. He picked up the other bag. Along with some wrapped goods there was a pink folder which he pulled out and opened. It contained her notes and copies of letters. They were probably the letters she'd been researching, the ones she wanted to discuss. He quickly looked through each one until he found the letter to which Sandra had referred in the Museum. It was the letter from Stimson. Momentarily distracted from Sandra's death, he began to read:

DRAFT ONLY

Mr H.S. Truman,
President of the United States of America,
The White House,
Washington, DC.

October 4, 1950

Dear Mr Truman,

As a former Secretary of War under both Mr Roosevelt and yourself, I am only too aware of the potential dangers in divulging information relating to the development of atomic weaponry under the Manhattan Project which would otherwise remain classified, for all practical purposes, in perpetuity.

That the prevailing climactic conditions in 1945 precipitated the demise of Roosevelt was an incalculable blow. As with all things historic, past events cannot be changed to suit future generations, whatever the consequences. But with vigilance they can be laid

safely to rest.

Yet, at a time when development of Dr Teller's proposed super-bomb is envisaged to be a device of even more terrifying proportions, I have become increasingly aware of potential breaches in security relating to weapons development. While these may not be of a systematic nature, I feel that you would be well advised to initiate immediate steps to investigate the matter.

Indeed, less than two weeks after your official statement that the Atomic Energy Commission is to press on with the development of the super-bomb, a television broadcast discussion with Mrs Eleanor Roosevelt, Dr Oppenheimer, Dr Bethe and others contained references which, while admittedly obscure, could ultimately be seen as, at best, incautious. At worst they could be interpreted, by those so disposed, as a deliberate attempt to breach security.

The attentions of the House Un-American Activities Committee last year in investigating possible Communist infiltration at the Berkeley Radiation Laboratory at the beginning of the War were enlightening. The arrest of Fuchs by the British in January of this year was worrying enough to initiate the immediate work on Teller's bomb. Now that our country is once again involved in war and the development of small atomic weapons for use in the battlefield is well advanced, it would seem crucial that the same degree of security as enabled us to develop the first atomic bomb be maintained.

Having both been in office during the final weeks of the greatest conflict that this country of ours, and the rest of the world, has ever experienced, we both know better than any other that it is the duty of the United States of America to ensure that our technical and military superiority is never exceeded by other sovereign states.

Although I have been retired from office for some five years now, I nevertheless feel duty-bound as a US citizen of some experience in these matters to offer this advice. I trust it will be accepted in a reciprocal manner.

Sincerely yours,

Henry L. Stimson

There was a neatly penciled question mark in the margin. Alongside the second paragraph, in the left-hand margin, just one single question mark. Nothing more. No explanation.

Powers looked again through the other papers, but none was annotated and none appeared significant. But then apart from Sandra's conviction that Stimson's letter had some deep meaning, the text of the letter meant nothing to him either. The only significant feature of the letter was Sandra's question mark. At least he assumed it was Sandra's.

The telephone rang. He went over to the table, "Hello."

"Dr Powers?"

"Speaking,"

"This is reception. A Lieutenant Barringer wishes to see you regarding Miss Sandra Lamont. He wonders whether you could meet him in the lobby right away? He says it will only take a minute."

Powers sighed heavily. He'd just spent the last two hours with Barringer. What more could he tell him? "I'll be right down." He replaced the receiver.

He went into the bathroom and washed his face. He avoided looking in the mirror. He felt like he'd advanced twenty years since that afternoon and he didn't need the harsh fluorescent illumination to confirm his fears. Switching off the light, he left his room and walked over to the elevator.

On exiting he went straight to the desk, glancing around for the Lieutenant,

"My name's Powers. You just called my room to say there's a Lieutenant Barringer to see me."

"Oh, yes sir. He's right over there," said the receptionist pointing towards the gift shop.

Powers looked in the direction indicated. "I don't see him."

She frowned. "Well, he said he was going to wait outside the shop for you."

"A guy built like a whole football team is pretty difficult to miss," said Powers.

"Pardon me?" quizzed the receptionist.

"Lieutenant Barringer. He's around six foot four and must weigh in at around three hundred pounds."

She still looked as though Powers was talking to someone behind her.

He wondered whether they were speaking a common language. "You did say Lieutenant Barringer wanted to see me?"

"That's the name he gave. But I'd put him at no more than a little on the large side, and he couldn't have been more than five eight tall. And he wore gold-rimmed glasses."

He felt hit by a thunderbolt.

"Balding? Was he balding?" Powers demanded urgently.

"Why, yes. Now you mention it, he was. Do you know ..."

But Powers had already turned and started to run back to the elevators. He collided with a bellhop pushing a loaded cart, cases cascading across the floor. He didn't wait to apologize, only cursing at his loss of vital seconds as he desperately fought to regain his footing. When he reached the elevators, one was already ascending and the other two, doors gaping, had maintenance men working on them.

As his mind was on the point of deciding to make for the stairs, the single operative elevator eventually returned and the doors opened. He pushed his way in and stabbed furiously at the buttons. On the way up, it stopped at the second, third and fifth floors before he could finally disembark on the sixth. Seconds, valuable seconds were wasted. All the way he kept jabbing the *Close Doors* button.

"Other people have to use the elevator, too, you know," commented a befurred woman passenger, irritated by Powers' jumpiness, uneasy about his disheveled appearance and foul language.

"Lady, believe me this is urgent." He was shaking with rage.

"All the same, you shouldn't push ..."

"There's a killer in the hotel!" he exploded, as the doors finally opened on his floor and he sprinted down the corridor. The woman could summon no more than a dumbfounded gape.

Nearly five minutes had elapsed since he left the lobby. He plunged his room key into the lock and pushed the door open. He found exactly what he expected to see. In the short time he'd been lured downstairs Sandra's papers, his briefcase, even the photocopies she'd made at the library had all gone.

He raced back out of the room and down the corridor. In the distance he could see the down arrow extinguish and the bell rang as the single elevator arrived back at his floor. A couple were just stepping in.

"Excuse me! Hold it, please!" he shouted as the doors began to close.

As he came to a halt, the doors miraculously reopened and Powers slipped inside. "Thanks," he said breathlessly. They descended agonizingly slowly.

Powers burst from the elevator on the ground floor. A woman screamed as he gracelessly elbowed her aside and ran for the main entrance. He flung open the door and stopped at the stairs where he'd been standing only a half-hour before, his eyes scanning wildly along the sidewalk, across the plaza, from person to person, car to car. Casual walkers, window-shoppers, restaurant-goers, hookers. Then his search abruptly stopped.

A limousine was pulling away and as it did the passenger in the rear seat turned and looked back towards Powers through the lowering window. His eyes met the fury in Powers'. The man wanted to be seen. To be recognized. The light was poor, but Powers was certain.

The balding head was the same balding head that Powers had seen in front of him in the

Museum, the guy who liked watching re-runs of *I Love Lucy*, the guy who'd leaned over the balustrade in the library - the bastard who'd said he'd get some help for Sandra.

Before the car disappeared into the night, Powers was sure the guy smiled at him. A smug, self-satisfied leer. And in the shadows he thought he saw the man's hand curtly salute him. A hand which rapidly moved to the guy's forehead flicked sharply away in brief acknowledgment. A terse understanding as the dark-tinted window rose and the car accelerated away with a screech of urgent rubber.

It was that smile which most disgusted him.