



Mandate

a
Jack Riston
Novel

Mandate

a novel by

Jack Riston

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.-- That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

US Declaration of Independence - 1776

The United States shall guarantee to every State in this Union a Republican Form of Government, and shall protect each of them against Invasion; and on Application of the Legislature, or of the Executive (when the Legislature cannot be convened), against domestic Violence.

Article IV, Section 4 United States Constitution

The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.

Tenth Amendment Bill of Rights

About the Declaration there is a finality that is exceedingly restful. It is often asserted that the world has made a great deal of progress since 1776, that we have had new thoughts and new experiences which have given us a great advance over the people of that day, and that we may therefore very well discard their conclusions for something more modern. But that reasoning can not be applied to this great charter. If all men are created equal, that is final. If they are endowed with inalienable rights, that is final. If governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, that is final. No advance, no progress can be made beyond these propositions. If anyone wishes to deny their truth or their soundness, the only direction in which he can proceed historically is not forward, but backward toward the time when there was no equality, no rights of the individual, no rule of the people. Those who wish to proceed in that direction can not lay claim to progress. They are reactionary. Their ideas are not more modern, but more ancient, than those of the Revolutionary fathers...

Calvin Coolidge
30th President of The United States

MANDATE

by Jack Riston

He would have known that she came from money even if her name had not been entered on his appointment calendar, her body tall and erect, her gate telegraphing a no-nonsense style, moving with the accuracy of a rifle shot from the office door to the chair placed across from his desk, looking neither left or right but with eyes locked on his from the moment she entered the office, and without any hint of the hesitancy, awkwardness, uncertainty, fear, anger, or disgrace with which so many had entered through the door of his office, which even now was simply and discreetly lettered: Personal Investigations. She was Grace Sunderlin Dakan. He knew the name instantly...wife of the late Senator from New Mexico, Hugh Dakan and the only child of Delano "Del" Sunderlin founder and CEO of Sunderlin Electronics, easily standing to inherit millions one day, perhaps billions, her model-perfect face frequently gracing the cover of Forbes Magazine and twice on the cover of Time. Who knew what she was worth for sure? She was already on the Board of Directors of Sunderlin, as well as three other corporations and numerous charities, everyone simply assuming that she was being groomed to take over the entire Sunderlin operation as soon as "Del" Sunderlin reached the point where he had his fill of the political games that one had to play as the head of the largest electronic defense contractor in the western hemisphere. And, she was no "bimbo daddy's girl" either, bearing her own educational credentials, having earned her MBA from Stanford, with her undergrad work done at USC in Los Angeles, years before the "tax and spend" legislature in Sacramento drove her dad and many of the largest companies in California to relocate to more tax friendly states and even before Sunderlin had abandoned its 227 acre campus in Irvine, south of Los Angeles, setting up their facilities in Arroyo Seco, New Mexico, about 20 miles north of Taos and about 100 miles north of Santa Fe. The business savvy that he knew Grace possessed had obviously been passed from father to daughter, resulting in a corporate location that was not only in the perfect tax climate, but was situated among mother nature's most friendly climates as well, offering year-round recreational opportunities to the Sunderlin employees who had migrated with the corporation.

She was taller than he remembered, standing perhaps five feet ten inches on her own, although it was difficult to tell exactly in her Manolos, adding as they did, a couple of inches to her height...maybe three...putting her at least eye-level with 70 percent of the CEOs in America and taller than most. There was only a hint of hesitancy as she took her seat across from his desk, indicating that she might have at first preferred to pace and talk, doubtless as she often did in her Board meetings, speaking from a position of power rather than submission. Her blue eyes were piercing and her blond hair cascaded down to the collar of a navy jacket and textured skirt outfit that was quite obviously from the St. John Collection, and as she finally lowered herself to her chair, she demurely crossed long and elegant legs, taking a moment to sweep away either an imaginary or real strand of hair that must have momentarily tickled her perfect facial complexion. There was the merest hint of perfume that reached him. Unlike more insecure women who had sat in this very chair previously, she didn't splash it on, offering instead the personal assuredness of a faint...elegant...expensive fragrance that reminded him of a cross between honeysuckle and roses. Her grooming was perfect, but no amount of makeup could conceal that she had been crying...and recently, the slight puffiness of skin below her eyes giving some lie to the poise and carriage that must come so naturally to someone so well educated and potentially wealthy. Even though he knew her age to be approaching the half-century mark, she looked like she was 30, mostly and nearly successfully hiding the sadness that he knew must fill her present world after the recent and shocking death of her husband. No woman wanted to think that her spouse had a secret life in any case, certainly not a parallel and hidden life which the tabloids and even some of the mainstream news sources indicated had involved the caustic and career ending combination of drugs and cheap little thirteen year old, two-bit Brazilian whores of both sexes, execution-style murder and suicide. This had to be particularly painful time in her life, and behind the perfect business facade he sensed great vulnerability

and pain. This powerful woman had been hurt badly, even though education, training, wealth, and experience allowed her to hide most of it from those who either didn't know her that well, didn't know the signs to look for, or those who simply couldn't see beyond her stunning looks.

"Mr. DuPlessier, I didn't just pick your name from the Washington phone book. It was given to me by our chief corporate counsel. I believe you might know him - Jacob Kunis? You have my permission to check with him on anything we discuss. I was told that besides being quite effective at what you do, that you are discreet. I need our discussion to have the highest level of confidentiality. As you can imagine, the death of my husband has posed a serious impact on the stock price of Sunderlin and clouded the company's relationship with the US government. May I trust that our conversation will not go beyond you, me and Mr. Kunis?"

If the Private Investigator thought that she might be anything less than business-like, that image was immediately dispelled by her directness, speaking first and without even asking or waiting for permission or resorting to casual but the usually meaningless and often defensive and protective pleasantries the moment her body was firmly in the chair. "Yes, I know Jacob Kunis by reputation, mostly. We've attended a few functions together in the past, and I'm honored that he remembered me. By the way, my close friends call me 'Arlo', Mrs. Dakan. My given name is Michael, but my Mom and Dad were Depression Era children who grew up to the music of Woodie Guthrie and gave birth to me just a month after his own son, Arlo Guthrie in 1947, and they nicknamed me "Arlo" after him. It has stuck after all these years, and very few people know my real name, which even surprises me sometimes when I hear it, so I hope you'll call me 'Arlo' and drop the "Mr", please. Besides, you and I have already met, although I would hardly expect you to remember. It was a few years ago at one of Laura Bush's educational symposiums where you were giving a speech was about Sunderlin's efforts toward wiring up classrooms in America. Even though I was on the dais with you and was the opening speaker, I would hardly expect you to remember that my firm contributes heavily to the Charter School projects here in Washington, and we provided nearly a hundred thousand dollars in funds just last year to purchase computers for inner city schools in the DC metro area."

In her world, a hundred thousand dollars was a pittance, and he knew it. However, she liked him instantly and responded to his smile with her own, flashing a mouth full of perfect teeth, even though her eyes continued to flash reservations about offering her own first name in return. "Mr. Du....I mean, Arlo, thank you for your concern about the youth of the city. I assume you can understand that the circumstances surrounding my husband's death will impact not only Sunderlin but all of the many things that Sunderlin does to give back to the communities we serve."

"Impact" was not quite the word that flashed through Arlo's brain, instantly latching onto the word "crater" instead as more descriptive of the shock that Hugh Dakan's death had on Sunderlin Electronics, having watched the stock price of SEI fall well over sixty percent in the three months since Senator Dakan's demise. Impact didn't begin to tell the story. And if the public couldn't yet privately imagine what the circumstances of Senator Dakan's death were doing to Sunderlin, then the newspapers and cable news outlets were even now all too eager to paint the story in hideous and full-color detail of just what the Senator's death implied: The husband of the heir apparent of the largest military contractor in the free world, a US Senator on the Foreign Relations Committees, a Desert Storm Air Force Ace pilot, and a supposedly faithful husband of nearly thirty years allegedly had a cocaine and crystal meth habit as well as the propensity to sleep with underage boys and girls and play a little Russian Roulette at the same time, and who was depressed enough to commit both murder and suicide. After disappearing for three days, he turns up dead in a filthy little apartment on the outskirts of Rio. Yes, this just might have some "impact" on Sunderlin stock as well as the reputation of the United States, and Michael "Arlo" DuPlessier knew that more than any time in his thirty five years as one of the top paid Private Investigators in Washington, DC, that no word of this meeting could go beyond the walls of his office. "I can assure you, Mrs. Sunderlin, that everything we discuss this morning will remain just between you and me."

She sighed a breath of relief and began her story. "First, please call me Grace."

Arlo DuPlessier knew the official story: Squeaky clean US Senator from New Mexico gets to Washington and is immediately and unfortunately seduced by the availability of power, money, prestige, sex, and drugs; goes “off reservation” on his wife, finding that he can easily cover up his new-found interests and proclivities under the guise of political junkets. Nor would it be the first time that someone with incredibly decent and morality-abiding intentions had been pulled out of an exalted, nearly star-quality orbit and into the vortex of dirt and slime that inevitably surrounds politicians of nearly every stripe in every country in the world, the Italian and French politicians having decades and perhaps centuries earlier perfected the gentlemanly competition of seeing who could collect the most mistresses and most ill-gotten financial gains. No one seemed to bat an eye any longer. Ever since 1974, when Wilbur Mills, the powerful chairman of the US House Ways and Means Committee did a late night swim in the Tidal Basin with a stripper by the name of Fanne Foxe, the headlines seemed to grow smaller and dimmer with each passing incident. Sure, there was the 1987 dustup with Gary Hart and Donna Rice and more recently, the story of Virginia governor Mark Sanford and his Argentinian paramour. But either congress-folks were growing more chaste, or the stories were growing more scarce. Arlo believed it was the latter, rather than the former, and that the media reserved their greatest amount of moralistic shock and disbelief only for times when they could topple some really powerful figure from either party, scoring bonus points if the target just happened to be a Republican, and even lining up for a Peabody or Pulitzer if the story somehow led to the corridors of the Whitehouse. Arlo thought the most appropriate award was usually The Hugo, seldom seeing so much fiction sprinkled among the print and electronic pages of what had at one time been the paragons of research and truthfulness, which had been forced through competition for ratings and advertising dollars into the daily fight to be fictional best sellers.

Senator Daken certainly scored high on the media hit meter: He was the junior Republican Senator from New Mexico, a military hero whose wife was both beautiful and rich, a dashing Top-Gun fighter pilot in his own right, son-in-law of the founder of one of those evil corporations, the kind that just happened to employ nearly 150,000 people at various locations around the country...in short, a ripe target for the media. There was no more fair game than this, and the tabloid stories were brutal, painting him as a playboy going all the way back to his Senior year of high school, stories which insisted that when the young Air Force cadet was not studying at the Academy in Colorado Springs, that he somehow found time to burn up portions of Interstate 25 while making frequent runs to the University of Colorado in Boulder and Colorado State University near Fort Collins where he was “rumored” to have dated countless coeds. How he ever found time to do this and still graduate at the top of his class never seemed to be explained by the tabs, which also described the lurid details of young Dakan’s experiments with Marijuana and later with the harder substances, including cocaine. Again, the newspapers simply avoided discussing the issues of drug testing in the military, which not only predated any of the testing that is now quite common in private industry, but which were far more rigorous and complete, even conveniently forgetting to explain how an allegedly drugged up Dakan managed to have spotless flight readiness reports during his entire 20 years of service and never once admitting that none of this supposed commonly known information was brought up either in the campaign or during his first months in office. It was always left up to the reader to either fill in or ignore the blanks. There was no way that the media was going to spoil a good story with counter facts...rumored, logical, or actual.

Grace Dakan’s story was vastly different, as Arlo expected it would and should be. She related how they had met during her last year at USC, he 10 years her senior, a 1978 graduate of the Air Force Academy. At the time they met in 1986, he was attached to the Los Angeles Air Force Base in El Segundo, working with Northrop Grumman Corporation and McDonnell-Douglas as the Air Force considered purchase of the F-18 for deployment world wide. They met at a business mixer in downtown Los Angeles, where young Captain Dakan was giving a speech on the military’s economic contribution to cities throughout America.

There was no denying that he was handsome. Hugh Dakan could have come right from a Hollywood set. At 6’2” and 190 pounds, he looked every bit the quintessential fighter pilot as portrayed by Tom Cruise in the movie “Top Gun” which was released that same year. It was love at first sight, and they were married in June, just after Grace’s graduation. The next couple of years were tough on

both of them, Grace accepted into the MBA program at Stanford, moving to Palo Alto, while Hugh stayed behind in Los Angeles. In 1988, Grace completed her MBA and rejoined Hugh, who had by that time been transferred to Langley, AFB in Virginia, where he was assigned to an F-15 Eagle strike wing, and among the first to be deployed to Saudi Arabia in August of 1990, when Saddam Hussein's forces invaded Kuwait, becoming the first verified "ace" of the war just twelve days after actual combat operations began in January of 1991.

After the war, and now Major Dakan, he was reassigned to Langley, was promoted again to the rank of Lt. Colonel, and retired in 1998, at just about the same time Del Sunderlin was moving Sunderlin Electronics from the Los Angeles area to Arroyo Seco, New Mexico. After experiencing the more dense populations of east coast cities, both Hugh and Grace longed for the wide open spaces of the West, and New Mexico seemed perfect. They moved to Taos after Hugh's separation from the Air Force, where Hugh took up an Air Sciences teaching position at the University of New Mexico - Taos Campus, and Grace, to the delight of her father, began showing an interest in the corporation. It was a perfect life for both of them. Hugh eventually found an interest in politics, and when Paul Thomsen announced his retirement from Congress, Hugh ran and won his Senate seat as the new Junior Senator from New Mexico. Now, less than two years later, Hugh Dakan was dead.

"He didn't do the things that they are saying he did. I knew this man. I was married to him for 26 years. If he was into drugs or having wild sex parties, I would have known about it. We were inseparable. Well, I guess that's not entirely true. There were those two years while I was in my MBA program and the 18 months he was deployed in Saudi Arabia. Other than that, he came home every night and slept in our bed." She cried softly and dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. "He didn't do it. I know he didn't."

Arlo easily put on his most understanding face, as this was a story he had heard from countless spouses over the years, most often from the spouses of notable government officials who had somehow been caught with their pants down around their ankles, needles shoved in their arms, or coke spoons lodged up their noses. He admired the women for trying to support and stand by their men, but over the years and with the influence peddling that went on in Washington, the odds almost always meant that these same women ended up lamenting their ignorance and hating these men who had casually and repeatedly and serially cheated on them. Arlo knew that if he had even a dollar for every strenuous cry of disbelief that eventually turned into anger at "that bastard who cheated on me", that he would have easily had an additional hundred thousand dollars to contribute to educational support. Grace Dakan was different. Even if she was mistaken, she sincerely believed the story she was telling, and Arlo sensed that her defense of Hugh Dakan didn't grow out of fear for Sunderlin Electronics but a true belief that the Senator was innocent. "What makes you so sure, Grace?" The question was asked with genuine kindness. "There are so many temptations in politics, especially here in Washington, and while I realize that you knew the Senator for nearly thirty years, isn't it possible that he was able to keep his sideline interests hidden from you? Or, maybe he succumbed to the temptations, Grace. Maybe this was his first time. He was 58, so perhaps he was going through some sort of midlife crises....possible?" Arlo resisted adding that any man would have to be insane to cheat on someone as stunning as Grace Sunderlin, but stranger things had happened, and Arlo had witnessed many of them.

"There's not a chance, Arlo. When I think patriot and "true blue" and honesty, integrity, loyalty, yes, and fidelity, I think of the image of Hugh. A wife knows, after all. We can tell. Maybe it's a sixth sense or something, but we know if our man is cheating, and I would know. I knew Hugh, and he was not into drugs and he was not into underage prostitutes, or even legal age prostitutes for that matter."

Arlo leaned back in his chair and clasped his fingers behind his head. "OK, Grace. Let's say that Hugh didn't do it. What's your explanation then? I don't want to cause you pain, but I'm guessing that you've seen the same pictures I've seen: Sleazey apartment in Rio; Hugh's body, gun in his hand; two dead underage prostitutes; backs of their heads blown away; drugs everywhere; tox report showing high drug concentration in everyone's system. It certainly has the look of a drugged up game of Russian Roulette that went

bad and turned into murder-suicide. I'll admit that the forensics are spotty and that we're dealing with the filter of the Brazilian government for clear details, but wasn't an autopsy done on Hugh's body when it was returned?"

Grace began to lose composure and looked at her hands. "Yes!" It was obvious that the mere thought of Hugh's body on an autopsy table was still a visceral shock to her sensibilities and love for Hugh. "There were still powder burns on his hand, but his body had been embalmed. There was no way to verify the toxicology report. Keep in mind, however, that I knew this man for nearly thirty years. Even if he was drugged up, anyone could have put drugs into his system for one night. I just don't think he did it himself."

Arlo leaned forward in his chair. "What are you saying, Grace? Are you saying that there's foul play involved?"

"I think you can leave out the "suicide" part, Arlo. I believe that Hugh was murdered."

"But why, Grace? He was a Senator for less than two years. From the reports I've read, he kept his nose down and his pencil moving....not splashy...not flamboyant...seldom on CNN or FOX News, not even one appearance of any of the Sunday morning shows. He was just a hard working, dedicated Senator. Why would anyone murder him?"

Grace took in a deep breath. Arlo sensed that she had already been down this road with someone else, perhaps her Dad. She had come up with this idea that her husband was murdered and someone, or several other "someones", had already told her that she was just in denial; probably well intentioned people, who were merely trying in the way they knew best to help Grace get over the shock, dismay, and disbelief of losing her husband in such sudden and horrifying circumstances, and who resorted to attacking the very core substance between a husband and wife: trust. It was obvious that even more than love, Grace trusted Hugh. One could drive a wedge between couples in many ways, but driving a stake through trust was usually the hardest, which is why it's the most destructive if it succeeds. Everyone was piling on, and the newspapers were the worst, of course, their headlines easily translated to read, "You Were Stupid To Trust This Man"!

"He knew something, Arlo. Something big. I don't know what exactly, but something was troubling him, or he was on to something. He just wasn't the same for the last few days before he disappeared."

Arlo sensed a slight shift in her body posture, in the defensive way she moved her right hand over her body and clasped the elbow of her left arm her quick look upward and how she blinked away some tears. Yes, she had told this story before, all right, and she was expecting the same pail of cold water from Arlo that she had probably received from those to whom she had opened her heart. Instead, Arlo rose and walked around his desk, taking a seat in the other client chair beside her, and then speaking in the kindest voice he could muster, "What else have you got to go on, Grace?"

She smiled. Someone was finally taking her seriously, and she quickly opened her business portfolio, retrieving a large manilla envelope, which she handed to Arlo. "I've got this. Hugh had these in the middle of his desk in our home office. Of course, I never would have even looked at them if Hugh had not died, but when I was tidying up his office, I found them."

Arlo undid the clasp, sliding an 8 x 10 photo and one of those, "From The Desk Of Senator Dakan" notepad sheets from the envelope. He studied the photo for a few moments. It was very obviously an aerial shot of a large expanse of desert, and Arlo quickly recognized it as the 'boneyard' in the southwest corner of the US where the Air Force stored planes for either parts cannibalization or destruction. The photo had been taken either from the space shuttle or from a high-altitude camera and covered an area so large that Arlo couldn't judge its breadth, guessing that the area had to be measured in square miles, not acres, and revealing thousands of planes, of all shapes and sizes in the black & white photo. Everything from obsolete fighter jets to hulking transports were arranged in orderly, nose-to-nose and tail-to-tail rows, the expanse broken only by a spider web of dirt trails criss-crossing the desert floor

between and among the aircraft. It was here in the nearly moistureless expanse of the American desert that the military chose to store aircraft that were either no longer in service, or which had been damaged beyond repair, but which still had useable and salvageable parts. The photo told Arlo nothing, so he turned his attention to the note. Scrawled across the middle of the page, in capital letters, with three exclamation points behind it, and with two underlines was a single word. “CONDORS!!!”

Arlo guessed that this would have certainly been the point where well-meaning friends would have said, ‘But, this means nothing, Grace’, and where conversation would have begun to shut down. There was nothing about any death that could be put into the category of “good”, unless you could somehow throw in such names as Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Amin, Hussein, or Osama like Bin Laden, along with a few others that the world might welcome into that category; names like Adam Gadahn or Ayman al Zawahiri. Even then, as difficult as it might be to imagine, there were people in the world who looked at even those deaths as sad and without reason. So, there was no chance that Grace should have been any less saddened by the death of a husband who had all the appearances of being a good man; perhaps not a great man, but a good man nonetheless. There was nothing about Hugh Dakan’s death that fell into a “good” category. Grace had loved him intensely, and she had every reason to want to clear his name, not only to clear the Senator’s legacy, but it was just good business sense, too. On top of all of that, of course, clearing her husband’s name would be a vindication for Grace, too, as no one wants to feel as though they have been taken for a fool. If Hugh Dakan was all the things that the press said he was, then Grace had to question her own instincts and beliefs. If all the accusations about Hugh Dakan were true, then it would mean that she was fooled and taken advantage of for the majority of her life, a personal assault on core foundations and beliefs that few could withstand. Arlo glanced at the picture again and admitted the sad truth of the picture and note, that at first glance communicated that there was nothing here. Nothing in the picture, and certainly nothing in the word “CONDORS!!!” said, ‘...your husband was murdered’. Grace was a smart woman, with a great business sense. Even in her grief, she had to know these things. Arlo was patient. “Do you have anything else to go on, Grace. These are not speaking to me yet.”

“They meant nothing to me, either...at first, that is. I found them two weeks after Hugh was buried. It was just too difficult to go into his office before then. I just kept them aside until now, because these were the last things that Hugh was working on before he disappeared. There might not be any connection, but there was something troubling him in that last couple of days. Oh, I know he had an unquenchable interest in airplanes, and I also know that as a Senator he was privy to classified material, stuff he never told me about. But, the evening before he left Washington for the final time, he got a phone call at around 8:00 PM.”

“Any idea who called him?”

“None at all. I only knew because I heard him raise his voice inside his office. The call lasted about five minutes, but he was clearly agitated afterwards. I asked him who the call had been from, but he told me it was nothing to worry about...just Senate stuff...confirmations and bills, along with the unadorned pressure to vote this way or the other. We went to bed shortly afterwards, and he slept throughout the night. In the morning, he packed a small carry-on bag and told me that he was flying out to Davis-Monthan Air Base in Arizona for the day. That’s where the picture comes from. That’s where they have the Air Force’s plane storage area.. He told me he would be home the following day. And, well...you know the rest of the story, I guess.”

“Have you told anyone else about this?”

“Well, as you must have already surmised, there’s not much connection that’s readily apparent. I mentioned the phone call to the police, but found the picture and note afterwards, and I haven’t called the police back, since Hugh died in Brazil, and there is still an investigation going on...of sorts. Nothing has come of the investigation, however, and I can’t find any connection between the phone call and Hugh’s death. The police seem to be taking the story from the Brazilian authorities as fact, but the circumstances of his disappearance and death are odd to me. Of course, the press has picked up on this too, but they paint it as nothing more than a

cheating husband's cover story while he goes off to play diddle with some prostitutes. They are portraying him as nothing more than a pedophile."

"So, is it your frustration with the police investigation that has brought you to me?"

"It's partly that. I just chalked it all up to either lack of police interest or stonewalling by the Brazilian government, and had just about resigned myself to never having any full closure on this, Arlo. I'm sure my friends think I've gone over the edge, but I knew Hugh like no other human knew him. I just want to clear his good name, and I was going about it in my own way until something else happened."

"There's something else?"

"Yes, there is. I have seen the pictures you mentioned, the ones taken in the Rio apartment, and there's something you should know about Hugh. He was left handed.." Then, in a voice that said she didn't yet think that Arlo was convinced that he should take her case, she also said, "...and I think someone is following me!"

“No, I don’t think you could classify her as a paranoid. Still in shock? Yes. Under a great deal of stress? Most certainly.” The voice on the other end of the phone was Jacob Kunis, senior partner at Kunis & Dowd, probably the largest, but certainly the most prominent law firm in all of Washington, their list of corporate clients looking more or less like a photo copy of the Fortune 500. There were reportedly over 900 partners in the firm, and Arlo didn’t doubt it for a moment. With offices sprinkled among the major US cities and a half dozen foreign capitals, Kunis & Dowd occupied a large footprint in the corporate world. “We’re not even certain that she is being followed yet. Her driver was the one to notice what appeared to be the same dark gray sedan on a number of consecutive days. Under the circumstances, we felt that it was prudent to investigate this, but as discreetly as possible.”

Arlo made notes on a legal pad as he continued the conversation. “I appreciate the recommendation, Jacob. Do you think her life is threatened?”

“I can’t say that we have any belief that it is, Arlo, but we’re just not willing to take any chances at this point. Sunderlin is one of our top five clients, and Del Sunderlin is not getting any younger. It’s no secret that Grace will probably step into his shoes when he retires. As a precaution, we’ve recommended that Del’s daily driver be upgraded to CCW permit status, even though it’s only a fifteen minute drive from their home in Taos to the campus in Arroyo Seco, and we’ve made the same recommendation for Grace’s driver, even though Taos is hardly at the center of world crime.”

Having a driver with a “carry concealed weapon” gun permit seemed, at first, a little over the top at first, possibly indicating that there more here than met the eye? “Have there been any threats against Del?”

“None at all, and there haven’t been any direct threats against the company, either. As you can imagine, Congress is snooping around for a full investigation regarding Senator Dakan’s death. Sunderlin stock is at a six year low, but there have been no threats...well, other than the daily kook calls that any company receives...nothing against Del, Grace, or any other Sunderlin employee. We’re simply suggesting what we think is the prudent course, given the situation. We appreciate your discretion, Arlo. There’s just no need to involve the police further, at this point.”

“I take it that you’ve seen the photo and the note?”

There was an audible sigh at the other end of the line. Jacob had obviously seen it, but didn’t know what to make of it either. “Pretty thin stuff, Arlo. The photo is not unlike thousands that are available on the internet. Hugh was an ex-pilot, and he might have been looking for one of his old F-15s for all we know. The word CONDORS could have just been doodling, although God knows that the boneyard is probably full of dead critters and occasional Condors too. We don’t know what it means, although I don’t think it adds up to any murder plot. We’re just being careful.”

“That’s prudent, Jacob. I’m in agreement. I can’t smell anything yet, either. But I guess you already know that besides being gorgeous, Grace has her dad’s business sense. She’s got wind of something. Do you think it’s worth a trip out to Davis-Monthan to poke around?”

“That’s difficult for me to say, Arlo. I’m guessing that all you’ll find is Gila Monsters and Rattlesnakes, but if you decide to go, do it now while we’re in the winter months. If you wait until summer, you’ll get to experience some balmy 120 degree days, you know? Stay out in the sun too long, and you might get to meet some Condors up close and personal.”

Arlo had never experienced the desert heat, but he had grown up digesting stories about 20-mule teams, Cochise and the Apache Indians, John Wayne, and the rest of the Hollywood Western genre. He’d never been to Tucson, but his imagination could just

visualize miles and miles of nothing but miles and miles, with airplanes baking in the summer sun. “If I do make a run out there, it wouldn’t hurt if I flew into Taos for a day and have a sit-down with Del Sunderlin, either. Fathers-in-Law often have a “take” on the men their daughters marry. Maybe he’s got a different slant on Hugh than anyone else has. Can you clear the path on that for me? I’ll keep you in the loop. Grace gave her permission.”

“Yes, I know she did, and I appreciate you letting me know what’s going on. If there are icebergs ahead for Sunderlin, then we certainly want to have all of our ducks in a row. I’ll call Del first thing on Monday and let him know that you will be visiting him.”

The call was ended with the usual professional pleasantries, and Arlo leaned back in his office chair, staring first at the photo of the boneyard, then at the hideous picture of the two little prostitutes draped over the body of the late Senator, and lastly at the word CONDORS. Contrary to what Jacob Kunis had said, this wasn't mere doodling. There was too much emphasis in the handwriting; the underlining; the three exclamation points; the force of the pencil strokes themselves. One thing Arlo guessed for certain; somewhere there were some vultures gathering, and not necessarily of the feathered variety.

There was a saying in police and private investigative work, made famous in the movie, “All The President's Men”, when the Deep Throat character said, “Just follow the money!” Arlo lived by this rule. Where there was money, there was almost always a motive, and there was huge money in what was turning into the Sunderlin saga. Billions had already been lost in investor value due to the stock price decline. If it turned out that Hugh Dakan was as bad as the newspapers painted him, then billions more might go down the drain. Ultimately, if the US Government decided to cut all ties with Sunderlin, it might bankrupt the company entirely. Arlo knew also that clearing Hugh Dakan’s name and, by association, Sunderlin Electronics, would cause the stock to soar, making millions for anyone picking the stock up at the current discounted prices. Meanwhile, the “shorts”, those betting that the stock price would go lower still, stood to make millions more if the story continued to fester, became more sordid, involved more company personnel, and perhaps led to Del Sunderlin’s office door. There were some titanic forces working, of this Arlo had no doubt, cognizant that millions – perhaps billions – in profits meant that lives coming between those forces and those billions were one simple thing – expendable.

Arlo rolled some of the facts he already knew and some disclosed by his meeting with Grace over in his mind, remembering first that Dakan was ten years older than Grace, perhaps going through some common mid-life crises or some physical condition. Was she jealous? The scorned wife? Had she found a younger man? Arlo could think of numerous cases in the past where the spouse who stood to inherit a fortune had done away with the other spouse in order to avoid sharing the money. High profile divorces were messy and usually reduced a fortune by nearly seventy five percent: half split between the warring spouses, and the other half split between the two law firms involved. Another possible motive lead to Del Sunderlin. His company had started out as a small electronics shop in the bowels of south Los Angeles, and he was rumored to have personally known Jack Northop, Donald Douglas, and William Boeing. The stories were probably part myth and part truth, but the fact was that Sunderlin’s firm won early contracts from all three manufacturers for wiring harnesses in some of the early airliners and many of the most famous fighter planes of the 20th century, leading to fifty years of sustained commercial and military contracts which made Sunderlin Electronics into a multi-billion dollar firm, far removed from its humble five-person beginnings in the period just after World War II. Del Sunderlin was a member of the Forbes 400 and had a personal worth somewhere north of \$50 billion. Was it even remotely possible that indiscretions by Dakan had created a gulf between the two? Then, there were Hugh Dakan’s Senate duties. He wasn’t on the Defense Procurement Committee, since the conflict of interest would have been far too obvious. However, his vote still counted in major defense funding bills. Was there an issue there? As so often happened in the Senate, even a single vote often made the difference in a bill’s passage. Had Dakan suddenly threatened to derail a major defense contract that would have benefited Sunderlin? There were so many possibilities, including the possibility that Arlo, as a very high-profile investigator, was being called in to provide whitewash to a seemly family mess?

Saturday's were Arlo's favorite day, as they are for most of us, giving him a chance to grab Barrons, the Saturday Wall Street Journal, The Post, and The Times and read them all from cover to cover, while his wife slept in and enjoyed the luxury of not having to hit the deck for this meeting or that. Over the years, it had frequently amazed him how much a story over the weekend foreshadowed a conversation during the following week, since many of his clients, or clients to be, were the subject of stories just breaking in the nation's newspapers. However, on this particular morning, "The Blues Brothers", Arlo's two cats, were insistent that feeding time be honored. "Amadeus" and "Dylan" were Tonkinese, not Russian Blues, but with their cool bluish-gray points, and their lighter, almost white bodies, the breeders classified them as "Blues" for the consuming public. They looked like Siamese in coloration, but with softer and rounder heads, not as pointy as Siamese, not nearly as cranky or demanding in their demeanor, more loving and affectionate overall, and far more curious and playful than Siamese. Their meow was softer also, rarely causing a neighbor to assume that a small child was being strangled inside the DuPlessier house. Actually, most owners reported their "meow" as more like an attempt to "talk", seldom sounding exactly like a cat is supposed to sound, but rather as an attempt to communicate with their "humans". Nor did they seem to have the destructive mindset of Siamese. The family drapes and furniture had so far survived the six years since "the kids" had been adopted from a breeder out in Silver Springs. Arlo loved the two "boys" and had hand-picked them from the same litter at birth. His mom and dad were certainly right to have nicknamed him Arlo, because he loved music as much as his namesake, leading to the names of his two Tonks. His tastes were far more eclectic, however, and when the two "Tonk Boys" came into his life, Arlo named them for artists from two rather extremes of the music world; "Amadeus", after Mozart, of course, and "Dylan", after Bob Dylan. The Tonks, being typical cats, really didn't care what they were called and seldom responded to any name, preferring to concentrate on the importances of life, such as food. They might be out of sight for hours at a time, but if anyone rattled a feeding dish, then they appeared instantly from some sleep-world where they spent the hours between meals and from which they raced to see who could be first to nuzzle the legs of the human who happened to be operating the can opener. This morning, they were not observing the posted feeding hours, however, twining themselves instead between and around Arlo's legs and insistently jumping into the middle of the newspapers Arlo attempted vainly to read, clearly indicating that they were hungry, and just as clearly indicating that they cared not a whit for Arlo's typical Saturday fare. Arlo decided that reading the newspaper was a lost cause, and as he prepared to feed "the boys", he flipped on the TV and punched in the CBN news channel numbers on the remote.

Arlo nearly dropped a cat dish when the screen brightened. How did they know this stuff? There on the screen, in a split image, was a picture of the boneyard in Arizona in one half, and a picture of Senator Hugh Dakan in the other half, while the anchor was interviewing someone whom Arlo didn't recognize, the byline below his name identifying him as a spokesman from one of the millions of on-line blogs. Arlo knew from experience that about eighty percent of the stuff in the online blog world was simply made up, but the American public didn't. He picked up the story mid-stream.

"...the unfortunate and untimely death of Senator Hugh Dakan, which still hangs under a cloud of unusualness, to say the least. CBN contributor, Axel Wintford, editor and founder of poli-talk dot com has been following the story of Senator Dakan's travels immediately before being found dead outside of Rio just over three months ago. Axel, are we any closer to solving the reason for the Senator's disappearance and ultimate end in Rio?"

"Frank, it's still a total mystery. No one seems to know what Republican Senator Dakan was doing in Brazil, and there's still the questionable connection between Dakan and the Air Force's aircraft disposal yard at Davis-Monthan, out in Arizona. I think you have that picture up now, don't you?"

“Yes, you can’t see it, but we have it split screen with you. Our viewers should know that the Air Force stores planes at Davis-Monthan that are no longer flyable, but which still contain parts and assemblies that can be cannibalized for planes that are operational.

“Yes, and many of those operational planes are flown by nations that are very unfriendly to the United States, some of them in South America, many of them in the mid-east. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that spare parts from this storage area might be worth millions on the black market.”

“Then, are you suggesting that the late Senator Dakan was involved in a “parts for money” deal?”

“What we’re saying, Frank, is that there appears to be some connection between Brazil, Dakan, Davis-Monthan Air Base, oh, and by the way, I guess no one has to mention that scrap metal prices are through the roof in the past few years. If you could somehow haul away the carcass of an old transport plane, for instance, you might become a millionaire overnight.”

“Senator Dakan was married to the daughter and heir-apparent to Del Sunderlin, founder, Chairman, and CEO of Sunderlin Electronics, our nation’s largest defense contractor. Do you see a connection there?”

“What we know for certain, Frank, is that fruit seldom falls far from the tree.”

“Alex, we know you’ll stay on top of this story and bring any further updates to our viewers. In other news this morning...”

Arlo punched the remote, and the TV went black. It all reminded him of the Sarah Palin coverage during the 2008 presidential election. Speculation and innuendo was put front and center to masquerade as “news” and “fact”. The truth was that the only factual elements of the story so far were that Daken had died, in Brazil, and that Del Sunderlin had a large company and a child, while the rest of it was just fluff and suggestion. Even if it was true, there were no facts presented in the interview to back it up, making it no different than backyard gossip. The sad truth was that in the age of MTV and with lack of time to analyze news stories, not to mention little training in critical thinking skills, many would simply accept the conversation that Arlo had just witnessed as “fact”. During the next 48 hours of the news cycle, the story would be picked up, massaged, rebroadcast, tweeted, and morphed into “absolute truth” that would make the Monday morning headlines for the entire world to see. If it was true, then it was devastating. But, if it was false, then it was nothing short of a political hit job. More than ever, Arlo knew it was time to start doing a little snooping down the money trail. “The Boys” would have to spend a few days under the care of “mom”, because “dad” had to go have a conversation with the Sunderlins and then go see if there were any skeletons hanging around the “boneyard” in Tucson.

The Following Monday

Because of the time difference, it was almost noon before Jacob Kunis confirmed an appointment with Del Sunderlin for the following week, confirming that Arlo would meet the elder Sunderlin at the corporate offices in Arroyo Seco on the following Thursday, and Sunderlin would make the entire day available for Arlo. As soon as the appointment with the elder Sunderlin was set, it was time to turn to transportation. Arlo picked up the phone and punched in a number from memory.

“Netshare Jet Services. This is Sonya. May I help you?”

“Sonya, it’s Arlo DuPlessier. Can I get a few hours of jet time next Monday?”

A moment of checking and page flipping followed. “We have a Citation III that would be available for all of next week. How many will be traveling?”

“Just me, and I will probably need it for the entire week.”

“One of the captains can start flight plans immediately, Mr. DuPlessier. Where are you headed?”

“Direct Tucson, then direct Taos, then home.”

“Oh, Taos. How nice! Are you skiing or purchasing art?”

“Well, neither, really. But, I am hopeful that a...er...clear picture will develop from this trip. Is a 9:00 AM departure possible?”

“The flight crew will be ready for you on Monday. Just a reminder, though, to be here at least thirty minutes prior to scheduled departure.”

Getting to Tucson was the easy part, which Arlo knew already. However, he also knew that civilians couldn't just walk up to the base entrance, knock on the gate, announce that they were doing a little private investigation work about a Senator that might involve the theft of government surplus equipment, and expect to be greeted with open arms. He could certainly be assured of taking some public tour, and he might even get a glimpse of one or two mothballed planes. That wasn't what Arlo wanted. He needed to get closer to whatever Senator Dakan had discovered in that photograph, to get "boots-on-the-ground" so to speak. For that sort of personal tour, Arlo needed to turn to someone who could cut through the red tape, cut through security, cut through the delays that were created to slow down any request for information, cut through the crap and the military BS in other words. Arlo picked up the phone and called one of the most powerful men in the US military-industrial complex.

His call to the Pentagon phone number was answered on the third ring, and a familiar voice barked into the mouthpiece. It had the sound that one hears when ice is tossed into a whirling blender...raspy, gravelly, like bits and pieces of metal and rock had suddenly met up inside a concrete mixing machine. It was a voice that sounded irritated and would have told anyone that they had interrupted something important...important enough that they had better get down to business and not waste a second of time. "General George S. Patton's Office".

"You've got your caller ID working today, I see" Arlo laughed and could hear complimentary snorts coming from the other end of the line. He hadn't talked to George in months. However, like many old friends, their conversations seemed to take up right where they had left off previously, as if they had only chatted the day before.

"Hey, how are you, Bro? Oh, hell, Arlo...sometimes it's fun to just scare the crap out of young shavetails. To this day, it's just a never ending source of joy and wonderment to see some young lieutenant stumble in here for the first time and see 'George S. Patton' on the name plate. They try to keep their eyes locked onto mine, but I see them snatch quick glances around the room to see if they are on candid camera, or being punked somehow. After the stuff they pull on them at the academy, they probably think that this is just a continuing part of the testing."

"You are an evil, conniving man, George...and, I'm just proud to call you 'friend'." Arlo leaned back in his chair and could visualize the six foot, reed thin frame of the Chief Master Sergeant sitting in the middle of his Pentagon office, papers loosely piled and askew on his desk, tie loosened, the top button of his uniform shirt unbuttoned, frequently shoeless, and even General Officers reluctant to call him on the carpet for his lack of dress standards. "Ever made a mistake and found some Line Officer on the other end of the connection?"

"No, but I also wouldn't give a good damn! Hell, I'll tell you what, Arlo, even SecDef doesn't know quite what to make of me, and I see him almost every day, but do I care? I'm in the B-ring, as you probably recall, just down Anzio Corridor from the Secretary of Defense. By the time visiting brass has made their way from the E-ring all the way to SecDef's office, they are properly awed and all jelly-legged. We start 'em off easy-like, pass 'em by all the hotties and civilians out on the E-ring. Then, we march 'em through the corridors and let them see enough military brass to let them know that they aren't God's gift to the officer ranks. Ever once in a while we get some hot-shot Colonel or some one-star in here, and by the time they get within a hundred yards of my office, they've seen more eagles or stars than Carter's has pills. When I get hold of 'em, they are sort of mellow and moldable...all docile and squishy, just the way I like them. The ones that are still a bit irascible get one look at the nameplate and go all school-girl on me, legs wobblin and all. Hell, I've seen brand new 4-stars nearly piss their pants when they finally get all the way down to my part of this barn." George let go with a hearty laugh that must have echoed the sound of his famous great-grandfather's. "When I get my 30 years in, I'm thinking of paying the government just to let me come in each day and sit behind my nameplate. The look of bewilderment is worth the price of admission all by itself."

Although Arlo had only visited the Pentagon on a couple of occasions, it wasn't easy to dismiss the memory of the maze of hallways and connecting corridors. For the uninitiated, it was a truly daunting experience. George was correct, too. The outer ring of the Pentagon, the E-ring, was where a great portion of the secretarial pool was stationed, along with civilian contractor offices, print shops, and other miscellaneous and lesser important offices, as well as storage. Except for the Marine and civilian contractor guards at the entrances, the first military personnel were not often encountered until one reached the D-ring, at least. From there to the innermost, or A-ring, could be a half-day affair without a map or a guide. Arlo had never quite figured it all out, and he wondered how George managed to keep the endless list of Pentagon floors, rings, corridors, and wedges all straight. By the time a visitor reached the A-ring, they were properly mesmerized and often befuddled by the immensity of this seat of power, for while it was certainly true that the president was the most powerful man in the world, much of that power flowed through the halls of the Pentagon for execution. It was here, through appropriate authorization of course, that a designated Officer of the United States government

could press a button and vaporize a city on the other side of the planet. If the building's intricacy didn't awe the visitor, what could happen here, would.

As George brought the conversation back to the moment, he asked, "So what's happening in the 007 world, Arlo?" For all his laughter and irreverence, he had a keen wit and insight, and Arlo knew that it wasn't George's famous name that had kept him at the Pentagon for over twenty years. George was intuitive and was known for his ability to cut through the clutter, BS, and political correctness and niceties to get to the heart of the matter, neither awed by or particularly deferential to Officers from any branch of the service, and just as likely to dress down an Admiral as some unlucky young Private. After more than twenty years in the service, there was little that George had not seen, and very little fazed him. If levers could be pulled, George could pull them. "What are you onto this time?"

"Well, I'm just a PI, you know, not one of your black-hat, special ops guys. And, while I carry a nine millimeter, I'm afraid I don't carry a license to kill. Although I guess I know enough tricks that if you tangled with me, you might wish I would go ahead and shoot you." They both laughed. "No, nothing quite that exciting, at least not yet. It's the Senator Dakan incident."

"I thought that was...er...put to bed. No pun intended. Open and shut, isn't it? Senator gets the smell of money, or something else up his nose, goes off the reservation on his bride, although God knows why he would do that with a hottie like Grace Dakan waiting at home, starts doing a couple of teen prosties in Rio, and the next thing you know, he gets himself very dead. Suicide, wasn't it?"

"Well, Grace Dakan doesn't seem to think so."

"You met her? In person? And you're still able to stand? You are the man, Arlo."

"I have to admit. She's pretty hot."

"Hot? I saw her about two years ago, some event just after the late Senator had come to town. She had grown men crying in the corners by the time the evening was over. I'll bet the crises phone lines haven't been the same since. 'Hot' doesn't even come close. So who blew open the Senator's head if he didn't do it himself?"

"Not a clue, George. Well, that's not true. I do have one clue, but it seems to be one hell of a long shot, and I'm not even sure it was anything more than what you described. It's a puzzle."

"Just my specialty. What have you got?"

"It's probably nothing, but on the night he disappeared, Hugh Dakan left a picture of the bone yard on his office desk."

"Bone yard? As in Tucson? Davis-Monthan?"

"One and the same! Been there?"

"Not me!" George's response was instant. "I don't do rattlers very well. I've eaten a few at survival school when I was a hell of a lot younger and far more stupid, but I don't go out of my way to mess with them, and the bone yard is full of 'em. So, why a picture of the bone yard?"

"I don't know what it means yet, George. It may not mean anything. Right out of the gate, though, is there any chance that someone could be smuggling parts out of D-M and selling them on the black market?"

"You think Dakan was skimming parts?"

"I'm not sure what to think. If not that, then is it possible he discovered someone else selling parts to some unfriendlies?"

"Not likely, Arlo. AMARC has that place buttoned up as tight as a tick on a mule's ass. There's probably five zillion dollars worth of parts there...maybe ten zillion dollars worth to the right, or perhaps I should say the 'wrong' parties. DOD controls all the cannibalization, and you really don't ever want to mess with those guys. No, AMARC is a secure installation, and the control is top notch."

"Well, that's my thought, too, George. Plenty of bad guys would pay lots of dinars to resupply governments that are still flying F-15s and 16s. Money has a way of turning people's heads, and perhaps the late Senator found a way to put a little spending money in his pockets."

“Perhaps, Arlo, but isn’t Grace Dakan worth billions in her own right someday?”

“Yup, and there’s part of the rub. Why go get dirty and steal money when there’s a ton of it coming after ‘daddy’ leaves the scene?”

“Unless things aren’t so heavenly at home?” George had put his finger on the question that was still lurking in the back of Arlo’s mind. Was there something in that relationship that had not yet bubbled to the surface?”

“I’m not sure, George. The tears I saw certainly looked real enough. The words were right. The body language didn’t say anything but grieving widow. Grace is one hell of a business woman, however, and her intuition is flashing ‘setup’, I guess. In the meantime, I’m going to fly out to Taos and talk with Del Sunderlin. As long as I’m that close, I was thinking that a trip to the bone yard might dredge up something. Might as well make that trip in the winter months.”

“Yeah, well winter is on a Thursday this year in Tucson. And don’t bother taking a jacket. I’m guessing that you are looking for a private tour?”

“You read my mind, Amigo. I’m sure the public tours are well scripted and sanitized. I need to get down to where the tarantulas meet the road, and I won’t be able to do that on some cute little tour bus. Yeah, can you get me behind the scenes?”

There was a momentary pause in the conversation and Arlo could hear the clicking of a computer keyboard as George obviously searched for something. “Done. The base information officer is Capt Anthony Mattice. I feel quite confident that he will want to show you all the intimate little details of D-M. He owes me big-time.”

“You must have used your substantial skills to keep him out of the Mideast conflicts or something.”

“Well, I kept him out of a war, all right, but not the ones in Iraq or Afghanistan.”

Arlo was curious more than having a need to know, and pressed further. “Oh, and how so?”

“Seems the good Captain had a little taste for the local Senoritas. Notice I used the plural? The Captain got himself caught between two of them about three years back. When they found out about each other, a couple of nasty hombre brothers called on our Captain Mattice, then just a 1st Lieutenant, and threatened to permanently separate him from his silver bars...and his cajones, if he didn’t make it right with the ladies. Oh, and did I mention that Captain Mattice had a wife back in Boston at the time?”

“That sounds like a pretty nasty situation. So, how did you get involved?”

“I got a call from the Base Commander, asking for some help and direction. So, I looked into the matter and found out that one of the ladies was undocumented.”

“So, you had her rounded up and deported?”

“Not a chance. Let’s just say that through my concerted help, she was shown a quick path to citizenship that no one else is likely to find in our lifetimes...one that included her entire family, a large suitcase of money, and a small house on the north end of Tucson. That convinced her to look for greener pastures.”

“And the other one?”

“Legal Secretary, Durbin and Plough, PLC, right there in Tucson.”

“Wow, I’m surprised...legal secretary skills. Impressive for an immigrant.”

“Oh, I didn’t say anything about legal secretary skills. Arlo. But, she did have impressive skills at handling...er...briefs, if you get my drift. Let’s just say she gives good enchilada. Can’t type worth a damn, but makes it up in looks. And, with a salary of \$90,000 a year, she won’t be making noises any time soon.”

Arlo was impressed and said as much. “You are a man of considerable and varied skills, George.”

“Well, the difficult we do today. The impossible takes a little longer. It also pays to know attorneys who depend on the largess of the US government for their annual payroll. The payoff is that people are happy to cooperate with you later when they realize that you saved their careers and their ass, or contributed to their bottom line. Know what I mean? So, I think Captain Mattice will be overjoyed to see you arrive and will gladly give you as much of his time as you need. In fact, I can personally guarantee it.”

“You sound pretty certain, George.”

George's voice slipped into his best imitation of Marlon Brando's character in 'The Godfather'. “Perhaps some time in the future, and I don't know when that time might be, I may come and ask a favor of you...”

Arlo grinned. “You keeping score on me too, Pal?”

More laughter. “Arlo, you have no idea how long your tab is with me!”

“So, how are things for you there in foggy bottom, George?”

“Officially, it's across the river from us, Arlo, but if you are referring to the bureaucratic fog that rolls in from Capitol Hill, you know we are up our necks in it all the time, although it looks like it will get a bit worse under the Schroder administration than even under Obama. We thought Obama was a defense spending cutter, but Schroder seems to have rolled into town with a full keg of powder. My view is that administrations come and administrations go. The pendulum swings right and then left. This too shall pass.”

George's reference to the landslide victory by Ernest Schroder in the previous presidential election cycle echoed some of the same stories Arlo was seeing daily in the Washington newspapers. After the incredible run-up in deficits under Obama, the public was in no mood for more spending, signaling their willingness to pay increased taxes, and echoing the calls for changes in entitlement programs, especially the big two - Medicare and Social Security. But, Schroder turned out to be no centrist deficit hawk, either. On the contrary, Obama had been handed his hat after a single term, and the public had pulled the lever for Schroder, an electric and charismatic Attorney General from Pennsylvania. Although he was a Dem, Schroder presented himself as a centrist, strong on defense, dedicated to cleaning up the budget mess in Washington, a believer in the job-creating power of the private sector and business, and focused on getting America back on the track that was inspired by the founders. It was a welcome message, and his popular vote had approached nearly 70 percent. Only a handful of southern states went for the opposing candidate in the general election. Even the electoral vote had been lopsided, with Schroder receiving around 85 percent in the Electoral College. However, after only a bit over twelve months in office, it was pretty clear that the only “cutting” that Schroder was interested in was defense. There was no decrease in entitlement spending of any kind, and where Schroder had promised to begin a rollback of the Obama health care plan, the program was immediately expanded to cover families with up to \$100,000 in income. The “so-called” Bush tax cuts were reimplemented as a bone thrown to the Right, but only for those earning \$50,000 a year or less. His popularity was very high, still above 60 percent even after twelve months in office. When President Schroder spoke about the need to curtail defense spending, it was never paired up with the increases in entitlement spending. Rather, it was always presented under the umbrella of America's need to lower its militaristic profile in the world. After two centuries of expansionism, America would not retreat to isolationism, but would recognize that our message, form of government, democratic way of life, and culture, while preferable for us, could not be projected onto any other country. It was music to the ears of the Left, and much of the Center. And, it was also something that could and did have significant impact on a company like Sunderlin Electronics, the nation's premier defense contractor, something that had not escaped Arlo's attention and concern. With a mandate like the one that had been handed to Schroder, even a company the size and scope of Sunderlin might be roadkill in the budget battles looming in Washington.

“Sure must keep life interesting, George!”

“In spades, Arlo. When are you going to be at D-M?”

“I'm flying out next Monday morning. My week is blanked out to handle Tucson and Taos. Let's say Monday afternoon, and all of Tuesday and Wednesday. I'll plan of heading to Taos on Wednesday afternoon. Does that work?”

“Sure! I'll let Captain Mattice know that his calendar has just been cleared for three days, and he will be waiting for you at Tucson International.”

“What if he has plans already?”

“He doesn't any more, Arlo.”

The call ended with the perfunctory pleasantries to respective wives, and Arlo leaned back in his chair, once again amazed at what had just transpired. A Chief Master Sergeant, without even calling to verify, without any other authorization, cleared the calendar of an Air Force Captain on the other side of the country, arranged for three days of his time to entertain the whims of a civilian Private Investigator, on government property, at government expense, to investigate some nebulous clue about a dead US Senator. It was amazing, and, if George said it was a done deal, then Arlo knew from experience that he could count on it. It wasn't just puff and bravado on George's part either, although the man had plenty of those characteristics.

It had almost always been this way between the two of them...almost from the evening they first met. It was at the Fabriletto Foundation's annual casino night and masquerade ball in 1995, right at the height of the Clinton years, when Washington, the markets, and America were at their high points...when the cold war was supposedly over...when Al Queda and Bin Laden were mere footnotes on some CIA report at Langley. It was a grand party, as Arlo remembered. Although a little short to pull it off convincingly, Arlo had dressed as Abraham Lincoln, complete with stovepipe hat. George entered the party in full Patton regalia: the polished helmet emblazoned with four silver stars, the rank the original Patton had achieved in April of 1945, just before his death; the riding britches and crop; the Ike-styled jacket; the nearly knee-high leather boots; even the ivory-handled six-shooters holstered on his hips. It was convincing, and the ladies seemed to buzz around his 6' 2" frame. It was nearly an hour later that they met up near the bar.

"I think my Great-Great-Grandfather might have known you, Mr. President."

"Really, and how so, General?"

"Colonel George S. Patton, Virginia Regulars, fought under the command of General Jubal Early, killed in the Battle of Opequon. No, wait a minute! Great-Gramps wore a gray uniform, and you were in charge of the blue boys, if I remember correctly! Maybe you never met him after all." His laugh was infectious, and Arlo liked him immediately.

"You really get into your character, don't you?. I'm Arlo Duplessier." Arlo stuck out his hand.

"I'm George S. Patton." There was that moment of silence when Arlo wasn't exactly sure what to say. The way that George looked at Arlo was a sure sign that his reaction was being tested.

"Yes, that's pretty obvious. But, who will you be when you get out of this costume and report to work on Monday?"

"Oh, on Monday, I'll be a Master Sergeant, USAF, assigned to the Pentagon. But, I'll still be George S. Patton." There was a twinkle in George's eyes that told Arlo he was being punked more than a little bit. In order to put Arlo out of his misery, George continued after a lengthy pause. "...the fifth."

Arlo knew that the real Patton had children and that one of them was named after the famous General, himself a retired two-star General in the Army, but, that's about where his knowledge ended. "So, your dad was the son of the son of the...*real*...George S. Patton?"

George smiled as the light bulbs came on in Arlo's head. "Craziest thing, isn't it? I often wonder what God must have been thinking when he put me in line to be a Patton. The uniform is rented, but it just seemed to be the most appropriate thing to wear to this masquerade ball. Buy you a beer?"

"I'm drinking Zin, but tell me more about your life and what you remember of your grandfather. I suppose you were born well after your namesake had passed away."

"Yep, '62 actually, well after George III passed away. My dad was never in the service, but my grandfather, George IV was, and he and I were close. I was named after him. Not many folks know that he was a Major General, served in Vietnam, died just back in 2004 at age 80. Hell of a guy, and a great influence on me."

"With all that brass in your history, how come the enlisted ranks for you? If you were making a career out of it, I would think it would be a lot better in Officer land, wouldn't it?"

George frowned. "Politics, pure and simple! When Gramps found out I had a hankering for the military, he pulled me aside and gave me an ear full about the nonsense he had faced, first as a Colonel in Vietnam, and then as a General. Too much BS. Same story I had heard about George III, and I suppose your history is complete enough to know about that?"

Arlo had to reflect for a moment, pouring back through various history books, Time-Life documentaries, and "World At War" episodes, to dredge up the facts that he was looking for. "Yeah, I know the 30,000 foot level stories about serving with John J Pershing and chasing Pancho Villa across half of Mexico. The rest is a lot of bullet points, I'm afraid: North Africa, tank commander, defeated Rommel, then on to Sicily, and eventually Normandy campaign, I assume. Let's see..." Arlo struggled for more details. "...the slapping incident, was told to stay out of Paris, tried to take Berlin all by himself. You know, I'm not sure where the history book version of Patton ends and the movie version take over. It's sort of a blur. How'd I do?"

George looked at Arlo with a new respect. "You've pretty much nailed it. By the time it all got massaged for me from Gramp's perspective, he said the days of an Officer making a real difference were over by the end of WWII. His suggestion was that if I wanted to make an impact, I had to do it as an NCO. That's where the real work gets done and differences are made. The Officers spend all day filling out forms in triplicate and answering BS questions from the guy above them. The evenings are spent sipping white wine and kissing some politician's butt. That wasn't my idea of the military."

"And, has that worked out as you expected?"

"Better than! I've got contacts world wide. Even the 4-stars stop by my office to get help on issues that get tripped up in the mine fields on the Hill."

"So, you're in it for the long-term?"

"Lifetime, I'm afraid. Ten down, twenty to go. I'm in line for Sr Master, which would make me one of the youngest in the force. I figure Chief Master before I retire. I've even got my sights on First Chief Master. It's a great life."

They talked on for more than an hour. Arlo was amazed at the exposure to the moving parts of the military and US government that had previously lay hidden from view behind facades of steel, marble, and official protocol. By the time their conversation ended, Arlo was convinced that without the NCO ranks, and particularly without Sergeant Patton, the wheels of the United States just might fall off completely, with the US running driverless into the nearest ditch.

George and Arlo found their respective wives and mingled well into the night with the party-goers. By the time the evening was done, the foursome were fast friends, and had been ever since. Arlo was about 10 years senior to George, but there was something almost telepathic between the two of them, almost like brothers. The friendship had never waned. And, it was a good thing, because in the world that Arlo Duplessier was about to enter, he would need every friend he could find.

This wouldn't be Arlo's first trip to the mountains of Taos, but the desert areas of the great southwest had never held much interest for him. That leg of the trip was promising only if it revealed something about the photo and Hugh Dakan's interest in Davis-Monthan. Did it have something to do with what he had seen in the boneyard - or more correctly the AMARC photo? The Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group had a never ending inflow and outflow of aircraft. It had been over a dozen years since then Lt. Col. Dakan flew his last official mission. Why would he be looking for a derelict old F-15 Eagle, other than for pure nostalgia? And, would he ever expect to actually see any specific plane, especially his own aircraft, among the countless rows of "dead" planes baking out in the Arizona sun? No, the desert had a certain beauty to some. However, to Arlo, its "beauty" would only be if it yielded some answers to the puzzle surrounding the Senator's demise. The mountains were a different story, however. Arlo and his wife had skied Taos once but had been there twice in the warmer months to do some shopping, and for some well-deserved vacation time. She was more into art than Arlo, but the only purchases had been for a couple of small originals that hung in their living room. However, after soaking up the ambiance of Taos, both of them had read Mary Carroll Nelson's very readable history of the legendary artists who settled the area, going all the way back to Bert Geer Phillips, the first Anglo artist to make Taos his home, back in the late 1800s. From that humble beginning, Taos had built a reputation for year-round recreation, enveloped by artistic talent that was known world-wide. For Arlo, it wasn't a case of knowing art, which he didn't claim to. It was more a case of knowing what he liked, and there was something about the Taos artists that he liked very much. It would be good to get away from Washington for a few days, even if the purpose of his trip was not leisure. He had only been half jesting when he told the JetShare receptionist that he would be looking for a clarified picture in Taos. His hope was that conversations with both of the Sunderlins would shed some light on a troubling death.

But, first it was on to Tucson, and it would be about a four hour flight direct to the desert town. The pilot responded to takeoff clearance, and as the Cessna business jet lifted off of runway 4 at Reagan International, the pilot banked sharply to the left. Arlo's passenger window filled with the view of the Pentagon first, nestled in the cradle of Interstate 395, as it rounds the north end of Reagan Airport property, threading its way between Reagan and the Pentagon toward the George Washington Memorial Bridge. Next, the grounds of Arlington Cemetery appeared, as the pilot began his swing toward the west. Within minutes, Reagan's Departure Control had carefully threaded the lightly loaded Citation through the busy Washington airspace up to a cruising altitude of 34,000 feet for the non-stop trip to Tucson.

The Cessna's cabin annunciator chimed, waking Arlo. A moment later, the co-pilot's voice announced entry into Tucson airspace. "We're just 10 minutes from touchdown, Mr. Duplessier. Local Mountain time is 12:17 PM."

Either he was more tired than he thought, or the thinner air of the pressurized cabin had made him drowsy. Whatever the cause, Arlo had slept for the entire length of their flight from Washington to Tucson, and as he glanced out the cabin window, the sea of green, concrete, marble, and asphalt he had seen on departure from Reagan International, had been replaced many miles back by the dusty roses and browns of the great southwest. The fact that it was February, with the sun's lower angle, made the soft desert hues all the more muted. Even now, at just a little past noon, shadows were already beginning to form along the northeast slopes of the mountains and hills below. Then Arlo saw it, ahead and a bit to his right. As the pilots skirted to the south of Davis-Monthan and banked ever so slightly to the right in order to intercept the localizer into Tucson International, Arlo had a slow-motion view of just what Senator Dakan must have been looking at on the night before he disappeared. The uniform grayish-brown of the desert unfolded below the plane for almost as far as Arlo could see in the distance. Then, it suddenly ended, to be replaced by a flattened area of white and silver, broken by snakey black trails of what could only be shadows in the afternoon sun. It was the "Bone Yard", and as Arlo's jet

proceeded along the extreme southern edge of the Davis-Monthan Air Base footprint, the palette of silver and white began to break down into the recognizable shapes of airplanes...thousands upon thousands of them; parked nose to tail, tail to tail, and nose to nose in uniform, but what appeared to be almost endless rows, offering no way of calculating how many planes were actually parked in the desert sun. From his present altitude, there was even less chance of calculating the number of square miles needed to store so many aircraft, but Arlo couldn't help but try. His best guess was a 10-15 mile perimeter on the long south edge that faced his jet as it moved along in a mostly westerly course. An early afternoon desert haze was beginning to obscure the stretch to the north, but Arlo just guessed that it might encompass 5 miles in that direction...maybe 10. Very quick math told him that as much as 50 to 150 square miles stretched out below his plane, covered with old dead, partially decayed and partially disassembled planes, as well as many that looked similar to those parked on the apron of any municipal airport and ready for flight. How many thousands of planes could possibly be down there? How would anyone pick out a single plane, or even a dozen or two dozen of them from a satellite picture? What could Hugh Daken have possibly seen in that photograph that ultimately resulted in his death? Was there any connection at all? Or, was it all a cover for some other far less honorable activity? And, if the latter, then that meant Arlo might be on a very wild goose chase. Only time would tell, and as Arlo looked down on the vast swath of desert covered by an endless carpet of aircraft, he could only believe "Goose Chase" was the operative phrase. If it was anything else, then he was suddenly aware that he had allowed for way too little time in Tucson, since it was suddenly obvious that a small army couldn't cover so much area in just two days. What chance would Arlo have?

The chirping of rubber against asphalt signaled the arrival of the jet at Tucson International, located just six miles southwest of Davis-Monthan. As the pilots taxied the business jet towards the Prescon Air Services Fixed Base Operations building, it was obvious that even with a huge Air Force base less than a dozen miles away, this was a military town. Two enormous C5 Galaxy transports were parked off to one side of the apron area, their hulking wings seeming to almost droop to the ground, and Arlo spotted a dozen or more F-18 Hornets sitting in the afternoon sun. With all of the parking space available for dead planes over at D-M, Arlo began to wonder how there could possibly be an overflow that required use of a nearby civilian airport. It only took a few minutes to reach Prescon, and the pilots spooled down the engines of the Cessna as soon as it came to a halt. A dark blue Chevy Suburban pulled into view and came to a halt just a few yards from Arlo's plane, its windows tinted black, another sign that even though the temperature was a mild 60 degrees today, other months bore witness to heat of twice that amount. A lone Air Force Officer emerged from the driver's seat and stood at parade rest next to the vehicle, watching as the pilots completed their arrival checklist, opened the cabin door and then lowered the self-contained stairs.

Arlo stood, stretched, grabbed his briefcase, and stepped the few feet forward to the cabin exit, first thanking the two crewmen, confirming that they were on schedule for departure on Wednesday afternoon, then stepping onto the top level of the exit stairs. The young Air Force Officer stiffened as Arlo stepped into view, began walking the short distance from the Suburban to the base of the stairs, arriving at the bottom step at just about the same moment Arlo did. The Officer reached out his right hand to greet Arlo while reaching toward Arlo's briefcase with his left hand. "Welcome to Tucson, Mr. Duplessier. I'm Captain Anthony Mattice. Chief Master Patton said you would be arriving this afternoon."

Arlo's mouth involuntarily fell open in surprise. This was the 'Red Hot Lover of the Southwest'? This was the guy whose career required the base commander to call George for help in saving not just his Air Force job, but perhaps even his life? This was the guy who had not one, but two apparently very hot Latinas fighting over him? Arlo could hardly believe his eyes. Captain Mattice, who had to be in his late twenties or early thirties, looked to be all of 18 years of age. Bright red hair peeked out from under the Captain's casual flight cap and a thousand freckles fought to hide his eyes and all other discernible features from view. His eyes, what Arlo could see of them as the Captain squinted in the afternoon sun, were clear and green. The youthful look was completed by AF-1505

tan summer attire that was easily two sizes too big for the captain's thin frame. Arlo didn't know what the captain's secret might be, but whatever it was remained hidden from obvious view.

“Sergeant Patton does a might better job at flight planning than any of the airlines I've had experience with. He told me that you would be available for a couple of days, but I didn't expect plane-to-door transportation. Nice to meet you, Captain. I'm Arlo Duplessier.” Arlo took the young Captain's offered handshake and noticed immediately that the grip was strong, warm and dry. The Captain's hand was soft. He was definitely a desk jockey. After placing Arlo's briefcase on the rear seat of the Suburban, the Captain motioned Arlo toward the passenger's side of the vehicle. Captain Mattice climbed into the driver's seat and seemed to disappear inside the envelope of suede cloth and leather trim. A slender arm seemed to reach unattached toward the ignition, while a left foot and leg, equally unattached stretched toward the brake pedal. Its mate angled off toward the accelerator pedal. Arlo couldn't help but wonder if the boy-captain was old enough to actually hold a driver's license.

He may have been young, and he may have appeared even younger, but the captain didn't waste any time getting down to business. It was the mark of a good information officer. As the big suburban threaded its way among the general aviation aircraft on the airport apron, and when he must have thought that Arlo wasn't looking his way, the captain stole a couple of quick glimpses in Arlo's direction. However, Arlo could see the captain's reflection in his own passenger door window, knowing full well that questions were on the captain's mind. If Captain Mattice was going to be good at his job of explaining the scope and mission of Davis-Monthan Air Base, then it stood to reason that he should know about everything and everyone that was on the base. Arlo was some sort of friend of one of the most powerful Chief Master Sergeants in the military, a civilian, not a Congress person, but someone of such importance that a Chief Master Sergeant would personally arrange for his visit. That alone made Arlo's visit a big deal. It might not be any of Captain Mattice's business, but that certainly wasn't going to stop him from trying to find out. And, Arlo appreciated that the captain didn't beat around the bush. “So, what brings you to Davis-Monthan, Mr. Duplessier?”

George would have definitely kept Arlo's true identity and background information private. And, unless Captain Mattice had googled stories about the better versions of Caesar Salad made with blue cheese or Tonkinese cats, then there was very little chance that a computer search would have turned up any information about Arlo. And, even that information would mostly mention his wife, with very little information about Arlo personally. His private investigation firm was just that...private...very private, and Arlo wasn't about to change that. With George's lack of information sharing to Captain Mattice, Arlo was free to establish any identity that fit the moment, and Arlo didn't miss a beat. “Writing! I'm a freelance writer. I'm contracted to do a deep background research piece for The American Nation Magazine. The 90th anniversary of Davis-Monthan is coming up, and I'm working on a section involving not only our love of airplanes in general, but how our country evolved on the world stage with the development of military aircraft. The Bone Yard is sort of the end of that chain of events, but the editors thought it might make an interesting slant on aircraft...sort of a start-to-finish piece, I guess. It will be a positive article for the Air Force.”

“Sort of a 'birth to death' story?” Captain Mattice caught Arlo's eye out of the corner of his own as he said it.

“Yes, you could say that, I guess. In a sense, Davis-Monthan is a place where planes come to die. But, I can write a piece from the viewpoint that life begins all over again here.”

“Sometimes there is that sense of death here. I see planes chopped up every day. The “new life” part is more invisible. You notice when a B-52 is hauled out of here on flatbed trailers to the shredding machinery in North Tucson, but when something smaller, like a temperature gauge goes out of here as a replacement part, no one notices.”

Arlo decided to test the water a little bit, and watched for any imperceptible body movement as he asked the next question. “Perhaps the Condors notice?”

There was nothing!

“Oh, I guess they would see everything, but not until summer mostly. Then, some skunk or Coyote dies, and the Condors circle for days.”

There wasn't a lot more conversation on the remainder of the short drive to the D-M main gate. As they pulled out of the Airport and turned north onto Tucson Blvd, the Captain settled into his military role of Information Officer and began to confirm some of the facts about D-M. Yes, it was established in 1925 as Davis-Monthan Landing Field, named after a couple of World War I pilots, Lieutenants Samuel Davis and Oscar Monthan, both Tucson natives, both pilots, both killed in action during the war. By the time they reached Valencia Blvd and turned eastbound, Captain Mattice had disgorged some of the facts that Arlo already knew: home of the 355th fighter wing, A-10 Thunderbolt close air support training, and home of the Air Force Combat Command START Treaty Compliance Liaison. He was also a font of knowledge about those things with which Arlo had less familiarity. The field was actually dedicated in 1927, and Charles Lindbergh, who had just returned from his solo, non-stop crossing of the Atlantic, flew The Spirit Of St. Louis to Tucson for that event. Numerous other famous flyers had visited the field over the years, including Amelia Earhart, Benjamin Delahauf Foulois, and James H. Doolittle. In fact, Doolittle, who had been awarded the Medal of Honor for his Tokyo air raids during World War II, was the very first military customer on the field, on October 9th, 1927.

“The afternoon is getting on a bit for a complete tour of the base. I would suggest that we grab a quick sandwich first. Then, I'll take you back to my office and give you the birds-eye view of what goes on here. We can start our driving tour at 0700 tomorrow. That will take most of the day. Is there any particular aspect that interests you most? I know you have only a couple of days here, and I want to plan our itinerary to your needs.”

“That's very kind of you to ask, Captain.” Arlo hesitated, wanting to appear as casual as possible. “Cannibalization, I guess. I know that a plane is more than wings and engines. When a plane comes here, much of it must be obsolete, but other identical models are probably still flying. I'd be interested to see how the Air Force nets a plane out...what goes back into service as a spare part, and what goes out the door as scrap metal. Sounds boring but in this age of deficit spending, our readers have an interest in knowing that their tax dollars are being spent wisely and recouped where possible. I'm interested in the base history, of course, but 'dollars and sense' is where I'm coming from mostly.”

“Well, you have to know it's big business, I guess. If you want to look at it in big, broad, easy-math numbers, then for every \$100 billion worth of planes that come onto the field, about \$60 billion is gained through parts replacement or outright income for scrap metal. It's big, all right. And, it may sound like a loss to the taxpayers at first, since defense spending is usually a sunk cost. However, if we can take a huge initial outlay of tax dollars and ultimately turn it into a smaller outlay for the taxpayers in the end, then we think we are doing a good thing.”

“Without a doubt. If it was all merely scrapped, then as taxpayers, we'd be out the entire \$100 billion. I guess it's like bucket with a small hole in the bottom, being filled at a spigot. Water, in the form of money, pours in the top, and some leaks out the bottom. Ultimately, the spigot only has to be turned on half volume, because the hole at the bottom is small. If the hole was big enough, then the spigot would have to be full on, all the time.”

“To the taxpayers, it must feel like it’s ‘full on’ in any event, but without AMARC, defense spending would be substantially higher than it is today. Frankly speaking, I’d rather that the troops on the ground get more and better rifles and armament, because we saved a few million dollars by recycling an old B-52 and kept others flying well beyond their design years.”

Arlo liked the Captain’s sense of pragmatism, and said so. “You seem well grounded, Captain. What’s your background?”

In the next ten minutes, Captain Mattice revealed nothing that anyone would consider unusual, certainly nothing that might make him a VIP in military circles. He was born and raised in Marlborough, about 20 miles west of Boston; attended Marlborough High School; was accepted at the University of Missouri, where he majored in Journalism and went through the Air Force ROTC program. On graduation, and after marrying his High School sweetheart back in Marlborough, he breezed through BOT or Basic Officer Training at Maxwell AFB in Alabama, he was assigned to Davis-Monthan, where he had spent the last three years. His wife had originally traveled to D-M with him, but the first summer in the Tucson heat drove her back to the cooler climes of Massachusetts. Captain Mattice professed love and longing for his wife, and fully planned to return to Marlborough and work at one of the talk radio stations in Boston as soon as his service to the country was finished. He had no desire to make a career of the Air Force.

After they had turned north on South Alvernon Way, it was just a short drive before the road transitioned into Golf Links Road, as they began the slow turn to the east, traveling along the northern edge of the base. In just a few moments they were at Craycroft Road. Captain Mattice wheeled the big suburban into the right turn pocket and turned onto Craycroft and toward the main gate. He carefully negotiated the K-rail and concrete pylon obstacle course that had become an all-too familiar but necessary sight at all military installations, and drove forward toward the main gate itself. Even in the US, any return to the broad, open, and welcoming main gates of the past was unthinkable. Instead, entries were set up so that a vehicle was forced to slow to around 5 MPH, just to negotiate the barriers. Beyond that, visitors were no longer greeted by Airmen in fresh blue uniforms, either. Instead, men in full battle dress uniforms, or BDUs stood with M4s slung over one shoulder. Captain Mattice’s vehicle had a base entry sticker, but he still pulled to a stop in front of the two airmen, who took a quick look inside the vehicle before waving the Captain and Arlo through, but not before consulting a computer screen in the guard shack. Doubtless, somewhere there was a magnetometer or some “sniffer” that looked at the signature made by the Suburban and instantly made a decision about entry, displaying the solution decision on the Airman’s digital display. Window stickers were too easy to counterfeit, as were uniforms. And although D-M didn’t have as high of a security profile as many other bases, no one took chances any longer. The suburban pulled forward and cleared the gate as Davis-Monthan, in actuality just a large-scale, industrial-sized chop shop, home of snakes, lizards, Jack Rabbits, Coyotes....and possibly even a murderer, swallowed up Arlo Duplessier into the next phase of his investigation.

As they headed toward the Bachelor Officer’s Quarters, where Arlo would spend the next two nights, Captain Mattice also suggested an early dinner in anticipation of a very early morning the following day. “We should start around o’dark thirty tomorrow, if you want to have a chance of seeing much of AMARC. As you may have seen on your approach this afternoon, D-M is a huge base. The tour will take most of the day, but I promise that you will have plenty of material for your writing. As soon as we get you checked into the BOQ, I’ll take you over to my office and let you take a look at how billions and billions of your tax dollars are being chopped into tinfoil confetti every day.

“Ugly beasts, aren’t they?”

Arlo turned his eyes away from the base restaurant window that overlooked the Davis-Monthan flightline, to find Captain Mattice standing at his table. He was dressed in a set of “chocolate chip” DCUs, or desert combat uniform, the kind that were ubiquitous across TV screens when troops stormed across the Kuwaiti border in Operation Desert Storm. “Good morning! I see you are ready for a day of playing in the dirt. How’d you find me?”

“The Orderly at the BOQ told me that you were headed over here for breakfast. Hope you slept well. I see you are mesmerized by the A-10s”

“Yes, they are strangely beautiful aircraft.”

The Captain laughed. “Well, ‘beautiful’ is not the word we use around here. We think they are so very ugly, so ugly in fact that the base commander gave out orders long ago that they crank up and get out to the training area before dawn each day. And, we don’t let them back on the field until after dark. That’s why the flight line is so busy this morning....fire ‘em up...get ‘em outta here!”

“You’re kidding, aren’t you?”

“Well, only just a little bit. They really are ungainly and the butt of a lot of jokes. We don’t call the pilots ‘pig drivers’ for nothing. But, scratch an A-10 driver and you’ll find one hell of a warrior. These guys are trained to get low and slow, down where the action is, down where they can get hurt too, if they are not careful.”

Arlo had to admit that they were odd looking aircraft. The cockpit had room for a single pilot situated very far forward, nearly to the nose of the aircraft, the entire cockpit assembly canted or tilted forward, so that the pilot could easily see over the nose of the aircraft.. The visual result was that of a pilot with a plane strapped to his back, rather than that of a pilot riding in an aircraft.. Wide, stubby, squared off, straight wings jutted out abruptly from the side of the plane. Behind the wings and mounted high up on the back of the aircraft were two oversized jet engines that seemed many sizes too big for the smallish frame of the aircraft itself, the engines appearing to have been bolted onto the plane as an afterthought rather than smoothly contoured into the wings, and even then well up on the back of the plane, as if that was the only place left for an engine. Finishing off the tail of the plane were twin vertical stabilizers, or rudders, connected by a wide swatch of metal placed in the horizontal position. The overall effect was that the plane had been designed by some committee whose members never communicated until the final assembly was scheduled, resulting in an ungainly, even ugly plane that had few of the sleek looks made so popular in the movie “Top Gun”. But Arlo sensed in the stance of the aircraft that it was a special kind of hunter, obviously not designed for supersonic speeds or dog-fighting. “Warthog, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. Or, just ‘Hog’. Very few people call them by their attack designation, A-10. It’s the plane we all love to hate, and we make a lot of fun of it. But, if you are a ground-pounder in a pinch, the odds shift to your favor in a hurry when a couple of A-10s fly into your neighborhood.”

“How did it evolve? It must have a special use, right?”

Captain Mattice pointed to one that was just taxiing past their view on the apron area below, a bright gray one, almost white, where so many of the others were painted in camouflage browns or greens. A large snarling mouth had been painted just under the nose, with white shark’s teeth and two upturned white fangs glaring from the black background of the mouth opening. Eyes were painted above the mouth, giving the ‘Hog’ an even more ominous and menacing appearance than normal. “You see that stubby round turret sticking out from just below the mouth on that one? Right there on the chin of the aircraft? That’s what that plane was built for. That is the 30-millimeter GAU-8/A Avenger Gatling-type cannon. The plane was designed around that gun. It is literally a flying Gatling gun with a pilot who rides it into combat.”

“A Gatling? Like an old western Gatling gun?”

“Well, it’s the same principal, but vastly superior, of course. It’s a rotary machine gun, but that’s about where the similarity ends. This baby is electronically driven, comes up to speed in less than one second, fires nearly 4000 rounds per minute, about 60-70 rounds per second. Trust me when I tell you that you do not want to be on the receiving end of greetings from one of our ‘Hogs’. We train for accuracy, and a ‘Hog’ flying at 350 knots, in a 30 degree dive can still put 80 percent of its shots in a 40-foot wide circle. Nothing in that circle will make it out alive.”

Arlo was impressed. “Wow, that is some kind of firepower!”

“It’s a tank buster!”

“A 30-millimeter shell can take out a tank?”

“Well, it’s a special kind of shell, really...spent uranium...very dense stuff, and, yes...it can kill a tank, really killing the operators inside, but the result is the same. A tank is dead without drivers. When one of the shells hits a tank, it’s traveling at over 3000 feet per second. At that velocity, the shell goes right through the outer armor like a knife through butter. That slows the shell down to the point that it can’t exit the other side, but it still has lots and lots of unspent velocity. After it has rattled around the tank interior for a while...well, you start to get the picture, I guess. If the story is true, and I believe it is, a couple of ‘Hogs’ took on an entire regiment of Saddam’s tanks that refused to surrender at the end of the 1st Gulf War. In less than 30 minutes, the tanks were cut to ribbons. No one survived.”

“That’s an amazing story, Captain. But, a whole plane designed for that little gun sticking out the nose?”

Captain Mattice stifled a chuckle. “That ‘little gun’ as you call it, Mr. Duplessier, is the business end of nearly 20 feet of gun assembly on which the pilot rides. One of the reasons the cockpit is so far forward is that immediately below and behind the pilot, right below his butt, is a canister, an ammo drum, that carries 1350 rounds of ordinance. The gun assembly alone is bigger than an average mid-sized sedan.

Arlo made a slow whistling sound.

“As for its evolution, one of the lessons from Vietnam was that there were no close air support aircraft to protect the troops on the ground. F-100 Super Sabres, F-105 Thunder Chiefs, and F-4 Phantoms were the mainstay of that war and pretty effective in their primary mission of targeted bombing around Hanoi and Hiaphong Harbor. But, when it came to laying down suppressive fire against NVA forces, who were often within yards of friendly forces on the ground, their accuracy was not so good. Most people don’t know this, but one of the most effective planes in the Vietnam War were the old piston-driven Douglas Skyraiders that we gave to the South Vietnamese. I guess we figured that’s all their pilots could handle...not the newer jet aircraft. Then, when the grunts got their butts in a jam on the ground, we’d call in the Skyraiders who would come in low and slow and make mincemeat out of the unfriendlies. The Pentagon learned a costly lesson from that shortcoming. So, in the very early 70s, Defense ordered a new sort of close air support fighter, and the competition came down to a duel between Fairchild’s A-10 and Northrop’s YA-9. Fairchild won the contract, and the rest is history. Fairchild had a history of close air support aircraft in World War II, and they played a big part in Vietnam, mostly making tail assemblies for the F-4s, and eventually for the F-14 Tomcats. They aren’t around any longer...long ago merged into other aerospace companies. However, their legend lives on in the A-10s. I’m afraid the teeth have been removed from these, however.”

“What do you mean?”

“We do all of our training with lasers now. No live fire in the test ranges any longer.”

“Budget cuts?” Arlo was curious

“No, although at \$75 per shell, you would think so. It’s the illegal aliens. Our target test area is southwest of here, just about 30 miles away, between Three Points and Sonoita down on the Mexican border. But, we came to find out, through some rather unfortunate incidents, that our test range is directly astride the busiest smuggling corridor from Mexico into the US. We can’t put up enough signs to keep people out of the area. So about three years ago, orders came down stopping all live fire. No one seems to mind

if we put a hot round or a Hellfire missile through a bale of cocaine. But, they get a bit upset if we blow up a family walking across the desert. I know we're not supposed to make political statements, and this is totally off the record, Mr. Duplessier, but it's a real national security issue to me. If we can't get these pilots trained using the real thing, then they won't be ready for the next confrontation, where they have to fire real ammunition at real targets."

Arlo knew exactly what Captain Mattice was talking about. Immigration issues had been a very heated political debate well before 2010, when then Arizona Governor Jan Brewer and the Obama Administration came to blows over illegal border crossings. The airwaves were full of accusation and invective from both sides. Lawsuits were plentiful. Solutions weren't. Even the mid-term elections of 2010 hadn't solved the problem. Incumbents were tossed out. New political aspirants who said they had a solution were voted in, but little changed. As soon as the elections were over, it was back to business as normal, which meant that the borders were as porous as ever. With the change in administrations in 2012, everyone just knew that border security would finally be solved. It wasn't, of course, and there had been more than a few angry demonstrations and near riots along and near the border with Mexico. But, places far removed from the border were not immune, either, and Arlo was well aware of some of the ugly demonstrations. The rub was that the Democrats wanted porous borders so that new Latino citizens might be added to the voting roles – votes that had a high percentage chance of going to Democratic patrons. Meanwhile, the Republicans wanted porous borders for the cheap labor that made its way as far north as Detroit and allowed auto makers and other manufacturing facilities to continue to eke out meager competitive advantage over foreign manufacturers. The truth was that both parties lied mightily to the American public, figuring, or at least hoping, that the average American was too besotted with booze, drugs, or cheap TV reality shows that masqueraded as entertainment to worry about an invasion that was happening right in front of their eyes. Angry demonstrations said that both political parties were wrong, but they were either too stupid to realize that their game had been figured out, or filled with too much ideology to make changes. It was obvious that the immigration issue was having a direct impact on Davis-Monthan, but it was the budget issue that was on Arlo's mind.

"So just how have defense cuts and the various budget cuts affected the base here. Have there been other projects that have taken a hit?"

"Well, no effect at all, really. It's one of the best kept secrets in the Air Force, but Davis-Monthan is the only military base in the entire US Command that turns a profit?"

Now, Arlo's ears perked up. "Profit?"

"Yes, big time. Only in the military could you count a tax dollar saved as profit, rather than 'zero expense', but yes, vastly profitable."

"How so?"

"One word...or acronym, really...AMARC. It takes around \$6 billion a year to run this base. Through aircraft parts recycling, scrap sales, and aircraft refurbishment, AMARC is able to generate nearly \$9 billion in revenue. So, in the military's strange bookkeeping way, we're profitable. Of course, out of the nearly \$550 billion in defense spending for the current fiscal year, we're just a drop in the bucket. But, it's a do-more-with-less world that the defense department is in these days, and there are more and more calls for AMARC products every day."

"Products?"

"Parts, wing assemblies, altimeters, wheels, rudders...you name it. Spare parts is a huge business, and growing bigger every year. More and more big-budget programs are getting axed before they get off the drawing boards, or axed half-way through. The F-22 Raptor and the Joint Strike Fighter were both cut back severely. This means that active air wings have to keep their older planes flying well beyond the design years. The B-52 is about the oldest in the fleet now. We've got some D and E models that were probably built about the time you were born...sixty year old planes with twenty-something year old pilots flying them around. Late

Vietnam era planes are still fairly common in the guard forces. The F-14 Tomcat entered service in 1973, and they are still flying plenty of them, especially in allied forces. We get a steady stream of orders for Tomcat bits and pieces. It's big business here in the desert, and destined to get bigger, it looks like."

"Oh how so?"

"Well, you probably couldn't see this from the air when you flew in, but there is a great deal of construction going on at the south end of the base. The word is that there will be a lot more aircraft coming into AMARC over the next few years."

"More budget cuts?"

"And, probably some base closings and consolidations will account for most of it, I'm guessing. When they are through, D-M will be about twice as large as it is now.

Arlo was about to ask another question when something happened that he would have never expected to see, perhaps on any base, but most definitely not on a base in the continental United States. The last 'Warthog' had already departed. For a few minutes the commotion out on the flightline area had halted. Arlo and Captain Mattice had a chance to talk uninterrupted by the whine of jet engines. But, their conversation came to a sudden end when a formation of four Russian Migs settled onto the runway in a perfect diamond formation. Neither of them spoke as the 'Migs' taxied from the runway onto the apron area below the restaurant. Each of the plane's cockpit canopies were already propped open, and Arlo could clearly make out the Russian flight uniforms – a dark olive-green jumpsuit, with a red star emblazoned on the left chest of each pilot. The four planes parked in a perfectly straight line facing the restaurant. Each of the pilots hurriedly unhooked oxygen and G-suit hoses. As they did this, ground units quickly moved ladders into position along side each plane. The pilots finally jumped from their cockpits, dropped down the ladders to the concrete apron and raced around to stand ramrod stiff at attention in front of their individual aircraft. Arlo stared in amazement as a service vehicle approached the pilots, the same single red star painted on its door, disgorging a senior officer with enough 'scrambled eggs' on his hat and his shoulders and hat that Arlo figured he must surely be a General. The pilots stiffened even more as the officer approached them. As the 'General' saluted the pilots, they immediately stood at ease and began shaking hands, first with the 'General' and then with each other. Once they had completed full greetings of each other, including the Russian ritual of kisses on each and everyone's cheeks, they all got into the service vehicle, and it departed across the flightline.

Arlo looked at Captain Mattice in questioning amazement, but the Captain's face was unchanged. "Yes, Mr. Duplessier. It would appear that the Russians have landed."

Captain Mattice couldn't help but laugh. "I'm sorry, Mr. Duplessier, but the look on your face is priceless. I guess I'd better let you in on the joke. They aren't Mig-29s at all. What they are is very clever makeovers of F-18 Hornets. Did I mention that we have a lot of spare sheet metal around the base, and more than a few F-18s? Part of our job is to take F-18s that have been bent and make them flyable again. While we were doing that project, a little sheet metal went missing, and voila...a Mig-29. If we parked an F-18 right next to one of these mock 'Migs', you would see the similarities between the two. The real Mig is thicker in the forward part of the fuselage, with a larger weapons pod and radar dome below the nose and different engine intakes. Also, the vertical stabilizers are nearly vertical on the Mig, where they are canted outward nearly 15 degrees on the F-18. Other than that, the plane has performance figures and maneuverabilities that are a very close approximation of the actual Fulcrum. Dimensions are similar also."

Arlo knew when he was the butt of a joke, and began to laugh also. "OK, you got me. As a lay person, they sure look like the Real McCoy to me. But, I guess that's the idea, isn't it? Oh, and maybe we'd better dispense with the "Mr Duplessier" stuff. Just call me Arlo."

"Will do, Arlo, and please call me Tony. Yes, the goal is to make them look like real Migs. Everything about them is 'Russian'. The pilots dress like Russians, as you clearly saw. All of their vehicles are painted to look like Russian ground support. They speak Russian mostly, live apart from the regular base population, have their own barracks and BOQ. For all intents and purposes, they are Russians."

"And the officer who greeted them?"

"Colonel Mike Bitteman, Somerset, Alabama, and believe me when I tell you this; you haven't lived until you've heard Russian spoken with a southern accent."

"The pilots?"

"Well, there's a full squadron of them, along with ground support and administrative staff. But, they are all volunteers, very carefully selected for this assignment. As you can guess, they are very isolated from the rest of the base, and the Air Force wants to make sure that they have the proper psychological makeup for their mission."

"And, their mission is....?" Now Arlo was very curious.

"Oh, sure, well they are a Red Flag force. They fly training missions against our 'blue forces' and try to out-think and out-fly our pilots. It's as close as many of these pilots will come to the real thing in the normal course of their careers, and we want them to be trained for the unexpected. So, our 'red force' is isolated and trained to think like 'Russians'."

Arlo was still perplexed. "Well, I knew there were 'red flag' forces at Nellis, outside of Las Vegas, but I just assumed that was the only unit like that. There was a documentary on Discovery Channel or Military Channel a couple of years ago."

"That's right. Nellis was the first one. Then, the Navy set up their own 'red force' at Miramar for the Top Gun school. But, the mission was expanded to D-M about two years ago, and our 'red force' was established at that time. They also fly sorties against some of the other bases in the western half of the US to test readiness. It's grown into quite an operation, and they occupy the southeast corner of the base."

"The southeast corner? Good grief! How many of them are in that unit?"

"Counting admin staff, nearly two thousand, I guess, give or take a few."

"Where do they find enough people who speak Russian? It's not the easiest language to learn, you know."

"Yes, I do know it's difficult, and I can't answer your question. Aside from Colonel Bitteman, I've probably met only a dozen of the pilots. The rest of the men keep totally to themselves."

"Men? No women?"

“Well, none that I’ve ever seen, but does it matter?”

Arlo glanced around casually. “I was just curious.”

“Once we’ve toured the base, maybe we’ll swing by ‘The Gulag’ and see if we can have a sit-down with Colonel Bitteman.”

“The Gulag?”

“Well, it’s another world unto its own, Arlo, isolated and even with restricted access, gate guards, the whole “Russkie” bit, which has caused everyone to nickname it the Gulag.”

Arlo glanced once more at the faux Migs parked on the concrete apron area below, gulped one last mouthful of coffee, knowing that a long day was ahead of him and the young Captain, and then followed Tony out of the restaurant to a Jeep waiting just outside the restaurant door. After boarding the Jeep, it was less than a two-minute drive from the regimented and uniformly laid out grid of the base streets, mostly laid out in a north-south and east-west configuration, to the vast, seemingly unordered area that is the reason d’etre for Davis-Monthan. There was just a momentary delay at the entrance to the boneyard, as credentials were checked against access lists, a procedure, Arlo was certain, to further protect the billions and billions of dollars of spare parts that were stretched out over the thousands of acres in front of him. Ahead of them was nothing but the brown flatness of desert floor and a sea of silver planes. Tony gunned the Jeep through the gate area, and they entered another world. It was immediately apparent that even though they were less than a mile from the restaurant and flightline where state-of-the-art F-18 Hornets and even pretend Migs were coming and going, they had entered a world that could have easily been a million miles away. If the boneyard area had appeared vast when viewed from Arlo’s jet-based vantage point on the previous day, that view was suddenly eclipsed by the sheer colossal magnitude of being thrust in among so many planes of various shapes, ages, and sizes. Almost immediately, Captain Mattice left the relative smoothness of the access road that ran along the rows of planes, instead choosing to strike off in a random direction between the aging aircraft bodies, driving in what seemed to be a totally aimless pattern, across small mounds and gullies that separated the individual aircraft. Arlo felt very small, like an ant might feel when crawling across the soil of a flowerbed, with petals, leaves, and stems towering high above. They were quickly dwarfed by transports and bombers, and frequently hidden among the shadows of wings and tail assemblies. As the young Captain twisted and turned the steering wheel, dodging first this mound of dirt, then that hole dug by some desert critter or gouged by some insect-like piece of machinery used to chop up or disassemble one of the hulking aircraft bodies, Arlo suddenly felt like little more than a bug, surrounded by hulking but lifeless monsters. They were dead planes, no longer flyable, but like organ donors in an emergency ward, ready to give further life to their living brethren. Even though there were no workers in evidence, Arlo knew that this was a true beehive of activity at some point. In one area of fighter jets, he had spotted a flatbed truck stacked with what appeared to be some sort of airplane batteries, not unlike automobile batteries, but larger, perhaps ten to fifteen inches square, black, with crimped wires running out of the tops of each one and then left dangling over the sides. He had no idea what the black squares were, but he could easily envision an army of technicians, working much like drones must work around a queen bee, scrambling over the hulks of the planes before him, probing, unscrewing, prying, ripping, tearing to get at the “meat”, the important and still valuable contents that these planes once held in great secretiveness from enemy eyes.

And just as quickly as they had been engulfed by the steel and aluminum of the first section of planes, they were just as suddenly out in the open again, in an area that could easily encompass five or ten football fields...maybe more. Arlo could see more planes ahead, and to both sides, but this area, which appeared to be approximately square, held nothing. Only the rolling floor of the desert was evident, broken by but a few scabbly sagebrush-like plants that had not been trampled into the parched earth.

“Did the Air Force run out of planes for this acreage?”

Tony let out a hearty laugh. “Not a chance, Arlo. In fact, up until about three months ago, this was one of the older areas of the boneyard. If you had been here this time last year, you would have thought you had traveled back seventy-five years. I don’t know how familiar you are with aircraft, but this area contained nothing but KC-97s, the old Air Force tankers, the ones that were based on the Boeing C-97 Stratofreighters, which were themselves a variant of the B-29, the heavy lifter of World War II. They were finally

parted out completely, even the National Guard finally decommissioning the last one. So, the remaining airframes were chopped up, sold off for scrap, and hauled out of here.”

“So, what happens to this area now?”

“I believe this is reserved for B2 and F-117 Stealth Fighters.”

Arlo jerked his head around to face Tony. “Stealth Fighters? But, those are brand new, aren’t they? Why would they be coming to the boneyard?”

“Well, ‘new’ is a relative term, Arlo. And, it depends on whether it’s ‘new’ to the public, or ‘new’ to the Air Force. The first F-117 flight was in 1981, and the plane went operational in 1983, meaning that we are now talking about a aircraft that has been in inventory for over 30 years. Some of the A-models are beginning to reach operational limits. The B-2s are of the same vintage. That doesn’t mean the Stealth will be decommissioned; far from it. However, it does mean that as the older models are replaced by F-22 fighters and eventually the F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, the older F-117s will come here to begin the parting out process for Night Hawks that are still in service. Engines and some flight controls, computers and such, can be used in many different planes, meaning that the 117s will supply lots of different planes that are still flying, even some that belong to foreign nations, especially if we are talking about a declassified piece of equipment.”

It all made sense to Arlo, and he was beginning to put the pieces of this vast puzzle together. Even the money was beginning to make sense, and the dollar figures that Tony had mentioned earlier began to take on actual reality as they continued the tour. There were certainly billions and billions of potential dollars here, and Arlo could easily imagine how the trail and smell of such riches might turn anyone’s head. The trick was figuring out how this related, if it related at all, to the death of Senator Dakan. It might be easy to siphon off the money from spare parts, scrap sales, and overall cannibalization of these aircraft, but the actual movement and transport of such material couldn’t be carried out by a single individual, or even a few dozen, or even a few hundred. Arlo instantly knew that a plot to turn government spending into eventual personal profit would have to involve thousands of people, meaning that the opportunity for discovery and exposure was almost inevitable. If a plot of such magnitude was real, then it would have been discovered long before Hugh Dakan came on the scene. And, if the Senator was himself dirty, then it made even less sense. There were far easier ways to make billions, and Hugh Dakan had already done it. He had married into the billions that would eventually be inherited by his wife. No, it just had to be something else. But what?

The next stop on the tour brought Arlo face to face with a plane that even he, as a layman, recognized: the historic and iconic B52... acres of them, although each of them seemed large enough to take up an acre on its own. The effect of space requirement was even more pronounced because each plane, unlike the whole airframes that they had seen up to this point, was chopped into large pieces, as if some giant cleaver or guillotine had come along and sliced the fuselages into thirty-foot sections. Wings of the hulking bombers had been dissected from their stations on either side of the fuselage and similarly chopped into sections, but laid out out as if they had simply dropped from the bomber’s sides, simply too tired to stay attached any longer. Engines and their casings were also detached and placed ahead of the wings, in the approximate locations they had been when the planes were still assembled.

As the Jeep pulled to a halt near the nose of one of the aircraft, Arlo rubbed his forehead, pondering the immensity of the bomber, lying “chin down” in the desert floor. “OK, what gives with these?”

“START-II Treaty, Arlo. We still cannibalize where possible, but as part of the first Bush’s treaty with the Russians in 1993, we not only agreed to a reduction in nukes, but the means of delivering them also, which meant dismantling ICBMs and also some of our B-52s. What you are looking at is the B-52 compliment.”

“But, 1993? That’s over 20 years ago.”

“That’s right, and the agreement was that these planes would lie here, fully exposed, chopped up and verifiable as no longer airworthy for 25 years. We’re just about there.”

“So, who comes to verify that they are no longer flyable?”

“No one! Satellites do the work for the Russians. You’ve probably even seen satellite photographs of the boneyard. The Russians take them. We even take photos and supply them to the Russians as part of the treaty. There have been a few rare occasions when Russian officials have toured the boneyard to make sure that we didn’t somehow erect wooden decoys to fool the satellites, but the treaty spelled out that the planes would simply stay still... dead still, if you’ll pardon the pun...until the twenty-five years was up, then and only then to be finally chopped up and sold off as scrap.”

Arlo let out a whistle, “Whew, a quarter of a century just taking up dead space in the middle of the desert. Goodness! Well, yes, I’ve seen the pictures. I guess even Senator Dakan had one in his possession shortly before he disappeared. Any idea what connection their might be?”

Captain Mattice looked at Arlo intently. “Not a clue! Pretty common pictures. I’ve seen them passed around on the internet for years. Dakan was a ex-fighter jock. Nostalgia, perhaps?”

“Maybe.” Arlo decided to drop the subject, and the two of them suddenly fell quiet, as quiet as the late desert morning, sitting motionless for a few more moments as they look out over the field of dead aircraft...dead for many years...and destined to be dead forever.

The remainder of the day was spent wondering from one area of planes to another, crisscrossing great expanses of the base, first wondering around planes from the Vietnam era, planes that must have certainly looked sleek in their day, but which now looked old and boxy when compared to F-14s, 15s, 16s, and 18s, appearing even older and more antiquated with their dull paint jobs and multiple coatings of grime and dust. Next it was bombers, more B-52s like the ones that they had encountered in the morning, but now the supersonic B-2s, and even a couple of truly old B-47s, and B-58s parked in one corner of the vast plane graveyard. After stopping for lunch beneath the wing of an F4-Phantom, they drove by countless rows of F-14 Tomcats, the music from “Top Gun” playing silently in Arlo’s head. A couple of things were apparent to Arlo after hours and hours and rows and rows of derelict aircraft. First, what had appeared so orderly when flying over the base on the previous day was far less so when one was on the ground among these aged war machines. What had appeared so tidy from a few thousand feet up, was actually just a junk yard, with junk parts strewn about in a somewhat orderly, but mostly haphazard manner. It was fairly obvious that when a replacement part was needed for some far distant aircraft, it was needed ‘right now’, meaning that young airmen found the respective candidate for the spare part, pried or ripped open a section of the donor plane, retrieved the necessary part, leaving access panels, bolts, screws, aluminum bits, pieces, and whatever...the flotsam and jetsam of a wrecking yard, wherever it fell, only casually tossing or kicking the pieces into piles beneath the wings of the craft, where they became the semi-permanent homes of rattlers, Tarantellas, and scorpions, not to mention the rodents, Coyotes, and Raptors that preyed on them, and which in turn became prey for each other. There were two other things that became readily apparent to Arlo: there were no Condors at Davis-Monthan, at least at this time of year, and there was little conceivable connection to the death of Hugh Dakan.

It was nearly 4PM when Tony and Arlo agreed between themselves that the degree of difference between any one group of a thousand airplanes and the next group must only be the degree of sun damage to the aging paint jobs, the shape of the planes, whether they had propeller or jet propulsion, and the degree of dismantling, with some of the newer arrivals looking like they could still take to the air, and the much earlier arrivals looking like so much metallic Swiss cheese, planes with so many panels removed and so much of the interior components cannibalized in earlier years that the what was left looked like it must collapse of its own weight, without enough structure left to support the remaining skeleton for even another day, much less another decade before being hauled off for a final flight into a smelter. They decided to call it day. But, before they headed back to the main part of the base, there was one more stop that Captain Mattice had promised – a trip to Russia.

From even a few hundred yards away, it looked like any other base residential area, alone, isolated, far away from the hustle of the main base, but no different in building size, color, or configuration. It was only when they drove up to the main gate and

approached the guards that Arlo sensed they were entering another world. Not only were the two guards dressed in distinctly Russian uniforms, with AK-47s cradled loosely in their arms, but the sign over the gate entrance gave notice that what was on the other side of the tall chain link and concertina wire fencing was uniquely different than anything Arlo had experienced so far. The large red sign above the gate was stenciled with white letters, each about one foot high, reading:

ВЫИГРЫШ ДРАКОЙ МУХЫ

“Any idea what it means?”

Tony chuckled as he produced identification documents for the two “Russian” guards. “It’s about the only Cyrillic that I do know, Arlo, and it’s the Air Force motto: Fly, Fight, Win.”

With the casual document inspection complete, Tony waited for the gate crossing arm to be lifted, then accelerated the Jeep through the gate opening, aiming directly for a single story, nondescript building that very obviously served as the HQ for this section of the base, a single flag pole in front of the building, a circle of green-painted rocks surrounding the flag pole, a single flag flying...the Russian tri-colors; three wide horizontal stripes and not at all the red, white, and blue that Arlo had expected. For a moment, nothing made sense...until it did. Arlo had temporarily left the US, and was now, for all intents and purposes, in “Russia”. Before the vehicle even came to a stop, a lanky man in his mid-40s came bounding from the building entrance, jumping over the two entry steps to the ground below, waving excitedly in the direction of the Jeep. Tony brought the vehicle to a stop, accompanied by a small cloud of dust, and Arlo instantly recognized the smiling man as the same officer who had greeted the “Mig” pilots early that morning.

“Welcome! Welcome! Thanks for coming!” The man returned the salute from Captain Mattice, turning instantly in Arlo’s direction. “You must be Mr. Duplessier. I’m Colonel Mike Bitteman. We’ve been expecting you. I’m glad Captain Mattice brought you by. Come on in. I’ll bet you guys are thirsty. It’s not summer, or we’d probably have already seen the buzzards circling, but after you’ve choked down enough of our dust here, a cold drink can taste mighty good” The Colonel shook Arlo’s hand vigorously, patted Tony on the shoulder, and waived them in the direction of the office front door, his southern drawl still hanging in Arlo’s ears, and his infectious grin revealing a set of perfect teeth. They weren’t even fully seated in the Colonel’s office before their host had punched the intercom on his desk, asking an orderly in some other part of the building to bring iced tea, colas, a bucket of ice, and some cookies or crackers for the guests. In the meantime, Arlo surveyed the room, more or less typical of a military office he thought, with a dry-erase scheduling board on one wall, with perhaps forty names down the far left column, various headings that Arlo couldn’t quite make out, and various red and green checkmarks which he assumed meant on or off duty, in or out of training, on or away from the base, statuses that would be typical of any office like this. The other wall was filled with plaques and awards, the wall flanked on one side by the Russian Tri-Colors again, and the US Flag occupying the other flank. Finally, Arlo felt at least a little bit like he was still in the United States. The area behind the Colonel’s chair was taken up by a large map of the southwestern United States, from the Dakotas and Nebraska on west to California, and from Canada down to Mexico. There were perhaps 100 push pins stuck in various locations around the map, most of them near areas where Arlo knew large population areas existed and presumably where military installations were located. The only picture in the office was on the Colonel’s desk, and Arlo assumed it was the Colonel’s wife and children, a beautiful red-headed woman who appeared to be in her late 30s, and two sandy blond children who were in their mid-teens when the picture was taken. From a small adjoining room, Arlo could hear a mandolin CD playing. The effect took him totally away from America. They were “in” Russia.”

Colonel Bitteman finished the intercom call and turned his attention to Arlo and Tony. “Pretty amazing chop shop, isn’t it?” He leaned back in his chair, curled his fingers behind his head, and waited for Arlo to speak.

“I’m overwhelmed, Colonel. You hear about places like this, and I’ve seen pictures of the boneyard. However, until you have your feet on the ground here, it’s hard to imagine just what goes on.” Arlo couldn’t constrain his curiosity, however, and his experience as an investigator took him right to the issue that most interested him. “But, why is a ‘Red Flag’ unit here?”

Colonel Bitteman offered a friendly laugh. “I’ll bet you were quite surprised to see our Mikoyans pull up to the flight line this morning, Mr. Duplessier.”

Arlo instantly knew two things: The Colonel did his homework, and his reference to ‘our Mikoyans’, instead of the more generic ‘the Migs’ gave emphasis to Tony’s comments about this being a world unto its own. “I like to think that I’ve developed an unreadable face in my many years as a journalist, Colonel, but Captain Mattice could read me like a book when your boys landed and pulled up in front of the restaurant. I must say I was surprised and I’m still curious. And, please call me Arlo.”

“Perhaps you’ve noticed that we have a lot of spare parts here, Arlo, but maybe Tony has already told you that our Mikoyans are nothing but F-18 Hornets with a bit of fancy makeup. The Navy has a habit of bending them now and again, and the ones that don’t go into the drink, but can’t be easily repaired aboard the carriers either, are brought back to San Diego. We get a few of them, nurse them back to health, bolt on some new sheet metal, and suddenly we have Mig-look-alike that serves as a terrific training bogey for the jocks who come into either Nellis or Miramar for the Top Gun schools. We fly in, shake ‘em up a bit, and then get out of Dodge for our little piece of the desert here. We are also missioned to fly occasional readiness sorties against potential strike targets here in the western US. We very secretly ran a mission against Southern California Edison’s nuke power plant at San Onofre last month and did the same thing against Pacific Gas & Electric’s station at Diablo Canyon, further up the coast. A terrorist attack is not guaranteed to come from the land side. And, there’s no reason to believe that a missile or fighter strike is out of the question. China is within a year of deploying their first strike carrier, nuke powered, capable of bringing fighters in range of the US. Then, there’s North Korea, Iran...multiple threats, and we have to be prepared for as many of them as we can think of, and a few that haven’t been thought of yet. Besides, it’s good for the US taxpayer, also. We get just a bit more use out of those precious defense dollars that are now stacked up as the metal heaps you saw today. Good training opportunities...good use of money...that’s what you’re writing about, isn’t it?”

The public relations campaign was fully underway, and Arlo could feel it. This was a pretty good sales job, and Arlo had to admire the communication that must have taken place since he boarded Tony’s black suburban the previous afternoon. Most of what he was witnessing must have been arranged just during the last 24 hours. Sergeant Patton surely would not have spelled out too much of this beforehand, preferring to allow Arlo the full range of possible and plausible stories, as well as deniabilities that he would need to conduct an investigation that wasn’t an official investigation at all. He was just about to ask about the strike sorties against targets such as the power plants and even cities when there was a soft knock at the door.

“Come!” And, then to Tony and Arlo, “That will be Adrian with our drinks”

A young airman entered with a rolling rack of drinks, creamer, and sugar as well as a platter of freshly cubed melons and some grapes. The Colonel was right. After a day of dust and dry desert air, the drinks and melons were a welcome treat, and the conversation steered away from mission profiles while Adrian set out cups, saucers, spoons and began placing ice cubes in three glasses. “Thank you, Adrian. We have a guest today. Mr Duplessier is representing The American Nation magazine, and he’s doing a story about Davis-Monthan and AMARG.”

Adrian smiled in the direction of Arlo, but kept at his task of preparing cold drinks. It was only then that Arlo, looking at the man’s uniform and name tag, noticed the young man’s last name and felt a little bit of America flow back into the room. “Are you from Louisiana, Adrian?”

There was a momentary pause and Arlo thought even a stiffening of the man’s hands. Adrian looked first in the direction of Colonel Bitteman, and Arlo could see a nod of the Colonel’s head out of the corner of his eye. Adrian had permission to speak. “Why, yes sir, I am. How did you know?”

“A lucky guess, Adrian. The last name ‘Guidry’ gave it away. Where in Louisiana are you from? I’m from Baton Rouge.”

“Oh, I’m from Crowley, born and raised. Attended St. Michael’s High. Academy grad in 2000. I’m already on my second hitch.”

“Crowley! Now there’s a great town, if ever there was one. You’re lucky to have grown up there. But, I’ll bet this part of the world still feels strange after the humidity and greenery of south Louisiana.”

“Well, I do have to say that I don’t miss the humidity, but a little more greenery would be a welcome change.”

“And, you probably don’t even get anything like the home-cooking you grew up with either. When’s the last time you had a mess of mud bugs in this man’s outfit?”

There was a passing look of bewilderment on Adrian’s face, and he dropped one ice cube, just missing the third glass. “Mud bugs, sir?”

Arlo hesitated a moment. He was the only other person from Louisiana, so he couldn’t expect any help on this. “Crawfish. You know, gumbo...etouffee...crawfish boil.”

“Oh...yes...right...yes, crawfish. Well, I haven’t been home but once since leaving the academy. I’d all but forgotten about them. No, we sure don’t get crawfish here. Scorpions look like them, but there’s no one brave enough here to see if they taste the same. No Okra here either, so I’m afraid I’ve turned into a meat and potatoes guy.”

Arlo hesitated a moment, taking in the full measure of Adrian. “Well, I miss it also. But, I’m a pretty good cook, and my wife indulges me by letting me smell up the house with shrimp gumbo at least once per year, but never for important guests. She’s afraid they’ll never come back if they find out I’m cooking ‘bugs’ as she calls them. Shame! Good eating!”

Adrian nodded in agreement, straightened up, smiling the entire time, but gesturing with his head to the Colonel that some things still needed attending to in the other area of the building. “That will be all, Adrian. Thank you.”

The remainder of the meeting was uneventful, with the Colonel continuing to explain their overall mission, mentioning that they flew sorties as far north as Seattle and as far east as Memphis, with the occasional profile games against Offutt and the SAC forces near Omaha, plus penetration strikes to test radar systems near Minot, North Dakota where most of the remaining ICBMs are located. They talked for about two hours, and by the time Tony and Arlo departed for the main part of the base, leaving around 6PM in the early darkness of the desert winter season, Arlo knew that he had seen just about everything he needed to see at Davis-Monthan, with the exception of the money trail. After a good night’s sleep, he would be ready to tackle the numbers, which he already knew would be stunningly large. If there was something going on in the D-M accounting, allowing anyone to skim off profits for personal gain, then Arlo had to figure that it was somehow cooked into the books. Making off with enough spare parts to make even a reasonable amount of money was just next to impossible. He was going to take Willie Sutton’s advice about robbing banks: You go where the money is, and the money was in the books.

Arlo was no CPA, but his cases had either exposed him to or involved him in enough forensic accounting issues to know the right questions to ask in order to bring improprieties to light, and there was no shielding of information on the following day. As far as anyone knew, Arlo’s goal was to paint AMARG in a positive light, a contributor to deficit reduction, resulting in a total openness and willingness to discuss any aspect of the accounting procedures in force. In the space of only a few hours on Wednesday morning, Arlo was able to review figures going back to the late 90s, prior to 9/11 and prior to the financial meltdown of the late 2000s. He felt that if money – big money was going to be skimmed from the government books, it would have been after 2007, when the financial crises made it difficult, if not impossible to make easy money on Wall Street and at the big banks. But, as Bill Clinton had so famously stated during the investigations of his presidency, there was no “there” there, leaving Arlo with little choice but to pack up, thank his hosts, head for the Tucson airport, board his Citation, and head off to Taos for the next leg of his investigation.

As soon as he was buckled into the front seat of the business jet, even before the engines were spooled up, and even before ground clearance gave permission to taxi, Arlo pulled out his phone and punched in the number for Sergeant George Patton. He owed

a big one to George for clearing his path at Davis-Monthan, and he knew that he might as well admit that it all seemed for naught, and that “goose chase” seemed to be growing as a possibility.

The call was answered on the first ring. “If you’re nice to me I’ll send you a ticket back to civilization.” George let out a big laugh. “I knew you’d be calling me, Amigo. Got enough snake pie under your belt yet?”

“Must be the wrong season for snakes, George. It’s certainly the wrong one for Condors. I got nothing...nothing that smells very funny, no crooked books as far as I can tell...and, no one that seems to be in a position to warrant being on the take. Might have been a mistake to even come here.”

“Well, you must have seen or heard something. Give me the high points.”

“Well, I’ve got a Red Flag squadron, right where I would have never expected it to be. A Colonel from Alabama who dresses like a Russian and says the word ‘vodka’ like it has about seven syllables, instead of just the two that you and I are familiar with; a kid who grew up in the rice capital of America and doesn’t even know the common name for crawfish, about 200 pages of accounting information, a dehydration headache, and I’m drinking water like they’re not making any more of it.”

“Red Flag, huh? Well, I can’t say that I knew about that, but what better place? Good weather, plenty of spare parts, room to stay hidden, short jump to Nellis.”

That’s what he said.”

“Who said?”

“Bitteman. Colonel Mike Bitteman. Maybe you could look him up and fill me in on his background. Oh, and maybe you could check out this young guy, a Captain if I know my Russian insignia, which I don’t, but I think he’s a Captain, Adrian Guidry, graduated from Colorado Springs in 2000, I believe he said...from Crowley, Louisiana and on his second hitch with Uncle Sam. Probably nothing there, George, but I’m grasping at straws.”

“Are you on your way to Taos, Arlo?”

Arlo peered out the window of the plane. “We’re just taxiing out now, George. We’ll be off the ground in moments, and it’s just over an hour to Taos. I’ll see Sunderlins tomorrow and be back in the office on Friday, I believe. Can you do a little homework on this stuff for me?”

“I’m on it, Arlo, although I wouldn’t expect to find much there either.”

As they disconnected, the pilots turned the Citation onto the active runway and began a takeoff roll to the north. As soon as the jet left the ground, Arlo leaned his seat back to contemplate what he had seen during his hours at Davis-Monthan...or more importantly, what he had not seen. Even though it was only early afternoon as they departed Tucson, it would still be too late to see the Sunderlins this afternoon. That was just as well in Arlo’s mind. There was plenty to think about and plenty of questions to review, including the question of where the “snakes” were...the snakes that were thus far not evident in Tucson. But, he also knew that cold weather drove snakes underground. Perhaps even in February, things would warm up in Taos, and perhaps that would drive some “snakes” out into the open.