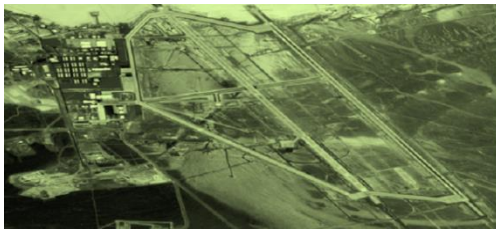




July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2001. 23:45 hrs. Keyhole-Class satellite KH-136, designated “REDHAWK” - the latest of more than 130 U.S. Defense Support Surveillance/Imaging Satellites - sped silently in eastward trajectory through the night sky in low orbit, 120 miles above the Earth...

Six hundred miles west of the California coast, REDHAWK’s attitude control system made a series of adjustments, and the satellite trained its 48-inch-diameter telescope on a target region in space near the edge of the constellation Orion. It set its optical systems for maximum sensitivity in the infrared light spectrum, and then homed-in on a large celestial object there, using both its infrared camera and mass-spectrometer. The giant orb it detected was still far outside our solar system’s orbital plane but moving closer. To the human eye it would be imperceptible in the visible spectrum, even in the vacuum of space. But to REDHAWK the object’s form, magnetic, and heat signatures were unmistakable...

As it passed over Death Valley, the satellite re-directed its telescopic camera downward to Earth’s surface then eastward, to lock onto a six-by-ten-mile patch of sun-parched badlands on the plains of Southern Nevada, just now coming into view along the horizon line ahead. There, on a remote portion of Nellis Air Force Base, the Groom Mountains encircle the dry beds of Groom and Papoose Lakes. When seen at ground level, these peaks shield from curious eyes the most highly guarded ultra-secret Research, Development, and Testing Facility in the US. Its Classified Site Designation is “R-4808 N”. But the world outside its boundaries has come to know it as Area 51: a.k.a., “DREAMLAND”.



The satellite’s powerful infrared camera began to zoom-in on the still hazy specks of that installation’s older yet constantly evolving surface facilities. They include several scattered groupings of Quonset huts, giant hangars, RADAR and radio towers, plus the world’s most extensive aircraft runway system. REDHAWK’s huge electronic lens mechanism began to whirr, buzz, and click these features into clear focus for surface security analysis using ultra-high magnification. Its charge-coupled device converted the visual images it captured into microbursts of encrypted compressed digital data then transmitted that product to a relay satellite in high orbit 122,000 miles above Earth, which bounced REDHAWK’s data to a ground tracking station in Ft. Belvoir, Virginia, for decryption and resolution into visual images for photo-analysis.



Directly below in the foothills of the Groom Mountains, and roughly a half-mile from Area 51's northeast perimeter, a light westerly wind swept up the steep side of a tall sand dune. For most of this late evening, the heat still clinging stubbornly to the desert was hot as a firecracker. The air smelled faintly of sagebrush and mesquite. But now, the man atop this dune who was known only as "SANDMAN" (like the legendary giver of sleep in children's' fairy tales) sensed something new in the breeze moving his way: The faint smell of rain.



He looked up and saw that on the western horizon but still miles away, a summer thunderstorm was on the rise. For a split-second, lightning lit-up a high thundercloud there, and the crack and rumble of distant thunder soon rolled across the sky. For a time, it would remain clear overhead. And the silvery moon would continue to cast its radiant beams out into the sky of midnight blue, now sprinkled with bright stars. SANDMAN scanned the area below, watchful for any sign of the chubby, middle-aged civilian Computer Technologist who worked swing-shift, performing research somewhere inside the perimeter fence a couple of clicks away. There'd be no trouble spotting his no-frills white, U.S. Government motor pool 4-door Ford Crown Victoria sedan with a blue interior, even in darkness; he'd memorized the 4-digit number displayed on its rear plate, distinguishing it as a U.S. Government vehicle for employees and contractors at Area 51.



For the past week SANDMAN's directives had been to merely observe the man and report any changes in his behavior or activities. Then only hours ago, his handler informed him that his surveillance assignment had become one so sensitive that within the entire U.S. intelligence network, only these two operatives would have immediate knowledge of it.

On this night, between 23:00 and 0:00 hrs., the Tech genius was expected to slip-away from his work site inside Area 51, drive the Crown Vic to this location, and park by the dry arroyo below. Here, he would wait for an as-yet unknown contact from Las Vegas. The purpose was not made clear. Regardless, SANDMAN's objective was to prevent that meeting from ever taking place, and the Tech was now his priority target. He shifted his body, and remembered tailing the man to this spot in the scorching afternoon heat...

SANDMAN followed the prime rule of setting up an ambush: Be *first* to arrive. He'd straddled his custom-made Ducati racing 'cycle and sped northward from 'Vegas on I-15, then up I-93 for a hundred miles, tailing the sedan from a safe distance. At Crystal Spring, he'd followed it west on "The Extraterrestrial Highway" but dropped back as it swept through the low hills of the Pahrangat Valley.



Then at a juncture a few miles south of the village of Rachel, the sedan forked left onto the unpaved Groom Lake Road. For ten miles it kicked up a rooster tail of dust across a broad playa toward these Jumbled Hills, nature's wall that blocked the view of the surface facilities at Groom and Papoose Lakes...and their painstakingly protected secrets.



Near the end of the gravel road, the Crown Vic disappeared 'round a dangerously sharp curve at the foot of this high dune, which he'd later prepped as the strike point for tonight's task. A quarter-mile ahead, he spotted two high hills between the sand dune and Whitesides Mountain in the distance. There, he stopped the 'cycle abruptly, and watched the sedan disappear through an opening in the barbed-wire perimeter fence (an open invitation to a security breach, if there ever was one.) Atop each hill were posted armed private security guards UFOlogists call "camo-dudes", standing watch over the opening in the fence through which the Crown Vic had passed on its way into the mysterious facilities beyond.

He'd found it almost laughable that although the Pentagon has always denied this installation's very existence, at this boundary, a large and solitary sign of warning is posted in deep sand off the right shoulder of Groom Lake Road to discourage truth-seekers from nosing around a place that officially does not exist. He scanned this sign, the text of which contains an ominous threat on the bottom line: USE OF DEADLY FORCE IS AUTHORIZED.



SANDMAN turned his 'cycle about here, then disappeared 'round the curve to the eastern slope of this steep dune above the now familiar ravine. For him, it was a great stroke of luck finding this particular sandhill: It was completely hidden by the surrounding terrain and would not be visible by line-of-sight to the men guarding the perimeter back there in the distance.

It was quick and easy to park his 'cycle well off the roadway there among the rocks and rough brush. Once that was done, he'd covered it with six-color camouflage netting, and then scrambled up the side of the dune to the top, facing the roadbed. There, he scooped-away just enough sand with a small folding military trench tool to lay prone and be unseen from the dirt road below. He piled a few large rocks on the downward slope to serve as a stable firing platform, and then retrieved two nylon tote bags containing the necessary tools of his profession from the 'cycle and carried them up to this small depression in the sand.



From the smaller of the two bags he withdrew a shoulder holster bearing a .50 cal. Desert Eagle Magnum pistol, strapped the holster on and adjusted it slightly, verified the pistol's readiness, and snapped it back into the holster. Lastly, he unzipped the combination soft rifle bag and foldout shooter's mat, and extracted the two halves of his hallmark .308 cal. Heckler and Koch PSG-

1 Sniper rifle, plus an optional 750-gram silencer and tripod rest...

With practiced hands SANDMAN quickly bolted them together and clipped a Darkstar 30,000+ light gain amplification infrared scope onto the rifle. He slipped a shell-holder containing six extra rounds onto his left wrist, then double-



checked everything. Satisfied all was in order, he settled down onto the mat in the prone position and waited for his prey to enter the killing-ground below. And sweltering in the relentless heat amongst bugs and rocks and Joshua trees, he reflected upon his predicament.

For years, SANDMAN had been a ruthless assassin for the CIA. And yet this killing machine didn't like being anywhere *near* Area 51. But he had a devil's job to finish out here tonight and was determined to force himself to complete the task, though his uneasiness wasn't making that effortless.

For some time, he'd been at a crossroads, and might soon be forced to either stay his present course or choose an entirely different one. A few things were certain, though. He was mad as hell at those who'd in the past betrayed and abandoned him. And madder still at those who'd sent him here to complete yet another gruesome assignment in the name of "National Security". For these and many other reasons, the prospect of continuing to do business with them had been weighing heavily on his mind lately. And that burden seemed especially heavy tonight.



The sound of thunderclaps moving closer caused him to look up to the night sky. And he couldn't help imagining it might have been a night like this one under desert stars the first week in July 1947, when the first disc crashed in a sandy arroyo during a thunderstorm about a thousand miles away near Roswell, New Mexico. He'd been told of the classified remains recovered there. What's

out *here*, too, and what they do with those...things. And the experiments.

*There's mighty bad Voodoo here*, SANDMAN reflected. Momentarily shaking off the mental images of "flying saucers" and "little gray men", he turned his left wrist to check the time displayed on his Luminox diver's wristwatch: 23:50 hrs. And still no sign of the predictably punctual little computer dweeb.

To calm himself, he closed his eyes. Not long. Just the length of a couple of slow, deep breaths. He held the last one in and released it slowly through pursed lips. Then a rapid-fire slide show of distant remembrances invaded his consciousness, reminding him how his previous life as an Army Special Forces Sniper had ended about a decade ago, and his present one began...



The low engine rumble and the scrunch of tires rolling over pea gravel on the road below made SANDMAN's pulse quicken. His body tensed too as, from the direction of Highway 375 a black C5 Corvette convertible grumbled around the curve and made a U-turn, then came to a stop on the right-hand side of the road by the ravine below.

The driver switched off the car's lights but left the engine idling, the low rumble of its exhaust keeping time with the powerful-sounding engine he guessed was a 350-horse, 5.7 Liter V-8 under the hood. This was a problem: The computer geek was to arrive there ahead of his contact. Now it might be impossible to eliminate him without involving a potential witness to the murder.

SANDMAN's eyes dilated widely, and his nostrils flared. He switched on the infrared scope and squinted at the glowing, green figure of the driver: A woman in her thirties with extremely attractive features and long, dark hair. He also made a mental note of the license plate number.

Seconds later, the familiar white Crown Victoria came barreling through the hidden back gate to Area 51 and scrunched to a stop, parallel with the 'Vette. His target left its engine running as the two people began an animated discussion in tones so low he couldn't hear it through the open windows of the two cars. And now, the Tech appeared to be getting frantic about something,

turning ‘round frequently and flapping his arms in the direction of the hills through which he’d passed.

Suddenly, the little computer man become argumentative about something. Any additional disturbance there in that moment could bring unwanted attention and compromise the entire assignment---a risk SANDMAN could not take. And now it was clear he had not one, but *two* targets. He released the PSG-1’s safety. Then all hell broke loose.



The Crown Vic’s engine began revving up, and the ‘Vette growled back to life. Engine roaring and rear wheels spinning, the ‘Vette kicked-up a cloud of sand and gravel and sped-off with lights ablaze in the direction of the ET Highway.

“DAMMIT!” SANDMAN hissed vehemently as the dust-cloud rose up. Given another split-second he could have squeezed off a round at her, and now she was out of sight. He let her go, fully intending to catch up with her as soon as he dotted the Tech’s eye. Again, he squinted into the infrared scope, feeling as he always did the adrenaline kick in the seconds just before a kill. He clenched his jaw and muttered, “C’mon, lemme seeya...” then held his breath, ready to drill a hole through the man’s left eye socket.



But in a heartbeat the Crown Vic spun ‘round in a tight U-turn and fishtailed wildly away, careening more than a hundred feet in the darkness before its lights came on. Then suddenly...

SANDMAN’s eyes were stabbed by a blinding dagger of blue-white light shining down through the torn curtain of dark blue sky!



He blinked several times in rapid succession. And as his vision cleared, without a sound, a second beam, and then a third appeared. The three indistinct aerial forms joined-up in a Delta formation, the blue-white beams under their bellies scanning the terrain below them. They were heading in his direction, and he estimated their range to be roughly half a mile and closing-in on him fast.

SANDMAN sprang to his feet. He grabbed the two weapon bags, zippered the pistol pouch and rifle into the long tote, and scrambled hastily down the side of the steep dune to the Ducati. There, he threw-off and stowed the ‘cycle’s cover of camo-netting, and spent precious seconds securing the rifle bag alongside the seat with a bungee cord. Quickly, he donned his black racing helmet and a light windbreaker, then straddled the big Supersport, thankful that it roared to life instantly with a single push of its electric starter button.



Half a mile now from the strike-point, SANDMAN back-glanced over his left shoulder. The trio hovered motionless in the sky over the hastily vacated scene, and then descended. He took advantage and urged the big Ducati onward a little faster. But now the dust in the air was becoming thicker---the Crown Vic couldn’t be too far ahead.

In seconds, the first red traces of its taillights glimmered faintly through the dust-cloud, but his relief was short-lived: One of the aerial crafts rose-up from the formation and, flying

low now, swept its beam side-to-side over the roadbed as it again headed toward them. SANDMAN figured it was pointless to try to hide from the unidentifiable objects above. Even if he cut the 'cycle's lights, he might remain visible if they were equipped with advanced weapons technologies that could paralyze, or even vaporize him.

Now the first few drops of rain began to spatter against his visor and streak off, and an extra sense of urgency shot through him. He cranked the Supersport's throttle wide-open, an exceedingly dangerous thing to do in the treacherous sand and gravel. In another quarter-mile, the white sedan came clearly into SANDMAN's view. It slowed enough to make the right-angle turn onto Highway 375 toward 'Vegas, but nearly fishtailed out of control. He glanced left, then right. No sign of the 'Vette. A mile farther along, SANDMAN noticed something else very odd: For some reason, the aerial crafts were slowing the pace of their pursuit.

He raced after the white sedan for several more tense moments. And as they entered the hills, canyons, and switchbacks of the Pahrnagat Valley, the little man at the wheel of the Crown Vic set a furious pace, driving faster and faster despite the ever-increasing danger of losing control 'round a sharp curve. But SANDMAN increased his speed too, leaning hard into the tight curves at Hancock Summit, the highest elevation on the roadway in these badlands. The big Ducati wailed angrily along under his fierce acceleration and quickly closed the gap between them to seventy-five yards...fifty...then twenty... NOW!

SANDMAN down-gear'd the Supersport, and again twisted its throttle wide-open. And with a tremendous howl, its front wheel rose-up from the pavement as it leaped forward, coming alongside the sedan on the left as if to pass. He drew the big Desert Eagle Magnum and pointed it squarely into the driver's frantic and distorted face, fully intent on unleashing with one squeeze of its trigger a ferocious blast of thunder, lightning, and lead.



The man quickly glanced left, only to see the gaping maw of the firearm pointing directly at his left eye. Both his eyes bulged with stark terror, and his mouth opened-wide in a silent scream as instinctively, he stamped the brakes and wrenched the steering wheel over hard to the right. Instantly, the white sedan vanished from SANDMAN's view. And then came the screaming of tortured tires, and a horrific scrunch of steel and glass and splintering timber.

SANDMAN backed-off the 'cycle's throttle, and its front-end plunged back down onto the pavement. He let it decelerate on its own around the rest of the curve, then broke right onto the highway's narrow shoulder and holstered the pistol. And then, PAWHOOMPFISH! And once more, he back-checked over his left shoulder...

A few hundred feet behind, a jet of steam belched high into the air from the Crown Victoria's crushed radiator, and a puddle of dark liquid began to spread out below the car's mangled remains. He whipped the 'cycle around hard and quickly covered the distance back to the wreckage at the side of the highway.



The sedan had smashed into the first solid pylon of the two-hundred-foot steel and wooden guardrail dead center and plowed through a half-dozen more before coming to rest. Flames were already engulfing the car. And the last vestiges of life were oozing from the horrible, glistening mess trapped inside...roasting to a crisp.

Then above and only seconds away now - their light-beams blazing again - the trio in the sky reappeared...probing, searching...

Mad as hell that *twice* he'd been cheated out of the split-second he needed to squeeze the trigger (and consequently, his usual moment of glory) SANDMAN got moving fast, pushing the Ducati through the canyon at nearly full throttle. In his rear-view mirrors he caught sight of the yellow-orange fireball of exploding gasoline leaked from the vehicle's ruptured fuel tank, and the heavy cloud of black smoke already mushrooming above it. And while the pursuing trio in the night sky froze and then hovered over the inferno, he concentrated on putting as much distance as he could between himself and them.



Once outside the badlands he continued to run the big 904 c.c. V-twin Supersport hard...135 mph...140...145...quickly establishing a cushion of about ten miles as he shot through Ash Springs, Crystal Spring, and then Alamo. And as he raced southbound on I-93 toward Las Vegas, the raindrops turned to steam when they struck asphalt. He was thankful now for that rain, it cooled the air and cleared his thoughts.

Peering back, he still saw no sign of the unidentifiable objects in the sky. But neither in the distance ahead was there any sign of the Corvette. The latter seemed worrisome until he began to rationalize, the woman's escape could be entirely inconsequential to the outcome of this assignment. Should anything ever come of it, he knew her plate number and could take care of her later, on his own. But for now, it seemed healthier to keep quiet about this little glitch---just collect his cash payment for the hit, and then lay low. And if he smelled even a hint of anything out of the ordinary, he figured Rio probably looks pretty good this time of year.

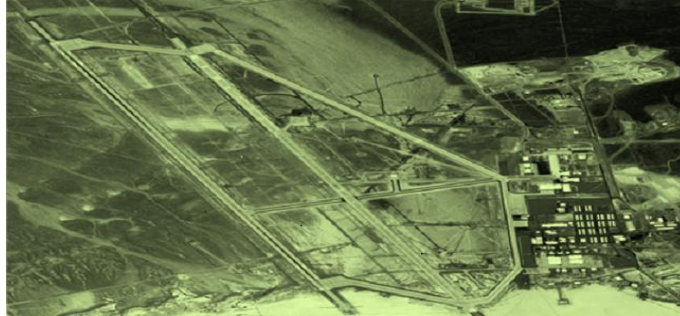
SANDMAN continued to urge the big Ducati toward the distant glow above Las Vegas on the horizon. But as a precaution, he reduced his speed to a comfortable 70 mph, reminding himself that while he might have problems right then, should he invite a fistful of tickets from some rabid State Trooper for speeding or reckless driving, he'd be searched and likely arrested. And then he'd have *trouble*, too.

All things considered, he was greatly relieved that the main operational aspect of this assignment had finally ended. And though disappointed that the method to neutralize his target was radically different this time, he recognized that the outcome was the same, nonetheless. And as the danger began to subside, an expression of exhilaration slowly came over the taciturn face inside the black helmet. He even allowed himself a rare grin that continued to broaden nearly ear-to-ear at almost seeing the Front-Page Headline on the *Las Vegas Review-Journal's* morning edition: "ACCIDENT ON 375 NEAR RACHEL CLAIMS ONE."

Accident? Yeah, right. Without question, this had been SANDMAN's all-time ugliest hit. But it was beautiful, too...a real "Work of Art."



Now well beyond Area 51's overhead flight bubble, REDHAWK continued silently along in its eastward orbit. Its infrared camera zoomed-in on Hangar Bay 3 and captured the images of its massive outer doors rolling shut just as the disc floated inside. It then encrypted and transmitted those images to Langley, along with the other anomalies it had captured. The satellite then began to cool its mechanisms with superfluid helium. And its great, dispassionate eye rolled over in retro-rotation and whirred, buzzed, and clicked into focus at maximum resolution a final infrared panoramic view of Area 51, already seeming to fall behind...



SANDMAN had been closer to the truth than he'd imagined... It actually *had* been a night just about like this one under desert stars the first week in July, 1947, when the first disc crashed in a sandy arroyo near Roswell, New Mexico. And though the odds against were almost inconceivable, the culmination of all these bizarre, and seemingly unrelated occurrences - separated by more than five decades and roughly a thousand miles - had just upset some of the most secret and carefully orchestrated conspiracies of the governments of the world. And, more specifically, of the silent conspirators behind the scenes who wield absolute control over them.

