

Martinez rolled the staff car to a stop outside the diner, a block down from the Sheriff's office. The bell over the door tinged as he went in; the smell of eggs, bacon, grits, coffee and cigarette smoke hit immediately. It was 0730 and a quiet hubbub of laid-back conversation permeated the air. Most of the booths were full, but even if they were not he would have sat at the counter. He wanted some gen.

Martinez eased himself onto the bar-stool and leaned on the pale pink formica counter. He smiled at Beryl, her name sewn in red thread in broad cursive writing across the front of her yellow and white checked apron.

"Eggs, bacon, pie?"

"Just coffee, thanks. Black."

She poured him a cup.

"Can I ask you a question? About the sheriff?"

"Why? I know George hasn't done anything so are you in trouble air force man? Just goofing. I know you can't be or I would know about it. Our whole little town would."

Martinez smiled. "No. Not today, at any rate. I'm meeting Sheriff Wilkins shortly. What's he like?"

"George? He came here around four years ago, been sheriff since then. Or was it five? Was a police captain in Chicago. Rumour is he had enough of the big city, the mafia, the shootings. None of that round here, pleased to say. Nothing interesting ever happens around Roswell."

Martinez nodded. Some of it he had heard already. "But what's he like?"

"Oh, a good egg. Solid. Grows plants in one of the cells; flowers with bright colours. You can depend on George." Beryl walked away.

Martinez paid his tab and walked out into the dazzling morning sunshine. It was going to be another hot New Mexico day. Still early for the appointment, he ambled down the sidewalk. The sheriff's office could have been from the set of a western: all it needed was a wooden rail out front and a horse trough. Martinez could almost picture the dusty tired posse coming back into town, their horses trudging, heads-down, and pulling up outside, having been out all night searching for Jesse James or Billy the Kid.

Martinez knocked on the wooden door and without waiting, went in. This door had a louder bell over it. The darkness inside was a stark contrast and it took a few seconds for Martinez'

eyes to adjust, but it was soon apparent that the inside looked as much like an old western film set as the outside did.

The sheriff was sitting at a big wooden desk behind a leather-topped banister that divided the small office in two. On his desk sat one of the few items of modernity, a telephone that looked brand new, judging by the lack of wear marks or smudges behind the rotary dial.

“Sheriff Wilkins, good morning. Captain Martinez.” Martinez extended his hand across the banister. He could have pushed through the low swing door but it was the sheriff’s territory inside and Martinez had not been invited, not yet at least.

Wilkins got up and took Martinez’ hand firmly. “Good to meet you.” Wilkins glanced down and could not help but notice the incredibly short pinkies on both of Martinez’ hands. A war injury? Maybe even torture?

Martinez scanned the man’s face as they shook and let go, and then the rest of him. Wilkins was shorter than Martinez - but then again, most were less than six feet. Five-eight or nine? He was not as slim as Martinez but nor was Wilkins fat, and he lacked the paunch common in police officers later in life. Wilkins’ grip had been firm and assured, and Wilkins had looked Martinez straight in the eye. Wilkins had a good tan: that was a good sign. It meant that Wilkins was out and about a lot and did not just sit on his tush behind his desk and leave it all to the sergeant. Wilkins was obviously too old to have been in the war - the second one, although he might have made it into the first - and his face and eyes looked like they had seen things. You could always tell, Martinez found: he was like it himself.

“Howsabout you come in the back and look at the stuff?” Wilkins held open the low swing door.

Martinez smiled as the sheriff picked up the big antiquated metal ring, several keys jangling off it. The sheriff unlocked the door to the back where the two cells were. Martinez noted that there were a whole load of fancy plants tucked to one side in the small corridor outside the cells. Wilkins pushed open an unlocked cell door: judging by a few bits of soil on the floor in the corners it looked like the cell had been keeping the plants captive until very recently.

Scattered over the floor of the cell was a pile of shiny pieces: it looked a bit like kitchen foil used to wrap something on the barbecue. Martinez went down on his haunches to look more closely. They had the bright chrome look of parts of a weather balloon.

“Give it a feel. Try to tear it.”

Martinez picked up a piece. It was a lot heavier than he expected and the back side had a thin coating of something soft and flexible that wasn't rubber and nor did it seem to be nylon. Martinez knew heaps about secret new aircraft technologies but he had never heard of a metal foil coated in a plastic material. He pressed his thumbnail into it and then took it away, leaving a little crescent-shape which gradually faded until the surface was smooth again. He grabbed the edge of a piece with both hands and tried tearing it. It scrunched up but did not give. He yanked as hard as he could but it would not tear and as soon as he let go the creases disappeared and it was as smooth as silk. Well, it clearly wasn't foil on the front and nor was it nylon on the back - he had heard enough women moaning about stockings laddering as soon as you looked at them.

The sheriff handed Martinez a magnifying glass of the old Sherlock Holmes style, then lifted up a linen cloth. “I kept this covered. Thought it might be top secret.” On the table lay a thin rectangular piece of greenish glass, around nine inches square and a quarter inch thick. It had two of the corners chipped off.

Martinez leaned down and peered at it through the magnifying glass. “Looks like tiny dots all across it?”

“Take a gander at the back.”

It was covered in minute little pads in rectangular shapes, with barely-visible ultra-fine wires connecting to them, across and up-down. He'd only got away from Area 51 a few months ago - they can't have developed this in that time, surely?

Martinez stood up. “Anyone else seen any of this or know about it?”

“No sir, only Mitch Baker, the rancher who brought it in. And your colonel, of course.”

“Good. Keep it that way.”

The sheriff nodded.

“I'm going to need to take it all.”

“Thought you would. I brought a duffel bag.”

As they were stuffing it all in the bag Martinez began. “It's really..”

“I know. But just wait until you see the craft, the saucer, it came from. And what's inside.”