

Prologue

The men were dressed in fatigues. They signaled for us to stop the car. Bob turned off the engine. The wind carried a small cloud of dust past the windows of the Oldsmobile we had rented in Las Vegas.

In the glare of the headlights we could see that two of them were wearing sidearms. The third one remained on the edge of the trail, closer to the guard post. He was carrying a machine gun. We lowered the windows, avoiding any suspicious or sudden moves.

"Didn't you see the sign?" said one of the guards.

"What sign?" we asked.

He didn't bother answering. We had seen a rectangular warning sign that indicated a federal facility and restricted access, but it was stored in the office of a television reporter back in Las Vegas, and Las Vegas was a long way away. Somebody had obviously taken the sign as a souvenir. On this deserted road, however, all we had seen was the full moon rising over the bare mountains of Nevada mountains that isolate the real world from Nellis Air Force Base and the specific location we sought: Area 51. Dreamland.

The rumor within the UFO research community stated that if you could get close enough to Nellis, you would see strange luminous objects maneuvering in remarkably erratic ways that seemed to defy physics. Some people argued that these objects were flying saucers captured by the United States government for testing purposes. Others thought they were a kind of prototype weapon, probably a remotely piloted vehicle (RPV), a fact that would explain their ability to change directions suddenly. They could even be RPVs made to resemble flying saucers in support of some weird psychological warfare project. Which is exactly what we wanted to understand, since we were working together on a screenplay for a UFO movie.

Bob Weiss, our producer, was at the wheel. Writer Tracy Torme was watching the landscape, making mental notes of the hills, the brush, the fences.

"With the full moon, and our headlights, we must have stuck out like a sore thumb," I said to my companions while the guards went around the vehicle, noting the make, year, and license plate.

"They've got infrared cameras and motion detectors," said Bob, pointing to a tall tower near the gate.

Nobody had forewarned us about that down in Vegas. The guard facility was new. Other people who had taken this road had not been stopped.

"Who does the car belong to?" one of the guards asked.

"Hertz," Bob answered.

"Where are you going?"

"We were on the way to Rachel."

That seemed to satisfy them. Rachel is a small cluster of shacks and trailers in the middle of the desert on the way to Tonopah, which has become something of a high point for UFO investigators and stealth technology buffs.

The guards took our drivers' licenses and went back to their shelter. Through the lighted windows we could see someone making a phone call.

"They want to find out if we've had any previous warning," Bob remarked.

"What kind of outfit is this, anyway?" asked Tracy. "They're not wearing Air Force uniforms."

"They're not really military," Bob answered. "They're the Air Force version of Rent-A-Cop. Guard services, contractors. I've hired guys like that to watch over movie sets in Hollywood. Here they come."

A guard walked toward us, carrying a clipboard. Pieces of paper with carbon underneath were flapping in the desert wind. We read the citation by the glare of the map light. It contained a warning not to set foot inside the perimeter of Nellis Air Force Base again. I took one look at the guy's machine gun and signed my copy. My friends did the same. We turned around. Two of the guards climbed into a Blazer and followed us all the way to the main road, staying some distance back of the cloud of dust we were raising on the long, straight, unsurfaced road.

They made sure we turned left toward Rachel. Any attempt to sneak into the network of smaller trails that led into the hills would have been futile. Besides, our Oldsmobile, although brand new, would never have made it. As it was, it had trouble dragging us uphill on the main highway.

"Why do they make engines with two and a half cylinders?" Bob joked, eager to put some distance between us and the Blazer.

There were no strange lights in the sky that night. And when we stopped at a place that overlooked part of the northern section of the base, all we heard were the muffled sounds of the desert, and all we saw were the familiar constellations being obscured by drifting clouds. If there were flying saucers in the process of being tested at Dreamland, the secret was being kept very well.

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