

Section I, “One if by Air....” In the near future....

Microsoft senior executive Jack Williamson finished his walk-around of his new favorite toy. Dark gray and black, the twin engined carbon-fibre and titanium XB-171 was the newest, state-of-the-art personal jet available to the general public. With a forward swept main wing, two canards flanking the pilot's canopy, and two 6,000 pound thrust jet engines, she had power to spare, if you had the cash to spare. At 42 feet long and packing a 34 foot wing, she was about as big as the Air Force's old F16 and almost as powerful. Williamson finished his pre-flight checklist, inserted the security key into the floor-mounted switch, and pressed the pre-start pushbuttons for the twin General Electric engines. Immediately, the APU came on-line, and the turbines growled up to speed. Thumbing through the various sub-system readouts on the triple full-color cockpit VDU's, Jack was satisfied that everything was working correctly, and signaled the ground crewman to remove the APU power umbilicals and roll the boarding ladder away. He cinched his restraining harness tighter, then released the brakes. The sleek

aircraft rolled forward slowly, and took up its position in the queue of planes awaiting take-off permission. The twin engined Cessna in front of him rolled out, then climbed, and he was next.

“November eight seven niner tango, you are go for launch on runway two fiver west,” the bored voice from the tower informed him. “Seven niner tango, switch on your transponder. We are not painting you on the tower radar.”

“Err, roger tower, seven niner tango to runway two fiver west. Rolling out. Transponder is on now, sorry about that, I need to get that automated interlink connected to the flight control system. I keep forgetting to turn it on. The tech is supposed to be out next week to update the software for that link. Have a nice day, gentlemen.”

“Ditto, seven niner. Looks like a beautiful day for a hop.”

The XB-171 required a repeating transponder, because it's carbon fibre frame rendered it nearly invisible to radar. Jack straightened the nose of the plane, then pushed the throttles to the stops. Immediate and brutal acceleration pinned him to the leather-covered seat and the XB-171 soon reached rotational velocity. He eased back on the stick, and a few seconds later, retracted the landing gear.

***What a sweet plane. Can't believe I got this for a performance bonus. We must be doing**

really well these days. I should e-mail down to accounting and get the latest financials.* Jack Williamson never got to submit his request. Just over nineteen minutes later, his brand-new XB-171 suddenly turned erratically, lost altitude, accelerated and then crashed into a scrubby, pine brush covered hill. The lead flight controller, in his late forties and too old for this crap, checked his scope twice, leaned back heavily, removed his glasses, pinched the inside corners of his eyes wearily with stubby fingers, and picked up the 'hot-phone' to the local FAA office.

Low slung, agile, and extremely fast; the exotic, bright yellow two door pulled to a quick halt at the curb. The growl from its 388 cubic inch fuel injected Chevrolet engine reverberated off the surrounding buildings, then slowly faded away. Nicholas 'Mad Dog' Pantera, Lieutenant Colonel, United States Air Force, retired, stepped out, looked around, then ran a quick finger through his close cropped, salt-and-pepper hair. He then carefully closed the exotic's door, and checked that his .44 was riding straight in its underarm holster. He had purchased the car on a whim, a joke to go with his name. A Pantera for a Pantera. The car was complete, but had no engine and a stripped transmission when he purchased it at auction, and it had taken him years of loving work and plenty of

his pension money to get it to the condition it was in now. The paint had been faded and the interior mostly complete but musty smelling from years of neglect. The paint now gleamed like a 10,000 watt spotlight and the new Recaros were covered in immaculate leather with contrasting yellow pipe stitching. Bright yellow five point racing harnesses contrasted with the rich black leather seats. Nick thought it was funny to tweak the gomers who demanded purity, the people that thought that all the chalk marks and undercoat overspray should be photographed and replaced after a restoration was completed. He took the car to the All Ford Nationals at Carlisle one year and caused about 5 coronary embolisms and a cerebral venous sinus thrombosis thrown in for good measure. He had decided to replace the missing Ford 351 with an all-aluminum Chevrolet high deck NASCAR racing block. In its current state of tune, the Pantera put out about 650 romping horses and would vault to 180 in nothing flat. Nick had hand timed it once unofficially through the quarter in about eleven seconds, so he figured it was fast enough already. He had once thought about having a supercharger added, then decided his middle-aged reflexes weren't quite ready for a JATO assisted suicide just yet. Nick did love the cossetting tan and black leather-lined interior and Recaro seats, but found himself driving his Pontiac Grand Prix GTP more

and more every year. ***Guess the age thing is finally catching up to me,*** he mused as his knees cracked. He pulled on a U.S. Air Force issue baseball cap, then took off and pocketed his Serengeti sunglasses. He buttoned his windbreaker on the bottom three buttons, to make the underslung holster less visible.

Nick looked around quickly a second time, then crossed the street to the offices of his new, temporary employer. Six years of combat flying and ten years as a police special ops officer had honed his danger sense to a keen edge, and he seemed to find himself 'checking his six' quite often, even in what appeared to be completely safe and ordinary circumstances. Yet, he still remembered well his recuperation in a hospital after a strung-out crackhead put a nine-millimeter into him during a bust in Chicago. Somehow the crackhead had "made" their surveillance van and riddled it with bullets. He had been hit only once but a junior surveillance tech next to him had taken two rounds in the skull and was pronounced at the scene. The guy may have been three quarters looped but he still had somehow acquired an M-11/9 9mm variant of the infamous MAC-10 machine pistol and emptied the entire 32 round magazine into their Chevy Express. Nick figured being a little on edge all the time beat the alternative, three aces to a pair.

Stepping off the unimaginatively adorned elevator, onto the fourth floor; Nick was ushered by a fairly conservatively dressed and extremely attractive administrative type into a typical, unimaginatively decorated conference room filled with typical unimaginative suits. Four, to be exact, all wearing corporate issue Brooks Brothers wrappers as if the company manual even specified how demure the tie colors must be. Typical. Suit one handed him a folder and suit two gave him a standard, lets-put-him-to-sleep briefing while the other two pretended to pay attention. Nick had no real questions at this point other than to reaffirm that his exorbitant retainage fee plus T&M was pre-approved and everyone nodded knowingly. Good enough, meeting adjourned.

About an hour later, Nick flipped through the dossier again on his way out the office door. ***An executive of Minisoft turns himself into a greasy spot on a hill, and they want me to go eyeball the situation. What a waste of time.*** The insurance company hadn't even balked at his exorbitant fee, so he decided to take the investigation. Nick had just thrown out a huge figure, run it up the flagpole, and waited to see who saluted. They didn't seem to care, which immediately put him on guard, because insurance companies are notoriously the cheapest corporations on Earth, so when they don't care,

something is usually more than it seems. Nick decided that one day, his overdeveloped sense of curiosity was going to get him killed, but so far he was enjoying the P.I. life. Not exactly Magnum, but he was working steadily and making enough to pay the bills and throw some back into his depleted IRA, so he felt pretty good about it. Besides his ridiculous retainer, this job was T&M, so he figured this ought to be a real healthy shot to that heavily depleted IRA. ***Lets go have a real look at this stuff, and see what we've gotten into this time, eh?*** Nick took the folder home, stuck the enclosed CD-ROM into his PC and flipped through all the documentation that had come with the dossier. His danger flag was in the fully raised and red position when he decided to quit for the day. ***Something really is rotten in the State of Denmark,*** he decided pretty quickly. ***Now all I have to do is find out what and not get iced in the process.***

After two weeks of beating the streets, Nick was sure that his first assessment was dead wrong, this was a total waste of time, and told his employer just as much. Jack Williamson's death seemed to be just an unfortunate private aircraft disaster, as many were every year. He wondered about his earlier sense that something was very much off, but just chalked it up to nerves and maybe too many late night detective movies. His

employer did not seem impressed, told him as much and reminded him pointedly of his ridiculously large retainer, and told him to keep looking. Nick spent another week, and went back again. This time they handed him a second case. He read through the CD on the second file, then went back and pulled up the first one again. Nick's second case was Jack's wife, Holly. Incredibly, a claim had been submitted for her death, too, and now Nick really thought something had to be quite fishy. His employer informed him that they wanted him to investigate Holly's employer, the Coral Haven resort. This turned out to be a playground for wealthy socialites, mostly men. He thought this could prove to be interesting. First, he went home and pulled up Coral Haven's website, an elaborate and flashy affair featuring oodles of flashy animations, a major shortage of any substance and dozens of the most incredibly attractive women he had ever heard or read about. ***This may not be so bad after all,*** he decided, then picked up the phone.

Nick stepped out of the light blue and white painted floatplane, and was immediately greeted by one of the resort's senior partners, Roberto Silvero. Nick disliked him on sight. He knew of his reputation, and thought that he represented everything slippery and repulsive in

the business world. Roberto didn't seem to be losing any love for him either. Dressed impeccably in a hand-made dark Italian suit and four hundred-dollar black leather shoes, Roberto oozed insincerity and greasy, ill-gained money from every pore on his body. He looked Nick over quite quickly, seemingly dismissing him as some lower-life demi-mortal in a collarless shirt and khakis. Nick fumed silently and wished that some large, hungry, man eating shark would pop out of the beautiful, azure water under the floatplane and eat him. ***Fat chance of that, though. The shark would offer him professional courtesy.*** Nick smiled faintly at the poor jest he had just constructed, and this seemed to annoy Mr. Silvero even more.

“Come this way, Mr. Pantera. I hope we can resolve this problem in a minimum of time, and recommence full scale operations soon.”

“What do you mean, ‘recommence’? Are you shut down right now? Totally?”

“You didn't know? Yes, unfortunately, Mr. Pantera,” Silvero answered in a long-suffering tone of voice. “The local police have shut down everything. Even the casinos are closed. They would brook no arguments until the investigator had finished his digging. That would be you, Mr. Pantera.”

Nick felt almost obliged to turn around and see if Ren and Stimp were standing behind him. ***Of course I'm the investigator, you eeeeeediot!***

"How nice. Is the delay costing you much?" Nick asked sweetly.

"About a million dollars a day, in salaries and lost revenues. Yes, I would say it will amount to some real money, fairly soon."

Nick followed Silvero, watching his expensive patent leather shoes leave little spots on the dock, where he had walked through some seawater puddles. ***Bet he polishes 'em every night,*** Nick thought, just to pass the time.

Silvero led Nick to an impressive, rambling glass and brick compound. The brick seemed to be some type of coral-like material, appearing very rough and porous, not ceramic-like or smooth, and the grey-ish blue color appeared to be impregnated into the material, not painted or sprayed on. The windows were all a deep-tinted bluish shade as well. Overall, the whole structure seemed to both squat before them and menace over them. Nick felt a bit unsettled by this effect, and decided that it was intended to impress their exclusive clientèle, but at the same time keep them somewhat off balance. ***All the better to pick your pockets, my dear.***

Silvero didn't slow, once inside, but headed directly for the security control center in one of the side wings of the complex. Stopping at a solid oak wood door at least ten feet high, inset into what appeared to be a granite faced wall, he pressed a sequence of numbers into a keypad almost as fast as Nick could watch. ***He's done that a few times,*** Nick decided.

After passing through an opulent, blow a million dollars style granite floored foyer, Silvero led him through a couple more security doors, repeating the automatic weapon fast keypad code routine, then settled himself into an overstuffed black leather and gunmetal suede chair; positioned in front of an imposing bank of LCD color monitors and motioned Nick to sit in a similar chair next to him.

“Mr. Pantera, the only way that we are going to get back on-line is to co-operate fully with you and the police. For some strange reason, the police think you can handle this yourself, and are ready to accept whatever conclusions you draw. This is unique in my experience,” he paused as if to reassure himself of the significance or insignificance of this observation. He did not appeared settled with his final conclusion, his eyes narrowing for a second, then returning to a studied blankness that is the trademark of high-priced lawyers and cardsharks. “You must have either some highly

placed or very powerful friends." Silvero paused again for a second or so, as if only considering the implications of his statement after he had made it, then plowed on. "Therefore, as much as I may like or dislike you personally, consider me to be at your disposal for any and all requests or needs."

Nick wondered how close to choking Silvero had come, having to spit out that speech, but at least the man was upfront about his personal agenda. Nick also knew that a few phone calls from some well-placed friends had kept the local gendarmes from messing with his investigation.

Nothing like having a bunch of Columbo wannabe's following you around 24-7.

"Fair enough. I respect a man who makes his personal likes or dislikes known up front. I don't like the type of business that you represent, but I will be impartial in investigating what did or did not happen here. I owe my employer and your investors at least that much."

Silvero's opinion of him seemed to have raised fractionally, but Nick didn't really worry much about it. He wasn't here to make friends or influence people. Only to find the truth or an unreasonable facsimile thereof, and collect an absurdly large paycheck. And possibly ogle a few of the locals along the way, as he was currently very very single.