

Time Pullers

Horton Deakins



Edmond, OK

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4RV Publishing LLC
PO Box 6482
Edmond, OK 73083
<http://www.4rvpublishingllc.com>
ISBN-13: 978-0-9826594-1-0

Printed in the USA

To my mother, who read to me.

CHAPTER ONE

The Breach

Day 1, 0600 hrs, Peacemaker Gate, Tinker Air Force Base.

“Okay, Scott,” Tom said, “don’t embarrass me on your first day. The first shift will be arriving shortly.”

Scott blew on his hands to warm them in the chill dawn. He ignored his partner for as long as he dared, then said, “Hey, no problem, dill weed. It may be my first day, but it’s not my first time. I used to do this in the Air Force.”

“Dill weed? Are you forgetting who’s the superior here? You’re not in the Air Force anymore. Now Bodark Security cuts your check, and you had best remember that. I was going to let you call me ‘Tom,’ but you keep up this crap and it’s ‘Mr. Grabosky’ to you. Anyway, just plan on checking plates on every tenth car, and check all plates if they don’t have a windshield sticker. And why don’t you have that gate open yet?”

Scott unlocked the gate and secured it in its fully-open position. “You know those windshield stickers don’t count for nothing no more. They don’t even issue them now.”

Tom decided he had already wasted too much energy and sat just inside the guardhouse. “Yeah I know, but just do it. And give them a hassle if they don’t take their badges out of the plastic holders. This job can be enjoyable, too. You can be as rude as you want to a civilian, and they can’t do squat about it.”

“You know, that might work up in Baltimore, where you come from, but that just don’t cut it down here. No sense in aggravating someone for no good reason. You wouldn’t want someone to treat you that way, would you?”

Tom got up from his chair so he could hurl his next abuse at close range. “Well, I guess we got us an Okie with a conscience. Sort of makes me feel like going to church. Yes, the great state of Oklahoma. Full of smokers and old smoking pickups.”

Scott grinned. “And smokin’ hot women.”

“Sure, the ones that don’t have a wad of Cope’ in their mouths. Anyway, what would *you* know of Bawlmer?”

“I was stationed at Fort Meade for awhile. I could tell you what I did there, but —”

Tom turned to walk back toward his chair. “Yeah, I know, then you’d have to shoot me. That’s *so* original.”

“And I’ll have you know my grandmother dipped snuff, and she was a very respectable woman.”

Tom’s feet found the top of the table, and he lowered the brim of his cap down over his eyes, “Well, I’m not surprised. Like I said, this is Oklahoma.”

“For your information, she was from Alabama, and I’m starting not to like your —”

Scott ran to the guardhouse to get Tom’s attention, but he kept his gaze fixed on the truck making a beeline for the gate. “That big rig’s not gonna make it around the bollards!”

The huge tractor-trailer rig, a turnpike double, had to be doing sixty clicks. The driver turned the wheel frantically but did not slow down. The truck entrance was a good kilometre away, but occasionally a truck would attempt to enter an automobile gate. There had never been one this big, though, and never one this fast. There was no way it could negotiate the S-curve around the security barriers.

Tom’s first instinct was to put his hand on his sidearm. Scott stepped out, raised his hand, and shouted, “Slow it down, slow it down, ho, *bo*, *hold it!* Where the *hell* do you think you’re going, mister?”

Scott saw the driver stand on the brakes. The truck skidded to a stop, its tires dragging with them the sand washed into the road by the last rain.

After a truck bomb blew up the FBI Field Office Building in Dallas, every transport vehicle that wasn’t where it was supposed to be was suspect. A rig as big as this one was all the more conspicuous.

The truck stopped just short of the pile of sandbags that provided cover for the machine gun nests that soldiers occupied when the Threatcon level rose above Alpha, but that hadn’t happened for over two years.

“You got some ID?” Scott asked.

The driver gave no answer, but he slowly rolled his head and eyes around as if he'd never seen the inside of the cab before. Tom went to the rear of the truck and noted the plates.

Scott knew something was wrong with the way the guy looked, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. "What's the matter, don't you speak English?"

"Yes, I speak English," the driver answered. "I have no ID, but I must pass, as I have very important information for General Tinker."

"Hey, Tom! This guy says he's got a message for General Tinker."

Tom returned along the other side to the front of the truck. He walked up to the driver, stared at him for a moment, and then said, "I hope you can swim. General Tinker went down in the Pacific in 1942 and was never found. Step down out of the vehicle, wise guy."

The driver spoke with an accent, but neither Tom nor Scott could quite make out its origin.

"Just keep your hands where I can see them," Tom said. "No ID, huh? You got a name?"

"Yes, of course," the man answered. "My name is Clark Gable, but you may call me, 'Rhett.'"

"You was right, Tom," Scott said. "This job can be fun. We got us a real comedian here."

Tom wasn't laughing. He stepped back, drew his SIG P226, and pointed it at the intruder. "Hands on your head — down on your knees! Scott, cuff him. We're shutting down the gate."

With the intruder handcuffed and face-down on the pavement, Scott set out traffic cones to discourage any further traffic through the gate.

The driver offered no physical resistance, but his appeals were incessant. "Please, you must not do this. It is very important that I deliver my message —"

Tom ran to the guardhouse, grabbed the phone, and punched up Air Police headquarters. "Keep him covered while I call for backup."

Tom shut the door, but that barely sufficed to allow him to hear the phone over the constant droning of the driver's pleas. "Grabosky at the Peacemaker Gate. We got a situation here. Let me talk to Captain Harris."

"I'll transfer you."

"Harris here. Talk to me."

"This is Tom Grabosky with Bodark. We got a breach attempt at the Peacemaker Gate."

"What are we talking about?"

“Some skinhead with a huge double tractor-trailer truck, fully-loaded, from the looks of it, so better get the bomb squad down here. We’ve shut down the gate, but we need to get traffic directed away from this area. If this thing is packed with explosives, I hate to think —”

“Let’s just deal with one thing at a time,” Captain Harris said. “I’ll take care of the traffic. We’ll evacuate to 300 metres until we know more. Bomb squad’s on its way. How many in custody?”

“Just one, but get this — the guy calls himself ‘Clark Gable,’ a.k.a. ‘Rhett.’”

“Right. Okay, get him away from the truck as far as you can but still maintain control of the gate. We have to assume there will be accomplices.”

“Roger that.”

Tom rushed to where Scott held the driver and drew his pistol again. “Take these two pairs of cuffs. Link them together to make him a set of leg irons. We’ve got to get him away from this gate.”

Scott and Tom walked their hobbled prisoner about forty metres from the gate, and the three of them took cover behind a concrete traffic barrier.

Moments later the Air Police arrived and cordoned off the area. The APs restrained the driver with plastic ties and returned the handcuffs to the gate guards. They loaded the intruder into a Humvee with an AP guarding him on either side and disappeared as quickly as they arrived.

0625 hrs, AP headquarters.

Captain Harris entered the holding cell. Handcuffs secured the truck driver on both sides to the arms of his chair, and he was flanked by two AP guards. In front of him sat a very ordinary-looking table with another chair on the opposite side. The captain slowly circled the table, but the prisoner would not make eye contact with him. When he had almost completed a circuit around the table, Captain Harris noticed his shoes were untied. He sat in the extra chair and tied his shoes before beginning the interrogation.

“You have given your name as ‘Clark Gable.’ This will all go easier for you if you start being straight with us.”

“Straight?”

“Right. The FBI will be here any minute. You’re in deep, deep trouble, mister, so you’d better start cooperating.”

"I am here to do more than cooperate," the man said. "I am here to help, and you must allow me to help. Please let me show you —"

"No, I'm going to show *you* how this works."

The intercom in the room squawked to life. Captain Harris recognized Major Danforth's voice. "Captain, would you step out for a moment?"

"Yes, sir, right away." Captain Harris shook his finger at the prisoner. "Don't think this is over by any stretch." Harris slammed the door on his way out, but the prisoner didn't so much as blink.

"Captain," Major Danforth said, "the bomb squad tells me that their dogs didn't hit on that truck. There were no locks on the trailer doors, so they opened them. Both trailers had an equal number of small boxes, some on edge, some flat, arranged in one layer across the floor. They say the boxes look like some kind of dark blue metal, but they have no visible seams and there's no obvious way to open them."

"Have they checked them for radioactivity or biologicals?"

"We have teams on the way right now. Keep on him and see what you can find out before the FBI gets here." The major lowered his voice. "And we should assume the DIA has already gotten wind of this. They always seem to know stuff even before it happens."

Captain Harris returned to his prisoner and sat directly across from him, leaning forward as far as he could. "What can you tell me about those boxes in your truck? What's in them?"

"I must speak with the general who controls this base," the man answered. "It is very, very important."

"Forget about that. You're talking to me," Harris said.

Captain Harris noticed something strange about the intruder's eyes. *This might work for a more personal tack. Maybe it will create an opening.*

"What's up with your eyes, anyway? Some kind of disease? I don't think I've ever seen anyone with no eyebrows or eyelashes before."

"No, I am well, thank you," the man answered. "It is a genetic condition, but it causes me no problems."

Okay, that got me nowhere. What am I going to use to pull this guy out?

Captain Harris recalled that some countries considered smoking to be more acceptable than it was in America. *Will he take the bait?*

"Cigarette?"

The man grimaced and turned his head away.

"Where's your family from?"

The man hesitated, and then said, "That is not important. I must talk to the general."

Harris was running out of things to try. He was a lousy poker player, and he knew it.

After a pause, the man said softly, "I can see that you are concerned about the contents of the truck. I can assure you that the items within the truck place you in no danger. But I must —"

Before the man could finish, Major Danforth stuck his head into the room. "Captain Harris, out here. I need to speak to you again."

Danforth took Harris aside far enough to make sure the prisoner could not overhear. "This is getting stranger by the minute, Captain. We get no readings of any kind on those boxes. We even tried a portable X-ray unit on some of them, and nothing. What's more, the glove box was full of Krugerrands and fifties."

Captain Harris lowered his voice to a whisper. "Sir, he had several of those coins in his pockets, as well as several hundred ameros in paper money. But no ID, no credit cards, nothing."

"Apparently he drinks a lot of Ozarka," the major said. "Two cases of the stuff in the cab. Just plain water, as far as we can tell. You didn't take a cell phone off him, did you?"

"No, sir, no comm gear of any kind. Anything in the truck?"

"Zip, zilch, nada. Just doesn't add up. This doesn't smell like a one-man operation, but so far that's all we've got."

Captain Harris knelt to tie his shoes.

"Harris, what are you doing?" Major Danforth asked. "Are you still having problems keeping your shoes tied?"

"Uh, yes, sir."

"All right, I'm going to give you some free advice here. You're never going to make major if you can't keep your shoes tied. It's just not dignified."

"No, sir."

"Here's what you do. Next time you tie your shoes, see which way you tie the first overhand knot. Do you go left over right or right over left? But don't try it right now."

"And exactly how will this help me, Major?"

"It's like this: Whatever way you're doing it now, do just the opposite."

Captain Harris gave the major a look.

"Just do it, Harris. We'll talk about it later."

Both men turned to watch the Black Suits that began filing through the door.

“Major Danforth? I’m Agent Craig Brewer with the FBI. Is there somewhere we can talk?”

“Yes, my office. Right over here. Captain Harris, continue to see what you can find out from *Mr. Clark Gable*.”

Agent Brewer followed Major Danforth into his office. “Gable? Like in the movies?”

“That’s correct. And yes, he says we can call him ‘Rhett.’ All crap, of course.”

Major Danforth shut the door and closed the window blinds.

“We’ve been told about the Krugerrands and the folding money,” Agent Brewer said. “We’re going to need to take samples for analysis.”

“You suspect some kind of counterfeiting? Isn’t that the job of the Secret Service?”

“At this point, we don’t know what to think. This is our call right now, and we’re not ready to involve the Treasury Department just yet.”

“No offense, Agent Brewer, but I didn’t think the local FBI office was equipped with the kind of lab you’re going to need for this job.”

“Actually, we’re going to utilize the services of the OSBI. They have a new forensic facility in town, and they are more than capable of assisting us in this matter.”

A knock interrupted their conversation. Major Danforth cracked open the door.

“Sergeant Cooper, I’ve told you not to bother me when I have the door shut. What do you need?”

“Sir, there are two people here from the DIA, Agent Cotton and Agent Abston.”

“Okay, show them in. Maybe they can help us make some sense out of all this.”

Sergeant Cooper brought the two DIA agents to Major Danforth’s office. They shut the door behind them, and the agents flashed their identification.

“Major, my name is Agent Aaron Cotton, and this is Agent Lana Abston. We’re going to be taking over from here.”

“Now, wait a minute,” Agent Brewer said, “the FBI was first on the scene here. This is our baby, and we don’t need any help from the DIA.”

“Agent Brewer plans to take some of the Krugerrands and paper money over to the OSBI for analysis,” Major Danforth said, “and that’s got to be the best plan —”

“No need for that,” Agent Cotton interjected. “The DIAC can handle that. We have a jet standing by. Besides, this all happened on a military base, so we have jurisdiction. Get used to the idea.”

Agent Brewer got in Agent Cotton’s face. “Mister, I’ve been sent here at the specific request of the Director, I’ll have you know, and if you —”

“I hate to interrupt your family feud, gentlemen,” Major Danforth said, “but aren’t you forgetting our guest in the holding cell? Right now I think we need to concentrate on what he can tell us about his cargo.”

“Thank you, Major,” Agent Abston said. “I believe the DIA has an excellent record of cooperation with other governmental agencies. Never let it be said that we put self above mission. Agent Brewer, are you confident that the OSBI facility is up to the task of the analysis? Of course, anything we find out will certainly be shared with the Treasury Department.”

“More than confident. I used to work with those folks, and not only do they have the equipment, they’re the most dedicated bunch I’ve ever seen.”

Agent Abston sat down. “Well, that’s good enough for us. Right, Agent Cotton?”

“Uh, right,” Agent Cotton answered. “I suppose it would save time to use a local facility. Won’t really matter in the long run, but can you assure us that they’ll be able to keep all this confidential?”

“Absolutely. If you have no objections, I’ll take the samples over now.”

“Fine, Agent Brewer. But let’s take one additional precaution. Find someone authorized to courier classified information and have them double-wrap the money and stamp the inside package *Secret*.”

“Why?” Agent Brewer asked, “The OSBI isn’t equipped to handle Department of Defense classified. You suspect this is somehow connected to the Soviets?”

“Just can’t take any chances, that’s all. Just standard operating procedure. The courier will know what to do. Keep exposure to a minimum, and don’t tell anyone what this is about. Just have them test the money, and send the results back with the courier. We’ll take it from there.”

“I’ll accompany him myself,” Brewer said.

Agent Brewer located a courier and shadowed him to a small mailroom where the courier prepared the materials for transit. As he waited for the courier to finish, he took out his notepad and began to scribble something. He recorded no events, wrote no reminders, and made no lists. Scribbling was just his way of keeping his mind diverted while waiting on someone or something. He *hated* waiting.

With courier and precious package close at hand, Agent Brewer headed for the exit. He pushed open the door, and then he heard someone shout, "Catch!" He spun around just in time to field a bottle of water Agent Cotton tossed at him.

"Get them to take a look at that, too, while you're at it, Agent Brewer.

The ride from the base to the OSBI Forensic Center took about twenty-five minutes in Agent Brewer's '76 Trans Am.

"We're lucky, sir," the courier said. "No rush-hour traffic. Could have taken a lot longer."

Agent Brewer parked his shiny toy as far from the other vehicles as he could. The courier grabbed the package, and they double-timed it to the door.

Brewer crossed his fingers. *I hope this works.* "These guys don't normally do work for the Feds," he told the courier, "but they owe me."

"Agent Brewer," the lobby guard said, sticking out his hand for a shake. "Long time no see. How you been? We just got a heads-up call that you were coming."

"Just fine, Fred. Your boy graduate yet?"

"Nope. Still got one more year. Wants to be one of you guys. He's majoring in criminology."

"Tell him to look me up when he gets out."

"Appreciate that. Jenkins is up on the second floor. I assume that's who you're here to see. Room 216, first office past the lab."

"Thanks, Fred."

Agent Brewer and the courier found the elevator, saw that they would have to wait, and then bounded up the stairs. Jenkins met them in the hallway.

"Jenk! How are ya, buddy?"

"Fine, Craig. But I gotta tell you up front that whatever it is you need me to do, number one this is a state office, for state business. No exceptions. And number two, we've got a backlog like you wouldn't believe."

"Jenk, you know I wouldn't come to you with just anything. This is a high-priority item. I'm working this at the request of the Director himself. This is a sensitive —"

"Agent Brewer," the courier said, "we really shouldn't be talking about this in the hallway. Mr. Jenkins, may we continue in your office?"

"Sure, sure, but y'all know what I'm going to say."

Jenkins' office was small but efficient. Bookshelves containing every sort of resource on forensics lined an entire wall.

“I like books,” Jenkins said. “Never cared much for reading on computers. Strains my eyes. Have a seat.”

Agent Brewer and the courier moved the books off a couple of chairs and sat down.

“Jenk, like I was saying, this is a sensitive matter. The DIA is involved, and we don’t know how much higher up this will go before it’s all over. They were going to take this away from me ... uh ... us, and do this work in Washington, but I told them that you guys would help us and that you were the best around. You know we don’t have the same equipment or the same high calibre of people that you have here.”

“I don’t know. I ... I just don’t know.”

“Look at it this way, Jenk. If you ever needed help from the Feds, this would go a long ways toward smoothing out that road. And I would take it as a personal favor. I’ll even make sure your name gets mentioned somewhere along the way.”

Jenkins sighed and clenched his teeth. “We’re just so damned busy, that’s all.”

Agent Brewer scratched his head. “Jenk. This could be an issue that seriously affects our national security. Consider it your patriotic duty.”

“You sold used cars in a previous life, right? I can’t remember when I’ve been handed such a hard sell.”

Jenkins picked up a few books and returned them to their places on the shelves. “I guess I do owe you one.”

“I wasn’t going to mention that. But I guess you do.”

Jenkins retrieved his reading glasses from the pocket of his lab coat.

“So, what is it we’ve got here?”

“Sir, before we disclose the contents of this package, we need to prepare the lab to handle classified,” the courier said.

“Classified? Nobody said anything about classified. You think you’re going to remodel my lab for this?”

“Sir, all we have to do is cut cardboard blackout curtains for the windows and duct-tape them up,” the courier said. “Then we need to put up signs and have someone stand guard at each entrance, and we’ll tell the technicians only what they need to know to do the job. Everyone involved will need to sign a release saying that they won’t disclose any of this.”

“Or what?” Jenkins said.

“Or ten thousand and/or ten years in prison,” Agent Brewer said. He turned to the courier. “Right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You boys sound serious,” Jenkins said. “Okay, what do I need to do?”

The courier assisted Jenkins in preparing the room for the analysis, and he demonstrated his skill with a box knife by cutting coverings for the windows. Agent Brewer offered the duct tape from his trunk, but Jenkins said they had plenty. One of the selected lab members had worked with the Treasury Department for six years and had ample experience dealing with counterfeiting rings, so checking out the stack of fifty-amerio bills would be easy, but testing the gold would take a bit longer. Jenkins set up the energy-dispersive X-ray fluorescence spectrometre to test the gold.

“Anyone seen Agent Brewer?” Jenkins asked.

“You mean the guy in the suit with the airman in tow?” The voice came from the desk of Carol Blakely, the administrative assistant. Her workstation occupied the strategic crossing point of the two main hallways. Nothing ever escaped her notice, and nothing seemed to go right when she was gone.

“He’s down there in the lounge drinking Cokes and hammering on the candy machine. Someone should tell him they didn’t change the labels when they raised the prices.”

“Thank you, Carol.”

Jenkins found Brewer and the courier in the lounge, their eyes glued to the television.

“Can you believe this is already on Consolidated Cable News?” Agent Brewer said. “We’ve been trying to keep this quiet. Largest legal truck on the highways, they said. Folks evacuated, government not cooperating with reporters, blah, blah, blah. It hasn’t even been four hours yet.”

“Craig, you guys come with me. You need to see this.”

The three men entered the lab.

“So, what have we got?” Agent Brewer asked.

“The paper money is fine. Absolutely nothing wrong with it. An Oklahoma City bank not too far from here had registered delivery of these serial numbers. The problem is with the Krugerrands.”

“Counterfeit, huh? What’d they do, use lead?”

“No, nothing like that. You see, Krugerrands are not pure gold. They’re only 91.7 percent gold, and the rest is copper. This makes them more durable, as well as affecting the color. Your coins are 24 karat, absolutely 100% pure. So they *are*

counterfeit, but they're worth more than actual Krugerrands, at least by weight of gold. Other than that, they are absolutely perfect. Couldn't tell them from the real thing except for the metal itself."

"Could've fooled me," the courier said, "I always thought if they weren't solid gold they weren't true gold coins."

"Well, well, well," Agent Brewer said. "This sure generates more questions than it does answers. Appreciate your help, Jenk. Maybe the DIA will be able to make some sense out of this, but it's got me stumped."

"Oh, yes, one more thing, Craig. The water was delicious."

"Don't tell me you drank it."

"No, just kidding. But it's pretty much what the label says."

The courier repackaged the money, Agent Brewer grabbed the water bottle, and they headed back to the base. Jenkins watched them from the window. Carol watched Jenkins shake his head.

"Carol, you try to do someone a favor, and what do they do? They leave you a mess to clean up, that's what they do."

At AP headquarters, DIA agents Cotton and Abston continued the interrogation, unconsciously assuming good-cop/bad-cop roles. Cotton began with his caustic, insistent tone, and Agent Abston interjected offerings of less painful alternatives. This continued for the better part of an hour with little progress. The mystery man had quite the one-track mind.

"You are in grave, grave danger," the man said. "I must be allowed to help. You do not understand."

"Here's what I understand," Agent Cotton said. "You tried to run a gate on a military base with a truck many times larger than what was used to blow up a federal building. This truck was full of boxes of God-knows-what, and you tell us you're here to help. Okay, help us." He hammered the table with his fist. "What is in those boxes!"

"Please try to understand," the man answered. "If I reveal the contents to anyone other than the general, then I may be unable to help. This must be done properly, and everything is wrong now."

He jerked his head first to the left and then to the right. "Where is the truck, please? I must have the truck to help you. What you need is in the truck. Please take me to the truck."

“You just don’t get it, do you?” Agent Cotton said. He kicked over his chair. “Here’s the deal: We *don’t* give you the truck, and you tell us how to get the boxes open.”

“Agent Cotton, would you mind leaving the room for a moment,” Agent Abston asked. “I’d like a word in private with our guest.”

“Sure, sure. Geez, I need some coffee anyway. But the guards stay.” Cotton turned to the prisoner. “And you! Nothing for you until you talk.”

The door closed. Now it was time for a little more good-cop.

“How is it that you think you can help us?” Abston asked. “Does it have something to do with what’s in the boxes?”

“Yes, yes, the boxes,” the man answered. “Are the boxes safe? It is so very important.”

“Yes, the boxes are fine. But we haven’t been able to open any of them. I believe they even tried a welding torch on one, but they still haven’t been able to find out what’s inside.”

“Oh, you must not do that! The heat may damage the contents.”

Agent Abston took a deep breath, and then let it out slowly. Maybe a direct approach would work better. “Can you open the boxes?”

“Yes.”

“Will you open them for me?”

“If you will take me to the general, I shall open the boxes.”

“Is there anything dangerous in the boxes?”

“No, no. Not dangerous. They contain only that which is required for helping you.”

“I’m going to step out for a moment. Can I get you something to drink? A soda, perhaps?” *Now I’m making some progress.*

“To drink? Yes, I would like pure water. In the truck there is pure water.”

“Tell you what. I’ll get you some bottled water from the machine down the hall. It will be cold.”

Agent Abston found the vending machine, coaxed a bottle of water from it, and then noticed Major Danforth standing nearby.

“Major, a word?”

“Certainly. My office.”

Major Danforth smiled, opened the door wide for Abston, followed behind her, and shut the door. “Have a seat, Agent Abston. Been reserving this chair just for you.”

“I’ll stand, thank you.”

“Suit yourself.” Danforth sat in the chair. “I was going to —”

“Major, is there someone here that our visitor has not seen yet, but who is briefed on the situation and can masquerade as the general? If we can convince this guy that he’s talking to the real deal, I can get him to open the boxes.”

Danforth raised his eyebrows, opened his mouth, and shut it again. He tapped his fingers on the table, grimaced, and stared at his bookcase. He looked back at Abston and tried to gauge her sincerity from her expression. “Guess it’s worth a try,” he said. “I wonder how far we have to take it. I think I can find someone who can play the part, but is this guy savvy enough to know the difference if we don’t dress our imposter as a major general? I don’t think he’s really the sharpest knife in the drawer.”

“It’s just a gut feeling,” Agent Abston said, “but I think we had better make this a Broadway performance. Of course, it would be a lot easier if the general himself played the part, but he’s still not back from London.”

“Actually, that’s not exactly right. I’ve just heard that his plane is on final approach for landing, and he’s been fully briefed on the situation. If I’m not mistaken, he’ll want to take a personal hand in this.”

“And you were going to tell me this when?”

Major Danforth leaned back in his chair, smiled, and clasped his hands behind his head. “Sorry for the ruse, Agent Abston. The general likes to keep a low profile, and I needed to see where you were going with this. You have to understand it’s not every day we get involved in a conspiracy to impersonate the base commander.”

Agent Abston started for the door, and Major Danforth jumped up to open it for her.

“Right. I’ll find my own way out. Thank you, Major.”

Purposely avoiding the Peacemaker Gate, Agent Brewer and the courier entered at the Tinker Gate and arrived at AP headquarters. There was a conspicuous increase in the number of armed guards. Major Danforth dismissed the courier to the chow hall, and an AP guard led Agent Brewer to a room that contained DIA agent Cotton and a couple of new faces.

“Agent Brewer, these are Agents Jerry Simmons and Ted Nakayama from the CIA.” Agent Cotton waved a hand toward the newcomers. “They’re prepared to transport the prisoner to Langley for further questioning.”

Agent Abston emerged from Major Danforth’s office just in time to overhear the part about transporting the prisoner. “Hold on now, guys. I’m really close to getting him to open the boxes. All we need is to have General Vega, or someone pretending to be General Vega, come talk to this guy, and he’s ready to give it up.”

“I’ve got news about that money he was carrying, too,” Agent Brewer said, “unless no one wants to be confused by the facts.”

“I assure you,” Agent Nakayama replied, “the only ones who are confused are those who think we’re leaving without our prisoner.”

Major Danforth came out from his office to join the fray. “*Your* prisoner? We’ve been working on this man for some time now, and we’re close to getting him to break. At least listen to what we’ve got so far.”

Agent Nakayama shook his head. “This is a waste of time. *You’re* wasting our time. We’re —”

Agent Simmons lightly tapped Nakayama’s chest with the back of his hand. “We’re listening,” he said.

“All right then,” Agent Brewer continued, “the paper money was legit, but the Krugerrands were 24 karat gold. Real Krugerrands are only 22 karat. No counterfeiter that I know of would make his phonies from something that cost more than the real thing. And in case you CIA-types are thinking Soviet operative, if they wanted Krugerrands they’d just buy them, or maybe steal them. But I say go with Agent Abston’s plan. Whatever it is we’re dealing with, we won’t know what it is until we get inside those boxes. And what if he is, by some stretch, telling the truth? We just don’t know. We need to see what’s in those boxes.”

“This does put a new slant on things,” Agent Cotton said. “I’m afraid I’ll have to agree. If we can get him to open the boxes by giving him a show, then we can get this circus over with and go home.”

The FBI and the DIA together in agreement? That, alone, was enough to get the CIA agents on board with the idea. But the prisoner presented no clear threat, and there were bigger fish to fry, what with a new espionage case or two opening up every day. The Soviets were relentless in their infiltration of high-level government offices, and the arms agreements negotiated by President McClellan, at that time a senator, had nearly emasculated the military, giving the Soviets a clear advantage and vastly increasing the fear and tension associated with the Cold War.

“If you gentlemen will excuse me for a moment, I’ve promised our captive this bottle of water,” Agent Abston said. “I believe Major Danforth has someone in mind to play the part of General Vega. He may even be able to arrange for the general himself to make an appearance.”

An out-of-breath Captain Harris burst into Major Danforth’s office. “Sorry to interrupt, sir,” he said, panting, “but I just came from the bomb squad, and someone has given them an order to blow up the boxes. They’re planting the charges right now.”

“And for some unknown reason, you thought it would be faster to run over here instead of calling me?” Danforth jerked his cell phone from his pocket, speed-dialed the bomb squad, then sprinted to the room where the federal agents were gathered. “Excuse me, everyone,” he announced, “but Captain Harris tells me the bomb squad is about to destroy those boxes, and it’s going to take more authority than I have to countermand that order. I’ve got them on the line now.”

Captain Harris followed close on the major’s heels, close enough to hear what he told the agents, but far enough behind to see what the major did not.

“Ten-hut!” The call echoed down the hallway.

“General, sir!” Captain Harris said, snapping to attention.

“At ease, Captain. Where’s the prisoner?”

“Sir, we have an emergency situation. Someone has ordered the demolition of the boxes the prisoner had in the truck. Major Danforth is down the hall here with the federal agents, and he’s got the bomb squad on the phone.”

“Well, we’ll see about that.” Captain Harris directed General Vega to where the agents congregated.

“Major, you have the bomb squad on that phone?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Then let me have that.”

The general grasped the phone as if it were a radio set microphone. “This is Major General Vega. I am ordering an immediate halt to the demolition of those mystery boxes. Get whoever you need to on this line so we make sure this order is understood.”

“General Vega —”

“And who might you be?”

Brewer presented the general his credentials. “FBI Agent Brewer, General. DIA Agent Abston here has gotten the prisoner to agree to open the boxes if he is able to meet with you. At this point I’m thinking we need a little insurance.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“I say leave the charges on the boxes, and if he reneges on the deal, then threaten to destroy them. Then we can see just how valuable he perceives them to be.”

“Gentlemen, ladies,” General Vega said, “I want to see what’s in those boxes just as much as you do, but my aide is convinced that, besides being pointless, it’s too dangerous for me to see this guy personally. What do you think?”

“General, sir,” Major Danforth said, “there is no physical danger to your person, as he is both restrained and under guard. But we can’t speak to the boxes. We’ve been unable to tell anything about them other than the fact that there are 1432 of them, they’re all pretty much identical, thirty-by-thirty-by-fifteen centimetres, and they’re heavy for their size. Each weighs just over 45 kilos. And one more thing, sir, someone decided, against orders, to shake one of them, and it did rattle a bit.”

“I assume you’ve tried everything on them?”

“Everything short of explosives, sir.”

“Then let’s get this done,” the general said. “Get one of the boxes over to an empty hangar, and then transport the prisoner over there. I want a closed-circuit TV camera showing the other boxes with the charges. Set up a monitor in the hangar and make sure our guest has a clear view.”

“Sir,” Captain Harris said, “I believe hangar seven is empty right now.”

“Make it happen. I’ll be there in thirty minutes to handle this guy personally.”

General Vega was nothing if not prompt, and he expected as much from his subordinates. Hangar seven was normally unused, except during times of high-volume aircraft maintenance operations or when the imminent threat of hurricanes forced Air Force squadrons from southern states to relocate to the area. In other times, the enlisted men’s club used it to provide shade from the hot sun for the chefs of the summer Saturday barbecues. They kept the sliding doors on both ends of the hangar open wide for ventilation.

“Get those grills outta here,” an AP senior master sergeant yelled. “And wipe up that grease. General’s coming in five!”

The master sergeant ran over to where an airman was interfacing the monitor to a wireless link. “Airman, aren’t you done with that job yet? The general wants to see video, and the general *better see* video!”

The APs grabbed a barbeque-sauce-stained folding lawn chair from inside the hangar and plopped the visitor down into it. They handcuffed him to an AP on either side, and between his ankles he sported a set of leg irons. They exchanged his wrinkled clothing for a flight-line worker’s jumpsuit. In front of him, about three metres away and slightly to the left, a fifty-six centimetre monitor sat upon a 200-litre steel drum, and on a smaller box next to it was a military-grade notebook computer. About the same distance away, but on the right, sat one of the boxes from the truck.

“Ah-tennn-shun!” the AP sergeant sang out, announcing the arrival of General Vega’s car. The general’s orderly leaped out the front passenger door like a jack-in-the-box, planted himself by the rear door, and smartly swung it open. General Vega stepped from the car into a hangar that still smelled strongly of mesquite smoke.

Captain Harris saluted. He held out a helmet and flak jacket and said, “General, sir, I’ve taken the liberty to pick these up for you ... for ... when he opens the box.”

“Captain, do you really think he’s going to blow himself up just to get to me? Let’s see how he responds when he thinks we’re going to destroy the other boxes.”

General Vega proceeded to a position directly in front of the prisoner. “All right, now, you ... I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage, since no one has bothered to tell me your name.”

“It’s Gable, sir,” Captain Harris said, “Clark Gable. At least, that’s what he’s told us, sir.”

“I see. Well. Do you prefer ‘Clark’ or just ‘Mr. Butler?’”

The general didn’t wait for an answer. “I am Major General Vega. I am the commander of this Air Logistics Center. You have stated that you would open your boxes if I would meet with you. Well, I’m here. And if you will turn your attention to that screen over there, you will see the other boxes. Those little cakes on them are high explosives, and those wires are connected to detonators. If you do not hold up your end of the bargain, starting by opening this box right here, I am prepared to give the order to blow those boxes to kingdom come. You have exactly one —”

“Yes! Now I will show you the boxes,” the visitor said. “Please, do no harm to the boxes, for they contain the only chance for the survival of both your civilization and mine.”

“Oh, really? Well, talk is cheap. Airmen, help our visitor over to the box.”

Captain Harris offered the flak jacket again to General Vega, but the general waved him off. Harris fastened his own jacket, tilted his helmet forward a bit, and kept a respectable distance from the box.

The two APs placed the prisoner in front of the box, removed his handcuffs, and backed away. The prisoner knelt, lifted the box up onto one of the narrower sides, placed the palms of his hands gently upon the two larger sides, and then positioned his face directly over the box. He hesitated, straightened up, and said, “General, it is imperative that only a select few be allowed to see the contents of the boxes. If too many are allowed to view, then I may be unable to give the help for which I have come so far.”

“Sir, if I may,” Agent Brewer said. “It’s not that I believe this guy for a minute, but I think it would be prudent in any case to minimize exposure to this event, even if it’s just to prevent a public-relations nightmare.”

“Probably the first thing I’ve heard today that makes sense,” the general said. “Okay, men, participation here is going to be on a need-to-know basis only. Everyone else out of the hangar, and let’s get these doors closed.”

With the doors secured and exposure limited to the general, his aide, the federal agents, and a few of the APs, the prisoner resumed his posture over the box.

“What’s he doing, Major?” whispered Captain Harris. “Sounds like he’s singing to it.”

“Don’t know,” Major Danforth replied softly. He glanced down at the captain’s shoes. “But I see you’re keeping your shoes tied now.”

“Yeah, your trick worked, but I don’t know why.”

“Square knot versus granny knot. Did you notice the bow lies across the shoe now, instead of up and down?”

“Hey, you’re right, it —”

A glaring side-glance from General Vega was all it took to for Captain Harris to cut the chatter.

A very low, but clear and constant tone emanated from the mouth of the visitor. Slowly, the volume of his tone increased, and the pitch jumped up a minor third. His voice oscillated between the first and the second tones, the oscillation gradually increasing in frequency. Then, suddenly, the top of the box began to

open, as if it were melting from the middle in a diamond shape, working its way toward the corners. The contents were now clearly visible.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” the general said. “I haven’t seen any of those for over twenty years.”