

# Prologue

It was not the first time he had murdered or the last. Ricardo pushed back his slick wet hair and raced up the villa steps, stirring the tiny dead leaves in his wake. If he did not act fast the police would know he killed the French woman back at the pool. He had no remorse about slashing her throat, but he did not want to risk hanging around this reality. It was time to return to Cibola and have the Aabaec create a new existence.

He yelled into the cellular as he ran onto the verandah.  
" Martin! Martin!"

If necessary, he would leave Martin behind. The little scrounger, having left earlier with some tramp, was now joy riding in his car and spending his money. After five hundred years together Martin still did not fully appreciate his benevolence. If not for his mercy at Cibola at the beginning, Martin would have died at the mountain pass. The cellular connected into a scratchy transmission. Martin's voice wavered. " Yeah..."

" Martin, where the fuck are you?"

" Coming past the front gate, old friend."

The woman with Martin laughed. Ricardo peered beyond the terrace, the rippling palms, and long linear gardens as Martin propelled the tiny yellow sports car through the gate.

" Get up here now!" Ricardo pressed the phone pressed against his ear and watched the car move up the hill.

" What's the problem?" asked Martin.

" Just get your ass up here! We're going to Cibola."

By plane and later in the helicopter, Cibola was only eighteen hours away, and they needed to board the jet before the police arrived at the villa. Martin accelerated up the drive and the car skidded to stop. His thin friend leaped from the open car as Ricardo ran down the verandah steps. He yanked the blonde from the seat and threw her across the gravel. Martin looked panicky.

" Get back in the car!"

Ricardo climbed into the sports car as Martin slid back inside, grabbed the wood wheel and spun around a wide semicircle, kicking up the stones. The dust swirled into the breezy air and Ricardo ordered him to the Marseilles airport. The French woman's naked body floated face down in the pool water as they passed.

Martin stared at the pool and sped through the front gate. " The woman is dead!"

" Shut up, Martin!"

" Are you crazy? The longer this goes on, the more chances you take!"

" She pushed me," said Ricardo, his resolve strengthening. He stared at the blue ocean along the coast, still upset Claudette would have tried blackmail. " No one challenges me, Martin..."

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Ricardo gazed out the jet's window as they banked over the French coast. The twilight cast an exotic glow over the breakers and beach sands far below. He gripped his pen and looked at his paperwork on the table. In his new reality, he would become a powerful force in the defense establishment. Power resided with armaments. Two hundred years ago, during the Revolution he had made a fortune supplying arms to the Americans. Today, technologies and expenditures bore no semblance to the cannon and musket of those days.

Martin, arms folded across his chest and eyes clamped shut, slept in a seat to the left. His unshaven face and disheveled black hair gave him a crude appearance. He had voiced his unhappiness about leaving this reality, but he would have to accept the change. Only sheer luck had allowed them to outrun the police.

Again, Ricardo studied his notes. By constructing a reality geared toward prodigious defense expenditures, he

would possess a private empire, selling to the government as he accumulated great wealth and power. He wanted no more boredom. Now, they might work instead of totally subsisting within the playboy atmosphere of the last fourteen months.

He checked his personal computer. A number of companies fit his profile. But these corporations were only models. He had about sixteen hours left before they landed in Denver and continued over the mountains to Cibola. The Aabaec consciousness, the remnant outpost of a long since vanished galactic civilization, would construct his corporation and his world.

# 1

Peter Sturgis climbed the platform steps as everyone in town cheered and the school band produced a strained rendition of Stars and Stripes Forever. Jeannie and the kids jumped up and down, applauding from the first row as he approached the mayor. She smiled and pointed behind him to a huge red, white, and blue banner attached to the brick school wall.

## **PETER STURGIS CITIZEN OF THE YEAR**

"Congratulations, Peter." The mayor shook his hand and the crowd yelled louder as she motioned toward him. "You aren't thinking of challenging me, are you, Peter?"

"I'm one of your biggest supporters, Susan."

"Good. I think you'd trounce me if they held a vote today."

She moved up to the microphone, tapped it a few times and raised her arms into the air to quell the crowd. " Ladies and Gentlemen. The man beside me you know as your Little League baseball coach, fundraiser for Boy Scout troop 35, active in soccer and basketball here in town, a member of the church council... He has worked at Riccom Corporation for the past thirteen years, first as an accountant, and now in the controller's department. He is a great father to his four children and married fifteen years to his wife Jeannie... I am describing, Ladies and Gentlemen, Peter Sturgis, Westerly's Citizen of the Year!"

Peter nodded, somewhat embarrassed as he stepped up to the mike. He looked over his friends and his family and toward the Riccom plant below the shadowing mountain range. Through the jubilation, his mind drifted back to what he had found at Riccom last night. Melvin had helped him audit the computers after they spotted the irregularities on a report two weeks ago. The crowd simmered.

" Thank you. Listen, I want to thank my manager." He pointed to Jeannie, her mass of brown hair furrowing in the wind and she produced a wide smile. Then he waved her up on the platform with all the kids. His son David, wearing his baseball uniform, picked up Petey, his youngest son, as Jeannie led them up the stairs. She kissed him and put her arm around him. " Don't give him the mike."

" Are you saying I'm long winded?"

" Yes!" called big Fred Watson from the Chamber of Commerce. He stood with his petite wife and when he laughed his jowls shook from his cheekbones to his shirt collar.

" Well, that reminds me of a story. A little boy grows up in within the beautiful Arostock Mountains. He is brought through the Westerly Public Schools and goes away to college. Meets his sweetheart, returns home and raises a family." Peter saw Melvin standing off to the side, smoking and looking into space. " And Riccom, the company that has allowed me to do well here in Westerly. Now, I promised Susan I wouldn't go on."

Susan, a smile fixed on her face, moved forward with the huge gold trophy in her hands. " Peter, as mayor of Westerly, I am proud to name you, Citizen of the Year."

She handed the trophy to Peter and he again faced the applauding crowd. " Seriously, folks, I do want to thank my wife, who deserves this as much as I do. Den Mother, PTA, Nursery School President... The list goes on."

He hugged Jeannie and they moved across the stage arm in arm.

Don Williams from the Little League, a local cop, patted him on the shoulder. " Atta boy, Peter."

" Thanks, Donnie."

Peter moved back across the school parking lot. Petey ran up and jumped into his arms, followed by Marisa. David

shook his hand, trying to act like an adult. Even Corrine smiled.

" Nice going, Dad."

Peter set Petey and Marisa down.

" Dad, can we play ball later? " asked Petey.

Peter looked into his big brown eyes and squatted down.

" You bet, Petey. We'll play ball. "

" And you promised me another Macachi Machu story, " said Marisa. Peter ran his hand along her long brown hair.

" Bedtime stories are my sepciality, sweetheart. "

He hugged them both together and looked at Corrine, half grinning. " I suppose you want a Macachi Machu story. "

Tears dwelled in her eyes. " I'm just so proud of you, Dad."

She hugged him and Peter felt his throat tighten.

" Coming from a teenager, I consider that an act of courage. "

He smiled and then turned to David. " Now don't you start. "

David pressed his lips and put his arms around Peter.

" I really look up to you, Dad. "

" Thanks, David. " He looked over at Jeannie, wiping a tear of her cheek. " There isn't much more a dad could ask for. "

Peter put his arm around Jeannie and headed with the kids toward the baseball field. His elation soured when he

saw chain-smoking Melvin near the ballpark entrance. Melvin spoke in a low, grumbling voice, perfectly suited to his dark rimmed glasses and gray hair. " Congratulations, Peter."

" A lull in the action, Melvin?"

" Can I talk to you for a minute?"

" Sure." He raised his brows to Jeannie. " Follow Mommy inside, guys. Jeannie, I'll be right back."

Jeannie nodded and Peter moved with Melvin under the bleachers. " Melvin, it's Saturday, you don't have to wear your white shirt and tie."

His friend stopped and turned quickly. " Peter, we have to meet with Berringer from the IRS tomorrow. Ricardo is in serious trouble."

" Hey, Peter!" The high school baseball coach waved as he jogged by. " Good job, buddy!"

" Thanks, Tommy." Peter turned and held Melvin's shoulder. " Look, Melvin. I just want to work my job here in Westerly. I know what Ricardo has done is bad, but-

" Peter, it may involve people in Washington. Meet me over the lodge tomorrow afternoon. Two-thirty."

" Melvin, I've got a wife and four kids and a sometimes not too bright dog. I don't want to rock the boat by going after Ricardo. And you, you're ready to retire and open up a chain of cleaners, right?"

" Ah, I don't have the money for that. Listen, Peter, I don't think you understand. This is the IRS. I would make it a point to be there."

" Okay, Mel. I'll be there, but only because I have to."

" Good. I'll leave a message for Berringer. Thanks."

Melvin briefly tapped his shoulder and turned. Peter watched him creep, his body hunched as he smoked, across the school parking lot. He threw down his cigarette and got inside his compact Toyota. Peter creased his brow. He had thought this would be handled internally within Riccom and not with the IRS. As he moved toward the baseball field, he wondered where their innocent audit, now with the IRS involved, would take him.

## 2

Peter arrived at the cinder block lodge hall before two-thirty, parked his minivan and entered the darkened hall through the front. A baseball game blasted from the wall set ahead as he looked around. There were a few guys sitting at the tables, but no sign of Melvin. He moved over to one of the groups. All of his friends stood and then pretended to bow.

" All right. All right, knock it off you guys."

Eddie Fitzpatrick, owner of Eddie's All Night Gas Station, raised his beer mug into the air. " It's Citizen Sturgis!"

" Listen, has anybody seen Melvin?"

" Follow the cigarette trail," said Brian Simmons, Peter's friend from the bank. Simmons looked as if he was still dressed for work.

" I've told Melvin to cut down. He just keeps smoking," said Peter as he walked up to the bar.

" Hey, Peter," said Ritchie behind the bar.

Peter stared at the comb marks frozen into his greasy black hair. " Ritchie, you seen Melvin? He was supposed to meet me here at two-thirty."

" Old Melvin usually spends Sunday with his wife's sister. I like Melvin. Good guy. Wife's a lunatic."

" Mildred can get a little emotional at times."

" I don't know how many times Melvin has been in here after taking a pounding. "

" Yup." Peter turned as the front door opened, momentarily letting in the sunlight. The silver haired Melvin, belly bulging into his white shirt, walked inside.

Ritchie put his hands on his hips. " Speak of the devil. If it isn't Melvin Pervis."

" Pervis worked for the FBI," said Melvin. He adjusted his black rim glasses and kept a stern face.

Peter smiled, but sensed Melvin's fear and fatigue. Melvin sat on the next stool, said nothing and lit a cigarette. He shook the match before he threw it in the ashtray.

Ritchie pulled the tap and filled two chilled mugs.

" Thanks, Ritchie." Melvin exhaled, took the beer and looked at Peter. He wiggled his frame off the stool. " We need to talk, come on."

" Was it something I said?" asked Ritchie, grinning.

" Call me Pervis again and I'll kick your ass, Ritchie." Ritchie smiled and nodded. Peter followed Melvin's smoke to

one of the back booths. Melvin set his beer on the laminated table and squeezed into the tight fitting booth.

" Ah... Mildred keeps telling me I have to shed twenty pounds."

" Melvin, what is this about the IRS?"

" Have I got you sufficiently upset?"

" Yeah, you've got me sufficiently upset. Is this guy Berringer really coming over here?"

" Good question, good question. I don't think I can fully address that question."

" Why have you dragged me down here on a Sunday afternoon? We were going to bring the kids to my brother Mike's house. Jeannie is all ready there."

" Berringer *is* on his way over here." Melvin took a huge hit from the cigarette and spoke as he exhaled. " They want to get Ricardo."

" Oh, man... Let's just drop it." He pushed his fingers back through his hair. " I don't want trouble. "

" I don't think you fully understand the magnitude of this thing at Riccom."

Peter took a gulp from the beer, still swallowing as he spoke. " I know what we found was serious... Did *you* call Berringer?" Melvin said nothing, looked away and grabbed his beer. " Then you did call him. Melvin, if Ricardo ever found out what you did, he'd have both our asses on a silver platter! I have kids to support."

" Peter, those kickbacks are illegal... Listen, I think Ricardo's people might know about our work on the computers."

Peter closed his eyes. Everything was going so smoothly at both work and home; and now this. He had worked at the company a total of thirteen years, his first real job since college, and had started at the order entry position. Nights and weekends had pushed him up the ladder. More responsibility and more money. He was secure in his work and his life.

" Okay, they trace the money back to us. What can Ricardo do?"

" He's a powerful man. We need the IRS. Who knows what he could do to us?"

Peter leaned back and then banged his fist on the table. He closed his eyes as he thought. " You're telling me you alerted this Berringer? What did you tell him?"

" Everything we know, the fudged records, the government payoffs."

Peter turned back toward the door as Melvin lit another cigarette. He grew increasingly nervous and feared being questioned by the IRS. For the next fifteen minutes he waited silently, not even watching the game, as Melvin kept smoking.

Near three p.m., a dark haired man of medium height and build, dressed in a plaid jersey and jeans, moved into

the hall. Melvin held up his hand. The man nodded, but did not change his neutral expression.

" Melvin, sorry I'm late. I was caught up in a conference call outside." He turned to Peter and stretched out his hand. " Mister Sturgis, I'm Phil Berringer, Internal Revenue Service."

" Seems as though you all ready know who I am," said Peter. " Must be in one of those files you guys keep."

" Nope, just a deduction," said Berringer. " No pun intended." Melvin laughed, but soon coughed. Even Peter could resist chuckling. At least the guy had a sense of humor.

" I thought all you guys wore white shirts and black ties."

" You mean like Melvin?"

" Yeah, like Melvin." Peter motioned for Ritchie to bring a beer to Berringer.

During the next half hour, Berringer maintained a direct dialogue. Because Peter and Melvin worked in the controller's office and had access to the financial records, he wanted them to provide his office with incriminating information. Once they had reviewed the raw data, an official investigation could go forward.

" There is another consideration. You guys know Ricardo is coming into town this week. He has scheduled a dinner party for management. We hope he is not in town to

find out if anyone suspects his activities. Hopefully, this is just a PR thing."

" Melvin thinks he knows."

" Maybe he does."

Melvin ground a cigarette into the metal ashtray and leaned toward Berringer.

" Ricardo never visits the plant. I'm very leery of this trip."

" Melvin, you're leery of everything," said Peter.

" Peter, I need to plant a recording device on you and on Melvin. I need you to engage Ricardo in conversation about-

" What? I don't even know Ricardo." Peter had a burning sensation in his stomach. " What do I do, just walk up to him and say: Hey, Ricardo, speak into the mike. I need you to tell me, in detail of course, how you defrauded the United States government."

Berringer, genuinely laughing, took another a sip of beer. " I don't think he will know or even remotely suspect that one of his employees will be recording him. We can take care of the legal ramifications."

" Wait a minute, Mr. Berringer. Please. You just get through telling me how savvy this guy is. How suspicious he is. How he might be on to us. And now you want me to go in there, wired, and record him. Come on. If he ever finds out-

" He won't," replied Berringer. " There is another consideration."

" Here it comes. Melvin. He's going to start telling us about our patriotic duty." Peter rolled his eyes and fidgeted with his feet. He thought of Jeannie and the kids. There was no way he could put them in jeopardy.

" We can't have people like Ricardo milking the taxpayers' money. Think about it. Your money and mine being loaded on a conveyer, leading right to Ricardo. That is intolerable to me. I want to nail this son of a bitch and nail him now. He's an arrogant self-promoter who deserves to be behind bars. I need your help."

Peter stroked his chin and then shook his head. " I don't know. I just don't know if I can take the chance."

Berringer paused for a moment as if he were collecting his thoughts. He looked down, holding the beer glass and then leaned toward Peter. " Okay, I won't push you. Ricardo will be in town on Tuesday and the dinner party is on Thursday. Is that right, Melvin?"

" Thursday at The Plaza. Eight o'clock."

" So, you have some time to think about it. You won't be broadcasting, Peter. You will be recording. The device is so minuscule that no one will see it. Even your wife."

" I don't know. My wife is pretty sharp," he said with a smile. " Listen, I'll think about it. That's all I can tell you."

" Okay." Berringer took out his wallet, pulled out a red lettered card, and handed it to Peter.

" I appreciate your meeting with me this afternoon." He slid across the bench and stood next to the table. " I'll be speaking with you."

Berringer reached into his wallet again, walked up to Ritchie and put a twenty on the Formica counter. Then he turned and Peter listened to the sound of his boots hitting the floor tiles. This was all so risky. When the door closed on the incoming sunshine, he turned to Melvin. " All right, Melvin. Let's hear it. You have to do it, Peter. You can't leave me alone. You're the only guy who can do it, Peter."

" All of the above correct."

" I have to think about this. This is not an easy decision."

Peter felt as if he were on edge of the abyss. Why did this have to happen? Yesterday, Citizen of the Year; today secret agent. He kept thinking about Jeannie and the kids, wondering how he could ever put them at risk.

" I think you're worrying about this too much, Peter. There is no way that Ricardo will know we are recording him. No way."

He pointed at Melvin and spoke in a lower voice. " I hear you, Melvin, but there's this little voice getting louder inside my head. And that voice is telling me to mind my own business and let them take care of it. I have to think about it. Weigh everything and then... then decide."

### 3

Ricardo emerged from the bedroom and put on his shirt as he slammed the door. Martin, at the suite's main table, looked up from the laptop when he heard the door close. Ricardo shook his head as he buttoned the shirt. " Martin, we should have brought women with us."

" What's the matter now?"

" What's the matter? That woman back in the bedroom is a kid. I want a woman in there who knows what the hell she's doing. These local girls can go. Is that clear?"

Martin still refused to stand. " I thought we were leaving in the morning."

" We are. I want somebody down here who knows what they're doing." He buttoned the top button of his ruffled shirt and removed the tie from the hanger. " Is this my regular tux?"

" Yes, it is... Everything is becoming a problem. It's your tux and from your line. And I'll make arrangements to have women brought in here."

" Good." Ricardo finished tying the knot as Martin closed the laptop, slid it forward on the table and quickly

crossed the room. " That's why I like you, Martin. You always know how to go with the flow."

Martin carefully removed the velvet black tuxedo jacket from the hanger and Ricardo stepped into it. He walked over to the mirror, studied himself and placed a fresh red rose, from the bouquet the bellhop had delivered, into his lapel. Martin watched as he gave himself a half smile and nodded.

" Ricardo, before we go downstairs..."

" What is it, Martin? I don't want to discuss business right now."

Martin dropped the hanger on the bed. " Well, you'd better start thinking about business. Or head back for Cibola and out of this reality."

" Not this threat of investigation again."

" Yes."

" I have people working on it. It will never come to full-scale hearings nor will it enter the court system. The lawyers have assured me they can keep it out of the courts for at least a year. By then we will be back at Cibola. You worry too much, my old friend." He pinched Martin's cheeks.

" All I'm saying, if you've become too cocky. If you let this thing gain momentum, then you won't be going back to Cibola. They'll have you locked up somewhere. And God help you if you think you can buy your way out of that one."

" It isn't at the level you think. I'm not worried." He placed his hand on Martin's shoulder. " If I thought there

was even a one in ten chance of jeopardizing Cibola, I would bail out in a second."

" We may be virtually immortal now, aging minutes while decades go by, but I think you're getting as bored as you were in France."

" Running Riccom, do I look bored?" He laughed and glanced back to the mirror one more time.

" No, but you're taking things too lackadaisically. Almost as if you wanted to chance it all."

" I appreciate your concern, my friend. It's noted. Now let's get downstairs. The beloved employees of Riccom, Westerly, are awaiting their leader."

Martin rolled his eyes once Ricardo turned. " I have to make a few phone calls,"

" What?"

" The women. You wanted the women..."

Ricardo marched toward the suite door. " I'll be down there, Martin." He entered the forward section of the three-room suite and left.

Martin sat on the edge of the bed and picked up the phone, but hesitated before placing the call to New York City. All these years he did not mind being second to Ricardo. Even back in Spain before they sailed with Coronado, he had worked as a merchant for Ricardo's business concerns. But lately, doing his bidding became increasingly stressful. Ricardo would bark out more orders, sometimes

belligerently, forgetting their past friendship, and treating him more as if he were a servant. Often, Martin had thought about returning to Cibola alone. But the Aabaec viewed Ricardo as the first one at Cibola, some kind of leader or first come, first serve. He would never enjoy freedom unless he entered Cibola alone.

## 4

He backed the van down the driveway and gazed at the two-story, Tudor style house he and Jeannie had built eight months ago. Rusty came running around the garage and Peter stopped the van. He opened the door, Rusty put his two front paws on the seat and slobbered over Peter. Peter laughed and patted his head. " Did anybody feed this guy?"

" David fed him... Good dog, Rusty..."

" Okay, time to go. Go lay down."

Peter laughed when Rusty turned, ran to the front steps and sat down. " He actually did it, Jeannie. He sat down."

" Will miracles never cease?"

Peter, still smiling, finally drove the van out the driveway, glancing at Rusty on the front steps, but very much aware of the microcassette beneath his suit coat. The gas gauge light sounded as he pulled out of the cul-de-sac. Jeannie shook her head and grinned. All day long she had told him to get gas.

Peter headed to the center of town. Eddie Fitzpatrick, wearing his yellow gas station shirt, came out to the pumps while Peter filled the van. He and Nicky Pedrulous from the

silver diner next door started razzing Peter about being Citizen of the Year.

Peter smiled as he left. " They're good people, Jeannie." He looked down the long stretch of buildings, paralleling the mountains. " This is a good town."

" You're a lucky guy, Sturgis. You've got a good family... Great dog. The town's behind you... Job is great."

If she only knew what he and Melvin were about to do. He held her hand. " I have plans for you later."

" Oh, you do, do you?"

Near the interstate and below the mountains, the Riccom plant glowed white in late afternoon sun. On the far side of the highway, The Plaza, seven stories high, rose over the town. They had allowed some time to visit the hotel shops and relax before the Riccom party.

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Peter held Jeannie's hand as they walked along the exclusive, high priced storefronts below The Plaza. She brushed a few of Rusty's dog hairs from his suit and checked his tie. This was the first time in months they were out alone, but Peter kept thinking about Ricardo's bribes and kickbacks. He checked the activation switch under his cuff. Just two hours before, Berringer had replaced a suit coat button with a microphone and a tiny microcassette recorder

inside the lining pocket. The IRS agent assured Peter, Ricardo would never find the device.

Jeannie was beautiful in her green gown, bare at the shoulders. Around her neck was a gold locket, containing a picture of the kids. With a precise amount of eye shadow and mascara, her brown eyes were captivating. He had the urge to leave the Riccom party and run off somewhere with her.

They moved slowly to the escalator, ascended to the upper ballrooms, and talked about how they first met back at Bradford State. That world was simpler and less fearful, especially with the microcassette ready inside his suit coat. Their professors came up in the conversation as well as friends they had not seen in years. They composed a mental list of people they would like to see again.

His special time alone with Jeannie ended when he saw the marquee for Riccom. Now he had to carry out Berringer's mission. As they were escorted into the spacious ballroom, he looked for Melvin past the spreading gold chandeliers and the simulated rock waterfall. When he did not see his friend, he wondered if Melvin had become nervous about being wired into a recorder.

He spent the first few minutes of the party bringing Jeannie around to his friends from the branch, especially the office girls she had known for years. Melvin's absence had him worried. As he waited for Melvin to appear, Ricardo emerged from a side room up front.

Even more imposing than Peter had recalled, he wore a black velvet tuxedo with a red rose in the lapel and his dark hair was brushed straight back with trimmed sideburns dipped about an inch below his ears. He walked in an upright, proud manner and in total control.

Peter continued to mingle, but drifted next to the huge window overlooking the spread of lights around the town under the silhouetted mountains, and found himself in a long conversation with his wife. Being alone with Jeannie, away from the kids, felt like the early days, and he almost forgot Berringer's mission.

" Do you remember how Freddie Tobin used to drive his car without the inspection sticker?"

" I know, I know," said Jeannie, sipping on the Champagne Riccom had provided. " Peter, I can still smell the fumes. And Freddie used to wait for the cops."

" Like he was taunting them. No muffler, cracked windshield," said Peter, nodding. " It's like he's still there, Jeannie. But really it's long gone. Fifteen years gone. I wonder what Freddie Tobin is doing now?"

" He's probably married like the rest of us. With a house and kids in the suburbs somewhere."

" Yeah, but I bet he still has the car," said Peter and they both laughed.

Peter looked up. Directly across the room Ricardo talked to several women from the sales department. They were

obviously trying to make points and he reciprocated with an animated charm. The women giggled and were wide-eyed before him. Even at this distance, Peter heard his smooth, almost mellow voice.

As he turned back to Jeannie, Melvin wobbled through the main ballroom entrance. His friend seemed ill at ease in his checkered gray suit as he scanned the room. Peter raised his hand, but Melvin wandered aimlessly into the crowd. Peter excused himself to Jeannie, moved past his fellow employees and finally reached Melvin near the buffet table. "Melvin, where have you been?"

" Oh, Peter. I was looking for you." He bit into a hunk of cheese.

Peter spoke in a low voice. " Ricardo is already here. This is not going to be easy. We have to get him alone. In one of the side rooms. Get him to talk about finances is going to be difficult."

" You're right," he said, his mouth full of cheese. " I need a cigarette, Peter."

" You'll have to wait. So, Mildred didn't come with you?"

Melvin closed his eyes and shook his head. " No..." He swallowed the cheese and his face reddened.

" Sorry I asked," said Peter. " Listen, I'm going to try and get Ricardo to talk business. And then attempt to pull him out of here for a few minutes." He looked back but did

not see Jeannie. " I just have a bad feeling about this. Like I should have let Berringer and his crowd take care of this."

" No, Peter. No, we have to do this. Just keep reminding yourself what Ricardo is doing to the company and to the country."

" Melvin, at this point, I really don't give a damn.." He still could not find Jeannie, but as he panned, he saw Ricardo and Jeannie's green gown. She looked uneasy, standing before him, holding her drink. Peter stared for a few moments, jealous, as if Ricardo were making moves on his wife. Maybe he could play the charmer with the sales women before, but not with Jeannie. " Excuse me, Melvin."

He pushed the activation button on his cuff and accelerated his jaunt across the ballroom, but could only think about getting Jeannie away from Ricardo. He swept in from the left, catching Jeannie's eye first and she gravitated toward his arm.

" Mister Ricardo, this is my husband, Peter."

Ricardo, fixated on Jeannie, turned in slow motion until his brilliant blue eyes focused on Peter. His mouth was drawn upward to one side and he inconspicuously moved smooth lips over his perfect white teeth. Peter noticed no sign of beard stubble on his unlined face. Not even six feet in height, he still possessed an overpowering presence.

" Peter." He had a wispy handshake, making Peter feel as if he had never shaken his hand. " You are in what section?"

" I work with Melvin Bornstein in the financial office." Ricardo made no attempt to hide his alternating glances at Jeannie. " We're the ones who balance everything out."

" I see. What's your last name? I only know names I see on reports."

" Sturgis. Peter Sturgis,"

" Of course. You are on the 507 report and the sixteen hundred flash readout. Timely. I don't ever remember it being brought to my attention that your reports have been late."

" They haven't."

Ricardo looked directly into Jeannie's eyes and smiled.

" Tell me, Jean, doesn't the small time life in the suburbs bore you?"

" Not really. I kind of like *that* small time life," she said, holding Peter's arm tighter.

" Oh, come on." He tried positioning his body between Peter and Jeannie.

" Everyone has fantasies, Jean. Thoughts about lives they might want to live."

" Right."

" In your wildest dreams, what would you like to be?"

" Oh, I don't know."

" Come on."

" I'm sure every little girl wants to be a movie star," said Jeannie in a low voice.

" A movie star. Yes, a movie star. With all the glamour and all the attention that entails. To be known by millions and adored by loyal fans. What a life."

Jeannie grinned at Peter. " Yes, what a life."

" You have the face for it, Jean. I can tell by the rounded contours and your eyes. Those eyes could attract every man in America."

Peter, growing angry, interrupted. " I think you and I should talk."

" About what, Sturgis?" he asked, not looking at Peter.

" Melvin and I need to discuss some things with you." Peter was ready to push him back as he continued to admire Jeannie. He tensed his fists. " Certain things have come to our attention."

" This is a dinner party, not a board meeting, Sturgis. I'm sure you know your place."

" Yes, but do you know yours?"

Ricardo turned quickly this time, taken aback by his sudden forthrightness, but seemingly bemused at being confronted. He faced Peter, folded his arms and stroked his chin. " What is it you want, Sturgis?"

" Jeannie could you excuse us for a minute?" asked Peter.

" Sure, I'll wander back to the girls in the office," she said, turning to Ricardo.

" Nice to meet you, Mister Ricardo." She held out her hand, but instead of shaking her hand, Ricardo kissed it, infuriating Peter all the more.

Peter grasped her other hand. " I'll see you in a few minutes, sweetheart."

Jeannie nodded and Ricardo stared at her long chestnut hair swaying on her shoulders as she moved back to the guests. " You have a very attractive wife."

" Certain things have come to our attention, Mister Ricardo." Peter grew more upset as Ricardo kept his eyes on Jeannie. " As we delve into some of the hidden files-

Ricardo's face turned placid and he faced Peter. " What the *hell* are you saying? Hidden files, what hidden files?"

" My co-worker and I need to speak with you, Mister Ricardo. We need to know how to proceed."

" What is it you want, Sturgis? Money? What would you be doing with hidden files?"

" I'm not looking for anything other than direction. Some of these things are-

" Who do you think you are?"

" I think we should talk," said Peter.

" You get your ass and the ass of the other guy up to my suite." He pointed at Peter and pushed his finger firmly into Peter's chest. " Ten minutes!"

\* \* \*

Peter advised Jeannie, chatting with the office girls, Ricardo had requested a business meeting in his suite. Jeannie seemed to understand, nodded and Peter looked around for Melvin. He squeezed Jeannie's hand and headed across the room. Melvin was outside, still trying to adjust the recorder. " Melvin," he said, jogging into the lobby. " Melvin, this is it."

" This thing is a pain in the ass." Melvin pushed the plug into place. " There... It's taken me twenty minutes to get this thing working right."

" Melvin, I confronted Ricardo about the files," he said, holding his friend's arm.

" No shit?"

" We have to be up there, like right now. In his suite."

He dragged Melvin toward the front desk and quickly located Ricardo's suite on the fifth floor. As they walked briskly toward the elevators outside the ballroom, Peter's stomach soured. He kept asking himself why he had let Berringer talk him into this operation, but Ricardo's advances toward Jeannie pushed him toward a confrontation.

# 5

Ricardo burst into his suite, kicking the heavy door shut, causing Martin, now fully dressed in his tuxedo, to look up from the phone. " You had better get your fucking shit together, Martin. I want to know who the hell is responsible for getting into the Westerly records!"

Martin continued in a hushed voice. " Yes, I understand. Then you fly them up here now."

" Martin! Listen to what I'm saying! We have a major problem here. I don't want to leave for Cibola because of this! But I won't take the risk. Stupid-ass subordinates..."

" Whatever it takes..." Martin hung up and instantly spun around. " Ricardo, I was on the phone, lining up the women you requested."

" You listen to me. I have two goons from the Westerly branch, telling me they've been into the hidden files! Do you realize the implications of this?"

" So, they've been in the files. That doesn't mean they know anything. The files have been encoded and equipped with access passwords only members of our inner circle can gain entry to... You're telling me-"

" I'm telling you I just talked to this boy wonder who works in financial. He brought up the fact he and some other clown gained access to the files. I've just ordered them up here!"

" You should have ignored it. Now, you've brought it to their attention and they're going to be suspicious when they don't need to be. We could have done some behind the scenes work and squelched this thing right away."

" The little bastard," said Ricardo. " But, I'll tell you one thing. He had the most gorgeous wife I've ever seen in my life. This woman is perfect, I tell you. Perfect."

" That's the least of our concerns." Martin opened the laptop and accessed the personnel records for the Westerly branch. In a few seconds he looked over at Ricardo. " What was the guy's name?"

Ricardo mixed himself a Scotch. " You know I feel as if I met her before."

" Ricardo, you come in here hell bent for leather and now you're infatuated with this... this wife. What was the guy's name?"

" Peter Sturgis. He's working with another guy, but I don't have his name. I assume he'll bring the other guy up here with him."

" Sturgis. Okay, here we are. This guy has won efficiency citations. Organizes company family activities in the summer. Sounds like the perfect employee."

" I want the wife up here. Have her brought to my portion of the suite."

" You're kidding, right?"

" Bring up the wife. Here name is Jeannie." Ricardo thought. " Sounds too tacky. I would call her Jean."

Martin looked up from the laptop. " I would suggest we deal with these people. If this guy Sturgis finds out you are hot to trot for his wife, he'll be more apt to use this stuff against us. I don't know how they would have gotten into the files."

Ricardo rushed to the other phone. He called the hotel manager directly and informed him to bring Sturgis' wife up to Suite A. She would be told to wait for her husband. He could see Martin grit his teeth from the laptop, but somehow Jean seemed to fulfill some insatiable need within him. Martin would have no conception of that. All these years since they first contacted Cibola. He had an intense longing to find the right woman. Jean was a woman who could share his thoughts and dreams. He had never felt this way before.

" I think you've just made a colossal mistake, " said Martin, still at the computer. " I think these guys are going to respond to money over a period of time more than threats."

" I'm not worried about Sturgis. There are ways of punishing people for their crimes."

"Crimes? You don't have to punish anyone. You just pack your bags and go back to Cibola."

Before Ricardo could respond, someone knocked on the suite door. Martin hit a button on the laptop, pushed it back on the table and stood. He debated whether to allow the meeting to go forward.

\* \* \*

Peter, his heart pounding, gazed inside the spacious suite.

" I'm Martin Vasquero. I am Mister Ricardo's aide. Please come in."

" Thank you." Peter moved inside. Ricardo, with his back toward them, stood across the room with a drink in his hand.

" I'm Peter Sturgis and this is my associate, Melvin Bornstein."

" Pleasure to met you, both. Please sit down, Gentlemen." Martin gestured toward a couch to the right. " Can I get you two a drink?"

" Nothing for me." Peter, too nervous drink anything, felt the microcassette running and feared Ricardo might somehow find out.

" I'll have a Scotch" said Melvin.

" Good man, Melvin. Scotch is the drink of choice in this establishment. Martin, get him the drink." Ricardo

crossed the room. " Now tell me, which one of you bastards is responsible for going into inaccessible files?"

" I'm the bastard," said Melvin, half glancing at his button mike. Peter prayed that Melvin would not blow it with the recorder.

Ricardo produced a large smile. " What exactly do you cowboys know about the inaccessible files?"

" Is there something we shouldn't know?" asked Peter.

Ricardo slowly turned, as he had downstairs, and eyed Peter with an odd vengeance in his eyes. He set his drink on the end table. " You know. Sturgis. I don't like you. I didn't like you from the moment I met you."

Peter's arms tensed. Nothing would make him happier than smashing his fist right into Ricardo's long smooth nose. His arrogance allowed him to think he should dominate everyone around him. By trapping Ricardo on tape, Peter could strike back at his newly formed enemy. " You're going to like me even less when I tell you we are aware you have been paying off government officials with a well planned and well orchestrated series of moves of kickbacks and bribery."

Martin stood with Melvin's drink in his hand. He had a quizzical look upon his face and then he handed the Scotch to Melvin. " We will admit to nothing, of course." He had a cautious grin. " My question to you, Mr. Sturgis, would relate to the files themselves. Are you in possession of those files?"

" We are," answered Melvin and he gulped the Scotch.

Ricardo stood rigid and looked directly at Peter. " Who do you ingrates think you're dealing with? I have the power to ruin you. You get those files or I assure you, Sturgis. It will be the most regrettable move you ever make in your life."

" Why are you so frightened?" asked Peter.

Ricardo stepped back to the table. " Do you know your wife wants me?"

Peter leaped to his feet. " You don't mention my wife. You don't know what the hell you're talking about."

" And you don't know her, Sturgis. You don't know what she does behind your back."

Peter's jaw tightened, he stormed across the room and his voice shook as he faced Ricardo. " We're going to nail you, you son of a bitch! There is a long record of all your dealings under the table."

" She told me she has to be careful, Sturgis, because you have such a high opinion of her. She doesn't want to ruin that suburban life."

" Don't push me!" Peter's fists were locked tight now.

" She said she wanted to unzip my pants and-"

" Ricardo!" Martin ran from behind. " Stop it! Let's try and stick to the matter at hand."

" You talk to them, Martin. I'll be in my suite for a few minutes." Ricardo quickly moved toward a center door and disappeared into the other room.

" I apologize for that," said Martin. " Ricardo is a very proud man. He threatens and intimidates when he feels undermined. I'm sure that your wife-

Peter looked to his right as Ricardo suddenly emerged from the other room and grinned in the doorway. Very carefully, he closed the door and took two steps into the suite.

" Could I have another drink?" asked Melvin from the sofa.

" Of course," replied Martin as he took Melvin's empty glass. He looked dispassionately at Ricardo as he went to the liquor cabinet.

" We want to know what to do with this information, " said Peter. " We are employees of Riccom first. If the information about the kickbacks gets out there would be a major scandal in this country. I suppose you don't rise to the top," he said, looking at the gloating Ricardo, " without paying off the right people."

" Sturgis, you wouldn't have the balls to do what I do. I'm sure, you can find records and try to blackmail me-

" I'm not trying to blackmail you, Ricardo. I told you that downstairs. What do you want us to do?"

Martin, at the liquor cabinet, turned toward Peter. " I'm sure that you understand, in the upper levels of the corporate world, the same rules apply to us... All I'm saying is that you have to work within your parameters, Peter. If

you're in a game, you have to play by the rules of the game. If you don't, you'll lose."

" I understand."

" Sure, Peter," said Melvin, obviously feeling the liquor.

" You talk as if you know."

" Good thought, Melvin. Sturgis thinks he knows so much about everything." Ricardo opened the adjoining door and peered into the other suite. Then he turned with a sly expression. " You see, Sturgis, when I said your wife was attracted to me, I wasn't kidding. When I said she wanted me, I wasn't kidding. The woman is hot."

" Shut up!"

" Don't blame me, Sturgis. She's the one that insisted on coming up to my suite. All I have to do is go back in there and drop my pants."

Peter rushed Ricardo and began pummeling his face. Martin moved quickly, trying to break them up, but Peter landed enough blows to bloody Ricardo's nose and mouth. Martin wedged his shoulder between Ricardo and Peter.

Melvin, now on his feet in front of the couch, shouted.

" Back off, Peter. It's not worth it!"

" You," said Ricardo, holding his bloodied handkerchief over his injured nose. " You will pay in *hell* for this, Sturgis! And you will pay in hell for trying to destroy me!"

" I never tried to destroy you," said Peter, rubbing his bruised knuckles.

"Your wife is in my suite, you fool!" Ricardo went to the door, moved inside as Peter trailed behind.

Jeannie emerged from the bathroom, her purse in hand. "Peter." She studied his face. "Peter, what's wrong?"

"What did he do, tell you to come up here?"

"She *wanted* to come up here," said Ricardo.

Jeannie furrowed her brow and seemed cognizant of Ricardo's perverted game. "I never said I wanted to come up here. You told the front desk to get me up here."

"She's covering her ass, Sturgis. She plays around."

"What the hell is going on here?" She rushed Ricardo. "Don't you try and twist this thing! Peter, he had them tell me to come up here!"

"I know that, Jeannie. I know that."

Jeannie's awareness seemed to upset Ricardo and, still pressing the blood soaked handkerchief to his nose, returned to the original suite.

Martin appeared in the doorway. "I apologize to both of you. He is used to getting what he wants. Listen, I think what we need to do, Peter, is meet with you later this week. I'll have you flown to the corporate offices. We will sit down with my people. Step by step we will go through what you have. And I thank both you and Melvin for uncovering this flaw in our system. There is always room in our upper levels for people who are competent and committed to the welfare of our company."

" I'm not even looking for that, Martin. I'm very happy here in Westerly with my wife and kids."

Martin held his arm firmly. " You can be even happier if you're running the branch."

From the other room he heard Ricardo yell. Martin spun around and Peter, holding Jeannie's hand, followed him back into the first suite. Ricardo stood with Melvin's recorder and wiring system in his hand.

" You tell us you don't want anything, Sturgis! Well, what the *fuck* this? Martin, these bastards are working with someone! "

" Peter, what is going on here?" asked Jeannie, her eyes fearful. " What is this recording thing?"

" He's trying to fuck me over is what he's trying to do!" Ricardo pulled out a cellular phone and quickly dialed a number as Jeannie moved closed to Peter and held his hands.

" Ricardo, who are you calling?" asked Martin.

" My own security." He produced a small handgun from his pocket. " Don't anyone try anything." He walked over to Peter, frisked his coat and ripped out the recorder. " You're a damned fool, Sturgis."

Martin grabbed his shoulder and spoke with his head away from Peter.

" Ricardo, listen to me. Let's try and reason this through. Calling security is stupid. If what he says is true, then we just get out of here, go to Cibola and realign the whole thing."

" This is Ricardo," he said into the phone. " Send armed people to my suite. You will be taking away three individuals to..." He closed his eyes as if he were fatigued or preoccupied with things Peters could not begin to understand. " Get the limo. Bring it to the downstairs parking garage."

" What are you going to do with us?" Peter took a step forward, but Ricardo thrust the gun in his face.

" What... I'm...going to do." Again he paused, wincing as he thought. " Sturgis, you haven't got the remotest idea of what's going to happen to you."

" My husband seems to have listened to the wrong people," said Jeannie.

Ricardo's eyes glistened as she spoke and he lowered the gun. His eyes were on her again. " And you... You will never know, but I will have... I will have you. The way I want you. Without him."

" Shut up, Ricardo," said Peter, keeping his distance from the gun. " If Melvin and I don't return, they'll go right after you. If you murder us-"

" Murder?" Ricardo began laughing. " The man says murder, Martin. Sturgis, I have the power to make you pay for what you have done to me. Power that lies beyond the

grave. You will wish you were dead. Sit back and watch what I have in store. And then you will be praying that I had murdered you this evening."

As he was speaking the suite door flew open again. Two men in black suits and turtlenecks, both brandishing small, automatic weapons, ran up to Ricardo. With a sly smile, he glanced over at Peter and motioned the men across the room.

" I want them brought to the limo. Martin, get your things. We're out of here. Fly to Denver. I'm not taking any chances."

Martin strained before he spoke. " I think this is the premier mistake, Ricardo. Leave them up here. It doesn't matter what they did or what they will do. It's all a part of this reality, Ricardo. Their reality."

" Martin, you're starting to bore me. Get down to the limo or you can stay behind."

" And that's it?" Martin had a growing anger in his dark eyes. " After all these years, if I don't get to the limo now, I get left behind. You're losing touch, Ricardo and mark my word: It's going to cost you more than you think." He moved closer and raised his voice. " You're a fool!"

Peter thought he might reconsider, but as Ricardo looked at Martin with a half smile, he waved the security guys toward the door. They pushed Peter and Jeannie, her hands now trembling, past Ricardo in an almost military procession. But as they neared the door he called out. "

Sturgis." All the emotion had left his voice. " You made one fatal mistake... You challenged me."

" I never challenged you, Ricardo."

" When people think they can challenge me, they risk a living hell... Get them out of here."

Peter moved with Jeannie and Melvin down the hotel corridor and toward a rear stairwell. In the hotel's parking garage, they were packed into the rear seat of a waiting limo. He explained to Jeannie what Melvin had found on the files and how they had met with Berringer. Jeannie said very little as her eyes filled with tears. Peter felt guilty having made a poor decision by listening to Berringer. Wearing a recording device and trying to trap Ricardo was something professionals should have done.

Peter stared into the parking garage and felt as if his life were coming to an end. He thought about Westerly, his home at the end of the Spring Street cul-de-sac and pictured his children sleeping in their cozy beds. How would they go on without a mother and a father?

Ricardo arrived outside as bellhops loaded bags into the limo trunk. Martin arrived a few moments later, and both men entered the limo's forward section.

Jeannie never overtly blamed him. She probably felt the same emotions about the kids and their life together. As she held him. Ricardo talked with Martin on the other side of the glass and Peter wondered what he had planned.

The limo went directly to the airport and onto the tarmac. Ricardo and Martin disappeared when Jeannie, Melvin and, Peter were taken from the limo. Peter questioned why Ricardo had even allowed them to live. More of Ricardo's security men accompanied them across the tarmac and toward a small jet, hissing in the darkness ahead.

Riccom was emblazoned in red letters across the forward nose. The men brought them up the extended stairway. They were seated in a spacious lounge area in the jet's midsection and, within a few minutes, were zooming skyward at a steep angle. In the low cabin light Jeannie leaned on his shoulder. Rage now had supplanted guilt. He held Ricardo responsible for everything. Ricardo cheated the government. Ricardo masterminded this hasty departure. He wanted to get his hands on Ricardo now and kill him.

More security people arrived and jabbed his upper arm as they held him down in the seat. He looked up at the security men, holding the hypodermic needle. Drowsiness set in quickly, his eyes hung heavy and he tried to stand, but fell. He rapidly lost consciousness. Jeannie had already passed out. He reached his arms around her. The touch of her evening gown and soft skin was the last thing he remembered.

## 6

Peter lay under a sheet and tried to open his eyes. The room was hot. He smelled bacon cooking and heard grease popping and splattering as he finally opened his eyes. Through a small doorway sunlight poured in a front window and he realized he had somehow survived.

He reached over the sheets, but felt a rigid form and then a mass of frizzy blonde hair as a petite woman with dark eyes sat up quickly. Peter instinctively moved away.

"What the hell are you doin', Pete? What the hell are you doin'?" Peter leaped from the bed and looked around the wood paneled room of a small house trailer. "I spend nine hours on the late shift and you wake me up? Just cut the shit, all right?"

She turned and pulled the sheets up over her shoulders. Peter stared at the bed and then panned the front room. Why had Ricardo dropped him here with a woman who appeared to know him? She was paid to do this. He needed to get out and return home.

Where was Jeannie? He realized he was standing in his underwear. The woman in the bed half looked at him as she grumbled. "Your problem is that you're an *asshole*."

" I am?" asked Peter.

" Go ahead, laugh. It's real funny that I work on the line while you stay home... You lazy son of a bitch!"

" Who are you?" asked Peter. He studied her as she sat up in her two dollar blue nightie.

" What kind of a fucking question is that? Why don't you just get out of here and let me sleep!"

" I just asked who you are," said Peter in a low voice.

To his right a kid, maybe seventeen or eighteen, appeared in the doorway. He had long brown hair, bloodshot blue eyes, and wore a multicolored headband. " Don't start again. Come on, man. All you two do is argue. You've argued for twenty years. Give each other a break. Okay?" He had a sensitivity in his voice as if the arguing hurt him.

The woman kept her back toward him under the pink sheets. In the front room the kid faced the little green stove and stuck a fork into the bacon strips.

Peter grabbed a pair of pants off the floor. The pants as well as the shoes and socks fit him perfectly. He tightened the belt and moved from the darkened bedroom.

A small table was set with two plates, coffee cups, and utensils. The kitchenette's counter separated a living area to his left. He glanced out the window as the kid removed the bacon from the pan with a large fork and set it on a paper towel. Dozens of trailers lined the park, but the Arostock Mountains silhouetted the puffy clouds.

Peter smiled broadly. "Westerly!" The kid looked at him as he poured the coffee. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

The kid set the coffee carafe back inside the brewer.

"I don't think I've ever heard you say you were sorry, Dad. Hey, man this is a red letter day."

Peter felt goose bumps go up and down his body. "Dad?"

"Listen, Dad. I talked to Henry down at the shop. He said his wife knows somebody in Belville that might need a welder. He don't know that you told Crandall to shove it up his ass."

"He doesn't?" asked Peter.

"No, it would mean taking the train. I'll give you the money for that. Just to get you going."

Peter could not understand how someone could be acting so genuine. He dared not say anything, and for a moment he wondered whether he was the kid's father. "I appreciate that."

"You do?" he asked.

"Of course I do... What's your-"

"You gonna eat or just stand there gawkin' at me?"

"Sure." Peter walked up to the Formica table. He had not seen a table with Formica and chrome edges since he was a boy. There were stacks of magazines on the counter, separating the two rooms. The kid's name was Curtis and he

read sci-fi comic books and magazines on UFO's. Peter's own name was on one of the fishing magazines. And his address.

**PETER STURGIS  
87 PIMENTO COURT  
WESTERLY, NY**

Ricardo had performed an elaborate charade, meant to convince him he lived in a trailer park outside of town and hired these two people to fool him. But he worried about Jeannie and the kids. Peter grinned. " Listen, I have to get home. You can tell Ricardo this isn't funny. And I want to know where my wife and friend are."

" What are you talkin' about, Dad?"

The kid even had his height and brown hair. His eyes were blue, also. Then he thought about his own kids. " Okay, this has been very intriguing, but I have responsibilities in my life. First I want to know what Ricardo did with Jeannie."

" Ricardo?" asked the kid as he set a plastic plate on the table and then he brought over a coffee mug. " Who is Ricardo?"

" Listen, kid. I want to know what's going on here."

The blonde yelled from the bedroom. " Shut up out there!"

" What do you want to know, man?"

" Ricardo, where is Ricardo? Or Martin. I was on the plane when they injected me." He could see Curtis look at

him as if he were demented. " This is some kind of joke, right?"

Curtis smiled. " You're trying to make me laugh. I remember when I was a little kid you always came home and made me laugh. I knew when you made me laugh, that you loved me."

Peter vaguely recalled Martin saying about going to Cibola. He became frightened. What was he doing here? This had to be an elaborate hoax. He walked across the tiny living room and out the trailer door.

He gazed across the mountains and realized he was less than a mile from Grayson's Farm, south of Westerly. The top of The Plaza poked over the rounded slope's treetops and to his right the Stanton River wound south through the hills to Belville. Near the steps a shiny black motorcycle glistened in the sunlight, but his van was back at The Plaza.

He scanned the trailer park and the white rail fence bordering the Grayson Farm. Then he started walking briskly. Calling a taxi might be the best course of action. He reached for his wallet. His credit cards were gone. So was the hundred bucks he had placed in the back compartment, but as he looked closer, he realized this was not even his wallet.

Grayson's son, Billy worked in shipping at Riccom. Maybe Billy would give him a ride into town. He moved past a wide soybean field and turned up dirt lane leading up to the large white farmhouse. Out back, he saw the gray haired

Grayson, in his blue overalls, working on one of the worn tractors.

" Mr. Grayson, it's Peter Sturgis." Grayson looked up but kept working. Peter walked under the large apple tree and up to the tractor. " Mr. Grayson, it's Peter Sturgis."

Grayson peered up, his brow furrowed and when he spoke he hardly moved his mouth. " You get the hell off my property or I'll call the cops."

" What?"

" You heard me, you bum. Or wasn't a few nights in the poky enough for stealing my wife's kitchen money?"

" I... I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Grayson. I just came by to have Billy give me a ride back into town."

" Now, you've gone too damned far!" Grayson threw down the socket wrench and picked up his pitchfork. " Talking about Billy like that. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. You get out of here now, Sturgis... I am calling the cops!"

As he headed back toward the house, Peter reversed direction back toward the road. He closed his eyes briefly as he ran, pondering the possibility Ricardo really had changed things, and he stopped at the end of the drive. Grayson was no acting, and now Peter panicked. He turned to his right and ran toward town.

\* \* \*

He had several blisters on his feet and a sharp pain in his side as he slowed near towering The Plaza. The interstate traffic buzzed on the bridge span ahead by as he debated whether to call home or go right to the parking garage and get his car. Or maybe he should call the police. He walked quickly around the parking circle and entered the hotel through a side door.

The mayor had just left one of the upper function rooms. Peter ran up the stairs, raising his hand into the air. " Susan! Susan!" In her red dress, she turned, smiling, but her face dropped when Peter came into view. She quickly walked down the corridor, surrounded by aides. " Susan, it's me, Peter!"

One of the aides stopped and physically blocked his path as Susan disappeared ahead. " Get out of here, Sturgis!"

Peter hung his head and moved over to one of the hotel phones. He placed a local call to his house. The line rang for the longest time before a computerized message informed him he had dialed a number not in service. Quickly, he tried his number again, but with the same result. For a few

moments he looked around the lobby and down to the shops where he and Jeannie had walked the night before.

He called Melvin's number. Some child answered the phone and when he got his mother, Peter asked for Melvin. The woman told him he had the wrong number. Peter held the receiver in his hands and punched in the Westerly police station. He asked for Don Williams.

" Don, this is Peter Sturgis."

" Look, Sturgis, this better be important."

" God, I'm glad I found you. Listen, last night Jeannie and I were at the Riccom party. The guy who's the CEO, Ricardo-

" Sturgis, I don't know what the hell you're talking about. Don't waste my-

" Wait, Donny. This guy abducted Jeannie, Melvin and myself to his jet. I ended up at a trailer park in Pimento Court."

" You live there, you dumb-ass."

" What?"

" Oh, boy..."

" Check at Riccom."

" Riccom?" asked Williams. " You poppin' those pills again?"

" What?"

" If you waste my time again, I'll bring you in the tank for a few days!"

He hung up. Peter stared at the phone again. He reached for the phone book on the chain and turned the pages. Then he wet his index finger, searching for Riccom's listing. He checked and rechecked, but when he found no listing he walked directly across the lobby and out the front entrance. Meandering forward, he moved across the hotel grounds, past some shrubs and to the top of a small knoll, overlooking the interstate.

The white Riccom building, nestled over many acres had been replaced by a darker, smaller structure and woods still covered much of the landscape. He grasped an adjacent aluminum light pole, aware Ricardo had altered his world.

" Jeannie... Jeannie, where are you?"

He stumbled down the other side, tripping over the shrubs as he neared the curb. His hands shook and his leg muscles threatened to give way as he crossed the road. Main Street looked the same. To his left Eddie Fitzpatrick's yellow gas station sign slowly spun atop the tall metal pole. Peter walked along the sidewalk and stepped onto the station's asphalt.

Eddie, standing near the register, looked out the window. When Peter passed the pumps, Eddie moved into the doorway. This time Peter, would be more cautious.

" Eddie, how you doing?"

" Sturgis."

Peter readily sensed this Peter Sturgis had not endeared himself to the Westerly citizens. His main concern right now was finding Jeannie. "Eddie, I'm looking for Jeannie."

"Oh?"

"Have you seen her? I..."

"Who the hell is Jeannie, some bimbo from the lodge hall?"

Peter did not blame Eddie for the remark. He slowly understood this Peter Sturgis' reputation. "Hey, I guess you wouldn't know."

"Find work yet?"

Peter paused, looking down Main Street as he spoke. He shook his head. "No, not yet."

"Check with unemployment office. They have a new computer. Lists everything within a fifty-mile radius. Somebody must need a welder."

"You would think so..." He slowly moved away without looking back. Eddie wished him good luck and he started down Main Street. How would Ricardo have the power to accomplish this? Martin had mentioned some place called Cibola and Denver.

Down the street, Big Fred Watson, crossed from the Chamber of Commerce office. Peter trotted down the sidewalk, calling Fred by name. Fred, dressed in his usual

gray suit, turned, but seemed taken aback by Peter. "

What do you want?"

" Fred... Fred, it's me, Peter!"

" Go to hell." He walked away at a brisk pace.

" Fred, I need help!"

" Call the mental health people, Sturgis." Then he stopped and spun on the sidewalk. " You keep the hell away from me and my wife!" Peter's mouth dropped as he saw the tears in Fred's eyes. " Haven't you caused enough damage in my life?"

" What?"

Fred continued down the sidewalk and Peter staggered to a cement flower encasement around a streetlight pole. He put his head in his hands and tried to maintain control. Within this nightmare, Jeannie remained his overriding concern, yet finding her might prove impossible. Across the street a car turned into the lodge hall parking lot behind the hardware store. Peter leaped up and started across the street, nearly stepping in the path of an oncoming bus as he sprinted for the other side.

The simple cinder block building where he had met Melvin and Berringer had a parking lot full of cars. He climbed the wooden stairs and opened the front entrance. Inside, the lodge hall was filled with cigarette smoke and local people. He raised his hand to Ritchie behind the bar. Ritchie looked away and Peter shuffled to the far end of the

bar. Around the hall, he recognized everyone, but no one seemed to care he had arrived.

" Ritchie..."

The bartender turned with a sour look upon his face.

" What your problem, Sturgis?"

" Ritch..."

" You maxed out on your tab, so forget it. We can't afford to foot the bill on you anymore."

Peter held the edge of the wooden bar. Brian Simmons brought his empty mug up to Ritchie, but quickly kept his back to Peter as Ritchie refilled the mug. Peter knew better than to say anything more. When he gazed at Tommy Karpis, the high school coach seemed oblivious to his presence. Peter thought he was amidst his friends, but his soiled reputation left him isolated.

The front entrance door opened and the kid from the trailer, wearing jeans and a leather vest and undershirt, walked inside. He carried his motorcycle helmet and moved up to Peter. " Buy you a beer, Dad?"

" Sure."

He sat next to Peter and ordered two beers. " Roberta Jo was pretty upset the way you stormed out. Look, why don't you let me bring you over to Belville tomorrow."

Ritchie set down the beers, but Peter stared at the golden bubbles moving through the beer and up the sides of the glass. He cringed at the possibility his reality had

changed. Was this Ricardo's ultimate punishment, sending him across time and space and banishing him from everything he had known? He kept telling himself it must be a hoax. "Curtis, do I know a woman named Jeannie? Do you know a woman named Jeannie?"

"Jeannie, no..."

Peter nodded and tried to set up the larger picture. Groupings of realities, existing side by side, each slightly different and stacked up toward infinity. Cibola, this place in Colorado had to involve the ability to bring people into these coexisting realities. But how was this possible and how would Ricardo have gained access to this Cibola?

"Dad, you're acting kind of funny. You all right?"

Peter leaned on his clenched fist. "I don't know."

"Anything you want to talk about?"

"You wouldn't understand," said Peter.

"Try me."

Peter shook his head and then laughed. "This is unbelievable." He looked into Curtis's blue eyes. "Curtis, I need you to bring me to Spring Street."

"Spring Street?"

"New development toward the mountains."

"Oh, yeah. I know where you mean. Why do you want to go over there?"

"It's personal."

" Fine, but don't go getting me in between Roberta Jo and another woman."

" I won't."

\* \* \*

The air pushed through his motorcycle helmet as Curtis banked for the development and wound the motorcycle toward the cul-de-sac. Peter's Tudor style house slowly came into view and Curtis slowed. In the driveway was a black Volvo and a smaller Audi. There were no bicycles or kids toys around the yard. Peter took off the helmet, his stomach sinking as he walked up the driveway and up the front walk. He moved up the brick stairs and pushed the doorbell.

A young woman in her twenties quickly appeared in his doorway. " Can I help you?"

" I don't know. Is this the Sturgis residence?"

" No, sir. I'm Debbie Allen. I live with my boy friend, Brad Channing. I think you have the wrong street. I don't recall any Sturgis on Spring Street anyway."

Peter's face froze and he descended the stairs as she said something else. Then he heard the boy friend. Jeannie and the kids were gone and his throat tightened as he put on his helmet. Curtis tried to console him, but he shook his head, climbed on the motorcycle and asked to be brought back to the trailer. If he only had a plan, a goal, something to

work on, but as he zoomed back through town, despair threatened to overtake him. He wanted to see his kids again, hug them and tell them he loved them. And he wanted Jeannie back, but he quickly was abandoning all hope.

## 8

Scorned as he wandered around town and depressed by the dismal trailer life with Roberta Jo, Peter grew more despondent as the days went by. Every night, mixed with booze and cigarette smoke, she continued arguments from years past. Astonished by her hatred, Peter said nothing, maintaining his distance, and usually left in the mist of battle.

He became closer to Curtis, almost like a buddy, spending evenings at the lodge hall with him and promising a mountain fishing trip before fall. In Curtis' face, the young boy yearned for his father and, despite his motorcycle and lackadaisical attitude, Curtis had a deep sensitivity, but stymied potential. Given the right circumstances he might make something of his life.

One night, trying to make up time lost by Pete Sturgis, Peter went bowling with Curtis. As he watched his son hurl the ball down the waxed alley, he leaned toward the adjacent table and grabbed a few magazines. Since he arrived, he had not even checked all of this reality. Through the music and crowd buzz of the busy alley, he thumbed through Time Magazine. Everything seemed the same as it was in his

former life. The sports teams had identical records, Clinton survived impeachment and the politicians were stalemated in Washington.. Curtis finished his frame by toppling the last four pins.

Peter patted his son on the back and stepped up to face the candlepins at the end of the polished wood. The blue sweeper, with a yellow-stenciled advertisement for Harry's Plumbing, pushed aside the fallen pins and the reset was lowered. Peter let the smooth ball roll around his hand and thought about Ricardo's revenge. Ricardo had engineered everything so perfectly. If only he and Melvin had not listed to Berringer and had let the government handle Ricardo's schemes. He released the ball, but it veered into the gutter just short of the pins. Curtis smiled and Peter shrugged his shoulders.

He performed better on the next frame and took some kidding from Curtis when he sat down again. For a moment he had forgotten how he was taken like a jump in a checker game, off the board and into a new realm. He slid People Magazine off the table and flipped the pages to the entertainment scene. At each explosive crack against the pins, Peter alternated glances at Curtis.

Near the rear of the magazine, he turned the folded page and his mind sputtered. He glared at a glossy black and white photo and tears formed uncontrollably in his eyes. In his most pessimistic thoughts he had never dreamed to see

Jeannie, her hair short and frosted, in a national magazine. The photo, taken in California showed her leaving her Malibu estate months ago. Peter gently mouthed her name, running his fingers down the page.

An accompanying article detailed her work on an upcoming motion picture called, *The Reluctant Bride*, directed and produced by her husband and long famous moviemaker known only as Ricardo. Peter's upper lip curled, fully aware what Ricardo had done, sweat broke out across his forehead and his heart hummed like engine pushed to the limit. Jeannie had acted in motion pictures for ten years and was married to Ricardo even longer.

" No!" Within the clatter of the bowling alley, no one seemed to notice him yelling. " Jeannie..."

Holding the magazine, he leaped up and nearly knocked over the table as he staggered forward. Curtis continued bowling as Peter ran behind the scoring tables and seats, and rushed for the exit doors. Once outside in the night air, he fell back against the brick building and lifted the magazine up again.

He flipped the pages under a parking lot lamp. Pictures of Ricardo and Jeannie next to a tiled pool were almost overwhelming. He had a skimpy suit and she wore a striped, string bikini. Peter stared at the body only he had known, now plastered over a national publication. Her smile, although wide and prevalent throughout the series of photos,

seemed fixed. And she went by her maiden name, Jean Carlisle.

Seeing Jeannie as a Hollywood star, touted as sexy, and referrals to nude scenes was not as upsetting as her marriage to Ricardo. The story detailed their travels around the globe and houses on distant continents. He shook his head when he read about this perfect marriage, a combination of personal and work place commitment.

He shouted into the summer air around the building.  
" Son of a bitch! Ricardo, you son of a bitch! I'll get you! I will stop you from ever returning to this Cibola." His voice became scratchy and strained. " You *will* die, Ricardo and I'll get her back. I'll get her back!"