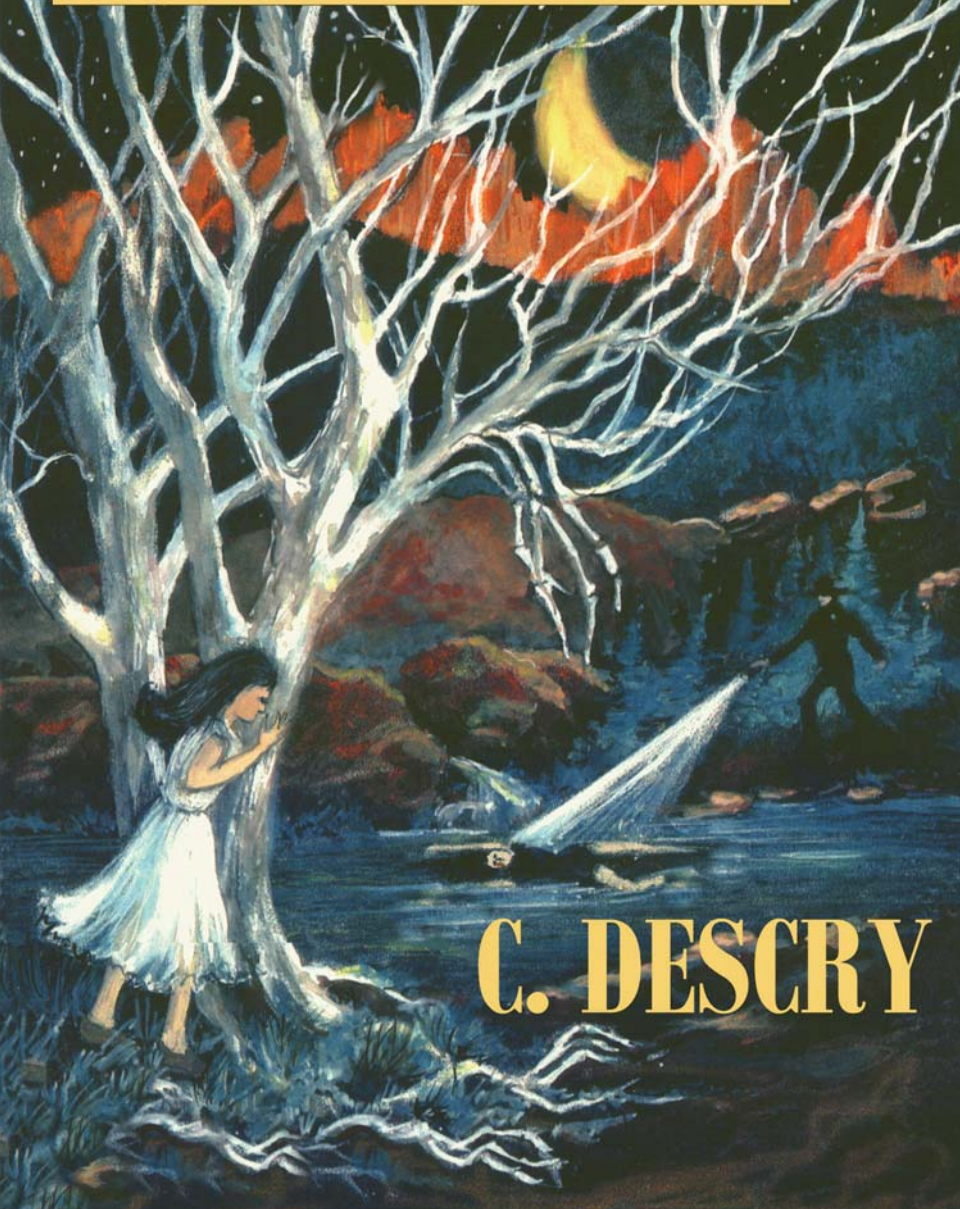


# The Spirit of the Sycamore



C. DESCRY

**A Sedona Mystery**

**THE SPIRIT OF THE  
SYCAMORE**



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**THE SPIRIT OF THE  
SYCAMORE**

**by**

**C. Descry**

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**THEY CAME LOOKING FOR RICHES OR FOR  
CELESTIAL GUIDANCE...  
THEY FOUND DESERT JUSTICE!**

**Ter Martel** is a troubleshooter for ruthless developers. He is a two-dimensional shark who knows all the dirty tricks it takes to win, and believes it is right to use them...

**Misty** is fleeing seven years of hell married to a totally amoral man. Now she is adrift, running from the courts, looking for spiritual guidance, unaware that powerful forces are shaping the essence of her life.

**Arnie Cain**, County Marshal, spent a horrible night sitting vigil with the body of the dead girl as she floated in the water hole, the latest in a bizarre series of murders. He knows that all of the dead have been cruelly murdered. What is eating at him is the reality that he can't prove it and arrest the killers. He is convinced that the guilty will get away with murder. He doesn't know about Desert Justice!

**Doc Connely** has amassed a fortune that he plans to pull into the grave with him...If he ever dies. He has discovered a force that will change the world and he lives on to protect its source...

**Orante** had escaped from a bamboo cage in Hanoi with dreams of power and position. Now he controls the fate and fortunes of thousands. Having attained his dream, he finds himself imprisoned again. Now he is trapped by his followers, forever bound, forever chaste.

**Celesta** believes that the Pleiadeans from the constellation Taurus have defeated their enemies from the Dog Star Canis and are coming back to Earth to rescue the souls they hid here 50,000 years ago...

**Raven**, once an archaeologist at the top of her profession, has discovered the desiccated bodies of the dead, deep within a cave in Prophet Canyon. Driven mad, she taps into a source of ancient wisdom and power.

***Well written. Well researched.***

***A great read!***

***Be prepared!***

***It will change your way of believing.***

**Grateful acknowledgment is given the following:**

Lois Eggers, Lew Davis, Sedona-Oak Creek Chamber of Commerce, Sedona Public Library, Southwest Research and Education Services, The Developers and Planners of Sedona, Desert Law Enforcement, Desert Region Medical Examiners, The Environmental Quality Avoidance Agency, Private Investigators and Troubleshooters for Hire, My Starbeings: Jo, Alex, and Nate, The Great Mandini, Spatial Intelligence and Cognitive Forces United, The Pleiadians of Arizona, The last survivors from Canis Major, The Seekers.

This is a work of fiction set in and around Sedona, Arizona. Names and descriptions of humans are fictitious and solely the creation of the author. No connection to any humans living or dead is intended or implied. References to public and private agencies and to orders and assemblies of people for government, religious or other means is purely fictitious. References to non-humans is done with awareness of their vindictiveness.

A special note to those who know Sedona and its environs: Many of the geographical places described in this work of fiction are the amalgamated creations of the author. To avoid exposing secret places, the author has intentionally made-up many of the geographical names and locations.

**Descry, Conun** born: 1939

**THE SPIRIT OF THE SYCAMORE**

1. **Mystery / Thriller.**
2. **Southwest Adventure / Suspense**
3. **Occult / Paranormal / New Age / Cults**
4. **Travel and information: Sedona, Arizona**
5. **Action / Adventure**

Edited by **Lew Davis**

Cover by **Eljay**





## Prologue

WHEN I PLAYED BACK the tape from my answering machine and received your warnings, I thought you had left a message for someone else. I was confused. I had never heard of you, or Sedona, Arizona. I couldn't fathom why you had left the message. You see, at the time, I didn't know that Greater Development was sending me to Arizona. I hadn't heard of their Prophet Canyon Project.

Thanks for trying to warn me about the forces which would be organized against me. I remember your words, and they make sense to me now. You said, *"Beware! There are several conflicting forces. The most powerful group operates under the guise of the occult and supranormal."*

I thought I knew all the dirty tricks developers used to get what they wanted...even murder, but you used words and spoke of concepts that didn't exist in my mind at that time. Channeling, vortexes, crystals, gurus, out-of-body and off-planet experiences, were things that I had never even thought about.

You know, before Arizona, I was always pragmatic. I was good at my job because I could use common sense, cut through the crap, and get to the essence of things. I didn't believe in magic, the occult, Starmen or... I wasn't interested in such things. I didn't understand Sedona...then.

Thank God you are recovering. I hope this account answers your questions.

- Ter Martel

*p.s.*

***Did you know that almost all of those who coveted the resources of Prophet Canyon are dead? They died horribly... The Medical Examiner called it Desert Justice! A local Guru claims it was the work of the forces from Canis Major, the Starbeings...***



## PART I

### Chapter 1

Their laughter came from deep within reptilian parts. The canyon's living things felt evil wafting.

BY GETTING UP EARLY, Ben Carrigan could beat the heat and get in a good three miles of cross country hiking. 'Today is beautiful,' he thought as he watched the sun tip the heights of the red rock colonnades that formed the Prophet formation. The weathered shapes he imagined as five rock prophets, were beginning to absorb the morning sun and glow. He loved this time of morning. The living rocks re-energized and the creatures of the night found shelter for the day.

The old trail led from the cul-de-sac a mile north of his house. The Forest Service had put up trail markers back in the '80s, but someone had torn them down about a year ago. He wouldn't complain about that, the fewer people who knew this trail the better. For seventeen years it had been his trail, his connection with the wildness of the land. Every other day he hiked out, often taking off cross-country, trying to know every part of the wonderful canyon and its guardian escarpments of red-orange sandstone.

Ben especially loved the deep washes where the rocks, tumbled along by the violent runoff of mid-winter floods, lay in jumbles of color and geometric forms. The wash beds were filled with materials which were all that remained of great lenses of rocks and gravel which had once been deposited high above the existing red sandstone. There was an occasional sandstone block in the washes, but most of the stones were hard basalts, chert, and even some granite. He loved to keep an eye out for volcanic bombs which had been shot high into the sky by ancient volcanos. He never knew if they had landed in the drainage or had been washed there from some ancient formation now long gone. He could close his eyes and imagine them blasting through the sky like shooting stars,

flames trailing far behind. In his mind's eye, he saw them crashing down through ancient forests; starting fires as they penetrated the earth.

Ben stopped under the limb of a great sycamore tree and readjusted the laces in his old leather walking shoes. Even now, mid-summer, the leaves were larger than his hand, fingers outstretched. "Grandfather tree," he said quietly to his old friend. "Do you know what they plan to do?" He wasn't going to look, but he couldn't stop himself from walking around the tree to see the great axe-marked blaze where the surveyors had cut a strip of bark off the ancient tree and driven a nail into the heart of the wound from which blue plastic survey tape dangled. "I'm trying to stop them, old friend. I'm trying!" He had tears in his eyes as he looked up at the leafy splendor overhead. Through the leaves and branches he could see the sky gaining blue intensity. It would be hot today. "I've got to get along," he said. He placed his hand over the new scar on the tree's trunk. "Bless you and protect you from their evil."

His anger was a driving force that made him take an animal trail that climbed almost straight up the rubble fields on the canyon side. He twisted and sidestepped through thick stands of manzanita and under and around catclaw and yucca plants that stood three feet high at the tops and were spiked out in a radius of more than two feet, their needle points warning off predators. Out of breath, he grabbed at the helping branch of a juniper and pulled himself up to a gravel area studded with cubes of sandstone placed like seats in an amphitheater. Puffing and feeling light-headed from his efforts, he took a center seat from which he could look out over the canyon and back the way he had come. Speaking to the beauty around him the old man confided, "They say I'm supposed to get twenty minutes of steady exercise every other day. Well, that's twenty hard ones, and I've only just begun."

Up canyon, where for perhaps a hundred thousand years the wild winter flood waters had dumped tons of rock and soil which formed a mile long, half mile wide flat, he

heard men yelling back and forth. He looked toward the noise and then he heard the sound of a diesel engine below. Turning his glasses slightly up and then down on his nose to better focus his sight, he saw a plume of black diesel smoke and the orange-yellow of a D-9 Cat pushing through the trees. He could see the tops of ancient pinions whip back and forth and then arc toward the ground as they were torn from the earth and brought beneath the treads of the killer machine. He heard the sounds clearly now, the awful shriek of splintering live junipers and the crack of broken limbs. It was, he looked at his watch, 6:15. Perhaps they thought no one was up this early. There was an injunction. They were breaking the law, but once the trees were down and the road was cut, it was too late, and they knew it. They might pay a fine for 'jumping the gun,' but it was worth it to them. He had to stop them.

Ben checked his shoes again, hitched his belt tighter around his thin waist, marked the spot where the Cat was ripping the life out of the heart of the canyon, and started down the way he had come. He had gone less than a hundred yards when he saw two men climbing toward him. He stopped, unsure whether they had seen him. The lead man stopped, looked around until he spotted Ben, then pointed so that the other could see the old man's location. They came on, faster now.

Ben felt the awful paralyzing grip of fear. He didn't know the smaller man, but he had seen the taller man at their meetings. He always hung back and never participated. He knew who he worked for. Suddenly, a lot of things made sense. He had long suspected that the deaths of Carri Sides and Jim Westermann, other leaders who had opposed the project, had not been accidental. He turned, urgencies driving him, and started moving away along a tangled animal trail which lead in the direction of home. He was strong, but his eighty years didn't give him an advantage. Within minutes, out of breath and dizzy

from his efforts, he leaned against the standing, bare trunk of a long dead pinon.

Puffing and sweating, cursing under their breaths, the men had him. "You smart-assed old fart," the taller of the two snarled, "you old son-of-a-bitch, you thought you and that citizen's group you founded could stop us. You thought you could hurt us by getting court orders? You dumb old fart! Well no more! Today you have an accident... Look what we got here, Phil, a real tree hugger. Quit hugging that tree, damn you. I said let go!"

The other man, smaller, meaner looking, sweating profusely, interrupted. "Yeah, you old coot! Today you had a hiking accident. Clumsy of you to slip and fall. What were you doing spying on us anyway?"

Ben kept his arms around the tree trunk as long as possible, scratching into the old wood with his thumbnail. His breath was gone, his throat dry. He tried to yell for help, but his voice cracked and came out raspy. He couldn't hold on any longer. The taller man grabbed him by the collar and belt, swung him up above his head and walked to the edge of the slight step that Ben had used as a trail. The next level was about five feet below, covered in catclaw, ringed with waxy-leafed manzanita.

With tremendous downward force, the tall man slammed Ben into the catclaw and onto the jumbled rocks and gravel. The old man had been much lighter than he had thought. "Nice flight old man?" he asked, taunting the broken form as Ben writhed once in horrible pain, shuddered and lay still.

"Poor man must have slipped!" the shorter killer quipped. "My goodness, someone will have to find him in a day or two."

"Not too soon Phil. The heat and critters have a lot to do."

They moved carefully now, wiping their footprints away with boughs and making their way back the way they had come.

“You gotta admit, Chris, that guy would have preferred to die out here. He was some kind of nut!”

Their laughter came from deep within reptilian parts. The canyon’s living things felt evil wafting.





## Chapter 2

You want to work ever again for this company, you got little choice now,  
Martel.

THE DENVER OFFICE OF Greater Development, Inc., was the control center from which the management team of Sam Prader and Bill Connors called the shots. I worked for them in Denver, contracting my services on a per-diem basis.

My adventure started in Colorado. It ended in Sedona, Arizona, one of the most beautiful and interesting places on the planet. My company is Terrance Martel and Associates. I have a great logo, a rock hammer with a sharp pick end.

I don't have associates anymore. I work alone now. I got rid of all my employees several years ago because they rode my coattails into the circles of businesses I had developed as clients, and tried to steal them so that they could set up their own firms. I guess they didn't notice that my hammer had a sharp pointed end. They learned the hard way! I haven't had any associates or competition for years.

I was doing very well in Denver. I had planned to get rich fighting Greater Development's battles for them! Then my world turned upside down.

I'd always known about Greater Development's Phoenix office. I wasn't interested in desert heat and snowbirds, so I ignored it. I wasn't happy when Samuel Prader called me in and, nervous as hell about it, begged me to go south. He and Bill Connors, the man I had worked with on the Power Center Mall and who had taught me the true meaning of the word 'disgust,' wouldn't take "no" for my answer when I tried to get out of the impending assignment.

'Gopher,' a handle Connors got on the line at Colorado University in his college days, got to his little feet and stood behind Prader, both fat hands white from his

death grip on Prader's chair back. I could see Prader stiffen and grimace as his chair was moved.

"How far along are you on that cemetery project, I mean, shouldn't you have wrapped it by now?" he asked as he panted for breath from the effort to stand.

"Days away," I told him, suspicious that my commitment to that development project was being questioned. He knew exactly how the project was progressing. He knew everything about projects he was paying for. I wondered why he was asking... Obviously it was for Prader's benefit, but why? I sensed that he and Prader were at odds about the project.

He grunted, tried to look at Prader's face for some clue as to the other man's approach, but couldn't see it from his position behind Prader's chair. "Has anyone noticed that you moved the fence last fall?"

"Nobody's been around for months."

"Headstones are gone?"

I looked at his red face and observed the beads of sweat around his receding hairline. I knew he knew that we had 'offed' the headstones last Halloween and blamed it on kids. "A mean prank!" the local village newspaper had called it, as I had made sure they would.

"No headstones there! We moved the fence to the north and changed the path in from the road. Grass has come up, what with the wet spring. It looks like the plot has always been there."

"The old plot? Any sign of the 55 gallon barrels? Any grave depressions? What have you done to hide it?"

"After the rain last week we drove vehicles all over it and made it look like a parking area for the cemetery. I was out there this morning. With the fence now weed-covered, and the parts of headstones we dug out planted on the new site, it looks exactly like the old site did. We even buried parts of the fence as it had been, and made it look like soil had wind-drifted over it. I think it's time to call in the state archaeologist."

Prader grunted and pushed his chair back to try to dislodge Conner's hands. "You don't have to do that yourself, do you?"

He caught me off guard. They both knew that I was the wrong guy to contact the state. I was known. I had a history with the bureaucrats. "Not me!" I told him, holding my hands up, palms out. "I got a man name of Samson who will claim to be a relative of the family buried out there. He's going to file a statement stating that he was told by a member of his family that the cemetery was never used, and that nobody was ever buried there. As a sole-surviving relative, he's going to claim that *if* it is a family plot and his family is buried there, then he wants to move his parents there and be buried there himself when he dies. I've been coaching him. He's asking the state archaeologist to either declare it a cemetery and make certain that it's protected through time, or get the state to abandon the site."

"Damn clever!" Connors panted. He had moved and now had both hands planted firmly on the desk top. He stood balanced on his knuckles. His wispy blond hair was wet; stuck down with sweat. His elbows were locked.

Prader stood and moved to the back of his chair. "Not so clever maybe if the university gets involved. What about that, goddamn it!"

I wondered why we were having this conversation. All I could do was play along. "I spent a lot of time covering that base. The last drums were buried more than thirty years ago. Minimal records were kept then, and only a few knew about it. None of the dead were identified. The med school's research cadavers were cremated and the drums contained only ashes. They were buried without ceremony. The university didn't want anybody to make a stink about it. The Sampson's relatives alive then were not to know."

"I'm not comfortable with just that," Prader said thoughtfully. He looked to me like the patriarch of some great family, graying hair pushed back from a shepherd's peak, high cheek bones, large almost Roman nose, and

thin-lipped mouth. His gut was a slight paunch over his belt, but at 60 he still carried the look of a classical athlete. We looked a lot alike. He could have been my father. When I looked at him I saw myself in twenty years. "Someone from the university could blow the whole thing," he continued. "If anyone even mentions fifty-five gallon drums, and then we're seen removing them when we build the pumping station... Well, the whole project would be..."

"You don't need to know how, Sam. I can guarantee you that the few records that were kept are now lost. Worst case scenario? Someone comes out of the woodwork and claims drums were buried there. No records. The state's archaeologist, after careful digging, certifies that nothing is there and the matter is dropped. I've got a plan for concealing the drums we dig up. We bring in dozens of drums and line the site with them. A few more drums won't be noticed."

Connors ducked his head as he often did when he was injecting himself into a conversation. "Then you could be out of there and someone else could finish that project? Let's see..." he looked at me in search of an answer. I kept a blank face and stared at him.

Prader injected himself back into control of the conversation. "Okay, can you start this new project... Tomorrow?"

"An Arizona project?" I exclaimed. I grimaced and gave him a nasty look.

Prader came around his desk and stood in front of me, too close. "I promise you Ter that you will love this assignment. Forget everything you thought you knew about Arizona. We're sending you to the most beautiful spot on Earth. In fact, you can consider this in part a vacation at one of the finest resort locations on the planet. I've gotten together a packet for you to look at. Here, sit over there and take a few minutes to look this stuff over! I'm not kidding, Ter, you will love this place...and it's only for a... Well, at the most two weeks.

“And goddamn it to hell!” Gopher Connors added, shaking his head slowly side-to-side. “Prader wants a man like you there who can represent us. He thinks that the Phoenix office has the project screwed because they lost their troubleshooter. He wasn’t as good as you anyway. He was a pussy and I told ‘em so.”

My mentor cut in. “This is worth millions to the company and a lot to you, too. This is an assignment for you to handle!”

Gopher had his head stuck down into his body so it looked like he didn’t have a neck. His red face and white lips communicated a feeling of anger at my involvement, and told me that there was a lot about this Arizona project that wouldn’t be a vacation.

“Okay,” I said in my steeliest voice, “you’re not leveling with me and you know me well enough to know that I don’t buy a lot in an avalanche zone. I’ll peruse your packet, but it won’t make a difference. Even if you level with me, I’m not...I can’t, go to Arizona. Got that? I can’t go!”

Sam Prader smiled at me, his thin lips pursed. “\$10K and expenses. Two weeks max.”

Connors tucked his head even deeper into his shoulders. “You said ‘can’t.’ Can’t? Why the hell can’t you? You’re single. You don’t have social obligations. You’re a loner. You’re tougher than nails and we all know it. What is this ‘can’t’ shit?” He popped his head back out on his neck and stuck it toward me, eyes looking straight into mine. I got the feeling that he was begging me for an excuse Prader would accept---yet he didn’t want Prader to know that he objected to my involvement.

“I can’t go away for even a week. That’s all there is to it. I’m telling you! I don’t have to say anything more!” I felt sweat build under my arms. Maybe I could get \$25K plus expenses? Prader wanted me down there. I knew I could get...probably \$20K! I knew how they worked. My mind was racing. What was the assignment? What was

going on in Arizona that would make these two Colorado vultures so antsy?

Prader went back and sat behind his desk again. He looked at me and I sensed the evil that lurked just behind his surface facade. An evil I had learned about shortly after I began contracting with Greater Development. An evil I admired.

“Ter, you level with us... Yes, we will level with you. Man, we have a lot of employees. None good as you at this type of thing. But even if we had a man of your obvious qualifications... A man who could see things our way... We couldn’t do this thing in-house. I know you! I need you, and we’ll pay you well! I never heard you say ‘can’t’ before. Explain, damn you!”

Connors was looking around for a chair. Three hundred fifty pounds on his size nine feet were pushing his ankles through his arches. He went for the visitor’s chair against the far wall and forced his bulk into it. “‘Can’t’ ain’t in our vocabulary. It’s Amer - I - can, not can’t.”

I had a few secrets I didn’t share with anybody I didn’t have to. The less these wheeler-dealer types knew about my private life the better. I did some quick thinking. If I could get fifteen big ones for two weeks work, I could buy that Lucent Technologies stock and make a killing. I could probably run that fifteen into a hundred in two years. Then I could... No way! There was no way to leave town. “Gentlemen, I can’t discuss your proposition because I can’t leave town. I might be interested, but I can’t leave town. Period! End!”

Prader rose to his feet, pushing his big executive chair back against the wall. “I don’t buy it, Ter. I’m getting pissed. What? Five years you have taken our money and worked with us and now you have this secret that holds you in town? What? Are you on probation or something?”

They were both as visibly upset as I had ever seen them. Even when Prader was convicted of destroying public records he hadn’t been this upset. Connors was apoplectic; an apoplectic gopher! At any other time I would

have fallen down laughing. Now, I felt their rage and fear. I knew I had to level with them. What in the blazes was so important that it had these two old pros working at counter purposes? My curiosity overcame my wish to protect my private life. "It's my mama," I said with head bent and fists clenched. "My mom lives with me... I take care of her."

Prader got bug-eyed. "So? So?"

"I can't leave her for a week. She depends upon me. I take care of her."

"She an invalid?"

I looked at both of them as I scanned the room. Prader wanted to kill me. The thought crossed my mind that they both looked as hurt, confused and angry as many of the people did who had felt their wrath after trying to stop their developments and projects. Something clicked in my head that made me uneasy. I decided that it was a reaction to the anger I felt directed at me in that plush office. "No, she's not an invalid."

"Then why can't you get away? You could call her every day if you had to."

"I can't call her. She's stone deaf."

Connors was gophering again. He was also puckering his lips which seemed white and dry even with his tongue going over them like a pink sponge. He had been hoping that I had a reason which would change Prader's mind.

Prader gave me a cold stare. "That's all? That's it? That's the reason we are having this stupid conversation? We'll hire a nurse or a companion. Better still, you hire someone! That's it then! It's settled, right? Right Gopher? Right Ter?"

He had me. I knew that Mom wouldn't like it, but she had made out okay when I was called-up. Carol could take care of her again. I could e-mail daily. "Okay, that may work. But I have some other concerns. First, I'm working on another project. I can finish it by...oh, let's say...one week. A week from today is the earliest I can leave Denver. Also, I'm thinking companion, expenses,



\$18K and two weeks max. That is if you level with me about the problem and *if* I think I can handle the job.”

Prader’s eyes narrowed and he hissed at me. “You want to work ever again for this company, you got little choice now, Martel. You’re sticking it to us ‘cause you sense we need you. Well, we do, and we’ll pay, but I don’t like it one bit and I’m telling you that up front! You better not screw up! You make certain sure that this thing goes our way. I’ll tell you what it is, and you’ll know you drove a hard bargain at \$14K. You got us. We got you! You leave here a week from today, not a day later. Now sit there and look over the packet! Then I’ll fill you in. Gopher, call that Miss Whatsit and get some coke and aspirin in here. Damn, what a way to start a Wednesday.

Five days had passed and I had arranged everything. I sat in their offices again, wondering what last-minute instructions they had for me. The packet Sam Prader had given me was fat with brochures and information sheets. Many of the color brochures featured the same photograph, a red rock, butte-type formation with spires and craggy escarpments. The captions read: “Cathedral Rock.” The photos all showed the rocks reflected in “Beautiful Oak Creek.” The place was spectacular, and the creek looked like a place I could meld into and stay for the rest of my life. The Arizona I had studied in geography class was a land of saguaro cactus, flat deserts, and parched, rock-strewn mountains. This green forested region with vertical columns of red rocks didn’t fit that image. I perused the brochures and learned that the spectacular red rocks region was centered on the City of Sedona. The incorporated area of about 9,000 souls, lay at about 4200 feet elevation at the foot of a great rim or drop-off that cut across the north-central part of the state, generally running west to east. This great barrier, and its jumbled escarpments and extreme changes in elevation, was called the Mogollon Rim. “Sedona,” the literature said, “is about 28 miles from Flagstaff and almost

three thousand feet lower.” “Drive the beautiful Oak Creek Canyon between Sedona and Flagstaff and enjoy some of Arizona’s most unique environments.”

I liked what I was learning and began to wonder if Sam and Gopher were being more truthful than I had thought. I scanned through information about art galleries, golf, fabulous resorts, state parks, good places to eat and... I put the packet down for a moment as Prader and Connors came in. “I’ve studied the packet,” I said. “So there’s trouble in paradise?”

Gopher took three aspirins from his small plastic Walgreen’s bottle and threw them back with a slug of Coke. The fizz made his eyes water and he belched before he could get his hand up to shield his mouth. “Pfft,” he said, tilting his head down by pulling his chin into his chest. “Did’ja read about the special energy vortexes, Starmen, and new age theologians?” His eyes bulged out at me.

I picked up the packet again and thumbed through some of the Xeroxed stuff. There were things here that I had no knowledge of, or feeling for. “What is this stuff all about?” I asked, directing the question at Prader and hoping he would answer it.

“Place is beautiful. Some think beauty equals magic. People looking for magic come to Sedona because they believe that the answers are there. Lots of people...a lot of lost or mucked-up people.” Prader wasn’t trying to answer objectively and I knew him too well not to sense the sarcasm and contempt that he obviously felt.

“Besides, there’s big money in magic,” Gopher injected. “The local economy gets a boost from people who come to find someone or something to solve their problems. Ha! What a deal! What a scam! We want part of the action.”

“It’s not just them! Lots of retired executives from aerospace and entertainment settle in the area. Ever watch those old Glen Ford movies? Remember cowboy stars riding around beneath the red rocks? Well, those westerns were filmed in and around Sedona.” Prader was

looking at Connors in a peculiar way. Maybe he thought Gopher had said too much. I was always disturbed by the constant body language between them.

Prader once told me he was like a gunfighter except that he was so intimidating he never had to shoot bullets. I had commented that his bullets were the laws. He shot back that laws were bullets and the powder was money. "Learn that no law is clear," he told me. "A law is a tool in the hands of those with the bucks to interpret it and get the courts to enforce it." I had to agree. That's how it worked for me and that's what was making me rich.

"Okay guys, you want me to go to Arizona and rub shoulders with the retired executives and the..." I thought a moment. What were these people who sought magical solutions called? "The Seekers!" I guessed that name summed up what I knew about them so far. "You want me to What?"

"Get the seekers and the know-it-alls off our back!" Gopher blurted, neck hidden again like a deflated organ. Get them to stop using strange forces against..." His hand went up to his mouth in an attempt to block his last words, but it was too late. Prader gave him a look that was filled with disgust and hate.

Prader cleared his throat with as loud an "ahem" sound as he could make. "Ter, it seems that the core of the responsible citizens---the power structure in the community---want development and expanded economic opportunities. Then, like everywhere, there are the NIMBY sons-of-bitches. Like everywhere, they scream in public meetings, "Not in my backyard!" You know these jerks are the ones we can scare off easy. Hell, you've written the book on how to do that. Then there's a minority of goddamn architects and environmentalist bastards and planners who claim that they know what is best for the future. These scary bastards, as you know, are the most dangerous. Like here in Denver, they're usually young and idealistic and don't understand about profit, private landowners' rights, and... Why am I telling you? You know

these types and I think you deal with them effectively. I nodded.

“You’ve got your regular situation in Sedona,” he continued, still staring at Connors with a look of incredulity, “the majority don’t give a fig about anything that isn’t in their face. The landowners and developers and businessmen, well, they’re the same everywhere. They want a profit, they want it fast, and they want out clean with no consequences down the road. They’re our kind of people! Like us, they’re building America.”

“One problem is that in Sedona there are more than the usual number of ‘Young Turks’ who think they are environmental planners and responsible developers,” he paused, straightened his tie and brushed the tip of his nose with his fist, “gad, those righteous bastards make me sick! They even got through some really tough regs called an ESLO, know what that is?”

I nodded. “Environmentally Sensitive Land Ordinance.”

“What bull,” he continued. “At least it’s only in the incorporated area. As if we pros in the field don’t know what is best for the areas we develop. It’s not their money, goddamn it! If it were their money they sure as hell would look closely at what they make us do. It’s our money and our land and we take the risks! These goddamn fuzzy-brained creeps have no right to tell us what we can or cannot do. Well, I understand some of it, within reason, but we do that anyway because it makes us more money.”

“Okay Sam,” I said, “You have described every cutesy place in the country. What’s the problem?” I decided to take advantage of Connor’s slip. “What ‘strange forces’ is Gopher talking about?”

“I’m getting to it. I’m getting to it! More and more we’ve seen the tree huggers and environmentalists increasing in numbers. Okay, they melt under the threat of a suit. But in Sedona there’s something else, something new. The... What the blazes did you call them? Seekers? The Seekers are organized against us. All that rabble who

filter into the area looking for magical solutions to their screwed lives, is being organized against our project.”

Connors gophered again, neck erect and then flaccid, forcing his head up and down. “Unbelievable! There’s this stream of misfits carrying crystals, beating drums, chanting, some with flowing Jesus robes and some nudists...” his tongue was going side-to-side hyphenating his words. He grabbed air and continued, “I mean they were right out where the fourteenth green will be, swimming naked and sitting bare-assed on the rocks in front of me.” His face got redder. “I was there! I’m telling you I saw it. I saw them. Some were shaved. Every size you could imagine. I saw it! I was there close enough to reach right out and even touch... I’m tellin’ you, and all them men was queer as three dollar bills! Queers, I tell you. Right there all of them playing and being around together and none of them was up. Sick! I’m telling you what we are up against is sick, and it’s scaring off our people, too!”

Prader gave Connors another major ugly look, raised his voice and injected, “Get yourself together Gopher! You’ve been having conniptions ever since I decided to oversee the project. Get it together! See Martel? This is different from anything yet. Look, you know we own that land... Well at least we will. Local powers demanded in, so part’s theirs, but that’s on the quiet, as always. We’ve got options, really. You know how it’s done. We don’t have to go the deal until all the pieces are in place. Most important for you to know is that we have control and the laws of ownership apply to us. As landowners we have the whole god-blessed Constitution behind us. We’ve got the law, and, well, we’ve got termites.”

I was having a hard time hiding my amusement. These bastards were so manipulative, so obvious, and yet I had to admit that Prader had the power and knew how to apply it. The two of them had made millions from developments. They had created whole communities that

served hundreds of thousands of people. I was proud of my small role in making their plans come to fruition.

Knowing Prader's head inside made me shiver. I admired him, even though I knew that his life was empty and meaningless. He was a shark doing shark things. 'I may look like him,' I thought, 'but I'm not like him at all. When I get mine, I'll know how to live my life.' Connors gave me the creeping willies. Someone told me that he had once been excited by the idea of improving the world and getting rich as a result. Now, he approached projects like he approached a table full of food. He was used to gorging himself until coins ran from his pockets.

"So what you're telling me is that a bunch of young architects and envirotechies and a bunch of bare-assed seekers have stopped a major development. What kind of development? What's so damn unusual about it that it draws negative attention and makes those kinds of bedfellows?"

Prader stood straighter. "Look! You *will* be on a plane to Phoenix tomorrow!"

Connors was upset, probably by Prader's stares. He was shaking his head and acting like all he wanted was out.

I wanted answers. I knew Prader too well not to know that he had drawn a line. I wasn't sure why. "Late tomorrow. 6:00 flight, America West."

"Good. You'll have reading material for the plane... And Martel, when you get to our office in Phoenix, you'll see the artist's sketches and the whole development plan. Stan Kling will fill you in. Your main contact is Paul Landsman in Sedona. You'll read about it all. Meanwhile, we don't need to continue!" He slicked back his hair and did a little twist-tug on his tie. "Gopher, get the rest of that material together, especially the Arizona laws stuff --- boy you'll love what our brethren have done for us down there, makes Colorado laws look regressive --- and make sure all the stuff's at DIA before Martel's plane leaves. Me, I've got to draw that cemetery project to a close so leave me

Sampson's number. Good job on that! May the dead rest in..." He smiled his tight-lipped smile, "in, under, and around our pumping station! Luck Ter, easiest money you'll ever make."

## Chapter 3

There seemed to be groups of people in Sedona, a majority women, who came looking for someone to turn their power over to.

I DON'T GET OUT TO Denver International Airport very often. I don't mind flying in the big jets, it's just the waste of time it takes to get to the airport, walk miles through terminals, and go through the security and boarding procedures. On the other end, I hate waiting for baggage and getting transportation. As you know, to fly for one hour takes almost a day of hassles.

Denver International is a classical model of a development project that had to run the gauntlet. Every step of the way, the project was attacked by people, most of whom didn't know a concourse from intercourse. Millions of dollars were spent getting self-appointed creeps out of the way so that the project could proceed as planned. In the end, almost no significant changes were made. The airport was built and everyone cheered. Now everyone loves it.

Developers know what needs to be done and they do it economically and on time, if left alone. The trouble with our society is that every uneducated, inexperienced, stupid clod has an opinion, and feels that his opinion is equal to that of the professionals. The crazy part is that 'againers' don't have to have qualifications, just loud mouths. I hate em! At least I know how to get even with them.

Greater Development didn't know it, and Prader, who had acrophobia or some such fear, wouldn't have liked it, but I made arrangements to have a plane at my disposal while in Arizona. I needed air hours to keep my pilot's license, so I had my friends at Denver Air Rents call their Phoenix branch and reserve a 172 for me. After scanning through the tome of material Connors and Prader had given me, I had decided that having an aerial



perspective would be an advantage. I also decided that commuting between Phoenix, Sedona, and the County Seat of Yavapai County, Prescott, and the County Seat of Coconino County, Flagstaff, would be easier by plane than by car. Part of the land Greater Development was concerned with was in both counties. I wondered if that would be an advantage or not? After I got the dope from the Phoenix office, I would fly to Sedona. I could get a car there from Landsman, my Sedona contact.

I didn't know it then, but that change from ground to air transportation bought me some valuable time and allowed me to get perspectives that probably saved my life. I was a man who followed routines, planned in advance, by the book. I guess that's what saved my bacon in the Rangers. Later, I learned that it doesn't pay to be too predictable in this business.

The America West plane I was ticketed on had been recently repainted with garish designs on the tail and bold stripes and lettering on its sides. Inside, it was a regular, heavily soiled 737. I entered the tube and found my seat. My carry-on bag fit overhead. The stuff Connors and the Greater Development staff had gathered for me filled a large rope handled shopping bag. I felt like someone coming home after attending a bookseller's convention, carrying all the free handouts.

In back of my row and across the aisle, I noticed two young things---maybe mid-twenties---with roached hair. Rings pierced their ears and noses. One had a black roach, 'the last of the Mohicans,' I thought, tipped with silver. The other's roach was red-orange. She stuck her tongue out. It was pierced and had a ring through it from which spittle dripped down her front as she tried to wet her lips.

The silver-tipped one had a low, off the shoulders blouse that exposed tattoos that ran over her pale skin like splattered roadkill. I watched the 'fem fatales' for a moment, then turned back and tried to read. I couldn't help but wonder what perversions and sick activities these hip

girls were into... The mental images that tried to form in my mind came from some cesspool I wanted no part of. 'Yuck!' I thought. I don't want to find out.

The flight was smooth enough so that there was no sense of motion or enjoyment. You know how travel is today. You get into the tube. They pack bodies shoulder-to-shoulder with almost no leg room, knees jammed into the seat in front. The tube is shot from one place to another. If it doesn't explode or crash, you get out in a couple of hours and tell your mind that you are now a thousand miles away in a different place. Your mind is confused, as the place you have deplaned is almost exactly like the place you left. I knew I was in Arizona because it smelled different, the sky was cloudless, and the blazing sun burned through the smoked glass in the terminal. Oh, yeah, I could also see palm trees and blooming oleander hedges out past the edge of the tarmac.

In my head, alpha waves were trying to sort, connect and put away new concepts that I had gleaned from my reading. The regular stuff all got associated into my ken without angst. The new stuff was like learning a foreign language. I rebelled, as any normal person would, arguing with myself that I didn't need to know *that* stuff and that I didn't want *that* language in my head. After consideration, I realized that somewhere in that strange new vocabulary were the handles for concepts I would have to deal with in Sedona. I had made my own list. I pulled it from my pocket and read it over. I had forty minutes to kill before my rental plane check out.

With only my masters in physics and my love for chemistry as background, I had trouble with the concepts of Vibrational Energy Breakthroughs, Field Coherent and Thought Interactive Nobel Gasses (Xeon, Argon and Krypton), Sacred Light Geometry, Free Energy, Ultra Photon Sound Beams, AstroGem Illuminators, Star Harmonizers, Brain Tuners, Trient, Monoatomic and Etherium Gold, and... Magic crystals and energy vortexes

seemed tame and completely logical compared to the rest. From what I had read, these forces and elements were the secrets of the Ancients and gifts from the Starbeings. I had once studied the myths of Atlantis, but now, right there in Sedona, Arizona, the wisdom of the Atlanteans was being revealed. If I went into this, I would also have to study the Vedic Texts and to learn about not just Vedic, but western astrology. I would have to study the Sufi and... I thought the whole thing was a con for ding-a-lings. I thought I could use some of the Brain Respiration I had read about. I was laughing inside and remembering Conner's comment: *"...there's big money in magic... The local economy gets a boost from people who come to find someone or something else to solve their problems. Ha! What a deal! What a scam! We want part of the action."* I also told myself to keep an open mind. Maybe I was the product of a linear society. Maybe I wasn't open to the 'truth.' Maybe...?

I had to pass through the car rental section on my way out to the private aviation area. Miss red-orange, tongue-pierced was standing near a pillar not far from the Avis counter. I had come up within a knot of people so she didn't see me until I was almost to Hertz. I watched her as she noticed me, reacted with tightening body language that I knew the exact meaning of, and then pretended she hadn't seen me. 'Why?' I thought. 'Why would she be watching me?' I went through the rental cars area, through the doors into the baggage claims, turned in the crowd and moved back to the door, looking for her. At first it seemed that she had gone about her business and that I had misread her. Then I saw her topknot bobbing as she made her way through the crowd like some weird salmon going upstream to spawn. She crossed the foyer heading toward National and Budget on the other side. Beyond her, I saw the skunk markings of her Mohican friend. The dark-haired beauty with the spaghetti tattoos hadn't seen her yet. She was obviously staked out watching the car rental agencies

on her side of the terminal. The red-orange must have called to her. She turned and they came together, had an animated conversation, then headed my way.

I stepped back to one side of the door and moved behind one of the big carrouseles. The two wonder women came by, heads swiveling to scan the vast room; walking as fast as they thought they could without looking conspicuous. What a laugh! I waited until there were sufficient people between us to hide behind and followed. They came to the end of the baggage claim area, stopped, looked back, and then headed toward the automatic exit doors. Outside, I could see them wending their way along the loading zone. Then they both stood facing the street and watching cabs, cars and vans pull out and drive away. They had a brief discussion, seeming to be confused and even scared. The skunk-top came back into the baggage claim and found one of the telephone kiosks. I'd have given 35 cents to know whom they reported to. It gave me the willies to think that these two bimbo-freaks were tailing me. I also wondered, as you can guess, who would be dumb enough to set up a tail using beacons? Who wanted to know what I was doing in Arizona?

As I made my way to the private aviation area, my subconscious worked on the problem. As I filled out the forms the rental agent handed me, I was connecting the comments made by Prader and Connors with what I had read. Opposition to the development was coming from the regular sources and, unlike any development they had been involved in, from the group I had called the Seekers.

There seemed to be groups of people in Sedona, a majority women, who came looking for someone to turn their power over to. They wanted to find special energies and magical solutions to life's problems. The two creeps who had been on the plane from Denver and who were obviously watching for me in the terminal, didn't fit that mold. They were punk freaks or something, obviously not seekers of Atlantean wisdom or astrological guidance. Were they involved? If so, why? Did they have something

in common with these others? No, it was too obvious that freaks who mutilated their bodies --- tongues and probably other parts --- had nothing in common with seekers who were looking for spiritual guidance.

The agent at the counter handed me the forms to fill out and the latest print-out of the weather. I filled-in the spaces, wrote my flight plan out carefully, perused all three pages once again to make sure I hadn't missed anything, and signed the forms. The agent didn't bother to proof my work. He handed me three keys attached to a plastic sunflower and grunted as he pointed with his chin to the only 172 in the line that matched the call letters.

I did a quick walk-around and liked what I saw. The plane was almost new. Then I patted its cowling and left it. Before I could fly up to Sedona I had to catch a Taxi and go to downtown Phoenix. I had a meeting with Stan Kling at Greater Development's office. I hoped I could get it over quickly.

The meeting seemed to go well, but Stan Kling cut it short. I left, feeling frustrated. I had a lot of new information to chew upon, and more questions than answers. Kling's secretary got me back to Sky Harbor, and it wasn't long before I was aiming the nose of the 172 northward. I was in my element, flying high above the earth where I could think clearly.

The Sedona airport had a 'visuals only' approach, so I was careful to keep my head turning and my eyes searching through the plexiglas for other aircraft. As I approached, I planned my dogleg and landing. As I did, I decided against landing. The light was great, and the beauty of the red rock spires and buttes, cliff faces and broken terrain had gotten to me. I pulled away to the south and began to ease out of the landing pattern. Soon I was looking from my map to the top of Bell Rock. Spread below on the flats was the strip and the sprawl of homes the map labeled the Village of Oak Creek. Two golf courses, only

miles apart, were fenced-in by developments. The closer course was surrounded by ranch style homes and some condos. Many looked like they had been built twenty years ago, although lots of new construction was visible everywhere. A very large school site seemed to be a recent addition. Signs of growth and sprawl dominated. Man's improvements, not the wild, ruled the landscape.

Along the highway to the east, the other golf course was being hemmed in by newer expensive homes and lavish condos. In a way it seemed obscene that so many homes and condos were being built right up against the greens and fairways. I knew that golf courses were sinkholes for money, and that the only way a developer could come out on such a project was to use the course as bait to sell sites and then divest the course to the homeowners or club members and get out. That had obviously happened here, and from what I had learned in Phoenix about the project Greater Development was planning, the sale of real estate, not a golf course or clubhouse, was the bottom line.

As I crossed over I-17, I realized that I had overflowed the limits of the majestic red rocks. I pulled back gently, gaining altitude slowly as I turned the 172 north, and then northwest, starting a return that would take me over the rough rim country between Flagstaff and Sedona.

As I flew, I focused upon flying, but another part of my mind began to wander. It was a great game, this work I was in, I mused. I thought of the dozens of public hearings I had attended, a fly on the wall, placed there to give feedback to the guys I worked for. Developers always talked greenbelts, public access, public good, conservation, and facilities the community could use. They had the buzz words down-pat. Part of my job was to list issues the locals held dear, so that my employers could include them in their spiels.

When my guys described the subdivision and development of land, they were able to convince the city fathers and members of planning and zoning and that they

were really there to give, not take. "Obviously," they cried as if they were victims, "we have to make ends meet and forego profit on this one." They always said something like that, straight-faced as if they were honest. All the while, their meters were running and the rush for the gold at the bottom line was on. I knew, and I supposed everybody involved knew, that if they offered to build or provide something that wasn't essential to their bottom line motivation---like a road, sewage plant, water system, clubhouse, library, school, or even a medical clinic---they planned to pass it off like a hot potato, most often to the city or county or homeowners. It was a game, and all the players knew the rules, or should have known them if they chose to play. Besides, most of the players had a straw in the soup. I know the creative ways payoffs are made. I have arranged hundreds of payoffs, but of course never a direct one to a person in public service.

I enjoyed being a 'fly on the wall' in the public meetings as a developer began to sell a Planned Unit Development to the local community fathers...or as some called it, "Pulled his PUD through the halls of government."

The beauty below me was a topographical wonderland with counterpoints of reds and greens, red strata supporting vertical towers, gremlins and gargoyles of red and white banded sandstone, and the glint of cool water flowing in the twisted channel of Oak Creek. This land was special! I could feel energy emanating from it. I could understand why people came here for answers and energy.

I studied my map as I flew. To my left, I could see where Highway 179 came around and about from the Village, through the red rocks and green Pinon-Juniper forests, crossed Oak Creek, and met Highway 89A. Highway 89A came twisting out of Oak Creek Canyon, through the older part of Sedona, and turned west, where it was lined with strip development. I followed the highway

with my eyes, toward a far off haze that must have been heat waves and dust rising over Cottonwood, sixteen miles away at the foot of the Mingus Mountains. On the far off mountainside I could see a speckling of colors and glints that must have been reflected light from the old copper mining town of Jerome.

The eroded-out cusp of red rocks around Sedona was only a small outcropping compared to the immensity revealed, but its beauty made it greater than any other feature. Even the white-capped San Francisco Peaks above Flagstaff, couldn't pull my eyes off the red rock country below.

East of Cottonwood, I did a 180 and headed back to the Sedona area. I knew that the airport landing pattern crossed my path ahead, so I radioed my position and intent and climbed to 7,500 feet. I studied the jumbled lands below, wondering where our project lay. As I flew over Sedona, something nagged at the edge of my consciousness. I wasn't seeing neighborhoods as I had come to know them.

As expected, there were thick developments that ran along the stem of the highways, then green spaces, and then more developments. What had caught me unaware was that off the main stems, like clusters of grapes, were neighborhoods---places where people lived. I shouldn't have been surprised. I thought back over all the Chamber of Commerce and other promotional stuff I had read, all the information about Sedona as a tourist center, an arts center, and a New Age center. Nothing Prader and Connors had provided me with mentioned that Sedona was important because people lived there. Was Sedona a healthy community with developed neighborhoods? I searched below for telltale things like parks and recreation centers. There was only one visible, a big complex on the north side of 89A. I saw ball fields and a large school, tennis courts and a pool, but that complex was the only one.



How could these neighborhoods, so distinct and visible from the air, have been built without parks and neighborhood schools? Maybe Sedona's promoters didn't talk about its grapevine communities and the quality of life of those who live there, because those in power didn't think such things were important. From what I had read, they hadn't missed any opportunity to laud Sedona's economic potential. That's when I mistakenly decided this job might be easier than I had thought. I sensed that those who really held the power knew how to squeeze a dollar and get their way.

Something else I had seen below was nagging at the edges of my mind's vision. I had passed over an area of irrigated land. Sprinklers were spraying great arcs of water over fields of hay or grasses. There were no farmhouses or signs of agricultural development. No cattle, hay stacks, tractors or hay balers, just green areas with dozens of sprinklers going full-force. Why, in a desert state crying for water, were sprinklers going in the heat of a summer afternoon? The thought that they were trying to evaporate 'excess' water never entered my mind.

To the north of Highway 89A, settling ponds indicated a sewage processing plant. I searched my map to note its location, but my map was several years old and showed nothing. I didn't connect the two areas. I had overlooked a major piece of evidence.

## Chapter 4

He looked at me, straight in the eyes at first. Then he looked down, his shoulders slumped and he seemed to lose the internal pressures that blew him up.

SEDONA'S AIRPORT WAS NOT an easy place to land. The strip was cut on the top of a narrow mesa. Come in too low and you hit the hillside; too high and you had better be able to overshoot and come around again. If not, and you ran out of runway, you would be flying again, straight down! I radioed my intent and was preparing to land when my message seemed to wake up someone doing the same approach; someone I hadn't seen. The speakers crackled, "I'm on final approach, Sedona."

I leaned forward, looking for the other plane. I caught sight of a glint just below me and to the right. Approaching from the north, in a sloppy, curving, forty five-degree approach was a blue and white Cessna twin. He was coming in too low; in too damn big a hurry! I knew that if I hadn't seen him I could have landed on top of him. I pulled up, doing a hard left, moving away from the path in a southerly direction.

Had the rays of the setting sun blinded the guy? I shuddered when I realized that from his position and approach I had been in his sight during my entire approach. He knew I was there, and he was trying to cut under me and come in faster in order to beat me to the ground. I thumbed the radio, but decided not to deal with the matter now. I went around and redid my approach. As my wheels touched, I saw three people drop from the wing of the Cessna and run to a white Rover parked nearby. As I parked, the Rover disappeared around the hangers.

In the terminal, I arranged for tie-down and refueling. As I closed my flight plan, I asked the attendant about the Cessna.

"From Scottsdale," the attendant volunteered. "Guy's father has a place here. Has more money than

God, and..." he was looking at me with a kind of smile, "that was you they cut off?" Before I could answer he continued, "Pilot's thirty, dresses and acts like a kid. Don't do no good to file a complaint. You can't prove anything and they'll countersue faster than you can file. I'll tell his old man, he'll give me more money and raves about what a good pilot his son is. Today? I bet he'll give me a C-note. Glad you're safe. Need a rental car?"

Nope," I replied. "But I do need a ride into town."

"Where in town? This here ain't no ordinary place. Town's spread out, you know."

"I need to get to Landsman's Realty. Its off 179."

"Easy! Not far from the 'Y.' You wait fifteen minutes for me to tie down that twin, and I'm going down. I'll drop you."

I sat, fuming about the near miss and the Cessna pilot's stupidity. It seemed like the old story. The old man makes a mint. His kids are so screwed up that they never amount to anything but trouble. The only good thing about all of that tragedy is that it keeps money in circulation.

I cooled off and reviewed the things I had learned from Stan Kling, Greater Development's Phoenix manager. According to Kling, during the past six months all but one of his employees had quit. Some just walked out without even drawing their last pay, never to be seen again. But why? Nothing I had learned so far would push people to those depths.

Stan Kling was a suave, quiet sort of manager who knew the ropes and had developed winning strategies for land development and, his specialty, water management systems. In Arizona, water is the key to everything. He had more knowledge about riparian rights than sexual positions, and from the way he referred to his sexual escapades, he was probably the west's foremost authority on getting wet.

From Kling, I learned that the Sedona area was one of the hot land development areas in the state. No, it

couldn't compare to the sprawl and expansion of Scottsdale, Tucson and Prescott, and the fortunes developers were making in those markets, but in deals-to-dollar ratios, it had a very high return. Part of that wealth was generated because the state government was looking the other way where development was concerned. State laws were still written by large landowners and speculators. "Arizona is a healthy environment for growth," he told me, "and as that is the business Greater Development is in, the Phoenix office was opened a decade ago."

For the first year, the Greater Development project in Sedona had gone as Stan said he had predicted it would. On the quiet they had optioned land owned by speculators who had bought it years before. "Even Sam Prader in Denver was happy," he said, "but then things turned sour."

I listened to Stan Kling and formed my own vision of things based upon what I already knew about the stages of development.

Like everywhere, land goes through phases. Phase I, was the opening of the land, settling it, and trying to make a living off of it via cattle or fruit. After many years, the old timers died out and their kids were faced with a future tied to the land. That was okay if the land was productive and the progeny were getting wealthy. In most places in the west, the progeny inherited land that couldn't produce enough to feed one family, let alone all of the kid's and their families. Some had to move to the city, take jobs and build lives there. Those who stayed to take care of the place soon found that their siblings, now removed from the land, wanted their inheritance in the form of cash. The land couldn't produce enough to buy the sibs off, so they sold a part and got the others off their backs. By the third generation, if they survived until then, the idea of self-sufficiency on the land was long lost; proven untrue. The only value the home place had was what it could be sold for.

Phase II, began when speculators found that the heirs were willing to sell the land at very reasonable prices. The prices were low because the heirs and the buyers knew that the land couldn't produce enough to give it value and that it would be a long time until people came to the area who could afford land that wasn't productive. Most of them never imagined that America would create thousands of folks who could afford to build their dream house on land that was selected for its esthetic qualities. None could have guessed that large numbers of people could live in places where there was no industry or other way of making a living. When they sold to the speculators, they thought they were getting a great deal, and they were.

The speculators gambled that they could buy the land cheap, hold it for years, and sell it at a time when its value was driven up by demand. Some Phase II owners farmed or ranched the land hoping to get enough return from it to pay the upkeep and taxes. Others had adequate wealth and this part of their portfolio was considered a hedge against the collapse of the economic system and a good tax write off.

Phase III, began when population pressures began to build in an area. For myriads of reasons, remote places like Sedona began to fill up. People came, intending to settle. Most newcomers brought income with them. Others planned to make money providing services for the others. To the educated observers like Sam Prater, Gopher Connors and Stan Kling, a community or a region grew in population until it gained the 'critical mass' necessary for Phase III. That's what they watched for and that's when they moved in, made deals with the speculators and any hangovers from Phase I, and drew plans for serving those attracted to the area. It was a hard business, full of risks, but it could be very lucrative if they were smart enough and strong enough to see it through.

I get pissed when I hear disparaging comments directed toward developers. After lawyers and used car salesmen, developers are thought to be at the bottom of

the barrel. Too many people never stop to learn about what developers do. Anyone with two wires to rub together can figure it out. Developers serve us all, usually very well.

So, I concluded, in Sedona, land that couldn't produce enough to feed families or even pay the taxes was now being put to good use. Where once only a few ranchers could enjoy the beauty of the red rocks and the almost perfect climate, now thousands could live here. Sure, sometimes a precious tree or rock got in the way. Sure, roads weren't pretty, strip developments were awful, and pollution was ugly. However, the people doing the most complaining about future developments were benefiting from development. If not for developers, the protesters would be living in New York City or Cleveland, or some suburb somewhere.

Kling explained to me that as people moved in, they began to covet their neighbor's land, and they expected "their" government to stop development. A few of these newcomers loved to hike into or just look at some of the undeveloped areas; therefore, they argued, no more places should be developed. In Sedona, they were in luck because many of the rugged ridge tops and broken canyons had never been claimed for settlement and had remained the property of the U.S. of A. These rough areas extended like fingers through the community, creating natural green belts and wild areas. These public lands were managed by the U. S. Forest Service.

Kling went on to explain that as population pressures increased, most generated by the new businesses and real estate people who advertised widely to attract new customers, the easily accessible lands filled up. In less than twenty years it became obvious that population demands would make even remote areas economically feasible for development.

"Greater Development's focus is on one of the remote canyons." Stan assured me that it wasn't even a heavily hiked or jeeped canyon. "It's just a rugged canyon with some great rocks, a great swimming hole where water

is trapped from a seep or runoff, and it has lots of trees. There's never even been a road in there, but don't let that bother you, there is access from the bottom of the canyon. The best part of the way the canyon lays-out is that homes can be placed around a golf course. Big money to be made... Right? It's a sleeper, Martel! This project is a natural!" It was obvious that he was trying too hard to make the argument for development. That bothered me. Why make the argument to me? He continued.

"Martel, the demand for more development has changed the way we look at things. A few years ago no one would consider a development in a canyon. Now? The demand is so great that whatever we develop will sell. Some who object to our plans say that no one would want to live in those canyons... The fact is, many other canyons have been developed successfully --- look at Oak Creek Canyon. Don't be put off by that argument. There is money to be made in Prophet Canyon!"

"Water?" I asked. I knew that one never said "golf" without saying "water."

"I'll explain later when you've seen the lay. You know that I'm the water man. Trust me, it'll work out better than anybody ever imagined."

I wanted more than "the lay" from Stan. I wanted to know why I had been sent here.

"Kling, I got uprooted in Denver and hustled down here with promises that ranged from a vacation to a piece of cake. Why am I here? I need to know what you're up against. Then I can tell you if I can help."

He looked at me, straight in the eyes at first. Then he looked down, his shoulders slumped and he seemed to lose the internal pressures that blew him up. I read the body language and got a sense of... I'm not sure what it was. The man acted scared. I could almost smell it, but his fear was also mixed with something else. I thought he was over doing it. Whatever he was doing, his energy got to me and I deflated a bit as well.

“Look Martel, you’ll think I’m playing games, but understand up front that I’m not. I’m going to level with you, tell all that I know at least. If you think I’m shitting you, ask me to clarify. Okay?” He stood a little straighter and I could sense his need for me to believe him.

“Shoot! I’m not here to judge you. I won’t.”

“There were some problems up front. We got ownership and options on most of the land in the canyon and that included steep sides and lots of rocks. We needed one more piece to make the project work as planned, and that seemed easy. The original settlers had hiked through the pass at the southwest end of the canyon and named it Tarantula Pass. That’s what shows on the original maps. We won’t want that name, but for now that’s it. Well, no one ever claimed the land at the head of the canyon or the pass, or the land on the west side, about a half mile of rock that drops down to what is now a county road. All we had to do was... Martel, do you know about land exchanges with the Forest Service?”

“I haven’t a clue,” I said, surprised that there was a dimension of development that I didn’t know about.

“We want the pass and the land to the county’s road. The Forest Service has a list of places... Places like in-forest holdings, special drainage’s and riparian areas, wildlife corridors, and areas like that. We go buy a place on their list. They trade us Tarantula Pass for it. We have both done a good deed. From the Forest Service’s perspective, we’re nuts. We trade a great wetland area for a dry, rocky wasteland. The American people are the winners, hands down, whatever happens.”

“So you set up the trade?”

“It was going great! Then all hell broke loose when a group of locals, mostly retired Whitetops, got on the Forest Service’s case for attempting to trade away what they called “the quality of life in Sedona.” We always expect some opposition, but these guys really knew how to organize against us. They scared the Forest Service real bad---the guys at the top are politicians, you know. Then,



within about a two-month period, two of the three old farts who led the opposition died, opposition slowed, and the trade went through... Only it wasn't Greater Development's trade! Another group had purchased a major riparian area near Tucson, one the Forest Service had been trying to get for years. They made the trade for the pass, not us. The Forest Service said they had to do what was best for the American people."

"Jeeze," I exclaimed. "Who did it? Did they try to sell it to you then?"

"No, that's what we thought they would do at first. No, we've never been contacted. We suspect someone," he paused and seemed to be thinking, "Well, aah, actually two guys... But we have no proof of course."

I sensed that Stan Kling was lying to me. He was looking down and shaking his head as he talked. I got my guard up and went fishing for more information. "So that's the problem? These guys you suspect, what are their names?"

"One is Pillar. Dennis J. Pillar. Another is Fulks, Oren Fulks."

"How do I get to them?" A flash of doubt moved across his face. I imagined that he was wondering if he had told me too much and set a trap for himself. I wanted an answer. He cleverly ended the meeting.

"Look, Martel. I have to go now. I want you to promise me that we will talk again soon. I'll keep you informed as to what is happening here. I must leave now! I'm almost an hour late to an appointment." He got up and left me sitting in his office. Then, as I was preparing to leave, he poked his head back in and said his secretary would drive me back to the airport. I had a lot to think about. Why was Kling jerking me around?

## Chapter 5

The great teacher and warrior had evidently been far away. He grimaced and a look of anger passed over his features, 'like a cloud over the sun,' she thought.

CAL NELS PUSHED HIS chair back from his desk and got up. He stretched his stiff back muscles and, taking an elbow, pulled it in front of his chest with his other hand. That eased the pain in his back and let his muscles relax. 'Accounting is the damndest, driest, most uninteresting work,' he thought. 'I wasn't made for sitting in front of a computer screen all day looking at forms and figures. Posting those damn Temple accounts is a pain, more complicated every day, always takes more and more of my time.'

He took his sport coat from the rack and put it on, straightened his bolo tie and smoothed back his thinning hair. Looking deep into the round mirror on the back of the door, he wet his finger and pushed up the long hairs at the corners of his eyebrows, 'like a smile,' he thought. He locked his office door behind him as he went into the reception area.

She was working on the files, standing with her back toward him. Trying to hold his pot in and shoulders back, he sat on the edge of her desk and waited for her to finish. She slammed the metal file drawer home and turned. He let her react to his proximity and then reached out to her. She took his long, thin hand and let him draw her toward him. He felt the softness and heat of her body on his knees as she leaned into him.

"I've got to go out for about an hour. Are we still on for tonight?"

She nodded. "You know I'll be at the Temple until seven?"

"Sure. Be home by 7:30! I'll be there. I'll stop and get some stuff. Anything you want?"

"You!"

“Me too, babe. I want you too. Me and steaks?”

“Cal, I’ll cook steaks for you, but you know what Ornate teaches us about meat. I have some tofu and... How about pasta?”

“Good as done. I’ll stop at Safeway. Need anything else?”

“Not for tonight. You know Cal, I can’t find all of the files you listed. Are you sure they were filed in here?”

“That’s my problem, Sally. That Valerie was a real mess. She screwed up everything she touched.” He felt anger rising again. That bitch! He’d given her everything and she had betrayed him.

“For all I know she threw them away. They are important, please keep looking. I want you to list everything you can’t find. Then...” he thought about the files she might have stolen, “then I’ll know what to do to get copies and rebuild the records.”

Everything up until now had been going well, Nels thought. They would find Val the betrayer and the files she stole. He couldn’t remember what they contained. He wracked his brain again. He couldn’t even visualize what was in the files. Something about the dummy corporation, but what? Val wouldn’t have taken them if they hadn’t contained information she could use against him. Damn her!

Things were getting tricky now. In a few days he would use the information he had gleaned as their CPA to get everything. He only had a few more ‘adjustments’ to make to the Temple’s books... The others had insisted that he help them steal money. Greedy bastards, what did they know! He played along, he could afford to. In just a few more days they could all go to hell. Pillar, the chairman of the board, had let them put that Celesta woman in charge of security. Celesta! Now, she would probably start nosing around. He had to be careful. He had to move fast.

The meditation period was almost over when Celesta relaxed and let pure energy flow through her body.

A last thought flashed through her mind: 'It always takes me so long to get there,' then she was able to stop the flow of thoughts and The Presence let her float to a new level of spirituality.

Like a shock wave coming from another dimension, the sound of wooden blocks being clapped together and the ringing of tiny bells brought her back to this world. She slowly opened her eyes and let the friendly and warming energy of the room and the novices bring her back. The thick oriental carpet felt good against her toes. The wafting remnants of incense, and the light filtering into the room through the cracks in the carved wooden shutters, seemed as one energy. She raised her eyes until she could see her teacher. Orante was still within his thoughts. She watched as he slowly came back from his voyages in space and time and reestablished himself in his earthly body. The great teacher and warrior had evidently been far away. He grimaced and a look of anger passed over his features, 'like a cloud over the sun,' she thought. She remembered the teachings, "These battles he fights, these forces he confronts and turns to good are his gifts to us. These are the things he was chosen to do for us, to clear the way for us," his Katsma, Otoa, had told them. Celesta watched the Spirit in human form, and felt a sense of well-being. 'He was out there for me,' she said quietly. 'He is my defender, a soldier, my contact, and my light.'

Celesta was hungry. That was expected after a long meditation. She moved with the novices as they melded into the group of initiates coming from the other side of the great room. None talked, but there was a warmth of communication --- the energy of beings who had shared a common experience. They walked along the breezeway that led to the cafeteria. Just past the trellises covered with trumpet vines, the first red rocks came into view. She walked slowly, moving closer to the outside railing. Below lay the wilderness of Prophet Canyon, at this point narrow and twisting, filled with great alligator bark junipers and bushy pinons growing as if they were

stepping carefully over the cubes of rock fallen from the cliffs above. Her eye was the eagle's, and she let her mind fly down from the Temple and into the canyon, looking at the face of God.

She stopped at the rail, knowing that there would be plenty of food even if she came at the end of the line. So much had happened in the nine months the novices had been living here. They had come so lost and bruised, she thought. Now they truly were like delicate petals that never wilted or died. They were becoming one with the universe and she knew that their souls were healing and getting ready for the journey into the next dimension of existence. She knew that the novices were released. She knew how good it felt to have given up all worldly goods and possessions. They were truly free for the first time in their lives.

Celesta knew that the beauty of Prophet Canyon represented things sacred. The world she had come from represented the profane. This passing age of mankind had been, and still was, the battleground of the sacred and the profane. Now, the terrible conflict was ending. Soon the profane would be defeated and the new age for the ancient Starbeings would emerge. Who could doubt that? The proof lay before her in beauty.

Meditation period was almost over and while Celesta and the others had been meditating, Orante's back was killing him, making it hard for him to keep a relaxed continence. The apostles sat around him, divided between novices and bright-eyed initiates. Some sat in lotus positions, others were fighting to keep their stiff legs beneath them, knees in agony, toes bent against the floor. His yukata still smelled of last night's incense---or was that mold? - he mused. The room was stuffy and their bodies stank. 'Still some meat eaters,' he thought as he looked at the cheap Timex fixed to the floor in front of his cushions and nodded a signal to Otoa that he should clap the wooden blocks together and ring the little bells.

The humble ones backed out of his presence, bowing as they knew supplicants must. When the room was empty, he got up, stretched his flabby body, and scratched his crotch. "Several tasty looking initiates," he said to Otoa, making the pretend eunuch grimace.

"Humor me Peter," Otoa said, backing out of the room for effect, all the time sneering with contempt at his buddy.

The Temple, which overlooked Prophet Canyon, had been a wealthy man's desert lair, donated to the cause. It possessed only one mirror and that was in his room. Other than that luxury, the room was plain. He slept on boards stretched between two wooden storage boxes. They had hung burlap curtains and placed his things in piles on the floor in shallow wicker boxes. The bed convinced others that he lived an austere life. In reality, the springy boards made a tolerable sleeping platform. The mirror was something he couldn't live without. Peter Hill, the polymath and warrior who called himself Orante, needed to see himself in garb to play his part.

For almost twenty years his presence had brought multitudes to their knees. He had told them that his name was Orante, and so it became. He had told them to call him Master, which they did willingly. He told them that he had come as a warrior as well as a teacher and leader. He explained that he was a master and guide, and that he was the focus of energy that transfers the past into the present. He convinced them that in his care, as spiritual pioneers, they would survive the cataclysms that were coming, and create out of chaos, the next great age of mankind.

Peter Hill had found the power over others and the success he had dreamed of when, as a captive of the Cong, he had crouched, rotting in a bamboo cage, dreaming of freedom and the uses he could make of it. Now, all these years later, he was a captive again, and once again all he could think of was freedom. In the jungles of Viet Nam, he had invented a scam that had

come true. A scam that was holding him in silken bonds and depriving him of every pleasure that he had imagined power would bring. He was his own invention, but they had created him in their image. He was desperate for a way out.

“Orante, Sir, Enlightened One,” a nimble woman of, he guessed, about twenty-three, said in a voice she would use for prayer, “your tea’s ready and your breakfast will be here soon.” She was bowing. Her perfect naked breasts so bare, so visible to him, sacred offerings to life, dangling inside her thin cotton blouse. He grimaced, curbing the urges that made his body respond. ‘Damn,’ he thought, ‘they’re all around and I can’t touch ‘em.’ He was in a temple prison created by his own stupidity. ‘You screwed up,’ he hissed to himself for maybe the millionth time. ‘Celibacy be damned! I never meant that!’

Otoa had come to him with an elaborate scheme that could be a way out. Peter’s friend and fellow prisoner-conspirator was also growing more desperate by the day. The scheme seemed beyond real and full of wishful thinking --- the kind brought on by desperation. They had to find a way out of this unbelievable thing they had created, but there must be a simpler way?

It was his fault they got trapped. Otoa had warned him when the IRS guys put guidelines in place for handling the donated property and financial gifts made by his followers. He had assumed that they could still have access to the money and that they would have the freedom to do what they wished with it. What a stupid mistake. “The ‘ass’ in assume was me,” he had admitted to his partner. Now the religious organization’s resources were managed by an independent CPA and a board of ‘significant others.’ The vows of poverty they had taken and their rejection of material goods---a ploy to get others to reject their wealth and donate to a ‘greater cause’---kept them from even receiving pocket change. Everything ‘His Sacredness’ needed was provided. At least they had more than sour mash and stagnant water in this prison, but...

The worst part was the celibacy. He was surrounded by hungry and willing women who understood how to feed a warrior and a leader. Yet he was never granted the privacy he needed to dip into the treasures. He was protected twenty-four hours a day. Even now, the light that could come through the slot in his door was blocked by the head of a devout guardian. He was considered too precious a property to leave unprotected. They believed that some of the devils he had created to keep them in line, might come and take him away.

Jimmy Sills, AKA Otoa, was also cut off. He had taken the role of a self-castrated eunuch. Even the most willing women in the Temple avoided him. It was totally unfair, but that was Orante's fault too. He had convinced the ex-sergeant that he could pluck the harem if they didn't suspect him of being a whole man. Peter had admitted that he had seen too many Arabian Nights movies as a kid.

No matter how Peter considered his plight, it always came out that there was no way out. It was unfair! Even Clinton had found privacy with a willing accomplice, and he had an Oval Office they could screw around in. Oh well, things were bad all over. Clinton hadn't known about the video tapes... At least there were no incriminating tapes of him, how could there be? He couldn't do anything.

The plan sounded like a madman's dream. That had been almost a year ago. Otoa had suggested that he tell his followers of his special meeting with the Starbeings. "You know, Orante, the one where they told you to develop a contact station in Prophet Canyon?" Peter had shaken his head in confusion, and raising his voice had cried, "Are you nuts?" Otoa had grimaced and put his finger to his lips. "Quiet, they'll think we're not channeling together."

The seed did get planted. Peter had time in his many lonely hours to sprout it, nurture it, and to shape it into something that he could climb to freedom on. The project had to be top secret, their involvement never known by the nonbelievers, the CPA, or the board.



They decided to work through a retired real estate promoter named Gwinn, who had joined them years ago and now lived in a cottage provided by the Order. Gwinn's Trust, paying monthly into the Order's coffers, was his guarantee that he would be there at the 'new beginning.' His love for Orante and his devotion to the cause made him loyal. He had once been a very effective land developer and realtor. He knew how to go about things, and he would help them because he believed in Orante's orders from the stars. He understood why they would need a contact-point Starbase disguised as a ritzy development. Through him, ownership in the property and profits from its development would be controlled by Peter and his loyal sergeant. Their corporation, which Gwinn filed for them under their real names, was veiled under the gowns of another, Gwinn Inc., with Gwinn at the helm.

The plans for a major development in Prophet Canyon, a Starbase disguised as a resort community, had been underway for many months. Unfortunately, there was another developer who coveted the land and who, two years before, had started obtaining options and ownership. They were even working on a land exchange with the Forest Service so that they could get control of Tarantula Pass. Orante was organizing his troops. He was a trained warrior, thanks to Uncle Sam. The enemy was just now being engaged, and with the cause of righteousness on the side of the ones who could rally the most money and soldiers, victory was to be theirs. Otoa observed that there was gold in their futures and that freedom was somewhere ahead.

No matter how he tried, Orante could not get away from his protectors. He was forced into the life he had chosen, held there by dedicated and enchanted followers who only cared about his well being. Even his time with Otoa, was not private. He had convinced his guardians and protective seraphs that he and the eunuch needed to be together to channel Star Energy as they had from the

beginning. They had to have time together to plan the greatest and most blessed of all events, the coming together of all dimensions and energy at the Contact Point. The guardians and the others were truly excited about the challenges ahead of them. The Temple was buzzing with energy, enlightenment, and purpose.

In late March, Orante had called a meeting of his security forces. Those attending were sworn to secrecy. Each had been selected for the security detail by their leader, Celesta. The Magi Pioneers, as Orante called them, were coordinated by Celesta. Celesta took her orders from Otoa, who dealt with the secular matters that the Master could not be concerned with. Orante spoke through Otoa. Celesta had assigned some of her Pioneers to Gwinn to help with the Prophet Canyon project. She had selected others to help her deflect Greater Development's staff and destabilize that company.

Orante's people were proceeding effectively against Greater Development. They had assumed that the Phoenix company provided the only opposition to their mission. Then, in early July, Valerie, one of the Pioneers, brought files to Gwinn that she had stolen from the office where she worked. Gwinn learned that the files were from the Temple's CPA, Cal Nels' office, and that Cal was now the accountant for another development outfit that had designs on Prophet Canyon. Of course Nels wouldn't have known to report the matter. He was not in the inner circle and he had no information about Gwinn's project. It was a stroke of luck, Otoa told Gwinn, that the other developer had selected their man as accountant, and that they had Valerie who was loyal to them, in Nels' office.

Although the files clearly exposed the newcomer developer's intent, they gave no indication of his identity. No one connected with Orante had a clue as to what was really going on. Gwinn was troubled by one file which seemed to enmesh the Temple's fund raiser and board chairman, Dennis J. Pillar, with the new organization. Gwinn immediately dismissed the probability of Pillar's

involvement. After all, there was absolutely no way to connect Pillar with the new developer, except Nels. He thought about Nels and Pillar, and dismissed that possibility as too far fetched. Nels was a lowly bookkeeper employed to do the Temple's accounts. Pillar was the chairman of the board and a leading figure in Arizona society. The two men were direct opposites and could have nothing in common.

Otoa spent a lot of time processing information about Gwinn's plans and the project's progress. He thought of himself as the General, running the operation, disguised as a servant. He had estimated the profits Gwinn had projected from the spreadsheets stolen from GD's Phoenix office. They would each get a cool million for their efforts. His job was to keep Gwinn convinced that the money he channeled to their corporation was necessary for the purchase of the Xeon, Argon and Krypton, Nobel Gasses that had to be available for the Starbeings to absorb until their organs made the transformation to Earth's oxygen-hydrogen-nitrogen atmosphere.

The original Starbeings, Otoa assured Gwinn, found the Earth's oxygen-hydrogen atmosphere, the water vapor, too poisonous to survive in. They had modified some of their numbers, changed them and merged them with local animal life. "More than they should have meddled," he said with a knowing nod, "and they made them the earliest sentient inhabitants of Earth. It was not a wise decision, and we have all paid a great price for it ever since," he confided to Gwinn, "but they were modified so that they could survive and multiply here, which they did. We are here as a result; however," he went on, "it had taken uncounted eons for the true Starbeings to develop a way of tolerating our planet. Now, with the right combinations of gasses, Orante could help them make the transition, and all on Earth would be united in the sacred form."

It sounded complicated, and that's the way Otoa wanted it to sound. Later, he had pulled Gwinn aside and

told him that the reason the development needed to resemble a typical subdivision was that the air chambers could be built into the recreation complex as a standard HVAC system and no outsiders would ever know. Gwinn had given Otoa a thumbs-up salute, winked at him, and said, "The Master's will be done."

Otoa sat as close to Peter as he could without attracting the concerned attention of the guardians. He knew that when the two of them were together, which was often, the guards relaxed. Still, they looked up, as if on cue, and began to move their bodies in sync with a sound source no others could hear. It was an old game they played well. Then, seeming to return to Earth, Orante leaned over and put his hands on Jimmy Still's temples, held them there for a long minute, and then both sat back as if to recharge.

"What did you find out? Did Greater Development's guys have those two Whitetops killed?"

"It looks that way, but I can't find any proof. The marshal says there's no proof of foul play. I don't believe it... But why would they kill? They didn't know about us, and besides, everything was falling apart for them. Thanks to Celesta, their people were leaving and their office was in chaos. Why kill a couple of locals who can't do much but irritate and cause a delay or two? No, getting rid of them didn't benefit Greater Development in any way... Strange, isn't it Peter? I think they were killed, but who can prove it?"

"Yeah, no reason to overreact. We need to find out who did it, if it was done. Can you do that? I mean, your hands are tied almost as tight as mine," he added sadly.

"Through our people we're gonna find out. It may take time, but we're gonna know."

"What about stopping the road? Have they got access over the...Tarantula...?"

"Tarantula Pass. Something's wrong there too. I just learned that the Forest Service traded the pass to

some group calling itself C&K Development. It's the firm Nels has taken on as a client. Some guy in Prescott is the registered agent, and they operate out of a P.O. Box. Our people are trying to get the dope on them... It's really strange. Until two weeks ago everybody, including the local opposition, was on Greater Development's case. Now this other outfit has the pass. It really matters to us... We want to block another entrance, but now, if they own the land, we may be in trouble."

"Otoa, I mean Jimmy, you mentioned a while back about one of my people who got some files where she worked. You said they were important and that she had to quit because she borrowed them. What gives there?"

"She quit all right! She got us the files and I personally gave her a place to be here in the complex when she said she hadn't gone back to work and didn't feel safe at her place. Those are the files that indicate that another group is trying for our canyon, which ties in with the Forest Service trade thing.

The girl, Valerie Lewis, she's a real talent and a loyal Pioneer. Yet something is wrong, she took off! We haven't seen her since Saturday. She told me she was scared. I assured her that Nels probably thought he had misplaced the files. She didn't seem convinced. She'll come back... She's really a bright kid, and," he placed his hand over his crotch, "someday, I'm going to let her know the real me."

Peter scratched under his thick cotton collar, looked at his guardians again, and turned a little more toward Otoa. He put his hands on the other man's hands and pretended to stare into space. "Greater Development got our message then? How was it done?"

Otoa nodded yes. "We targeted each of their key people. Celesta's soldiers, your willing Pioneers, studied each person and found their spiritual weakness. Then, and it didn't take too long either, they found ways to get to them. The human mind is an amazing thing---especially

when you know what strings to pull to create fear and anxiety. We're head people, and we're good at it."

"Like what? What did you do?"

"Hell, man I didn't get to do anything, I'm a prisoner here like you," Jimmy said in his emasculated eunuch's voice. Then he spoke softly in his natural voice again.

"The way Celesta, your loyal head of security did it, was that each team was assigned to a Greater Development employee. If it was a man, then mostly women were selected for his team. For women, sometimes a man, but usually other women were best. Men and women respond best to women, but they tend to believe their own sex. The teams began surveillance. They prepared elaborate profiles of their target and decided amongst themselves who would make the first contact. Then a chance meeting was arranged. Our person got eye contact with the mark and did something like stopping dead in their tracks, staring. Then, if that got a response, she said something like, 'My god, It's you!' or 'Please help me!' Whatever approach, the purpose was to implant in the mark's head the idea that there was something wrong, something evil, something dangerous about to happen. The contact person did her thing and then either faded or, if the mark was receptive, continued to feed him information designed to plant fear and doubt. Then, at appropriate times, other members of the team played-in. Each gave the mark confirmation that he didn't look well, or in some way communicated that something was obviously wrong." Otoa grabbed a quick breath. He was talking too fast and he tried to slow down.

"After a few days, usually longer, events were staged that confirmed the negative messages that had been planted. Then, the original contact, or one of the contacts the mark felt close to, came in for the kill. Wow, Peter-me-boy, psychological warfare at its best! It works."

"What do you mean 'events were staged?' I'm isolated here, Jimmy, you've got to give me more information."

“Well, you know. A little lysergic acid and bad company. A confrontation with someone who knows everything about you and tells you to run and hide. A packet of money and an offer you can’t refuse. Aw, come on Peter, I don’t even know all of the tricks.”

Otoa stopped talking long enough to take two deep breaths. Peter’s questions were such a waste of time. He had the information and he sorted through it giving Peter only what he needed to know.

“Interesting enough, one of their guys was shot and wounded in his car. The cops said a victim of a drive-by, but our team saw a guy come up to his car and shoot him. Who knows why? That helped us. That employee was too solid to scare-off. Don’t react, I checked. We didn’t have anything to do with the attack. The guy will live, but he won’t be effective for Greater Development for a long time. Hey man, the bottom line is that one-by-one the targeted employees quit. One even gave up his worldly goods and has come to you. That’ll do Greater Development in. They can’t run a company without employees.

“Oh, then we learned that they are bringing a guy down from Denver. We’ve got him covered.” He paused and put on one of his shit-eating grins. “Two creeps from Davenport who wanted to earn some extra bucks agreed to tail him. It was really a way to start getting to him. From what I heard, the chicks they got were really bad.”

Peter was holding his body straight, his legs were killing him. He moved from side-to-side to relieve the pain. “Stills, as long as we’ve been in this business, I still have trouble understanding how people get so nuts. Why? What is it?”

“You know Peter, it’s the way we play into their fear of the supernatural. At some level everyone believes in the devil, and everyone believes in bad luck, evil, and energy turned against you. Most people believe in ghosts. Most imagine that there is space inside their heads they can access with drugs or meditation, or by following a great teacher like you,” he grinned, “or by tuning in to a

broadcast from spacemen... All our soldiers have to do is scare the hell into them!" He grinned again and placed his hands on Orante's so the guardians would know that they were ending their communion. "Time we stopped. See you in a few hours or so." Rising to his knees, he bowed out of the room, smug in knowing that he was really the one in control.





## Chapter 6

Martel, you are supposed to know the ropes. Sam Prader told me that you can be ruthless.

AS I SAT WAITING for the clerk who ran the Sedona airport service to tie down the twin Cessna and do some other chores he had failed to mention, like gas the Twin and take a floppy diskette over to the main terminal, I continued to rethink the report Stan Kling had given me in Phoenix the night before. It was hard to believe, even for a pro like me. I thought that I had seen and heard everything the opposition could come up with.

According to Kling, employees at Greater Development were scared off. He implied that powerful forces were at work. As I listened, I decided that he was full-of-it! Adult employees, most college grads who have proven records in the field, don't run like wusses just because a development has opposition from a bunch of tree huggers and religious nuts. Kling had explained about the Whitetops, and the way they had organized, buffaloes the Forest Service, and even got a court order stopping the building of survey and access roads in Prophet Canyon. 'So,' I thought, 'what's new?' That may be irritating, but it's not scary.

Kling had implied that other powerful forces were involved: forces that he didn't understand and couldn't get a handle on. I pushed him for more information and he melted. He had to be imagining things. But then, there was one fact that I couldn't discount. The employees *had* fled. That is, all but two, Kling and the guy who was shot in a drive-by and almost killed. Of the two, why did they leave Kling alone? Who was the man really loyal to? I decided, just as the clerk got his chores done and motioned for me to get into his car, that Kling was involved in the weakening of Greater Development's Phoenix office. Straight as he seemed, he was not to be trusted.

I couldn't believe the view from Airport Hill, or the road down, or the way the clerk drove. About half way down he pulled into a turn-out parking area and hit the brakes. The gravel area was full of cars. People were moving along a trail which seemed to go to the top of a rock knoll.

The clerk became my tour guide and announced, "Vortex landing, Mr. Martel. Experience the energy of one of Sedona's four powerful vortex points." He jumped out of the car. When it was obvious that he wouldn't let me sit, I got out and followed. A short distance up, at the top of the trail, people were sitting and crouching, obviously absorbing something that I couldn't see or feel. It wasn't sunshine, as the sun was a giant ball low in the sky, already committed to a western light show. I opened my arms and raised my face to the sky. Nothing. I turned to my self-appointed guide and asked him what I was supposed to see or feel.

His answer indicated that I had misjudged him.

"Anything you like!"

The people around me were obviously getting a charge out of something, as they oohed and aahed and talked about energy and pure spirit and other things too fierce to mention. I felt left out and empty. My guide saw that I didn't connect and led me quietly back to the car. He didn't speak until we were almost at the Landsman Office. Then he looked right at me and said, "You're not one of them. I had to check... You understand?"

I didn't, but I nodded. He stopped, I got out, and he literally went off into the sunset. I could still see the falling ball through the colorclouds filling the sky.

Paul Landsman IV greeted me in front of his red rock real estate office. No one else was around. It looked like he had been waiting some time, as two styrofoam coffee cups sat on the rock planter beside him, and the one in his hand was almost empty. I nodded. He smiled.

"Glad you finally got here. What happened, your car break down?"

"Naw," I said as informally and as friendly as I could. "I got stuck at the airport. I flew up here."

"Flew? Well I'll be damned. I thought you would come up on the shuttle. Well at least you're here now. Before we talk business, there's something I want to share with you. But first I've got to pee. Wait here, I'll lock up and bring the car around."

He brought his Continental around front, I got in and we drove the short distance toward a major bridge over Oak Creek. The concrete two-lane structure was positioned awkwardly against the traffic flow. Just before the bridge, Landsman swerved off 179. Seeming to go straight, we were now on a road that followed the creek. We drove on a few hundred feet and the road began to climb to the right.

"Schnebly Hill Road," he announced, sounding like my last tour guide. In less than a mile the pavement ended and Landsman pulled the Continental into a drive, backed around, and headed back the way we had come. It was that twilight time of night when headlights don't seem to do any good. He steered the big car into a turnout and stopped right up against the log guardrail. Before us lay Oak Creek Canyon, and along its far edge, uptown Sedona, twinkling lights marking the now mottled forms of myriads of structures. The canyon was overshadowed by the silhouettes of pinnacles of rock --- phallic forms of stone --- which looked so unreal, standing hundreds of feet high, grotesque teeth or fingers backlit by the dying colors in the evening sky. 'Mom would love this,' I thought, 'but how can I describe it to her?' I made a mental note to come here another night with a camera. She would love this place.

"This isn't a vortex point yet." Landsman offered. "But it probably should be."

I'd seen sunsets over rocky islands on the New Guinea Coast, and sunrises viewed through tree-topped

little islands off Honshu. I thought I had seen it all. No wonder people thought the energy of the universe could be tapped into here.

"Landsman," I said as the sky turned too dark to silhouette the comb of sandstone obelisks, "I'm glad I'm here. This place is spectacular!"

"I'm glad you're here too, Martel," Landsman said in a tough voice that surprised me. "Don't let the beauty of this place blind you to its negative side."

He really caught me off guard. I wanted to follow-up and get him talking, but when I turned to him, he was already opening the door of the Continental. I took one last look into the dark and went back to the car. He drove us back to his rock office. On the way he made small talk, a way of letting me know that he wasn't ready to talk business. I got his signals, and respected him for his ability to send them. What I didn't like was that he was also communicating an icy cold message of fear.

In the office, we went through a big room with dividers marking out the territories of other agents. Past the cubicles, Landsman went into a side room and filled a styrofoam cup with coffee that smelled old and strong like coffee spilled on a hot burner.

"Want some java?" he offered it, not really believing that I would.

I didn't disappoint him. "Naw, I've had my caffeine for the day."

He led me into the back of the building through a door that had to be four feet wide. The door was beautiful, a burlled walnut veneer; something special! The office was about fourteen feet deep and maybe forty feet long. It ran the whole width of the building. His desk was a ship, like a small aircraft carrier floating in the lock of the room. Past it, loomed a round glass table supporting one of the largest cast bronze pieces I had ever seen in an office. It was horses with riders, pack horses, mules with packs with rocks and trees enough to communicate that the riders were coming down a mountain trail. A giant Elk blocked

their way, obviously spooking them. I couldn't stop looking at the bronze, that is until my eye caught the paintings and the Navajo rugs on the walls. The place looked like a gallery, not an office.

"My digs," Landsman said as he lowered himself into a high-backed leather chair that served the desk like a tender. "I'm a collector, and I like to have my things out where people can enjoy them."

"Nice!" I said, meaning it. "That's the largest bronze I've ever seen," I paused, "I mean outside of museum foyers and public buildings."

"Largest ever cast as coffee table art." He changed the subject.

"Martel, you are supposed to know the ropes. Sam Prader told me that you can be ruthless. He described you in a way that doesn't seem to fit. Are you the man who will go to any lengths to win for GD? You seem like a regular guy... I mean, I was expecting a mercenary type and you are anything but..."

I told him that I didn't have to be a thug to be effective in my business. "My skill is finding out who's in the way and going after them. I use lawyers and carrots. If that fails, I have been known to go after individuals. Everyone has a secret, if you know what I mean? Landsman, I try to pass myself off as a bland sort. It's better to be underestimated than... Well, should we say blocked by people who are prepared for me?"

"Okay, I can buy that. You're here because a lot of us got into this crazy deal due to greed and bad judgment. We will lose our shirts if GD's project isn't brought back on line soon, and I do mean soon!" He took a sip of coffee through tight lips, "I'll level with you. What has happened has people scared shitless. Sounds dumb, I know, but that is the case. The opposition has come up with a way of," he stopped, looked around his gallery and seemed to be searching for a word, "...a way of, well, of directing forces against GD's people that Stan says scare the hell out of them. Kling has filled you in, right?" He raised the coffee

cup again, seeming to hide behind it. I sensed that he was afraid to tell me more.

“Do you know Stan Kling well?” I followed his lead.

Landsman shook his head as if to clear the other thoughts and lowered the coffee cup. “I know him, I... We’ve worked together for maybe five years.”

I waited a moment but he didn’t offer more.

“And?”

He put the cup on the table, sat straighter and smiled. “I like him. He’s competent. He knows more about water rights than Mother Nature. When he replaced Connors as Director of the Phoenix office, five or six years ago that’s been, I celebrated... All of us up here did. Kling is straight and he gets things done.”

“Bob Connors? Gopher Connors? Works out of Denver now?” It couldn’t be the same man. I thought I knew all about Connors.

“That’s right. Gopher Connors opened the office in Phoenix and he was the man who first came here and got me involved. A rodent! I never could trust him.”

I was amazed. Did this information mean anything? I put it away with the other information I had about Connors.

The thing that was being tagged by my mind was that Landsman had nothing but good to say about Kling. I had decided that Kling was a key to the problems I was sent to solve. My instincts told me that Kling was okay, but my intellect knew otherwise. Now Landsman’s perceptions of Kling matched my instincts. I had to get more information. Maybe Kling and Landsman were working together? Things weren’t adding up.

“I met with Kling in Phoenix. I can’t say I was pleased with his explanations, or,” I added, “his lack of explanations. Listen, Landsman, I don’t believe things happen without cause. If his people quit, then there is a reason... Someone’s behind it and I aim to find out who.”

“Agreed,” Landsman said, spreading his hands, palms up. The expression on his face said, ‘so, that’s what

I expected!' He continued, "Obviously someone is behind all this disruption. That's what really has me... In fact it scares the hell out of me." He pushed the tender chair back away from the carrier and looked at me, seeking eye contact. He got it. I held a few seconds and then looked away. The guy had power.

"Martel, what has happened here is like nothing I have ever experienced or even heard about. According to Kling, people, good people, people I know and have worked with, have been forced to quit. They won't talk about why, even if I could find them to ask them. They quit and they're gone!" He was leaning forward, still seeking eye contact. "Martel, what scares me is that there is someone out there with that kind of power..." He wasn't through, he squirmed around in his chair, "...and I think they kill people too!" He added, gaining eye contact with me once more. I held until he looked down.

"Murder? You mean like that guy that was the victim of the drive-by?"

"Drive-by hell! Bill Speck had information that he wanted to give me. He was shot while waiting for me just down the road near Oak Creek."

That's when loose ends started connecting in my head. I thought I had what I needed to get to the heart of the problem. I had the feeling that it was all downhill from there. "What did he tell you?"

"He called and said that he knew why people were quitting GD. He said they were putting pressure on him, but that he had protection. He called the meeting and the place. I was there on time, but too late. Since then? He's not able to talk, as far as I know. I'm supposed to hear when he is. He's in intensive care, Cottonwood, Verde Valley Hospital."

"What did he mean by protection?" I was stalling for time to get my thoughts organized better. I didn't expect that he would know.

"I haven't a clue. Bill Speck was...is, a great draftsman, one of the best GD had...er, has. He could



work CAD programs like no one I ever saw. We all respected his ability. Other than that, the guy was a complete flake. I mean, he was into all of that crystal stuff and he dressed like an Arab, only tie-dyed. He let his hair grow long. He wore necklaces and meditated at lunchtime. He only ate...well, get the picture?"

I nodded. "A Jesus freak?"

"No, not that! He is an evolved form of hippy, I guess. Yeah, that's the best way to describe him. A hippy after thirty years in the life."

"That was his protection?"

"My conclusion? Whoever this guy is that's doing all of this to us..." he twisted his head and grimaced as if pushing the thought to one side. "He seems to be able to use---now don't get me wrong Martel, I don't necessarily believe this---the supernatural to scare people. He uses spirituality like a weapon!"

I looked hard at Landsman's face, trying to get eye contact, trying to fathom the depth of his belief in this weird conclusion.

"You suggesting that I go for the religious freaks?"

"I honestly don't know, Martel. If I did, I'd get you on them ASAP."

There wasn't much to discuss about the fear angle after that. I probed for information about Landsman's end of the Prophet Canyon project.

"What's your role in the development? A standard agency agreement?"

"Yeah, except that we don't want to multi-list the properties. Reason is, by the time we pay a percentage of our commission to our franchise holder, our profits are diluted enough." I understood. He had to pay the franchise holder, he couldn't avoid that. But under a multi-list agreement, if another agency sold a parcel, the gross commission was split 50-50. He would net too little for his trouble.

"Another thing. I had to put money in up-front. It was my money that was used for the Forest Service

trade... Well, it never happened, as I'm sure you've been told." He paused and I could sense his fear again. Something was going on inside this guy that I needed to know about.

"What did you get... What were you supposed to get in return for front-ending the trade?"

"Control of the Owner's Association."

I caught his eye and said, "Wow!"

He smiled and looked down. "I didn't get in this for charity."

"I understand," I said gently. Boy did I! Once the project was underway and the sites were selling, each buyer paying six percent commission to Landsman, then the assessment fees started rolling in. Under the agreement, they would go to Landsman. There were maintenance fees, club fees, recreational fees, and usually assessments for 'unanticipated' improvements and repairs. Typically, the average owner paid a couple of thousand dollars a year for basic fees and maybe ten grand a year, sometimes lots more, for golf and recreation fees.

During the construction period, the developer or his appointee ran the Association. They were accountable to themselves, no one else. It was a license to steal. Later, as the developer sold out, the Association was turned over to a locally elected group. Well, better said, the liabilities of the Association were turned over to a local group of suckers.

"So now what?" I asked. "Obviously they didn't use your money for the trade."

"So Kling promised me a piece of the water deal. They were always right up front with me, Kling and Connors. They know we work together well. Don't forget. I'll have unbelievably high advertising and promotional costs. I have to sell the project and the sites in the shortest possible time. The market's very competitive, and..." He paused, thinking that he shouldn't tell me something.

"And?"

“Martel, this project is going to be hard to sell. Developing a canyon is difficult. I got in this because I... Well, I was swept along because of my greed. Understand? It will work, but it won't be easy.”

“I understand why you need the position; I don't think it's out of line. I know this business pretty well.” I didn't know why I felt it necessary to soft-soap him. He seemed defensive, and I wanted to ease that.

“Did Stan explain the water deal to you Martel?”

“He mentioned something about him being an expert on all things related to water, but that's all.”

Landsman nodded. “I'd better let him give you the details. Today, most projects here and about are stopped due to lack of water or problems with getting rid of water. Stan's made a specialty of it. We wouldn't even be looking at Prophet Canyon if it weren't for Stan's ability to get over that hurdle. He did say that the level of local embarrassment was so high over Sedona's current mess-up, that water would be the key to our success. I'll have to let him tell you what he meant by that.” He was relaxing again, looking at me straight-on, losing some of that icy fear I had sensed. I wasn't through with him yet, I had to know who he was afraid of.

“Best guess,” I blurted it out to get him off guard. “Who is the opposition?”

He physically deflated, shoulders slumping forward, hands moving into his lap to comfort each other. “There's a guy here, has a big following. Claims he's a spiritual leader. Years ago a wealthy Sedona mogul built a giant playhouse of a place up on the ridge above Prophet Canyon. Cost millions. IRS took out after him. He gave up the life and divested his millions to others. He donated the place to the religious order formed by this guy, Orante. No one knows his real name. It's now called Orante Temple, and... Well, the canyon is in their back yard. I think they're the ones who want us stopped.” He pulled his shoulders back and took a deep breath. “There is something else...”

This guy Orante has power over people. He could get his followers to do anything he wanted.”

“Like murder people?”

“It’s hard to imagine, but who else would want to get Bill Speck out of the way? Then there’s the other two. Within two months, two members of the Whitetop’s opposition organization were found dead where they had ‘fallen’ while out hiking. Coincidence? I don’t think so! The new marshal, Cain I think his name is, spent a lot of time sniffing our laundry. I think he suspects GD and maybe even me of murder, although he hasn’t found evidence of foul play. It seems that the people who found the bodies trampled the sites and destroyed evidence, if it had been there.”

We made small talk about Sedona, and the agents that worked for him. Business was good, and when one agent left five were there to take her place. “There are more real estate agents in Sedona than people!” he stated with a straight face. I liked the guy. Of course, to be successful in his business, you had to have a way with people.

“Martel, you look as though you could use a good night’s sleep. I got a room for you at the Canyon Trail. You’ll need wheels. I’ve got a Jeep, okay?”

I nodded, and put my hand out. “Thank you for helping! Can I count on you to fill me in some more? I need a day or two to get into this place. Then?”

“I’ll be here Martel. Move as fast as you can! You may be our last hope if we’re going to pull this project out.”

“Oh, and Landsman, there are a few other things you can help me with.”

The Realtor turned around. He looked irritated.

“I need the name of a local who really knows this community. Someone whose been here a long time...”

“I know who you need to meet... I’ll get you his name and number...actually, he usually hangs out at the library, was a sociologist once. Anything else?”

“Yeah, who knows the religious scene around town? I mean the people that this fellow Orante seems to get... You understand?”

“You’ll need more than one source. I’ll think about it and get the names to you. Okay?”

“Thanks,” I said, meaning it. “It’ll speed things up.”

Landsman turned again, but stopped and turned back toward me and the Jeep. “Martel, you may need to knock heads. These guys play rough. I hope you are as tough as Prader says!”

“When I have to, I knock,” I said in a dry hard voice. Not even the glimmer of a smile crossed my lips. He had to know that I knew how to knock. What I hoped he suspected was that I rather enjoyed it.

## Chapter 7

You've got to understand generations! My parents were bigots and racists and they feared and hated almost everybody who was different from them.

I LEFT LANDSMAN STANDING by the door of his Continental, watching to see if I could operate the standard shift on the little Jeep. When I got turned around and out of the lot without grinding or jumping the clutch, he waved, and I was on my way. I liked the guy. The ties between Kling and Landsman were strong. I had a forewarning about the one, which really clunged-up my feelings about the other. Still, all I had to do was get information, get to the evolved hippy in the Cottonwood hospital as soon as he could talk, and solve the mystery.

I found my motel and mumbled a "thank you" to Landsman. The guy had registered me in a place that was my style. A motel that looked like it was designed by the art director of Country Magazine. I got the Jeep stowed in their secure area, checked in, and found my room. I wanted a drink and some fast and slick, but I had other things I had to get on to; an urgent contact that I had to make before I unpacked. The problem was that there was an hour time difference that made it even more essential that I move fast.

I got the Hitachi VisionBook out of my bag, and punched '9' on the telephone by the bed. When I got a tone, I carefully pulled the cord from the back of the set and plugged the line into the laptop. The computer took its sweet time booting and then it seemed to take forever for the AOL page to come up. I typed in my password numbers, and let the computer dial the 800 number. When the thing said "Welcome," I got to mail, flash mail, and there were five new messages. Damn, how could I explain?

I didn't bother to read the messages. I knew what they said. I moved the cursor to the icon, and got a blank message form. I typed in the address and skipped to the message box. Before typing, I clicked the 'Pager/Chat' on. I caught a few deep breaths and began typing.

Hi Mama,

I just got in to my motel here in Sedona. I know you were worried, but this is the first break I have had since last night.

As I typed, the Chat Box opened and I knew she had been sitting there for hours waiting for me. I ignored the fact that she was on-line. I didn't want to get into a typefest with her.

Terrance, do you know what time it is? Do you know how it hurts me to sit here with this computer? Don't you think that when you are away, which is far too often, that you could be more considerate? I raised you to be a considerate son, didn't I? Why don't you have a feeling for me about this? I'm getting old Terrance, and I don't ask for very much from you. What do you think - that you won't inherit from me and your Dad, bless his soul? I'm having to sit here and type this out when you could be here and I could look at you. Terrance, are you there? Type something!

Deaf people aren't used to having two way conversations and I understand Mom's ways, still, she really gets to me.

Mom, I'm an hour earlier here. Arizona doesn't believe in daylight-savings time, well, not all of Arizona anyway. Some parts are the same time as Colorado. It's all very confusing.

I'm not sure the chat system got my message across. Her message was printing on my screen before I said, "not all of Arizona..."

...and you flew there didn't you. You thought I couldn't call the credit card company records up on my computer and check what you were charging? You thought that I shouldn't know? Well I'm disappointed. You shouldn't fly little planes and you know it! If your father were here, he'd put a stop to this nonsense. You'll kill yourself and maybe... Terrance, you don't take women up with you...do you? You'd better not Terrance, you know how I hate that!!!

I put the computer down on the table and went into the bathroom to pee. When I came out, the cursor was beeping at me. She had written half a page more and stopped.

Ma, I gotta go. You know if I don't get my sleep how I am. I love you Ma, and I'll send you an e-mail in the morning. Goodnight.

I went out to the bar and had a Tequila Sunrise. The guy said it was perfect for sleep. I guessed it was supposed to put me out until sunrise. I made a list of things I wanted to get done the next day. I'd start with a drive-around and see what I had missed from my flyovers. Then, maybe I could find the geezer that was a retired sociologist. I wanted to get a handle on the community as fast as possible. I remembered that I had forgotten to ask Landsman for one other thing. Maybe I spaced it because it was the one area where I was sure I would have to butt-heads and get tough. I finished the drink and headed out and back to my room.

I decided to call Landsman first thing in the morning and get the names of Sedona's most active young 'Designer Sandals Types' and the architectural firm or firms that were in the way of progress. I savored my thoughts of knocking those envirosucking smartasses into line. I had never been on a project that wasn't skewed by guys like that, and something told me that the Sedona dudes were involved in stopping GD. Why wouldn't they be? We hadn't put the fear of God into them, hired them, or gotten them on our side, yet.



Morning came and the motel guy told me that it would be nice outside until about 11:00. "Then what?" I asked. "About 104," he answered, "but it's not the same as other places... Dry heat, you know." He was wiping down the counter, looking for smears and lowering his head against the light in the hope of spotting some errant smudge. He wore a rolled bandanna around his head, tied with a leather thong. Strands of his long brown hair were caught in the knot. It didn't seem to bother him.

"One thing, though, it'll change soon. Humidity! The monsoons are due any time now."

I thought about that for a few deliberation circuits. "Monsoons? I thought the Monsoons were in India? Asia?"

"You're right man. They are! Lots of people around here don't even know that. Where are you from?"

I told him, so he started in on Colorado, as I tried to get more information about monsoons in the desert. Well, you've had exchanges like that too. Before I left, I asked him for directions to a café where locals hung out.

"Locals? Do you mean people who like live here all the time?"

I nodded.

"Well, I don't know any locals...maybe some old farts, but, let's see, nope, no one here is what you would consider local... But you could try Pick's Café, it's in uptown, which is really our downtown. It's not far from the gas station with the best gas prices in town, if you need gas."

I got the Jeep rolling and let the cool morning air wash around me.

The canvas top blocked the sun, and the open compartment gave me a sense of speed and vulnerability. I drove west on 89A and tried to match my ground perspective with the aerial maps I had put in place the day before. The Jeep pushed through drainage's filled with cool air, and more frequently as I drove, patches of hot dry air that made my nose send a sneeze message to my whatever. The north side of the highway was spectacular.

The red rocks rose in formations that colonnaded up and back until they formed a rim against the sky, beyond which I couldn't see. At a crossing called Coffee Pot, I looked north and saw what looked like a cowboy's tall coffee pot. Amazing!

I found Dry Creek Road, the library, and a turnaround that let me get the Jeep headed back to Uptown-Downtown.

At the entrance to Pick's, I found a pay phone, called Landsman's office and talked to his secretary. She repeated the message, and had it right. She assured me that Paul would call me with information about the architects. When I was sure she had my number at the motel, I replaced the receiver and went into Pick's.

The place was dim and cozy, with plenty of little areas for groups to sit and share adventures. The air conditioning was already blowing the heat out the doors. I felt at home, grabbed a paper from the counter, and picked a two-person table not far from the kitchen door. The waiter looked over at me and nodded. He grabbed a menu and came over.

"Hi, how are you today? Say, I haven't seen you in some time... You been gone?"

His recognition took me by surprise. I did some quick thinking and went along. "Yeah, I've been up in Colorado," not a lie I'm pleased to say, "What gives? Something's just not the same here!" I wanted to get him talking and this seemed like the way to learn something without mounting a fishing expedition.

"You noticed! The whole group folded. That big guy, the one who ran the specialty leather store? Well he went belly-up, and then that woman who did the designer clothes thing? Well she lost her lease and... in less than a week no one was meeting here like they used to. It's been hard on Pick. They brought in a lot of business."

"It's the local business people, not the tourists, who make a place like this go," I said, as if I knew.

“Damn right! Well, we’re getting some of that Orante crowd and the new owners at the mini-mall have breakfast here every few days. I think we’ll make it. Glad you’re back. One thing hasn’t changed, the coffee is still bombo and the food is great. You know what you’ll have?”

After I ordered, he came by with coffee. I went fishing again. “I never thought that Orante’s crowd would come here. Don’t they have their own place?”

“Did, but it closed... Health Department closed it I think. They’re okay people. Mostly women, and they tip better than most women, it’s required by Orante. It’s funny. They really are mellow folks. I’m hoping we get more. Pick has added some great veggie dishes to the menu and we play CD’s they loan us, at least when they’re in here.”

“Nice. Ever been up to the Temple?”

“Are you kidding? Someone has to ask you... Maybe I will though, I’m about to ask one of them out, she’s really my kind and she communicates...”

I tried a not-so-white lie. “I tried to understand their teachings once. Maybe now, I could understand it all better.”

He shrugged and confided in me, “If you ask me it’s a bunch of nonsense. They sit and meditate and have sessions with the Master, that Orante fellow. They give all they have and whatever they make to him. In return, he gives them peace and security. If you ask me, I think it’s a scam. But,” he paused and looked around to see if anyone else was listening, “I give them points for really trying to be good. It’s hard to be too critical when all they really want is to bring about peace and enlightenment.”

I finished and pushed back from the table. The coffee was doing what it was supposed to, so I detoured by the john on the way out. I left a generous tip on the table. After all, I was back, and someone thought I belonged here.

I klunked two coins in the pay phone and punched in the number Landsman had given me. The phone rang

once and was picked up. Everyone knows that you have to let the phone ring at least twice. It placed me on my guard.

“Roy Connely speaking.”

“Is this Doctor Connely?”

“Yes.”

“Doctor, I would like to buy some of your time and expertise. My name’s Martel, and I need help from someone who sees the bigger picture around here.” I don’t know why I phrased it that way, but it worked... Later I learned that anything would have.

“Martel, fresh from Tours, I presume?”

I faked laughter. Boy am I sick of those jokes. I got it together and answered, “Just back, Sir. Could we meet...say at the library this morning?” Landsman had told me he hung out in the library.

“Well, yes, I guess so. What is the nature of your business?”

“I need an objective overview of Sedona.”

Now he was laughing, only for real. “You mean,” he said between dry chortles, “that you think anyone can be objective about this place? Well, I’ll try.” I could hear him cover the phone and talk to someone. Later I learned that it was his cat.

“I’d like to meet today, Sir, if possible.”

“That’d be fine. I’ll be over there in fifteen minutes.”

I couldn’t believe my luck. This guy held key information that I needed now, and he was available. I hung up the phone and a thought hit me like a blow to the gut --- I hadn’t e-mailed mom as I had promised. I’d pay for that, but, whatever, she was stuck with me. I knew I was hurting her. I kicked the wall, trying to relieve my pain.

The Sedona Public Library is a great building, built by community members, not the government. That told me a lot about the potential of the community. Any group that avoided government involvement had to be good.

Doc Connely was standing in the foyer waiting for me. I thought I was fast! I entered and stood just inside the door long enough to get a good view of him.

Connely was---rotund? I saw 'Mr. Potato,' with black hair and those great black-rimmed specks. His arms were akimbo, as fit the body. I couldn't see his hands as they were jammed in his pockets, that is, until he extended one and smiled a thick-lipped smile. I took his hand and pumped it carefully. This Mr. Potato had age spots the size of livers, and wrinkles that told me to be careful. The guy had to be ancient, maybe older.

"It's nice of you to be able to meet with me on such short notice," I smiled and let his hand go. He almost dropped it. "This building is beautiful!"

"Ah yes," he said exhaling softly, "this community can really do great things when they get it together, which is almost never. How did you come to call me?"

"Paul Landsman told me that you were the man I needed to talk to."

"A Realtor! These days they hold the place together. I don't suppose he told you I was old and out of things?"

"No, on the contrary. He said you were the one man who had perspective."

He turned and led me into the inner foyer and then toward a small side room. "We can talk in here. I always do."

"Nice," I responded as I thought I was expected to do. "Doctor, you are a Sociologist?"

"Was, probably still am. At least I was trained to observe. Ever draw a sociogram?"

I shook my head.

"That's what I do best. I draw lines between people that are interrelated. At least that's what I try to do. Here, all I get is isolated, interrelated groups. Know what that means?"

I shook my head again and tried to envision interrelated groups in isolation.

"It means you want to know about a community that isn't a community, that's what! It means that I have to tell you about different groups that futz-fart around here like they run the place, only most don't, because they don't have any good way of influencing the other groups. Understand?"

I wasn't sure, but I pictured bunches of grapes on a stem, kinda like the neighborhoods I had seen from the air, that seemed isolated from the whole, and incomplete, without neighborhood schools and parks and things healthy communities have. I gestured yes.

"Okay, so as a sociologist, I had the opportunity to study this place from... Well, from the early 1950s, almost its inception. I came here often back then...to act in movies. Ever hear of Howard Hawk?"

I had, in fact. I grew up on westerns. He was impressed.

"Well, I never knew him well. I worked as an extra in many a western movie he directed. Anyway," he continued talking with a strength I would not have suspected he had. He was old. His mind was sharper than mine. "This place was remote... Hell, Arizona was remote! No one ever thought that people would come here. Most of the locals didn't see the beauty through the hardship and isolation. Still, some got the land bug and have never regretted that."

Connely talked on for an hour, running his words out on tangents and painting word pictures for me that he enjoyed more than I did. I listened, aware that most of his stories and explanations were not applicable to my problem. Then, after getting up abruptly to use the facilities, he was back, saying things that did make a difference.

"You've got to understand generations! My parents were bigots and racists and they feared and hated almost everybody who was different from them. They weren't unusual. Almost their whole generation was made up of people like that. When I was a kid, I thought I was

enlightened, especially after college. I'd sit and listen to them talk about Calvinists and Niggers and Savages... They made me angry and I knew they were ignorant and wrong, even though most of my generation still believed as they did. When those generations died out---my parent's generation and part of my own---I was glad. I believed then, that the poison died with them."

He checked to see that I was listening. He had a way of getting off the subject and pursuing tangential information. I was learning that by waving my hand from side to side and frowning, I could get him back on track.

"I was past my prime when the economic travail of the thirties took down the America I knew. My generation either jumped, or was pushed ahead into a future we didn't want and most certainly didn't believe in. So much for the death of our hopes and dreams. The war got us out of the economic doldrums. Most of us could only find secure perches and hold on. I did. That's why I became a professor. I had security; a job. Security meant that I could survive. I'm afraid my generation was lost. You never even hear of us!"

"Now listen, because this next part is what you need to know to understand Sedona!" He shifted his great body in the wooden chair and got out a square of sheet rag and wiped the corners of his mouth, as one might do at the end of a great meal.

"The generations born in the late twenties mostly, some after, came up through their formative years in depressed times: the death of a nation. They were exposed to the frustrations and messages of futility my generation gave them, and a sense of desperation... I mean desperation of the survival type that breeds selfishness. As little kids they learned an 'Only I Count' way of getting by. Schools were bad, if kids could even finish. Jobs were scarce and learning a skill was a rare thing. The country was essentially dead! You can imagine what effect that had on those generations. Bad! The worst that American children have ever experienced!"

He was animated and sweating. He believed in what he was telling me. Something made me think that it was his unpublished dissertation --- his life's work.

"Now think of that! All these millions of kids with no hope. Parents who were confused and defeated, and almost everyone with poor educations. Then, Poppo! WWII. Off go the ignorant savages, the ilk of defeated and broken families. Off they go to... not to war, but to education, training, discipline, paychecks and, think of it Martel, the government takes the refuse of a failed economic system and sets it on its feet. Great! Right? But you know what? These kids still had the desperation experience... They cooperated when they had to, but they were, 'Only I Count' kids all the way."

I liked the lecture, but couldn't fit it into the Sedona scene I needed to learn about. I wanted to stop him and get into a question and answer mode, but before I could he was off again, sprinting along on words and insights.

"So these failed kids grow up. Then Uncle creates the GI Bill and millions of men are suddenly getting through high school and going to universities. They can marry and breed, and Uncle will get them a new house for no money down. Jobs are opened up for them and... Do you know what? They start thinking of themselves as self-made men. Honest! You know it's true! We sociologists think it was the combination of their 'Only I Count' philosophy, plus prosperity, that caused it. Whatever, these folks... I'm talking about the great majority of them, decided that they were successful because they were smart and that God was on their side. Study the religious movements of the time. Study how these generations dealt with others and used the wealth they fell into. Then imagine that generation coming to this place and coveting it. You following me Son? Imagine that, and don't be surprised at the ugly!"

"So, you're telling me that the power groups I need to understand all come from those depression generations



and that they thought God was on their side and that... What? That it was all right to exploit?"

"Close."

"And you're saying that these newcomers were only in it for themselves because they were 'Only I Count' people?"

"Right, only don't be afraid and stop there. Call them what they have proved to be... No, that's not fair. Many, probably the majority, grew and healed and gained new perspectives. But those that didn't are self-serving and basically cruel, without social consciousness, empathy, or tolerance. They lack the sensitivity to others to be able to listen and to work together. They were here to get theirs, and they damned the opposition, damned the environment, damned the generations that followed, and damned anyone who questioned their God-given power."

"Doc, that's not hard for me to believe. I believe that is the way human nature and our system works. In my profession, I deal with it all the time. Now, you mean to tell me that those characteristics are unique to those from the depression generation? You imply that this area is screwed up because those damaged generations came here to...to what? Exploit the area?"

"You're getting it Martel! They wanted it because it was something they could wear on their sleeves. At any other time in history, if any other generation's progeny had come here, this area would have been a National Park. Instead, the 'Only I Count' kids turned it into their preserve; a territory they divided up and developed for personal gain. The problems came when others came in. Hell, they brought them in, but that didn't matter to them. Most of the 'newcomers' were from those same generations, and most had made big bucks working for *government* contractors and *government* supported industries. Like the others, they thought that because they had made money and had powerful positions they were superior beings." He caught a quick breath. I was amazed that he had the wind to talk so long.

“They really threatened the ‘old guard.’ As a result, those in power decided that the best defense was a strong offense. So, through the media and in meetings and everywhere they had presence, they went on the offensive. Only remember, they were, ‘Only I Count’ kids. They used every nasty tactic they could invent. Their offense was really offensive! They attacked the newcomers, each other, and everyone they perceived as an enemy, with vileness. Then the newcomers from the same generations attacked back, equally vile.” He grabbed for another big breath, motioning to me that he hadn’t finished talking yet.

“You can read it in the newspapers, listen to it on tapes from the radio station, read it in the minutes of the local governments... In fact, until those generations die out, their communities will be divided; at war with themselves... But it’s not just here.” He rolled from bun to bun and found a more comfortable way to distribute his weight, and continued.

“Arizona is a retirement mecca for the ‘Only I Count’ generations. Look at the communities they flock to... sterile, no kids allowed! No one allowed who doesn’t do things their way, conform to their depression-driven values... Martel, go look at the places where they have warehoused themselves! Can you imagine living in a community with no young people? Arizona is cursed with their collective selfishness. They are the damaged products of their times. They are dying out now, but they leave behind a legacy of damaged social programs, poor schools, perverted infrastructures, skewed political systems, a raped environment.”

I recoiled against the information. It hit nerves within me, associated with my own observations, and I feared that he was right. If he was, then what I believed was wrong. Still, I was trying to think ahead of Connely, trying to imagine people like the ones he described and the impact an outside developer like GD would have on them.

“Doc, if someone from outside, let’s say Phoenix or Denver, came in and began to buy land and start a major development... Well, what would these guys you talk about do?”

Connely sat back and joined his hands behind his head. His black toupee slipped forward in perfect Mr. Potato form. He slid it back into place, looked at me through his oversized, black-rimmed glasses, grinned, and answered.

“They’d have to have a piece of the action. Now, they’ve sorted themselves, dealt in a few of the most powerful newcomers, and eliminated most of their own generations, as opposition, I mean. So, those who remain, and sometimes their kids, control the show. A developer comes in, he’s got to grease the hands that grease the wheels that grease... Get it? They don’t do the work or take the risks, but they want to reap a sizable share of the profits.”

“Okay, then,” I continued probing. “What if the new guy is powerful and won’t pay off? What would they do?”

“Anything! They only play to win. First they would go on the offensive... Hell, Martel, they control local governments. They would stop the development in a way that would allow them to take it over and have it all. No doubt about that, they’d do that!” He paused, thinking. “What development? Are you talking of any development in particular?”

“Oh no,” I lied. “I was just running something through to see if I understand how things work around here. But, Doc Connely, don’t these guys do good too?”

“Of course they do! But not because it’s good. ‘Only I Count’ people do things that give them power and prestige and that make them money. Even then, they do it on the offensive, making sure that no one else has a say, sits on a board, makes a buck, or gets the credits. It’s a power game pure and simple. They do more damage than good. I hope I live to see them buried!” He sounded sad and defeated, but then pulled himself up and added,

“Thank God there were a few from the ‘Only I Count’ generation who evolved into something decent. While you’re in Arizona, look around. Some great things are their creations. I mean, the creations of the ones who evolved like I hope I did.” He sagged in the wooden chair, looking pale. “Martel, I’m tired. Will we meet another day?”

“Doc, “I said getting to my feet and helping him rise, “you have given me some pieces to a puzzle I’m working on. I may need your insights again. I said I would pay you, what is usual?”

The old man smiled broadly. “The usual is a penny. ‘A penny for your thoughts,’ that’s what they always say.” He grinned at me and then turned the grin into a warm smile. “Son, I have no need for money. You see, as a sociologist I figured them out. When I knew how to manipulate them, I became one of them and amassed quite a fortune which, by the way, I didn’t keep much of! And so now you know that what I’ve professed to you isn’t conjecture. It’s my truth!”

He grabbed my arm, and pulled me toward him. “Martel, I have one son, born when I was in my fifties. A son whom I lost because of all of this...this ugliness. He’s denounced me and my family name. In a way he’s like I was. He wishes to see the end of my generation. He abhors my values the way I did my parent’s generation’s values, except for exactly opposite reasons than I had! Understand? Opposite reasons! I’ve paid a terrible price. I hope what I’ve learned in my ninety-nine plus years means something. That it doesn’t die with me... That’s why I talk so long, to strangers.”



## Chapter 8

Marshal, monitor 122.5, there's an emergency message from a plane!

YAVAPAI COUNTY MARSHAL ARNIE Cain slowed the Jeep Cherokee patrol vehicle to keep it from rolling over on the sharp curves that lay ahead. The short wheelbase made the vehicle great for off-road use, but at highway speed, around curves, it was not easy to control. Had the road been gravel, he would have slowed even more. The roadway cut from left to right and then back again. The Jeep held the road at this speed, but only because he knew how to control it. He looked at his watch, he was making good time, better than he had hoped. He was hungry and Friendly's Café stopped serving the special at 2:00.

At the junction with 89A, he turned into the stream of traffic and let his police vehicle slow the surrounding cars like some sort of resistor in an electrical circuit. It was always that way. Even drivers who were not speeding slowed as his vehicle came into view. Dumb, he thought, but part of his job was to regulate others' behavior. It was a part of law enforcement he was uncomfortable with. It meant that he could never have friends outside of the force. He had been here such a short time, eight months, and the territory he covered was so vast, that he had spent time with only a few other officers. He felt the emptiness; the ache of isolation, and what he called 'disconnectedness.'

Friendly's was almost empty. The lunch crowd had finished their steak specials and waddled back to work. The smoky old café was the last hangout for working stiffs in a town focused upon the Artsy Fartsy and tourist bucks. When his rounds brought him through Sedona, he always stopped here.

"Marshal Cain," the tall, angular hostess, waitress and cashier greeted him. She had worked in Friendly's

since it opened in the '70s. She should have owned the place, he thought.

"I knew you'd be by today. Tuesdays and Thursdays, right?"

"Saturday or Sunday too, it depends on Prescott."

"We were running out of specials. I had Bob put one back for you. Want it?" She reached out and took his menu before he nodded. That comforted him. It was nice that someone knew he existed and tried to please him.

She turned and picked up dishes from the adjoining booth as she made her way to the maw of the cut-thru where dirty dishes were stacked, orders were placed, and steaming meals were picked up. He sat looking at the label on the Worcestershire Sauce bottle, trying not to process, but as usual, the jumbled memories and hurt flooded in.

She surprised him when she placed the plate on the table. He came back from his thoughts, smelled the hot meat and fries, smiled up at her, and cleared his mind. He had been reliving it again, and that made him angry. 'How many times do I have to go back over it!' he thought, trying to understand why he couldn't stop processing.

'She... I'm starting again,' he thought, 'even as I decide I won't, I do anyway. Damn, let's see... If I once get it through my head that what happened makes sense, I can stop going over and over it.' He took a bite of steak and swirled a fry in a pool of catsup. He tried to organize his memories as they flowed.

'After the kids were in school---it was after! They were maybe sixteen and thirteen then. She started making excuses all the time. I thought it was something else, not me. I was angry. Damn I was angry, but I knew enough to keep my cool. She told me she loved me. She always told me that. She told me to give her space. I gave her space even though I didn't understand and I wouldn't give up. Then, when was it? When John went away to college? Yeah. She said she had "no needs that way," and had no feelings of pleasure. She told me that she loved me; that

there was no pleasure for her from sex. She even told me that she had seen a doctor.

'I was supposed to ignore my needs. I suppressed them. I remembered the way it had been when we were first married. Actually, the first ten or so years. I believed that she would become that way again; get on better terms with her body. She told me she loved me. She apologized and promised me that she was working on it.'

He cut the fat off the remaining piece of sirloin, cut off a mouth-sized chunk, swirled it in sauce and forked it into his mouth. He was staring at his plate, eyes partially focused.

"Did you want coffee? Did I forget to ask?" The waitress stood over him, coffee pot in hand.

"Can't..." he tried to remember her name, but couldn't, "Not this late in the day. I can't even take decaf. I'm okay, thanks a lot."

He chewed slowly, beginning to burn with anger again. He could feel the hate and bitterness welling up in him as it had that first time.

After Rangers, he had stayed in Georgia because they had a program to fill openings in law enforcement by hiring from the military. As he moved up through the ranks in Atlanta, some of his good military buddies were co-workers. Bill Price had been a friend since Nam. Bill came to him first.

"Anything else Marshal?" She said, smiling as she ripped the check out of her pad and slid it under the edge of his place mat.

"No... Thanks again, the steak was great! You're a good cook, too," he said grinning.

"Back to Prescott?"

"Yeah, all's quiet up at this end of the county. Be back Thursday...at least if I'm on schedule."

He paid, adding the tip into the total on the county's plastic. "Make sure the waitress gets the tip!" he said with a grin.



The Cherokee started reluctantly. He twisted the key and urged the little V-8 on as it cranked. The battery needed to be replaced. The maintenance guy said it checked-out okay, but he knew that it was right on the line. The engine caught. As he released the key, the radio speakers rattled and hissed with static.

He was required to stop by the station and check in with the city police. He drove in, around the building, put the tranny in Park, leaving the engine running, carefully locked the doors and went inside. The dispatcher looked up at him and smiled.

“Hi Marshal, keeping the javelina off the road?”

“Yeah, and that’s about all. Sure has been quiet... The way we like it, right?”

She nodded and turned back to her work.

“Nothing for me, huh!”

She nodded again, and without looking up said, “The way we like it, right?”

Outside, Cain unlocked the Jeep and slid into the driver’s seat. The thought of the hour and ten minute drive back to Prescott, and an empty apartment, sent a wave of depression through him. His head sagged to the steering wheel as he drew a deep breath and fought to overcome the feeling of being totally alone.

‘Bill Price, of all the people, Bill! His buddy had spent fifteen minutes telling him how good a friend he was and pleading with him not to let what he had to say interfere with their friendship.’ Cain had known something terrible was coming. He had never imagined how the information would change his life.

“It has been going on for a long time, Arnie,” Bill had told him. “You’ve got to know... At least you must have suspected?” He searched Cain’s face, but there was no clue there that his friend even heard him.

Cain didn’t grasp it at first, he wouldn’t let himself hear what Bill was saying. He stared, feeling separate from his body, looking on.

"I've known about it since... Well, a long time, more than ten years, Arnie. She'd just hit on someone, get laid, and then that was it. She never went with anyone steady... I don't think... She just..." He paused, sensing that his friend was almost totally removed. "Debbie hit on me!" his face turned red and his mouth screwed into a grimace. "That's why I'm telling you, Arnie. I owe you that."

The memory played again and he suffered the agony of it. Slowly, he raised his head, wiped his nose, and pulled the lever from Park. On the road again, he kept to the speed limit and passed cars that had slowed at his presence. His mind was numb. He was barely aware of how he was driving and what he was doing. Then, with a blast of ear-splitting noise, the radio came alive with the Sedona Dispatcher's voice.

"Marshal, monitor 122.5, there's an emergency message from a plane!"

Arnie knew that the frequency was reserved for aircraft. He switched to VHF and dialed in 122.5, catching the end of a message. "...so access will be difficult." He waited a moment and the message began again.

"Sedona control, this is Vista RR Aviation, seven-seven-nine-eight-nine-er. I repeat, Vista RR. Seven. Seven. Nine. Eight. Nine. I am presently over Prophet Canyon north of Sedona, my map coordinates, G as in Girl, Four. Repeat, G - 4. I am circling a water hole about a mile from the upper end of Prophet Canyon. There appears to be a body floating in the water. There is no movement. As we first passed over, several coyotes were moving about the water's edge. Looks bad from here. For ground access, read: coordinates G - 5, repeat, Gee Five, access will be difficult. Do you copy?"

Static, and then, "Vista RR, this is Sedona Control. We copy. That area is difficult to radio in and out of. We may have problems getting good radio contact. Nothing goes out to the west. Can you stay overhead and act as a relay?"

Cain pulled his mike from the dash bracket and pressed the button.

"Vista RR, this is Marshal Cain, Yavapai County Sheriff's Office. I'm presently near Sedona, heading west on Highway 89A. I read you and am proceeding to the trailhead at G - 5, my map. Confirm, that reads Barber Canyon Road near the road that goes east on the canyon rim to a site labeled Orante Temple?"

"Affirmative, Marshal. The trailhead you need goes from a cul-de-sac in Oak Ridge subdivision. Over."

"Read you Vista RR Aviation. Who am I talking to?"

"JB Mann. I have passengers. I need to return to the field."

"Understand...ah, JB, I'll contact rescue. Any other people in that area?"

"I've flown around the site several times. No sign of anyone else down there. There is a tent about fifty feet from the water, ah...due south, against some rocks. Lots of vegetation, hard to see, but no other sign. Does look like someone ran a Cat up the trail. Up to about a quarter mile from the water hole."

"I copy, Vista RR, I'm on it. Any chance of you getting airborne again? I understand that it's difficult to maintain radio contact in that canyon."

"Good chance, Sir. I can be back over the site in twenty minutes. I'll have to fuel."

"Thanks. Keep the critters away until I can hike in there!" He switched the radio channel back and pressed the mike's button.

"Sedona Dispatch, can you give me an ETA, your office to that G - 5 location?"

"Marshal, plan on 15 minutes."

"Fifteen. Okay. Sedona, this north area is blacked out. I won't be able to contact Cottonwood or Prescott... I'll have to go through you. Over."

"Read you Marshal. They said they would have the problem fixed in about a year. They're supposed to put in another relay so that they can line-of-sight from that whole

area... A lot of good that does us now. We will act as relay. Out."

"Sedona Dispatch, contact whoever's available and have them wait at G - 5. I'm going to start up the trail, estimate less than two miles. I will be in contact, this frequency."

"Roger, we read, will do. More like more than two miles of trail, Marshal. It winds around a lot. It's unimproved trail. Overgrown I'd guess. Good luck!"

Keeping the Jeep on the road required all of Cain's attention. He leaned into the curves and kept both hands on the wheel. There wasn't enough traffic to use lights or siren. He was relieved about that. He liked the lights, but hated wailing down the road like a banshee. In just over fifteen minutes he pulled into the subdivision and drove through it until he found the cul-de-sac and what seemed to be an old trail head. He parked, got into the back, pulled out his gear bag and started changing into trail garb. His boots were stiff with newness. He decided not to take his anorak, yanking it from his pack. He wouldn't need it. It was so damned hot that the Jeep's metal burned his hands. He checked for first aid kit, water, survival packets; he had them all. He got out some 45 sunscreen and rubbed it on his face, ears and the back of his neck. He finished by rubbing what was left on the back of his hands. 'Skin cancer,' he thought. This is Arizona.

Cain checked his gun and locked the Jeep. The portable radio was secure in his belt holster, he wondered if he needed anything else. "Damn!" he said aloud, "evidence bags and camera." He reopened the Jeep, got the bags and camera and closed it once again. He hadn't done one of these in a long time. He hoped he hadn't forgotten anything. If he had, he could radio for the others to bring it.

He pushed through brush that had overgrown the trail, crossed a drainage that seemed man-made, 'probably put in years ago by the developers of the subdivision,' he thought, and started up the right side of

Prophet Canyon. He had gone perhaps 100 yards when he came upon a place where a tractor had come in from the left and, blade down, drove up the trail, leaving a path about eight feet wide. It was scraped clear of brush, trees and rocks. Then he noted that the Cat had come back down the trail, doing some cut-and fill and additional work on rock outcroppings and big trees. Turning, he followed the tractor's trail back down toward the subdivision. Within minutes he came out on a new road that had been cut from what seemed to be a Forest Service fire road that connected to the subdivision. In the trees at the edge of the street, sat a giant D-9 Cat with an eight-foot wide blade in front and ripper teeth on the back. The Caterpillar's paint was brush-scratched and parts of splintered trees still clung to its sides.

Jogging, Cain made his way back to the Jeep, dropped his gear in the back, jumped in and started cranking the engine. On what seemed its last full crank, the engine started. He leaned back breathing hard and sweating. Then he smiled and said aloud, "Why walk when you can drive!"

In four wheel drive the Jeep was unstoppable. He nosed through several drainage's which the Cat had dozed dirt and debris into, but which were still too deep for an ordinary vehicle to traverse. Grinding along, he touched the button on his mike.

"Sedona Dispatch? I've found a new road cut that seems to follow the trail into Prophet Canyon. I'm driving up as far as I can make it. Please advise rescue."

"I copy Marshal. Are you certain that you are in the right canyon? There is no record of a road in there."

"I'm certain, Dispatch. It's very new, within the week."

"Roger, do you want the others to follow?"

"Affirmative, Dispatch, if they have four-wheelers with high clearance."

"Hummer?"

He laughed, thinking how meanings change, "That's also an affirmative! Tell them not to run over me! Out."

The mangled vegetation that lined the Cat's trail reminded Cain of his first rescue mission, years ago, after a tornado cut a path through the forest near Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. The white inner parts of trees and brushy plants, still glistening with droplets of sap, marked the path of the dozer as far ahead as he could see. Downed pinon pine trees formed a guardrail along the path, cemented in place by twisted boughs of manzanita and leafy sprigs of catclaw. Alligator junipers, some with trunks larger than he could have put his arms around, lay splintered and dying in windrows of ruin.

The Jeep labored as it climbed. Its tires spun on tree limbs and loose rocks. His headway slowed as the canyon narrowed at a point. The tractor had also labored here. In a narrows, a giant sycamore tree had been splintered in two. His path was blocked. The Cat had gone through here and returned, but sometime after, the massive other half of the giant sycamore had fallen, blocking the trail. There was no easy way around it. Cain turned the Jeep around, its nose facing back down trail. He thought that if it didn't start, he could roll-start it. Then he looked at the gas gauge and decided to leave it running. He got his gear together again and, squeezing under the great tree, began to walk on up the trail.

Cain hadn't gone fifty feet when he heard the plane. Looking up, he saw a small plane with white and blue markings. He read the numbers: 77989. He grabbed his radio, switched frequency, and pushed the button.

"Hi Mann. This is Cain, and you're to my left about a mile ahead."

"Read you Marshal. Saw your white Jeep. Road goes on, maybe another eighth mile. Then I can just make out the trail. I'm almost over the water hole... There, coyotes again, but not in the water as far as I can see.

Body's just floating. Looks like a woman. Must be dead. I'll circle around and come back over."

"Roger that, can a helicopter get in there?"

"Helicopter? No, this vegetation is thick for maybe...clear down to you... Oh, I'd say at least a mile around. Let me look for a closer site."

"Any sign of the rescue rangers below?"

"None that I can see. I'll fly down that way and find out where they are."

Cain put the radio back in its holster and kept climbing. The cut was steep here and the muscles in the tops of his legs began to burn. He was puffing. The sun was low in the sky yet it was still hot. He guessed 100 degrees. It was 104.

The radio spit static. He pulled it out of the holster. Once the antenna was in the clear he could hear JB Mann.

"I read, Mann."

"Marshal, you're not going to believe this, but I think I've spotted a body to your left and maybe 100 yards up the side of the canyon. I'm sure of it! It is a body, looks like a man... Hey Sir, glad you're down there not me."

"Can you see me? If so, give me an approximate compass reading on the body you just reported."

"Roger, I'm coming around. Hey, there's a red Hummer on your trail. Maybe ten minutes back, coming fast. Try 121 degrees from the Jeep."

"Do you have radio contact with them?"

"No, they're on local frequency. Don't have a fancy set like you guys carry."

"Thanks for the bearing. I'll switch now and talk to them. Out."

Cain felt like he had it together now. This wasn't unlike the training missions they had done so many times in North Carolina. He decided to deal with the body in the water first.

He switched the radio and called the Hummer on the local frequency.

“This is Marshal Cain. I’m about five or six minutes ahead of you. I want you to split your team,” he realized as he gave the order that he didn’t know who or how many people were coming up, “First, do you have anyone trained in protecting and preserving evidence at a crime scene? Over”

“The noise of a vehicle almost drowned out the voice that came through his radio.

“One, Marshal.”

“Okay then, I want that man, and one other that will follow his orders, to take a compass course from my Jeep of 121 degrees and go uphill about 100 yards. From that point I want him to begin marking a crime scene. Proceed with care. Do not touch, damage or destroy anything. Look for a body. Confirm the body or get proof that it’s something else. Got that?”

There was a long pause. Then the radio came alive again.

“Please repeat. We didn’t understand all that.”

Cain was stunned. He had hoped to get their help and be freed to go to the water hole. Then he heard the sound of the Hummer. He thumbed the radio, “Forget it. I’ll wait here for you. Out.”

Cain feared that he was not in control of the situation. His frustration at not being able to take charge and get people to do what needed to be done got the better of him. He picked up a stout five-foot section of pinon branch, and releasing pent-up frustration and anger, beat the fallen trunk of the sycamore until his weapon splintered and was impossible to hold. “Damn them all!” he yelled at the forest as he threw what was left of his stick into the brush. These were probably the same people who had wiped out any sign at the site of the death he had investigated two months before. He couldn’t trust anyone! After a few moments, he cooled down and felt better.

The red Hummer came around the point and the driver stopped it, nose-to-nose with Cain’s Cherokee, not



far from the fallen sycamore. Four doors flew open and people started getting out. Cain counted six, with the driver.

“Your engine’s running, Officer,” the driver informed him in the controlled voice a concerned news reporter would use to report an abandoned grocery cart. Cain grimaced and looked at the guy. He was serious? He thought he was being helpful?

“Well I’ll be damned!” Cain responded. “Do you suppose I left it that way?”

The driver, small, wiry, and geek looking, responded with a question.

“Are you alone Sir?”

Cain nodded.

“Then...” Some blinding light seemed to illuminate the wiry kid’s brain, “Did you mean to leave it running, Sir?”

“Battery’s trying to get recycled. Have you got jumper cables?”

“Of course, Sir.” He moved around the Hummer and opened a side panel.

“Then I’ll need a jump later.” Cain went over to the Cherokee, unlocked the door, reached in and turned the key to the Lock position. The little V-8 dieselled a few coughs, puffed, and died.

The area around the fallen sycamore was suddenly filled with people. The geek was off, near where the roots of the great tree had been torn from the ground.

“Look,” he yelled in his announcer’s voice. “a phreatophyte.”

Everyone looked over to where he was pointing. The torn earth was blackdamp with moisture. A rivulet of water had formed a silvery pool in the depression.

“I knew it had to be for a sycamore to grow here,” the Hummer’s driver continued. “They have to have water all the time. Wow, this is a great place!”

Cain took a minute to collect his thoughts. He’d been in Arizona and on the job only three months when

the first body had been found. He was totally unaware. He didn't know the names of the trees, the types of vegetation, or the geology. He had been totally unprepared for the investigation. The anxious tourists who had discovered the body had destroyed every bit of evidence at the site, but... Not now! Not this time! Not again! Not at these sites! He wouldn't let it happen again. He had gone to the Forest Service, bought books, and he often spent his evenings in the county library. Now he knew the environment and its flora and fauna. He knew something about the geology. At least he had learned what to expect. Now this damned wiry little nerd with the deep voice had found something whose name he couldn't even pronounce. It meant a supply of water, he guessed.

The first body had also been discovered by tourists. Anger welled up in him. Everything about the way the body lay suggested foul play, yet there was no evidence because the tourists and the rescue people had obliterated the entire site. He wondered if any of these "rescuers" had been involved at the scene of the other deaths?

"Okay people. I'm Marshal Cain, Yavapai County. What was it about my radio message that you didn't copy?" He decided that he could find out more if he pretended to be on their side.

A young woman stepped away from the fallen limb. She was about 5'5", stocky build, brown hair dyed blond, but growing out. She was dressed in what looked like Viet Nam era surplus army fatigues, with a big EMT patch over the breast. She could have passed for a man, he decided. Her face was tanned. She was attractive, in a boyish sort of way.

"Marshal, we read you, only we aren't trained in the rules of evidence. Well, I took a course once, and..." She paused and looked around to see if others agreed with what she was saying, "well, Sir, none of us has that type of training and..." She looked around again for support, "And

how can you mark a crime scene if you don't touch anything?"

Cain nodded. These were amateurs, and he had sent a confusing message.

"Were any of you involved in the operation to retrieve," he used retrieved, rather than discover, "the bodies of either or both of the hikers found this spring?"

No one nodded or came forward.

"Is this the first rescue of a... Of probably a deceased person that you have been on?"

"No Sir," several voices answered.

The girl, the leader he decided, raised her hand. He nodded to her, not thinking that odd.

"We've all recovered accident victims. Wrecks... Sir, we can handle ourselves around deceased persons."

"Good. This is what I need."

After dividing the group and giving specific directions to the girl and one other, he led his team of four anxious voyeurs up the trail toward the water hole. His radio started making static again. He unholstered it as he walked.

"Marshal. I saw another trail. Leads away to the right from the water hole and winds through thick vegetation. I traced it all the way to a big crack in the cliff just below the Temple. It looks well-worn, narrow, used a lot, I'd say."

"Roger that," Cain said, trying to use correct form with all the others around. "Any site for a copter?"

"Nearest would be up at the Temple, on the trail I just told you about. I wouldn't advise that though. Could be hell getting a litter up that wall."

"Roger, and thanks Mann. How long are you going to be with me?"

"Oh, I'd say another... Well, long enough for you to get to the scene and... Both scenes, I guess. I'll be here awhile, Sir."

“Roger that. Thanks. It won’t be long now. I may need you to radio for the medical examiner. I have the feeling that we’re going to need at least two forensic teams up here, but it’s too early to tell.”

Cain had never been close to a coyote before. The animal trotted across the trail about fifteen feet ahead of him, as if doing a trot-by to get a glimpse of the intruders. If the creature was afraid of man, it didn’t show it. Once back in the brush, he heard it yip once. A signal, Cain decided.

He wasn’t sure if the others had seen it. They were walking quietly, matching his pace and being responsible. He was thankful for that.

The area on his side of the water hole was small, a partially cleared area with a twenty foot radius around a great oak... The tree resembled the massive Live Oaks of the Texas Hill Country, he decided. It stood alone near the center of the space. In Ireland it would have been a sacred Faerie Tree, but here, if it was sacred, it wasn’t respected. The great oak’s trunk was full of rusty nails and spikes where twisting strands of rope and wire stood out like scabs. The splintered remnants of signs, now unreadable, were still nailed in place. Cans and trash littered the ground around it. Cain stopped and perused the scene. He had thought he was entering a wild place deep in the inaccessible canyon. The water hole and clearing were well used. The ground around the tree seemed packed and abused by human feet.

The water hole was eroded into the slickrock below a sandstone ledge with a V-shaped cut through from which a trickle of water fell dancing into the pond below. Over eons, flood water rushing over the fall had eaten out a sandstone depression about fifty feet across and thirty feet long. He took it all in, getting the lay of the place, while his eyes were directed at the body floating near the falls end of the pool. Behind him, the others had stopped and were seeing what he saw: a dead girl, maybe in her twenties. It was hard to tell, as her body was beginning to bloat. She

was dressed in pajamas. He caught himself drifting from his responsibility.

“Everyone, stop right where you are! We treat this whole area as a crime scene. Careful, or we could destroy important evidence. Let’s back out in the same footprints if possible. Then sit tight, I’ll do the preliminary.” As he spoke, he took the radio out of its holster. “JB, we need a coroner. I think the closest is in Cottonwood. Can you get on it? Have him line up some forensic people. We need them here tonight! They’ll need lights. Would you ask Sedona to get a Cat up here to finish the road to the water hole?”

“Roger Marshal, I’ll do that. I know the medical examiner. Dead girl?”

“Yes, been gone maybe six hours, hard to tell.”

“Sorry Sir. Any report on the other sighting?”

“Not yet. I hope it’s someone’s laundry, but prepare Cottonwood and Prescott for the chance that we may need two forensic teams. Out.”

“Sir, Marshal...” It was the driver, “I’m a good photographer if you need to document this site? I’d need a camera.”

“Okay son, stand right there. Here,” he slid the pack down off his shoulders and turned it so that he could access the Nikon. “Take this... Do you know what it is?”

“Yes Sir!” A Nikon!”

“Okay, it’s loaded and set. Turn it on. Now give me a panorama of shots. Start at the far left. Know what I need?”

“Yes Sir. I know how to shoot a panorama. Please duck down when I tell you, okay Sir?”

The kid wasn’t so bad after all. First impressions... Oh well, when is a nerd not a nerd? “Then get me some clear shots of the ground all around. See if you can use the shadows to delineate the footprints and marks. Then... Well I’ll tell you then. There’s extra film on the strap.”

Cain stood, using the bill of his hat as a sighting tool. He started in the trees to the left and above the site

and scanned a line all the way around the clearing until he came to the trees immediately to his right. Then he picked a point about three yards lower on the left and scanned around again. He saw nothing unusual. On his third sweep, he caught sight of the tent. On the fourth, he saw the trail leading away to the right, the one the pilot has told him led to the Temple on the ridge. The next sweep was at about water level. On the left, in front of the tent and between the tent and the water, lay what seemed to be a sleeping bag---blankets anyway. As he scanned across the water, before coming to the body, he saw what seemed to be a rag or towel or something reflected in the water, like something on the bottom. He continued his sweep.”

“Duck, Sir! I mean please duck Sir! Please?”

Cain crouched to the ground, head down. He heard the click of the shutter and an “All clear!” from his photographer. As he started to rise, he saw something shiny in the dirt about three feet in front of him. He leaned forward, bracing his body with one hand on the earth while he reached out with the other. He dug the top of a bracelet out of the soft soil. It was a thick silver strip with a flat surface made for a name. He wiped it off. It was shiny and didn’t look like it had been exposed to the elements too long. On the top it had one word. “VAL,” On the back, in smaller script, “TO A GREAT GAL. As always, CAL.” The band was gone. He imagined that it was once held in place by a silver band that looked like a chain. He got a small evidence bag, dropped the strip in, labeled it and put it in his pack. Then, examining the ground in front of his feet, he saw several pop-tops from beer or pop cans. The ground was littered with bits of trash. It was stupid luck that had let him find the bracelet, not that it meant anything. He stepped carefully toward the water. A slight breeze was coming up canyon. The body was drifting away from his side, toward the place where a dribble of water fell from the cut in the red sandstone plate above.

Coyote tracks were everywhere in the mud at the water's edge.

Carefully, knowing that he could be destroying evidence if he stepped on it, he made his way around the water hole and then began climbing the smooth sandstone up to where the water dripped. From that location he could look directly down on the girl.

'She's floating on her back. Women do,' he thought. Her hair was dark brown, it would be dark, it's wet. Her feet seemed to drag through the long strands of algae growing from the bottom of the pond. Her arms and hands were floating. As he looked at her fingers, he could see something dark---maybe blood and skin---caught in her nails. Her face and arms were covered with bites. Cain guessed they were mosquito bites, but they looked more like meat that had been damaged by an octopus's suckers. Her eyes had been open. Now they were gone. She had been dead longer than he had thought.

From his vantage point on the lip of the plate, he once again used the brim of his hat as a tool to scan the area. Finished, he made his way carefully over the sandstone, coming down by the side of the tent. There were lots of old footprints in the earth and they were deeper in the soft mud at the water's edge. There was only one set of footprints that looked recent. He followed them back from the muddy waterline the way they had come. The barefoot tracks became faint, but he could follow them. They led to the sleeping bag, and from there on, they continued in line up to the tent. Carefully, he paralleled the tracks, coming in close to them in order to see the bag as it lay rumpled and obviously thrown on the ground. Something caught his eye. Bloodstains. It was blood! Not drops of blood, but blood and bits of something brown and beetle like. He could see wings and stick-like legs...and mashed parts stuck in the blood on the inside of the bag like they had been mashed there against the fabric. He carefully got hold of the bag's edge and pulled it open. With a buzzing noise, a waspish, beetle-like thing

flew up by his head and then off into the fading light of the afternoon. He dropped the bag and jumped back as fast as he could.

“What happened?”

The nerd’s voice helped him re-focus. He wasn’t making sense of what he had seen.

“Marshal, why did you jump like that?”

He looked over and saw his photographer, and behind him, the other ‘helpers’ on the trail where he had ordered them to stay. He had an audience.

“Bugs. The bag was full of some kind of bugs...” He thought about that. “I don’t think that’s unusual,” he yelled across the water, “there was blood in the sleeping bag.”

He had given an answer that almost made sense. The part that challenged him was that some of the bugs were mashed. What other animal was here? He looked at the ground expecting to see the tracks of a coyote, but the only recent tracks he saw were human. Hers.

“It’s growing dark. I don’t want to do anything else until the medical examiner gets here. I’ve confirmed that there is a victim. I have no idea how she died.”

The group in the trees were talking loudly, discussing what they would do. One of them called to him.

“Marshal, can we send someone to see what the guys that climbed the hill found?”

Cain was also concerned. It was stupid of him not to be prepared for the coming darkness. He looked at his watch, the sky, and then the ground. “About an hour of light left I think,” he yelled across the clearing. “I’m going up to the tent. Please, send someone back.” Then his fears about finding another trampled site rose, “Be damned careful that you don’t cross their line. Call-out to them. Get voice contact first.”

Augusta took her compass out again and sighting the rock pinnacle she had used for a bearing, set the needle on N and read the degrees. “About 121 still, we’re okay,” she yelled at Tom, motioning as she did for him to



come up to where she was. "I still don't see anything. We have maybe an hour until it's too dark to search. Tom, we must be careful of where we step and go! Why don't you move to my left about fifty feet or so. That way we can cover more ground."

Tom moved to his left as he continued the steep climb up the talus from the canyon's vertical side. Occasionally, there were cleared paths where small rock slides had cut through the vegetation. He took them when he found them and that made the climbing easier. Most of their way was gained by pushing through tough manzanita bushes and the leafy, soft looking plants called catclaw, which hooked their clothing and skin with their curved spines and caused pain even through jeans. His hands, and Augusta's he could see, were bleeding with little bubbles of blood where the claws had caught in their skin and been ripped out. He was trying to avoid a dense clump of catclaw ringed by manzanita when the smell hit him. He gagged and recoiled as if hit with something solid. Augusta saw him turn, trip and fall down the hill, and disappear into the brush. When she got to where she could see him, he was on his knees, puking.

"Tom? Tom! What in the blazes happened?"

He moaned, waving her away. She was almost to him when the smell hit her. She could have held her lunch if she hadn't seen him puking his guts out. The awful thing was that the smell was getting worse. It was all around them.

"We've got to get up above...above this stink," Augusta cried, gagging on the taste in her mouth which seemed oily, like the air she was breathing.

Tom grabbed her arm and they moved off to the left, following a ledge or animal trail. Then, as the air cleared, they began to climb again, this time together. They came around to the right on another shallow ledge, using their noses to guide them away from the horrible stench. Near the bare trunk of an ancient pinon, they stopped and got their senses. Below them was the body of

a man, resting on top of the bent boughs of leafy green catclaw bushes, as if they were a bed.

“Oh damn!” Augusta said with real anger. “We just destroyed this crime scene! Look, we’re standing on the place he fell from...”

“Oh bullshit Augusta!” Tom yelled back. “How do you fall from a place like this? It looks more like he fell from a plane or something.”

“Jeeze, you’re right. But hey, anyway, let’s get back a few yards and circle this place with tape like he said, Okay?”

“Yeah. Let’s make a big crime scene, I don’t want to be too close to that smell again.”

Augusta tied and twisted the yellow plastic tape around the vegetation as Tom went ahead of her unrolling it, circling the site. They made a wide swing around the dead man, sometimes avoiding the stench that the evening breeze was carrying downhill. The going was tough. Both were scratched and bleeding from the catclaw and the manzanita brush. It was difficult to keep a footing on the loose rocks of the slope. Small sweat bees hit and bit before they could swat them or drive them away. Both were tired, disgusted; dejected by what they had found.

“Marshal Cain should be here!” Augusta said, angry that they had been left alone to find the body.

“It’ll be dark in a few minutes. What can he do in the dark?”

“I mean this is his work, not ours.” Augusta complained. “I don’t give a fig what he does, as long as I’m out of here before dark! I sure as heck don’t want to be out here at night with a dead man... And who knows what else is lying around here!”

“Tie it off and let’s get back to the Hummer!” Tom was as scared and angry as Augusta, but he wouldn’t admit it.

“Did you hear that?” Augusta stopped suddenly, her boots slipping downhill before they grabbed. Tom almost ran into her. They both stood listening.

“Hey, you guys up there?” The voice came from below, not too far away.

“Hey, we’re here. We’re coming down.”

“Should I wait down here?”

“We’re coming down!”

They changed direction, heading to the right; to the place where the voice had come from.

“Sounds like Dave. I hope the marshal’s with him.” The voice connected Augusta with what she knew. The dead man seemed less of a presence.

“I can still taste that smell,” Tom spit into the brush, making as loud a sound as he could.

Augusta ran her tongue around her mouth. “It sticks to my teeth. Gad it’s awful!” She cleared her palate and made a spitting statement of her own.

## Chapter 9

Cain held the radio out away from his body and gave it a look that could melt plastic. The others began cursing and calling the Judge names.

CAIN WAS UNPREPARED FOR the challenges before him. Night was closing in and he had no time or equipment to protect the site. "Can't do anything," he mumbled. "That girl shouldn't be left floating there," but what could he do? Nothing! And what if they found another body? He knew he was in over his head, and felt weak and afraid.

He looked into the tent and made mental notes of what he saw. The inner net fly had been ripped open, the zipper still closed, as if someone had pushed through it in a hurry. The outer fly had been neatly rolled and tied open. Inside, on the canvas wall still lit by the last light, were five or six of the dark brown bugs like the one that had flown by him when he opened the bag. A big black fly, and a bee, were also trying desperately to get through the fabric. He saw a backpack, a pair of hiking boots with socks laid over them, a paperback, and some clothes neatly folded, underwear on top. Near the torn fabric of the net fly was an open plastic can with labeling and a picture that told him that it had once held Beef Jerky Strips. The round plastic snap-on cover of the container was lying on the far side of the tent. As he peered in, being careful not to disturb anything, he could see that the lid had holes punched in it. He made still another mental note, then carefully moved away.

If the tent held clues as to what had happened, he hadn't seen them... Except that the girl had ripped the net fly in her hurry to get out, or maybe not. Maybe the fly had been ripped at some other time. He remembered his first tent. He had unzipped it part way and it ripped along the zipper seam as he caught his shoulder on the way in. Well, maybe, but this fly was ripped all the way from closed. The edges looked as if the tears were fresh.

There was enough light for him to circle around the back of the tent and find the trail that led to the Temple. It was easy to find. The ground was packed and someone had, long ago it seemed, broken and cut the vegetation away from the path. There were signs of footprints in the soil, which seemed to date from some previous rainy period. It hadn't rained since April, so these prints were old. The ground showed so much traffic that it would be impossible to find her tracks, or any other recent tracks that might indicate that she wasn't alone when she died.

Cain gathered the rescue team members who were patiently waiting where he had stopped them on the trail. They made their way back down to the place where the Cat had stopped. The going was difficult; the dark night's descent didn't help. They picked up their pace and made it easily to the fallen sycamore and the vehicles.

"Marshal, thank God you're here! We found a guy up there. He's dead... Been dead awhile. The smell is awful!"

Cain sensed the girl's anxiety and stress. "I'm sorry you had to do that. It's never a thing anybody wants to do. Thank you and..." he paused looking around for the guy he had sent with Augusta. "Where's the guy who went with you?"

Augusta started walking toward the Hummer. "He's in the Hummer, Sir, just as we got back he punctured his leg really deep. We came around the roots sticking up over there. It was getting pretty dark. One of the sycamore's roots jabbed into his calf." She led Cain to the vehicle and stood aside as Cain looked in at Tom, lying across the crew cab's back seats. A heavy military field bandage was tied around the calf of his leg.

"Hey man, what do you think?" Cain wanted to seem casual, yet concerned.

"Damned root was splintered sharp as a knife. Got me in the calf. More of a puncture wound than a slice or cut."

"Is it draining? Did it bleed-out good enough?"

“No, Sir, that’s bad isn’t it? It oozed some but...”

“It will have to be cleaned out. Puncture wounds? Well you know, you’ve had first aid.”

“Yes Sir. Marshal, we found a guy... Been dead awhile. Looked as if he’d been dropped from the sky or something. He was laying on top of catclaw branches bent down under him in an unnatural way.”

Augusta interrupted them. “Sir, they want to ask you something.”

Cain moved back from where he was leaning into the Hummer and turned to face the group that had gone to the water hole with him. They stood together. Each focused upon him.

“Marshal, are you just going to leave her up there in the water? I mean, that’s horrible!”

Cain nodded, looked down and around. “It is horrible, but I can’t do anything until the medical examiner and forensic team get here. They should arrive soon. Maybe they can get her out tonight. I hope so.”

“Sir,” a thin man in his early twenties, a guy who had taken a back position when Cain instructed the group, was walking toward him as he spoke. “Can we leave?”

Cain’s first thought was that he didn’t want to be left alone, especially out here. Yet he had no hold on these people and there was really nothing they could do. “I think some of you should get Tom back so that he can get his leg treated. If necessary, all of you can go, of course... I’ll need you and Tom,” he said turning back to Augusta, “to put your observations and actions in writing as a part of the record here.” As he said that, he remembered his camera and the kid he had asked to document the site at the water hole. Looking around he couldn’t see the nerd.

“Hey, where’s the driver? The guy I lent my camera to...”

“My God!” One of the guys who had been at the water hole said with anguish. “Billy’s not here and he didn’t come back with us... And worse, we didn’t miss him! My God, we left him up there, I think!”

Cain took the lead as expected. "Okay, I need two people with flashlights who will go back to the water hole. Call out, what's his name?" Someone said, "Billy." "Save your lights when you can, and please don't trample evidence. Stay out of the clearing and away from the tent and trails. Who's going?"

Three of the five raised their hands. "Okay, you two. What time is it?" They looked at their watches. "I read 9:10. Be back here at 9:45... Well, no later than 10:00. If you're not back... Be back here ASAP, understand!"

Cain's thoughts turned to Tom. "Hey Tom, how's the leg?"

"Marshal, I think I'd better get it cleaned out. It feels funny... I don't like how it feels. It's getting hot!"

"Augusta, of the three of you, who can stay here and who needs to get back?"

Augusta shrugged. The guy who had asked if they could leave spoke up.

"Marshal, I go to work," he looked at his watch, "in exactly one hour and forty-five minutes. I might lose my job if I'm not there."

No one else expressed a need to get back. Augusta looked from one to the other and got agreement. "I think it's Tom and David, here. But how? How will they get back?"

Cain unholstered his radio and switched it to the local channel. "Sedona, this is Marshal Cain, do you read?"

There was an immediate response, first static and then the voice of a different Dispatcher. "Marshal, we've been trying to raise you... Were you out of range, in the dead spot, or off the air? Over."

"On VHF, but the plane's gone now. Now I'm back with you. Can you give me a status report on my requests?"

"Read you Sir. Our understanding is that you need the medical examiner and a forensic team. Cottonwood's on it, should have given you an ETA by now. I know there

was some delay, but I think they'll leave there by...maybe by 11:00 P.M., Sir. No later. Over."

Cain was visibly upset. The others felt his anger rise. "What? They haven't even left Cottonwood yet? Over." He knew the answer. This would give him time to think.

"Roger that, Sir. Actually, Sir, they'll leave from Prescott. ETA at your site, after midnight. Marshal, did you request two teams? Over."

"Sedona, I have two different crime scenes up here. Two deceased individuals. I requested two teams, lights and whatever it takes to secure these sites tonight. And I requested a Cat to open the trail so we can get a vehicle to the water hole. Over."

"Marshal, we tried, but there isn't a county Cat at this end of Yavapai. It would take five or more hours to load one and truck it to your location. Over."

"Sedona, there is a Cat sitting at the entrance to this trail... It's the same one they used to put this road in here. Find out who owns it... We can hot-wire it if necessary, but get an operator and get it rolling this way. Over."

"Please hold a moment, Marshal." The radio went dead.

Cain turned to the anxious young people around him. "It's going to be a long night. I thought we had help coming... Now it'll be the wee hours before it arrives." He thought about his battery and getting stuck with a defective vehicle, "Drive my Jeep back to town and get Tom some help!"

"It's just me and Tom going, then," the young guy said. "What needs to be transferred from your Jeep, Marshal?"

The radio squawked. "Marshal Cain, this is Oren Fulks, County Commissioner Fulks. I was in Sedona at a meeting and heard about your problem. I understand your situation, but there's a court order in effect regarding building any roads or lines in Prophet Canyon. We can't



approve your request for a caterpillar in that area. There is to be no access up Prophet Canyon until the court releases that order. Over.”

“Commissioner, you’re several days too late. So is the Court. Someone already built a road all the way back in here. I just drove up it, so did a rescue team. What I need is a Cat to finish about three hundred yards of the road from where I stand to the water hole where the dead girl is. Over.”

The Dispatcher’s voice again. “Please hold a few moments, Marshal.”

Cain turned his attention back to the Jeep. “There’s stuff in the back... That’s it, and I’ll need the firearms... Can’t let a vehicle go out of my control if it has firearms in it. I want the first aid kits and that blanket, we’ll need it.” It took about five minutes to transfer the equipment from the Jeep to the Hummer.

“Marshal?” It was the Commissioner’s voice again. “Talked to the Judge. He says wait till daylight and get aeriels. He thinks this is a gimmick to put an access line up the canyon. He doesn’t know you, and he said, and I quote, ‘Dollars to dimwits, I think he’s in the wrong canyon.’ That’s a final Officer! Over.”

Cain held the radio out away from his body and gave it a look that could melt plastic. The others began cursing and calling the Judge names.

“Look, Commissioner, I’ve... No, we’ve got two dead people up here. One’s in a water hole we can barely get to. The other’s up the side of the canyon in a place no one should go. I’m Marshal here, and I’m declaring an emergency. I get what I ask for or... Anyone from the Arizona Republic around? Over.”

“I read you Marshal. I’ll get on it. But don’t expect the Cat. Hell, there aren’t any Cats in this end of the county! The one you saw is gone. The Judge won’t be disturbed again, and I take my orders from him. I don’t see that I have any choice. Over.”

“Okay Commissioner, but if you don’t want the stink on you, you get me a team of qualified people up here fast. This is a formal request, and I have witnesses here. You get help up here! The delay is interfering with this investigation. Now let me talk to the dispatcher again. Over.”

“Marshal, I’ve been on the line. And ah, Sir,” he said in a low voice, almost a whisper, “You have one very angry and vindictive commissioner. He’s mad as hell and going somewhere fast. Hold onto your job...”

Cain understood the warning and didn’t care. “Sedona, I have a situation here where evidence is being lost as we speak. I’m sending an injured man and driver down with my vehicle. Have someone meet them at the emergency center west of town. The injury is not serious, but it does need immediate treatment. Sedona, secure my Jeep and get a new battery in it. Get the two men other transportation. Now, that’s not all! Get me a fully equipped Suburban up here that we can put bodies in as necessary. Get on that medical examiner and the forensic team from Prescott and tell them to get here! If they are delayed, get another team! It’s important! We need lights, chainsaws, gurneys, bags... You know what we need, I want it here by... ASAP. Over and out!”

“Roger all that, Sir. I’ve got people on the phones now. Out.”

They had to jump the Jeep and almost shorted out the Hummer doing it. Cain knew about grounding the negative jumper cable to the chassis first. These guys didn’t. The three of them watched the Jeep’s taillights disappear down the broken trail. By now it was so dark, that Cain couldn’t see the others. He turned on his flashlight and raised it so that the glow lit the area around the sycamore’s trunk. In the dim light he looked at his watch.

“They should be back with Billy. Hear anything?”

They strained to hear their friends returning. Dead silence. Not even the sound of a bird or the rustle of

boughs in the forest. It was so quiet that it felt like velvet was stuffed in their ears.

Then, way off, seemingly miles distant, they heard someone calling. "Billy? Billy?" then nothing.

"I think it came from up the trail by the water," Augusta whispered. "Did you hear it Dave? Marshal?"

Cain had caught just the faintest whisper of the call. "Could you tell if it was to the left or right of us?"

"Listen!" Dave ordered, turning toward the right, and cupping his palms out from his ears.

Cain strained to hear something. Nothing. Augusta nodded and placed her hands up to her ears, hopefully extending their gathering capabilities. "They're calling and Billy's answering from way off to the right. I think they've found him."

"They have, I can hear them exchanging shouts now. Hear them Marshal?"

Cain listened hard again. Nothing. "No. I guess my ears are gone."

They stood listening. Long minutes passed. Then Cain could hear voices, faint but becoming louder. "I hear them now," he said, relieved that Billy and the rescue party were safe.

"Want some coffee, guys?" Augusta made the offer as she shined her light on the Hummer and began walking to it. "I just remembered. We have hot coffee!"

They were sitting on the Hummer's hood when the rescue party came down to the sycamore blocking the trail.

"Marshal! Augusta? We need help getting him under the tree."

They jumped up, embarrassed that they didn't know there was a problem, and went quickly to help, flashlight beams crisscrossing and jumping up and down as they ran. Billy was being held between the two rescuers, his head forward, a white T-shirt tied around it, soaked through with blood that formed a vivid target of red.

"Billy!" Augusta shouted. "What happened to him?"

"I'm okay now," Billy said, sagging as the two men let him down so that he could crawl under the sycamore. "Marshal, I tried... I thought I had him, but there must have been more than one."

Cain winced. Had he screwed up? Should he have stayed at the water hole? What had Billy seen that he had missed? He thought 'Nerd,' but a flash of guilt went through him. You don't call a hurt kid a nerd... Why didn't Billy tell him that he saw someone?

"Billy, I have a lot of questions, but let's get you into the Hummer and take a look at that head."

The injury on the boy's head looked like it was caused by a rock. The skin, what Cain could see of it under the matted hair and oozing blood, looked shredded at the edges like the impact of something explosive. The wound was deep, probably to the bone. Cain gently turned Billy's head so that he could look into the boy's eyes. The right pupil looked fixed, even as Cain moved the light near his face and then away.

"Billy, we've got to assume you have a concussion. Listen. You must keep awake. Keep awake, okay Son!"

"Marshal, when you left the tent and went up toward that trail... Remember?"

"I remember. You were photographing..."

"I saw a guy in my camera viewfinder. I thought it was a reflection, I took the picture and looked up. I saw the back of someone disappear into the brush."

"A man?"

"I think so... Marshal, I started to yell over to you... I remember that. Then I came to in a gully where they found me. I was over on the other side of the canyon..."

"We found him about one hundred yards to the right... We wouldn't have if he hadn't answered our calls."

"I heard the guys calling me. It hurt like hell, but I yelled and they found me. Only Marshal..." he paused and grimaced with pain, "your Nikon. I think they took it. I think I had the picture... A Nikon! I really liked that camera."

Cain knew that they had to get Billy to the emergency room fast. Head injuries were sometimes slow to incapacitate. He feared that Billy's brain would start to swell and that the obvious concussion could kill the boy. Saving his life depended upon his quick actions now.

"Augusta, Dave, all four of you. You must get Billy to the hospital. I want two of you in the back with Billy. The Hummer's going to bounce around a lot. Your job is to cushion Billy, don't let his head jerk around or hit anything! Dave, you drive. Try to avoid the bad bumps. Augusta, monitor Billy's condition. Don't let him sleep. Help Dave move stuff out of the trail that the vehicle might bounce too violently over. Okay everyone? First we take the stuff out of the Hummer, leave me anything you have to eat. I'll radio ahead and get an escort for you and a team ready at the emergency center for Billy. Let's move!"

The lights of the Hummer flashed in the trees and were visible for several hundred yards before the darkness closed in on Cain. The sound of the vehicle's motor and the cracking and scrunching of branches and gravel faded slowly until even that sound was gone. The stars above the canyon's rim were so bright that as Cain's eyes adjusted, he could see by starlight. Shapes and forms stood out around him. He knew he had to wait for the teams from Cottonwood --- No! The dispatcher had said "Prescott." It was, he pushed his Indigo button, 10:45. He moved around the pile of equipment from the Hummer and looked for a place to sit. He thought of sitting on the ground, but knew that scorpions and other creatures love the night. He walked the length of the fallen sycamore's limb and sat on it, near the roots, where it was closest to the ground.

"Sedona Dispatch, this is Marshal Cain. Over"

There was a pause, static and then the dispatcher's voice.

"We're working on it, Marshal. Give us time. We're on your side. Over."

Cain felt a little embarrassed. He had been hard on them. "I know you are, Son. I'm calling for additional help. I have another emergency. This one is life-threatening!"

He explained Billy's situation and told them about the Hummer heading their way. "Sorry Son, but with the dead area and no airplane overhead, you're my contact with the world. Out."

"Marshal, this is one hell of a night. Who's with you? Over."

"Thanks for your sympathy. The dark, scorpions, and a few tarantulas. Billy was attacked by at least two persons unknown. I hope insects are all I have to worry about tonight. It would be nice to have better company... You'll let me know, won't you? Out."



## Chapter 10

We are a species that wanders blindly among other life forms and destroys them... We're like a virus or parasite that destroys.

CAIN HOLSTERED HIS RADIO, moved his butt so that his seat on the fallen sycamore was comfortable, and let his bare hand rest on the tree. In the darkness, he felt the smoothness of the great sycamore's trunk. The bark felt like peeling patches of veneer. He leaned forward and let his hand slide around the curve. He girthed the entity that now lay a casualty of brute power. Trees had souls too. He knew they did as certainly as he knew about stars and molecular structures. In the forests back home, he had learned that trees were tied to him by life. Life as a string of energy he could pull his thoughts along with and use to probe outside himself. By being with trees, he had learned to form inquiries of empathic thought that connected him with the impetus in all living things.

His hand cupped the wood and a cloud cleared away in his inner mind. The great sycamore wasn't dead yet, he felt it suffering the pain of unnatural death. It took a long time for trees to die, he learned that now. Trees didn't have a heart to stop or a brain that could be destroyed. This great tree was losing the force of Life that joined it to all life, and its pain was greater than the physical pain a dumb animal might feel. Animals felt pain caused by firing neurons, and maybe some higher animals, too few, knew the spiritual pain of losing connectedness.

He pulled his hand back, shocked. His conscious mind caught hold again and that part of him knew what had happened. He reached down and patted the great trunk, knowing that there was nothing he could do to ease the entity's death. He spoke softly, "We are a species that wanders blindly among other life forms and destroys them... We're like a virus or parasite that destroys. Forgive us Tree, we are just now evolving to a place where we can



understand what we really are, which is, I hope, more like you.”

Cain didn't feel comfortable sitting on the trunk of the dying tree. He slid off and walked away a few paces to where, in the almost total darkness, he couldn't see the tree. He imagined that his presence was an insult. They were bringing a chain saw, a big one, to cut through the trunk and open the road to the water hole.

Cain's conscious reality was that there was a girl up there, alone, floating in the water; dead. It wasn't right for her to be alone. Maybe her spirit... There were those who believed that a dead person's spirit stayed around the body for three days or maybe even longer. What if her spirit was up there, alone...and what about her family?

He felt for his pistol, pulled it, checked it in the starlight, holding it up so that the casing's butts glistened brassily in the chambers. He snapped the weapon closed, fingered the trigger, thumbed the hammer, and checked the safety. It fit tightly in the leather, against his hip. The weight of it was supposed to comfort...yet handling the 357 gave him only a sense of brute force. He had hoped for relief from his fears, but...

He could see the dark mound of gear where they had stacked it. His shotgun was locked in the Hummer's compartment. He wanted it now. How foolish of him not to have kept it. He hoped Billy's head wound and concussion weren't life threatening. The Hummer should be near the cul-de-sac of the subdivision now, perhaps meeting the escort he had radioed for; demanded. He walked around the pile of gear and tugged a first aid kit and backpack from it, grabbed another flashlight, and found the thermos from which Augusta had poured hot coffee. It seemed hours ago. He pulled a page from his pad and wrote a note for the medical examiner, *if* he or she even came tonight. Then, ducking under the sycamore's trunk, he started up the trail. He held his flashlight, turned it on once, and decided that the circle of light separated him from the things around him. He let his eyes adjust to the

starlight again, moving as fast as the darkness would let him.

Cain slammed his shin into a branch jammed across the cut where the Cat had stopped. He cursed, leaned over and felt the loose, scraped skin and oozing wound. He paused only long enough to realize that the pain would continue whether he stopped or kept going, and forced himself to go on. He ducked and wove his way through the overhanging brush, imagining that he had gone further than he had. It was almost totally dark in the forest. He used his flashlight several times when he thought he had come to a dead end.

Wondering how a job as a county marshal had led him to this place, he made his way up the trail. He thought he was making fair time. He could go no faster. Weary, he stopped and checked the time. Fifteen minutes had passed. While he rested, he got his handkerchief out and wiped the sweat from his eyes. He breathed an audible sigh, and fought away reflections of the claustrophobic nightmare he was living. His heart was pounding so hard that the blood pulsed in his ears making musical sounds... No, there was music! A woman's sweet, high voice! The realization sent cold shivers through him. He felt terror; held his breath. His heart constricted in his chest as if even the noise of its beating would give his presence away.

He crouched down, now a shapeless thing hidden in the thickets, a cowering creature with jellied bowels. The music came from ahead. He imagined the dead girl's ghost? His leg muscles began to quiver. His body shook. His breathing became labored, mixed with involuntary gasps.

"Stupid thought! I will not fear! Damn weakness!" he softly cursed himself, a part of him using anger as a pry to open a way back to control. The survival power within him made his fear subside and turned the power of terror into a hunter's cunning. He tapped into the memory of the lifesaving skills he had learned hunting men---men who

were trying to kill him. His breathing regulated, his mind cleared.

Cain stood, muscles coming under his control as he gained energy and became a powerful creature of the night, a stalker, able to use guile and primeval animal senses to probe the darkness. With the adrenaline surge of anger, he wrapped tight, ready to cut into any thing that opposed him.

By starlight, he saw the clearing ahead of him. He moved silently off the trail, staying hidden in the brush. He could see the shimmering stars reflected by the water. The shadow of the girl was floating as if in ethereal space.

He knew the singing now, his senses had been tuned to it; focused upon the music beacon pulling him forward. He could see the singer's form seeming to float on the sandstone ledge above the water. He saw what he conceived to be long hair and filmy clothing streaming in currents around her, yet the air was still, not even a breath of a breeze crossed the hot canyon.

If the woman knew he was there, she gave no clue. She sang a sweet song without words, her voice a musical instrument played with eerie perfection. As he moved around the edge of the clearing, he focused upon her. She was turning in a circle as she sang, her hair and clothing thrown out in waving streamers by centrifugal magic.

The woman had long black hair. Her features were in shadows and then starlit as she turned. They seemed sharp and then smooth. Her breasts were full, and the loose cloth pushed against them and then hung out away as she spun the dance. She was bending back slightly from the waist. Balancing on the sandstone plate, a wraith, the lady riding the Rolls Royce, the nymph near the water; awesome in the starlight.

At first her beauty failed to penetrate the predator's animation that controlled him. He saw her through eyes geared to an assault mechanism that was bound to powers focused upon survival. He crouched and moved forward across the open space, silent, planning a route up

the sandstone which would let him take her down and render her harmless... Harmless? The inkling of it broke through his primeval rage. Delicate! A women. No threat. A singing, twisting, sexual rhapsody in starlight.

She stopped dancing. Her voice changed from instrument to shrill probes.

“You came for her?”

She stood facing him, hands on hips, face in shadow. He let the tenseness go, and felt power draining from his body. His mind half way between a weapon and reason. He stared, not able to answer.

“You’re a cop. Why do you leave her here? Don’t you understand she’s not to be alone?” She sat, grabbing her legs and placing her chin on her knees. It was still too dark to see her features clearly. She smelled of incense; musk. Her hair was tangled, not shiny and groomed. Her feet were wrapped in leather; moccasins.

“Do you know her?”

She turned her face up toward him, the starlight revealing sharp features; dark circles were all that he could see of her eyes.

“No. I found her here, like this,” an arm came loose and waved toward the body, “alone and... No one should ever be alone like that.”

“Who are you?” Cain asked. She was sobbing. He imagined that he could see her tears.

“Raven.”

He sensed her grief, but more, her wildness. There was something eccentric in her voice, something about her.

“Are you from the Temple up there on the ridge?”

“No!” She snarled it at him, forcing him back.

“Then where?”

She snarled at him again, “I have my place, a place where I live, it’s really none of your business!”

Now he sensed her craziness, a danger about her.

“It is my business, that’s why I’m here. Ma’am, please come with me.”

He expected her to snarl obscenities at him or try to run. She remained quiet, got to her feet, and went the way he motioned, stepping softly and surely down the sandstone. On the ground she stopped and stood looking at the floating body.

“Raven, what’s your full name? Do you have any identification?”

“Raven.” My name is Raven! Only Raven, and no I don’t! Why would I, out here?”

“No driver’s license? Nothing?”

“No! Why would I need it here?”

Cain knew his questions weren’t getting him the information he wanted. She kept saying “out here.”

“You live out here?”

“Yes, now.”

“Where?”

“I have my place, up over there,” She pointed up canyon toward Tarantula Pass, “I live with the spirits and remains of the Ancient Ones, Sinauga. I was once their mother too. I live with synchronicity, here in this land...all lands, I am the Earth. I am the Mother.” She turned away from the water hole and stepped toward him. “There was harmony, and then this! I’m needed to make it right.”

Cain cleared his head. She was crazy. “You say you didn’t know her. Do you know where she’s from? Anything about her would be helpful...finding her family.”

“She comes here from the Temple I think, I’m not sure, but I’ve seen her here before. Lots of them come here to swim. She came here to camp, I think... Look over there, that’s a tent.”

“Have you seen anyone else here tonight?”

“No, I didn’t see them... I know someone, at least one person was here. I heard him moving up the trail when I came down to bathe.”

“No idea who?”

“Maybe it was the guy she came here with before, if she’s who I think she is. Her face...the light, I really think it’s her.”

“Can you describe him?”

“Kinda... Not too tall, scrawny guy. They don't wear suits... I've seen him in town I think. Once with her at Safeway. He... That's all I know.” She stopped talking as he turned on the flashlight, pointing it at the ground.

“Don't do that!” Her voice was almost a screech.

He switched off the light. “What's the matter?”

“It's not natural. What's your sign?”

Cain answered before he thought about the question. “Aries, on the cusp, I think?”

“Of course! Why can't you take her out of the water?”

“I'd like to...” She was looking away to the east, her face seemed to luminesce.

“Half a moon tonight, the sky's beginning to glow.” She stood gazing at the horizon, the glow giving him the first real look at her sharp features.

“The moon will help,” He said, thinking of the work the team would have to do. “This place must be treated as a crime scene in case there was foul play and she...she didn't drown or die on her own. There's a team due here soon. Medical people and investigators. Until they come, everything remains untouched.”

“She didn't die by accident!” Raven spoke with resigned authority.

“How do you know?”

She sniffed the air, raising her hands as if gathering radiation. “I sensed the horror even before I saw her there in the water. He sensed her terror. Can't you feel it? It's still floating around here... It's everywhere. She died horribly! Smell that?” she said raising her head, sniffing. “It's her fear. It stays here for a long time.”

She moved around before him, and in the starlight, Cain could see the fullness of her body through her thin garments; the dark circles of her nipples; the darker gradation below her waist. She wore only the thin cotton veils of lacy cloth, and the incense or perfume he had smelled before. Her musk was like old cloth; the smell that

came from round-topped trunks in old attics. It wasn't sexual or sensual. It was dry without the phenotypes necessary for life.

"I need to go!"

"I'm sorry, but you must stay here with me... At least until the team gets here." He lied, they would have to treat her as a material witness... At least until more questions were answered.

She tensed and turned toward him. "But you don't understand, the moon... I can't be out in the light... It's coming up, I gotta go... Now!"

"You must stay here with me. It won't take long once they get here."

She turned away, looking at the forest wall. Then she turned back toward Cain.

"Well then Damien, if you say it won't take long... May I see your flashlight?" She reached out, and he put it in her hand.

"My name's not..." he started to say, when she threw the flashlight into the brush. He heard it land and marked the place the sound came from, afraid to take his eyes off of it for fear of losing the flashlight. He moved quickly to recover it, even as he remembered that he had the other in his pack. He stopped and turned back toward her. She was gone! A chilling jolt of anxiety shot up his spine, constricting his neck muscles, giving him a blinding headache.

Cain cradled his head in his hands, feeling a tingling in the back of his neck as constricted vessels slowed the flow of blood to his brain. The headache peaked and began to pass, he was dizzy and scared. He cowered in the dark, in the shadows of the forest, out of the starlight, barely able to see the ground he knelt upon. She had tricked him! He should have known. He got back on his feet, carefully. His head throbbed and the back of his head and neck tingled and felt hot. He was sick. Not nauseated, but sick as if a tar-like corruption was oozing through his body.

He thought he could find the flashlight the woman who called herself Raven had thrown into the brush. He began to step carefully in that direction, pulling his pack around as he walked, fishing around in it until he found the flashlight he had taken from the pile of gear near the fallen sycamore. He found the light and held it, waiting to turn it on until he was near where he thought the flashlight had landed. He moved slowly. As he spread the branches of a waxy-leafed manzanita bush, he heard a sharp crack, breaking brush, off to his right. Then more sounds of brush being broken and pushed through. His senses, still the hunter's, tuned to the night.

Something, no, several things were coming through the thick brush, not caring that they made noise. Not caring? Men would travel that way, he thought, as he moved quickly into the manzanita and crouched. He heard grunts just as he saw a dark shadow exit the forest and move into the clearing, then another, and behind, still others.

His mind raced to identify the almost indistinguishable shapes and the strange noises. Not dogs, pigs! Peccaries. Javelina. He had heard stories of how murderous they were in packs. He fumbled his pistol out and remained crouched. The first one came out of the shadows and into the light of the half moon which had just cleared the canyon rim. He could see its bristles standing on its arched back and the pig shape of its head. It was large, not as big as a German Shepherd, big though, twenty-four inches at the top of its arched back, he estimated.

The lead javelina stopped and turned toward him. The pack stopped behind it, all looking his way. Cain caught the strong, sour smell of them. He held his breath and waited, pistol ready. The lead javelina, a sow, he could see teats hanging, floppy bags under her belly, knew he was there. She sensed danger. When nothing moved, or his scent was lost, she gave several grunts and moved toward him. She stood her ground again, testing the air,



then, as if satisfied that there was no threat, she moved away toward the water. The others followed her, but not before each in turn walked toward him and sniffed the air. There were five, two as large as the lead sow, two smaller,

The javelina pack lined up along the water's edge, moved forward and dropped to their knees. They pushed the water around with their snouts, and drank. Cain stood and worked his way back into the brush, looking for a tree he could climb. It was too dark inside the forest for him to see anything, he felt around and looked up, hoping to see a tall tree's canopy against the sky. Nothing!

The pig-like creatures rolled and scooted through the mud at the water's edge. They grunted and seemed to be playing. Cain stood in the darkness watching them, urging them to leave. The sow was up and grunting. All of the javelina were on their feet, looking toward the trail that led back down the canyon to the fallen sycamore. The sow came around behind the rest and stopped, waiting, sniffing. Then she grunt-squealed, put her snout near the ground and came trotting his way.

The pack came to the edge of the forest where the sow found a path through the brush. She was passing within twenty feet of Cain, moving at a fast trot, leading the others. The last javelina, one as big as the sow, must have caught Cain's scent. Instead of following the sow, it swerved to the right and came at him. It was bucking brush and coming his way. Within a heartbeat, it was so close that its strong pungent stink filled the forest around him. He checked the safety and pulled the hammer back. The beast was after him. It began to whine and grunt as it moved. It stopped, maybe ten feet in front of him, somewhere under the boughs of the manzanita and catclaw. He didn't know where to point the pistol. It was too dark for him to aim. The silence and the creature's stench were all Cain had to shoot at. He stared into the dark, seeing shadows that weren't visible.

The sow grunt-squealed, off in the darkness. The beast near him was absolutely quiet; listening. Cain

pushed back against the boughs of a juniper, trying to hide; coolly pointing the gun in the direction from which he imagined the attack would come. Suddenly, the bough against his back snapped with a crack like a bow's string. The javelina gave a loud grunt and plunged forward at Cain, brushing the Marshal's leg so hard with its shoulder that Cain, already off balance from the collapsing bough, fell sideways into the manzanita.

The stinking creature, still invisible in the black night, stopped again, assessing the contact it had made. The sow squeal-grunted a call. The javelina grunted and, to Cain's relief, went bashing away toward the sow. He lay, legs intertwined with smooth-bark manzanita limbs, clothing hooked by jabbing spears. He was trapped and only able to move his left hand, head and neck. He found the ground with his hand and pushed himself up, feeling the tugging branches ease back. He pulled a leg free, got it under him and supported his weight while he got his other foot untangled. When he had both feet back on the ground, and as he pried the last branches from his clothing, he stood, hunched over, trying to breathe. The javelina were gone. He could have been dinner, he had been totally helpless. He shivered, as if the night was cold.

He carefully picked his way back to the edge of the clearing. The girl's body had floated nearer to his side of the pond. The moon, although only half, lit the clearing and water hole in an eerie way. It seemed surreal... Then he remembered that the javelina pack had left their play because of something they had seen or heard coming up the trail. He moved back into the shadows, and stood. Something burned like fire across his calf. He looked down and saw his pant leg torn open. He bent and felt his leg; there was blood, a sticky flow that went down into the top of his boot. He turned his knee in, and bent around his leg so that he could see his calf. Too dark! He took the flashlight from his belt and snapped it on. In the circle of light he saw a clean cut which ran from his shin to the side of his calf muscle. It looked like a knife cut. He spread the

meat gently, fresh blood oozed out of the cut and ran down his leg. It wasn't deep, not crippling. The javelina's tusk! The thing had cut him!

'Let it bleed out,' he thought. Wash out the javelina's filth. He'd have to doctor it soon. He needed a place to sit down.

To his left, close, a single high cry, a long pure note. 'Raven?' he thought. Then, from the forest, all around him, the quiet darkness was filled with yipping and then the unmistakable yodeling cries of coyotes. Far away, from somewhere up canyon, he thought he did hear Raven, the music as chilling as that of the animals around him.

As Cain watched, the coyotes came out of the darkness and began to circle around each other in the moonlight. Some lay submissively on their backs, crying tractably while others stood over them and seemed to nip or lick at their snouts. A large coyote moved about, first seeming to stand guard and then, having caught the scent of the girl or having caught sight of her, stopped, planted its feet and stiffened. Its back arched as it studied the floating body. The large male, Cain thought it must be a male, began to back away. In an instant the others sensed his fear. The pack was on its feet, all staring out at the dead girl in the water, sniffing, and slowly backing from the water's edge. They turned as one, and were gone.

"What the hell else," Cain complained as he set a course for the rocks. His leg didn't hurt. Watching the coyotes had been restful. He eyed the clearing and tried to analyze everything in the moonlit space. The shadow cast by the great oak was the only part of his world he couldn't see to study. At the edge of the shadow, something moved. "Shit!" he exclaimed, letting the sound out to fill the circle of moonlit clearing. He strained to look into the tree's shadow. Nothing. He had seen something move. Maybe not, he couldn't trust his senses.

He found a place where the sandstone formed a step, a seat. He slid the pack off and let it fall to the side

as he sat down and felt comfort. Then he rummaged in his pack and got the first aid kit out. Inside, he found the tube of anti-bacterial medicine and squeezed a glob of the gelatinous stuff onto his leg above the cut. He licked his index finger, wiped it off against his sock, and spread the goo over the wound. Then, as a precaution, he pulled up the other cuff and spread a glob over the scraped and bruised injury there. He re-packed the kit and sat, waiting. Where were they?

He felt a chill, and noted that a breeze was toying with the surface of the water. It was warm and the rock gave off heat. His shirt was damp, the perspiration drying slowly as he sat. He wiggled inside the shirt, getting it unstuck from his skin. The sound of water dripping into the water hole was relaxing. Nothing had happened, really, he had just witnessed the natural comings and goings of critters who lived in this remote canyon. Except for --- Damn her! The woman knew more than she said. Raven? What kind of name is that? She said she lived up canyon. She smelled, he was trained to observe, like something...what was it? Maybe it was a clue? Why would she smell that way?

The moon was setting behind the canyon's far rim. The stars were becoming visible again. He awoke, looking at the top of Scorpio, and Orion's belt, maybe, he wasn't sure. Then he felt the hardness of the rock against his back and remembered where he was. He pushed the button on his watch. 3:10. He was wide awake now, angry. Where were they? He had been told that the county wasn't really prepared to react to these types of emergencies, but this---the other body, hell, he hadn't even been to that scene. He thought of starting back, but remembered the girl who had once been. He knew the body was starting to decompose, to bloat. He imagined the smell and gingerly tested the air to see if it was there.

'When they get here, I'm turning this mess over to them. I'm going back down,' he thought. But he had to see

the other site. He had to compare it to the sites where the two hikers had been found. He had to get there and make certain that no one destroyed the evidence.

There was a glow in the eastern sky when he heard the grating whine of a chainsaw. He imagined that he could see the sycamore being cut out of the way. Then he heard the sound of vehicles, something diesel, which seemed to blast through the vegetation. They were coming up the trail, opening it. Other engine sounds told him vehicles were following the diesel. It wasn't a Cat, but it was big and capable of pushing trees; he could hear them groan and then crash to the ground.

A skunk went jerkily, hurriedly from the shadow of the great oak and into the forest. He thought he could feel the ground shake. Soon headlights were casting weird shadows through the trees. He stood, brushed his butt off, pulled his pack on, and walked toward the trail's entrance into the clearing. A military six-by-six, pushing a wide blade surrounded by a heavy pipe frame, appeared, dragging broken vegetation at its sides and knocking the last few trees and bushes out of its path. The noise was almost unbearable. The driver gave him a salute and pulled the vehicle off to the left. In moments the Hummer and two Suburbans, a new green 2500 and an old white, with vinyl top, stopped in the newly opened path. Doors flew open, people assembled, and he was facing ten or twelve men, Augusta and two other women. An older man came forward. Cain thought he had seen him in Prescott.

"Fielder. Medical Examiner," he announced and stuck his hand out. Cain shook hands with him, without giving his name.

"You're Marshal Cain!" Cain nodded.

"Looks like you've had a long night, Marshal," Fielder said, looking over Cain's clothing.

"Too long Sir," he was going to explode, got control, and said in a quiet voice, "I'm glad you're here.

You'll be in charge now... I'm turning this site over to you. Nothing's been touched."

"Marshal, I'm not responsible for the delay. We never had radio contact with you... Why?"

"They say it's a dead spot. I relayed through a pilot and through Sedona. Evidently we can't get in or out of here to Cottonwood or Prescott, nothing west."

"By the time Prescott took it seriously...admitted it was our jurisdiction...the State Patrol got things patched through. We've had these problems before..." He let his voice fade off, not wanting to vent his frustration or go into detail.

"You had to come from Prescott? That's what took all night?" His frustration was showing.

"I'm sorry Marshal, the girl? Augusta filled me in. I can't imagine what it was like being up here alone... What happened to your leg?" Cain looked down, the lower pant leg was black with dried blood, the ripped fabric was hanging out in a V.

"Javelina. I was attacked. Ripped me, but not too deep."

"Oh my God!" he turned and searched the group until he saw the man he was looking for.

"Fred, come over here and look at the marshal's leg. He got sliced by a tusk!"

A man about the same age as the examiner broke from another conversation and came over to them.

"What did you say Doc? A tusk? Javelina?" He looked at Cain, then at Cain's leg. "How bad?"

Cain hunched his shoulders and smiled, "Not bad Doc. He sliced me, but not deep. I put some anti-bacterial stuff on it."

"Not enough!" the Doctor said as he bent and eyed the wound through Cain's ripped pant leg. "Only thing worse than a javelina bite is a human bite. I couldn't treat it here very well. Best you get back and have it cleaned properly and get some antibiotics. Looks like several hours ago?"

“Three hours... It bled some.”

“I can see that, but... Get over to the Hummer and I’ll clean and bandage it.” He paused, thinking. “Only one slice? Did you kill it?”

“No, it hit me and stopped, then it went away. It was so dark I don’t think he knew what I was or...”

“You’re lucky Marshal. One tiny bit further, and he would have hooked your calf muscle and ripped it out! Had he come back, you wouldn’t be here. They’re never alone. You’d of had a whole pack on you in seconds.”

Cain shivered and felt weak again. The sow... Maybe the darkness had saved him.

As he sat in the Hummer, his leg up on the seat so that the doctor, could work on it, he gave the medical examiner his report. As he talked, he left out the part about Raven, but mentioned that there had been other people at the scene. The two men who hit Billy and dragged him away, and someone else. He said he sensed that there was someone else here when he came back. He mentioned the sleeping bag, the bloody stains and bug parts, and his quick perusal of the tent.

“Fielder, I don’t envy your team removing the girl from the water. She’s been in there a long time now. Every sense I have tells me she didn’t die accidentally... Oh, and she’s covered with bites... Looked to me like the sucker marks an octopus leaves... I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Okay Marshal, we’ve got it from here. Keep your radio ready in case I have a question. Go back now and get taken care of... Get some rest, and thanks.”

“Doctor,” he reached over and gripped the medical examiner’s arm, “It’s getting light now. I want to see the other site... I’ll need some of your people. I want to make damn certain that site isn’t disturbed... Do you know about the other sites... The two people this spring?”

Fielder nodded. “They were pretty messed up.”

“I think we have a murder up there, one here and one up there. I’m stopping on the way out to see.”

“Cain, it will be afternoon before we finish... We should get both bodies out before noon. We’ll get them to town to the funeral home and then move them to Prescott. Tell my people what you want done back at the other site. I can’t break the forensic team up, but they can convey the message when the team finishes here.”

Cain looked around, “Who’s going with me?”

Augusta stepped forward, “Marshal, we’ll have to have the guys move the Suburbans to get out.”

Cain changed gears... “Augusta, how is Billy? What about Tom?”

“Billy’s in intensive care. They’ve given him drugs or something, to stop brain swelling. He has a fractured skull... Doctor said he was hit with the intent to kill. He should be all right... It may take a long time and therapy for him to recover. They reamed-out Tom’s wound. Good thing, some root or bark or something was still in there. He left the hospital when I did. I took him home. Oh and Sir,” she was reaching into her jeans pocket. She pulled out his keys. “I couldn’t get your Jeep started, and I forgot to turn in the keys.” She handed them to him, smiling sheepishly. “They were supposed to put a new battery in, right?”

Fielder stood waiting for Cain to leave. “Hey fellow? What’s your name? Dan? Okay, why don’t you go with Cain. Someone else can drive if needed.”

A man about thirty came forward. He had a bag slung by a long strap over his shoulder, and a stenographer’s pad in his hand. “Okay, Doctor. I can record things at the other site.” He looked around at the others as if he were waiting for someone to object. Then he walked slowly around and got into the other side of the Hummer. The sun was already generating heat. It was almost 7:00.

Cain’s leg was throbbing. He felt dizzy and weak as they completed the climb up to the orange-yellow crime scene tape Augusta and Tom had put in place the day



before. Augusta saw that he was having trouble and moved to his side to help.

"Here Marshal... One arm over my shoulder, that's it. Looks like you've about had it."

"Thanks." His leg was throbbing, not the one with the tusk slash, but the one with the bruise and abrasion on the shin. He looked back to see what the guy named Dan was doing. He was standing, out of breath, looking at the ground.

"It's about here where the stench really got to us... Right up there about three yards." She pointed with her chin, and helped him up to another flat place on the slope.

"Be the other way, this time of day." He fought for air. It was so hot and... "The air rises as it heats, settles into the valleys as it cools."

Dan was following, not too close; too obvious in keeping his distance.

His actions irritated Cain. "Dan, circle around to the left and climb up ahead of us! Augusta, where are we in regard to the body?"

She relaxed her grip on his hand and let him remove his arm from around her shoulders,

"See that tall dead pinon? Big trunk, no bark?" She looked to see if he saw it, "If he fell, the flat place to the right of the tree, that's where he fell from."

"I can get there on my own, thanks for the lift. I felt washed out, but I'm okay now."

Dan climbed ahead of them, moving further to the left than Cain wanted.

"Dan," Cain yelled, "Not so far left! Aim for that big dead pinon."

Another fifty feet and Augusta reached back and gave him a hand up the last part of the steep slope. His hand had bright little droplets of blood across it from the catclaw. There were tiny spines broken off in his skin.

He caught his breath as they moved across the narrow step until they came to the dead pinon, passed around it and stopped.

Augusta was pointing, and tugging at his sleeve. He looked where she was pointing. Below, and a little to the left, partially hidden by manzanita and a large clump of catclaw, he could see patches of cloth that looked as though someone had dumped their trash on the hillside.

“My God, Marshal, the body... It’s been torn apart!”

Augusta’s voice cut through him... That was the body? He could see it now, only it didn’t resemble a body...

“Javelina?”

“I’ll have to get closer to see...” Augusta amazed him. She was actually planning to get closer to the mess down there.

“No. I know that smell. It’s javelina... Augusta, it doesn’t look like there’s enough left to...” The breeze twisted around, the smell of the decaying body hit them and they both gagged as they tried to twist away from it. As he bent over to get his head below the stench, Cain spotted something in the catclaw. His eyes watered; he couldn’t make it out.

“Marshal, I can’t stand this!” Augusta was trying not to breathe, but after gagging, took in a great gulp of poisoned air.

The breeze changed direction and the air cleared. They grabbed lungs full of clean air, as they tried to expel the noxious fumes. Cain wiped his eyes and looked closely at the thing he had seen caught in the catclaw.

“His wallet... Look, directly below me! I think it’s a wallet, it’s leather...”

Augusta grabbed a big gulp of air and like a diver went down the steep slope, grabbed the wallet from the spines of the catclaw, and was back at Cain’s side. “It’s been torn, some,” she said angrily, as she handed it to Cain.

Cain held the wallet carefully by a corner and let it flop open. “Benjamin J. Carrigan... Now we know who, but with the disruption of this site, we may never know why.”

Augusta coughed the bad air from her lungs and leaned forward, hands on knees. "Well look at this, Marshal!"

Cain had fished an evidence bag from his pack, and was trying to get the wallet inside without touching it.

"Look Marshal, doesn't this look like someone was sweeping up here?" She pointed to the earth in the center of the narrow step they were on.

Cain focused in on the sign and carefully stepped closer to Augusta, placing his feet on rocky areas, studying the open places where rain had deposited layers of sediment. Each patch he saw looked as though it had been swept with a broom or bough.

"Damn you're good. Someone up here tried to sweep the sign away." He bent and looked sideways at one of the flat places. "Look here! A footprint heading toward the tree."

Augusta moved around the tree looking for more prints. There were two depressions. "Marshal, looks like two heel prints here facing the tree... Why would they be facing the tree?"

Cain came over and looked at the depressions. "Someone stood right here facing into the tree. Look at these scuff marks; some clear heel depressions. Why?" He started examining the ancient, sun-browned trunk. "Signs of something tied here... No, maybe not tied, but," he stood up facing the tree and reached out, "about the right height for a person to hug the tree. Anything on the back side? Anything you can see from there, about this high?" He held his hand at chin level.

"Marshal, there is... Someone scratched something... Look!"

Cain came around the tree, stepping on rocks. She was pointing at something that looked to him like worm works. No, there were definitely letters scratched into the soft patina. "MDR," he read aloud.

"That's what I'd say too... MDR. Someone's initials maybe?"

“Yes, but our guy’s initials should be BJC... Maybe it’s a statement...”

Augusta looked at him and screwed her face into a question. “A statement?”

“It’s a long shot, maybe he wanted us to know... Say it fast. MDR... Murder.”

They heard a noise above them. Looking up they saw Dan balancing on the talus, writing diligently in his notebook.

They spent another fifteen minutes perusing the crime scene. On the way back to the Hummer, Cain organized his thoughts and observations. At the Hummer, he sat on a two-foot section of newly sawn sycamore trunk and wrote a note to Fielder and the forensic team. That job completed, he spoke for the first time since seeing the scrapings on the tree.

“You going back with me Augusta?”

Augusta nodded. “With your leg the way it is, I can drive. You know, I haven’t taken a break since yesterday either.”

Cain nodded and turned to Dan. “Dan, I’m going to give you this note for Doctor Fielder. Do you mind walking back up there? I’ve done it twice, it’s not far.”

“Sure Marshal, I want to go back and see what they found there. I’ll take the note. Don’t worry, it will be safe with me.”

Cain started toward the Hummer, then remembered. “Oh, Dan! Here, take this wallet to Fielder! Make sure the bag stays closed, it’s evidence.”



## Chapter 11

People had died! Whoever played this 'stop GD game,' played dirty; for keeps. I had a creepy feeling like I was walking into a beast's lair.

I LEFT CONNELLY AT the Library in the outer foyer where I had met him almost two hours before. I offered to drive him home. He refused. I got the feeling that he didn't want me to know where he lived. I didn't want to know, so I drove away, focusing on the excuses to Mom I had to write, and wondering if Landsman had called and left the contact names for the architectural firms. I didn't want to think of what the old man had told me. I knew the generations of which he spoke, and I knew that some had not survived as human beings. If I wanted to, I could write a list of my own. People I had dealings with that were damaged, 'Only I Count' kids inside. Sam Prader's name would top my list...and he was my mentor. Up until now, I hadn't questioned patterning myself after him.

The motel guy had been right on. It was almost 1:00 and the heat was blasting against me, drying, not cooling my skin. The faster I drove, the hotter I got. So much for summer in the desert.

It looked like Mom had written continuously since last night. Well, she had nothing better to do. At least she had someone to talk to, even if I seldom read her diatribes. I got a message written, avoiding the Pager/Chat option. I snuck a look at her last message. I wanted to make certain that she was all right. I may be a failure as a Son, but I really do care. It was more of the same. I was rotten, thoughtless and cruel. I probably was with a woman, how I wished, and I didn't eat right. It was comforting knowing that she was okay. I got off line and reconnected the phone. When I plugged it back in, the red button lit. I dialed 'O,' and the voice at the desk, not my bandanna buddy, said I had a message to call a 282 number.

"Landsman Properties," a voice that sounded like it came from the days of the talkies answered.

“Paul Landsman, Please.”

The fluttering voice asked for my name and, “The nature of your business, Sir?”

“Terrance Martel. My business is doing without.” I hate secretaries who think they can screen their bosses’ calls.

“Oh yes, Mr. Martel. Mr. Landsman is expecting your call. I’ll put you through.”

‘Put me through what,’ I thought, amusing myself with visions of encounters.

“Martel! Glad you got right back. Strange news from Prophet Canyon. Everybody and his brother are up there now investigating two suspected homicides... At least that’s what the radio says... And two assaults. One guy from a rescue team isn’t expected to live. Ever kick an ant hill? Well, we’re in the ant hill. People are rushing around here like they know what they’re doing, and that’s scary. How are things with you? Sleep well? Hear you met with the good Doc Connely.”

He caught me way off guard, and I didn’t reply as quickly as he expected. He started explaining, again from the top, so I interrupted. “Landsman, I got all that. What do you make of it?”

“Martel, it’s Prophet Canyon! That means it’s something designed to stop our project... Enough said?”

“I hear you. You seem to be wired-in. What do you see me doing right now?” There’s a rule that you never ask an employer what to do. I broke it knowing that he would tell me and be flattered that I asked.

“Sit tight! This might be a good time to call the architects. I have the info you seek... I’ll be able to get the inside skivvy on the happenings up in the canyon. Check back with me, oh, say around five?”

“Thanks Landsman. I plan to do just that. Anything else?”

“No, stay on the line and I’ll have Lisa give you those names, numbers and addresses.”

I went back to Pick's and had a roast beef sandwich and iced tea. The waiter really did recognize me this time. The half pickle was the crispest and best I've eaten.

"Damn," I said when the waiter returned, "I've had pickles and I've had pickles... But that was the best dill I've ever eaten."

He grinned. "Pick's mom makes 'em. She lives in Vermont. Imagine, a New England dill pickle right here in Red Rock City! I'll tell him you liked it. His mom's a lulu, but he's an okay guy."

I wondered if people said that about me. It made me mad, but the anger passed when two women came in, a brunette about thirty-five, trim, sexy; laughing. The other was mid-twenties, platinum blond, hair cut short like a butch, skinny body, and a nice smile. I watched them find a table and get settled. The brunette caught me looking at her, I smiled humbly, she smiled and then pretended to be busy with her menu.

"Chance encounters of the best kind," I mumbled under my breath. I smiled at her again, and got up. I wanted to stay and peruse the woman, but I had work to do and I needed to get tough and direct, and meaner than a cage cleaner in a zoo.

My waiter friend took my card and ran it. "Those two, they're long time Orante people. The brunette... She told me that she's been here for years. She's the one I told you about. I've got her staked-out."

I looked back across the room at the brunette. "Can't say as I'd blame you. Know her name?"

"They don't have real names. She calls herself Celesta... You figure it out."

I needed more time to plan a course of action that would work with the Young Turk architects. In Denver, I would take a direct and always effective course of action. I would identify their concerns and proposed actions, maybe with someone from the inside, and then I would slap them



with threatened litigation, force them to spend all of their time and financial resources on paperwork and lawyers, and generally convince them that the projects run by GD, or whoever hired me, were better left alone. Then I would reward their cooperation with little contracts. Little to us, but 'make-it' bucks to them. If that didn't work --- Well it had always worked so far.

I didn't feel right about taking this approach in Sedona. I had a sixth sense that something was different. I needed more information. I drove slowly by the building that housed the offices of the firm that Landsman said would be the key to GD's opposition. No clues there. I parked and walked through the afternoon heat up the outside staircase and down a long, balconied corridor lined with windows through which, when the light was right, I could look into their offices. No one was around, outside anyway. That helped. People had died! Whoever played this 'stop GD game,' played dirty; for keeps. I had a creepy feeling like I was walking into a beast's lair.

No one was in the room I could see into. It looked like any prosperous architect's lair, except that there were models on the tables and drawings on the walls of multi-family projects. A big model, maybe 4' X 8', was standing on edge against the far wall. It looked like a whole community development, golf course, rec centers, twisting roads, walking or bike paths, a school with playgrounds and gym, and dozens of houses. There was even a medical clinic next to the rec center. I stood back from the window. I had expected model houses; single family residences. This office told a different story. These guys were into big stuff. The room suggested that whoever these guys were, they were players on a scale that most archi-enviro-do-gooders aren't. If these guys wanted to get a piece of GD's action in Prophet Canyon, then they could mount one hell of an offensive. It made me mad just thinking about it. I looked around. Had I been seen? I didn't think so.

I got back in the frying hot Jeep. The angle of the sun let rays under the canvas top that were intent upon roasting my body on plastic seat covers and steel plates. I had to move fast or burn; find shade or go somewhere cool where I could survive. Survival made my mind work fast. The BBB. I'd seen the logo sticker in their window. Of course, where best to learn about a local business than the Better Business Bureau. I assumed it was located uptown. I had to stop at the Chamber of Commerce to get directions. In the Chamber, I grabbed a map that hadn't been in the packet Connors had prepared for me, and some handouts describing '*Investment Opportunities Along The Mogollon Rim,*' which was where I was.

The BBB was hidden on a side street off 89A. I put my best, lie-through-my-teeth smile on and waited for the counter person to get to me. I had time to think of the approach I would use that would extract the most information, fast.

"May I help you?" She was over 65; still focused on an officious past, or so I judged. I took that into consideration as I asked my first question.

"Ma'am, I know you are busy so I won't take more of your time than necessary, but I do need your help. My wife and I are planning to move here this fall. We have a lead on a beautiful site... Well, Ma'am, I'm looking for an architectural firm that does the...that's creative and..." I stopped talking and watched her reaction. She liked my approach and had a firm in mind. I could sense her processing and figuring out how to sell the firm to me. I interrupted her thoughts. "Not a regular firm, but one with young ideas and a sensitivity to the environment."

I could tell that she had made a decision and knew exactly the firm I needed. She postured, pretended to be considering my unusual request, and then nodded 'yes' at me, while saying, "No, most of the firms here are conservative... Yet one firm, a team of really creative and often controversial," she was pointing a finger at me,

“young architects is highly respected here. I think the team is made up of women, too!”

I wobbled my head to encourage her.

“The Conception Company... That’s probably the group you want. My friend has a house designed by them and she loves it, although, I never would adjust to having an atrium off *my* bedroom.”

I gave her my best, ‘I’ll take you to the dance’ smile and went for more information.

“I knew when I decided to come to the Better Business Bureau that I made the right choice. You people are so knowledgeable. Now... Ma’am what else do I need to know about this... Conception Company?”

The hook set. She fluffed less authoritatively and loosened up.

“They make my husband mad... He’s a builder you know, been in construction since the ‘70s. He thinks they add a lot of costs to a project that make it difficult to do. He’s right, you know. If you pick this firm, expect to pay for things they add in. Extras. Things like passive solar and alternative materials. Virgil also says they have no business designing other people’s places. He was livid when they got a bike path through a subdivision he was in-filling.”

I interrupted. “What? Your husband was...”

“Oh, that’s Sedonese for building a house on a vacant site in an already established neighborhood. The sites were usually passed over because they wouldn’t perk or they were too steep or because of drainage or something. Virgil figures out how to build on them and, well, that’s how we make our living. As I was saying, this group makes Virgil mad because they want to plan things like bike paths and community parks and schools and... You know, extra things that are none of their business. Still,” she smiled at me and lowered her voice, “I like them. They may be young and idealistic, but they are sincere and they do have a reputation for excellent work.” She paused and I prepared to ask her something... “Oh, and I

am probably giving you all this information at a time when they are so busy... I hear that they have people waiting in line. Marcy, that's my friend at the Chamber, says it's because the big developers all want them to do their new projects. Maybe you can talk to them and find out how long a wait you will have? Here, let me write their number down."

It took me a few minutes to get the fixed smile off my face and start rethinking my investigation. If big firms, and I had seen the models of big projects in their office, were trying to get them to work for them, and if business was that good, why would they be interested in destroying Greater Development? As you can imagine, I was confused. That's when I decided to hit them head-on.

I walked in the shade where I could find it, until I found a pay phone. I pushed the silver keys carefully, my fingertips so slick with sweat that they slid into the other keys. I had to hang up and re-dial twice before I got their phone to ring.

"Conception Company, please hold."

What was I supposed to do? What if I said 'No, I won't hold?'

I stood there in the heat feeling like an idiot.

"Thank you for holding. We are experiencing a large volume of calls at this hour. If possible, hang up and call back at another time. If you wish to stay on the line, your call will be answered in the order in..."

I slammed the receiver into the cradle and fumed. Then I remembered a trick that usually worked. It would cost me another thirty-five cents to find out, but what the hay. I dialed the number again, only this time I changed the last number from a 3 to a 4.

The phone rang once and twice and... "Conception. This is Dean." I felt a surge of pride at knowing what I knew. I had no clue as to who Dean was, so I assumed, correctly I learned, that he was one of the firms young architects.

“Dean. This is Terrance Martel, Landsman’s contact. I need a meet with you, soon as possible. You are the architect that’s working with him, right?”

“Landsman? You mean the Downtown Project? I am on that team...”

“Right, Dean. I know you’re busy. What I need is information. Can we meet for, oh, say fifteen minutes max?”

There was a long pause, a sigh, and I thought I heard a computer beep ‘save.’ “Sure, want to come up here?”

“Thanks Dean, I’ll be there in ten. Dean, I need information about what makes Conception attractive to big developers like I represent, okay? I’m the guy who’ll make contact with the guys with the bucks.”

So I lied, but more by omission than commission. If I told the truth... The thought hit me. That wasn’t a bad idea. Prader had taught me that the truth can always be embellished when necessary.

As I drove back to the building, I thought it out. What if I just go in there and tell him who I am and why I’m here? I was beginning to doubt that his firm was involved in trying to screw GD. If it was his firm, I would know it. If not, he knew who was. It was worth a try. I felt good. I only had to be myself, no fake smiles, no lies, no misinformation. I was committed, so I gave it a try.

I went inside. The place was humming. The area I had seen through the window that I thought was an office was really a showroom. The rest of the whole top floor of the building was dedicated to work spaces divided only by planters and moveable partitions with prints and drawings tacked to them. There were computers everywhere and most were being operated by hunched-over people in very casual dress.

Dean’s space was delineated by corkboard partitions and dangling house models hung like model airplanes on strings. The light was good. People were going back and forth and talking in little groups. Someone

put a cold juice bottle in my hand. They were cranking, and it made me want to be a part of the action. A successful workplace has an amazing, positive energy.

I was looking for a 'Young Turk,' and Dean didn't disappoint me. He was tall, in excellent physical shape, handsome, with clean-cut features, sparkling eyes and the necessary long pony tail. He was dressed like a man who rode a bike to work. He did.

He made eye contact, told me that there was Pepsi if I wanted it, and offered me a high stool, perching on one himself.

"As you can see," he said motioning with his arm across the office, "we're cranking here. We are a little behind on some projects and trying to stay ahead on others. You mentioned the Uptown. How are you connected to Landsman's people?"

"Dean, I'm here on an investigation for Greater Development. I'm out of their Denver office. Landsman is the agent for GD, as you know."

Dean nodded and probed me with his eyes, as if he knew what was coming.

"GD has hit a wall with its Prophet Canyon project. You may know that most of the GD staff in Phoenix quit. The project's stalled, people are dead... Two, in Prophet Canyon, I just heard from Paul about an hour ago, and someone is about to take the project away from GD. I thought it might be you guys... Is it?"

Dean wasn't smiling, but I saw genuine concern cross his face. That told me more than his words.

"No, we have no designs on Prophet Canyon... Except that we would really like to make a presentation to your guys... I'll tell you we were angry when we were left out. That canyon is one of the most beautiful around here. It has a spring that feeds a natural pool. We wanted in because that's where we shine. We do developments that bring things together, quality of life and future options-type things that enhance a project and really make it better in

the long run. We would have advised your people against developing the canyon.”

“Somebody wants us out and...”

“Your Phoenix guys made a lot of people mad, especially the group on the ridge.”

“You mean the Orante Temple?”

“Yeah, that’s their backyard, you know. I’ve been to a drumming at the pond.”

I looked at him. He evidently saw that I didn’t understand.

“Full moon. We greet it by drumming. It sounds great, and it’s become a tradition around here. Mostly we meet out by Cathedral Rock, but once we all hiked down there. The acoustics were amazing.”

“People are dead. Not all by accident, I guess. Would this Orante go to that extreme?”

“I don’t think so. People may joke around about the Temple and the Guru, but basically they’re a peace-loving and genuinely sincere bunch of folks. Most of the spiritual movements here and about are made up of very gentle souls. No, I can’t imagine them harming others.” He paused, obviously thinking. “I don’t know who your enemy is, but I’ll do some checking. Will you be around? I would like to talk to you about developments in canyons.”

I answered, and told him to contact me through Landsman. I had taken exactly fifteen minutes of his time.

It was time to go back to the motel and write Mom, but I needed time to think. I turned on 89A and drove west through the strip. Ahead, a police car, lights flashing, stopped traffic in both directions. I pulled into a line of cars and came to a stop expecting to see an accident. Instead, an old Suburban with white vinyl covering its whole back end, and a new 2500, dark green and powerful looking, pulled out of a modern looking building’s driveway and cut across the eastbound lane into the westbound. The cop held us there until the Suburbans got away toward Cottonwood. Then he got in his vehicle and followed.

Ahead of the subs, I could see another state car, lights flashing.

I studied the building across the street. It was a funeral home. I thought I knew what was happening, they were probably moving the bodies from Prophet Canyon. I turned around at the next intersection and headed back toward Airport Road. There was still plenty of daylight left, and I knew where Prophet Canyon was now. The view from the air might help me understand the problems the project faced.





## Chapter 12

Otoa leaned forward, as if receiving a blessing. "We know, the cops know, and there's a forensic team there now. Hell, I think everybody knows by now."

OTOA MADE HIS WAY around the Temple's north side and into the chamber where Orante held audiences. There were about twenty initiates in the room. They were at the part of the audience where they could ask for individual help. Orante was dressed in his simple cotton yakuta, worn over white silk pajamas. He wore a black, segmented Tibetan hat. 'He is the part,' Otoa mumbled, impressed by the way his buddy played the role. He moved to the back of the room, hoping Orante would finish. They had a lot to talk about.

Orante came suddenly alert. Something had irritated him. Waves of emotion spread through the initiates.

"We must have privacy!" he growled, angered. Several guardians moved away from the open lattice which covered the windows. Their job was to watch him as they would a precious stone. They were charged with his safety and knew the awful spiritual emptiness that would follow if he were lost. The Master made it very clear that he didn't want them hovering over him or eavesdropping.

Orante clapped his hands, reached forward to grasp the handle of a small brass bell on the carpet in front of him. He rang the bell three times. The initiates, refocusing now, bowed over their knees, even further down toward him, then relaxed.

"Your questions have answers. However, if you came here for answers, you have missed my message. I am here to ask questions. Inside you, you will find the answers." He had devised this method of cutting off questions before they were asked. He knew some answers, but it was safer not to say anything that might betray his ignorance of the mystical and spiritual world.

Otoa rose to his knees and announced, "What is it you seek? Ask, knowing that the answer is the key to your spirit."

A young man raised his head and got a nod from the Master.

"Sensei, I try to clear my mind of everything... To be silent, but thoughts keep coming in. Is there something wrong with me?"

"What is wrong? What is a thought that gets in the way of a pure mind? Think of force. When you try, you fail. Haven't you tried too hard?"

Otoa watched and listened to the exchange. Orante was well prepared for that question. It was the question almost every initiate asked. He chuckled to himself and thought, 'If you clear your mind of everything you will not have a mind... And that would probably make your life seem fulfilled.' It was hard not to become contemptuous of people who fled life's realities looking for avoidance.

The initiate bowed low from his sitting position. A look of peace and satisfaction fixed his face in a fool's tranquillity. Orante waited and then went on. "And?"

"I am wondering," a woman in her forties that Otoa had enrolled during the past week's intake, spoke up, "why my body won't separate from my mind like your teachings say."

Orante raised his hands, palms out. "Is the animal or the being in charge? Can a being deny the animal? Is there a balance you seek, or an end?"

The whole group of initiates looked up nodding and smiling secret appreciation for the great insight they had been given.

Orante nodded again and another woman, a much younger woman, looked up at him and cleared her throat.

"Sensei, I want peace... I want understanding more than anything in the world... I want children, a family too."

Orante took a long time to answer. He closed his eyes, not wanting to see the girl who asked the question.

“What is natural? Can you be one without the other? Can you do one and then the other? What is your nature? Is there a place here for you? Do you seek it?”

Otoa was somewhat surprised. Orante seldom asked complex questions... ‘Oh ho,’ he thought, ‘he still has a conscience. The girl should breed and live a normal life. So what the hell is she doing here?’

The girl wasn’t satisfied with Orante’s answer. She cleared her throat again and got the Master’s attention.

“I understand, but isn’t what I feel natural? I mean, aren’t people supposed to feel this way?”

Orante smiled down upon her and raised his hands, palms together. “This is secular, is it not? Your question is a statement of fact, is it not? Here with us is Otoa. He is prepared to answer secular questions.”

Otoa rose and bowed. “In his wisdom, the Master has provided for this important part of life. Here,” and he swept his arms around in a great circle, “Orante has created a place where all need not be focused upon the purely spiritual. Here, a person can achieve the spiritual health necessary to have a marriage, a family, and a meaningful life in the secular world. The Master gives! His support and his teachings are your blessing. In time, you may choose this course you are uncomfortable with now.” He paused and looked sternly at the girl, “For all who need to work on these other parts to be whole, live here and share in the life here. Get health so that you will be able to go out and have a healthy family. Learn the meaning of selflessness and how to let the other parts of you be healthy. If any here wish to do secular work at the Temple, and share your search with others, then you will know it and I will help you, with his blessing.”

He hadn’t expected Orante to throw the ball to him. Damn him! He thought he did a great job. The initiates sat silently in contemplation of his words. He had reached them!

Orante reached forward and grabbed the stem of the bell, ringing it three times. Otoa, who was still standing,

bowed and announced the end of the session. After the initiates filed out, humble and quiet within themselves, he closed the door and went to sit before Orante. They bowed toward each other and when Orante saw that the guardians were staring at him through the lattice, he began to chant and weave back and forth, bending from the waist and trying to relieve the pressure on his knees.

When the guardians relaxed and pulled back, Orante focused upon Otoa. "So, what in heaven's name is going on? All I've heard is that she's dead. Who else knows?"

Otoa leaned forward, as if receiving a blessing. "We know, the cops know, and there's a forensic team there now. Hell, I think everybody knows by now."

"Are you certain it's her? Didn't you give her safe haven here? Was it an accident? She's the one who stole files from Cal Nels, isn't she?"

"Jeeze, Peter, ease off. I gave Val safe haven. She left... Went camping. I'm not sure. We don't know how she died. They said she was floating there in her pajamas. An accident? Why not?"

"Because you told me she was scared. You said she was afraid of Cal Nels, didn't you? Was he here?"

"No, he hasn't been here this week... Longer I think. No one's been here we don't know...except one guy. Tall guy, works maybe for APS or the Telephone Company... Could have been him, no one seems to know how he got through here or where he went."

"He went down there?"

"I said no one was sure what he did. He could have gone down there, no one saw him come up...in fact, I'm sure that if he was down there he didn't come out this way."

"Great, Sils! We expecting the cops? How long before they storm this place?"

"The cops started up the trail, that's why I needed to talk to you. What do we tell them?"

“How about the truth? We know she went camping, we just learned that she died. We want to help if we can.”

“That’s all? Shouldn’t we...”

Orante interrupted him. “That’s all! Don’t talk and you won’t let anything slip...isn’t that what we learned in Nam?”

Sills nodded. “Okay then, we smile a lot. By the way, our recruiters are out and doing a great job. They already have three new prospects. This last group... What do you think of them?”

Orante scratched his neck beneath the heavy cotton collar. “Okay, but do we need so many men? Women are a lot easier. Any with resources?”

“From the last batch, one. She has a house and a sizable bank account.” He tried to remember the amount, but wasn’t certain enough to tell Peter.

“And?”

“She meets with Nels and someone from the board on Wednesday. Why? Think you can spend any of it?” he taunted. They were so far removed from the money that they didn’t even get financial statements. Otoa got information from Gwinn, who went to board meetings and played dumb, and from Thedra, the board’s hired secretary and one of Orante’s Magi, one of the first Pioneers.

“Speaking of Gwinn,” Orante tagged in, “how will he deal with all the games going on in the canyon? When will we get a report on his progress? Jimmy, I feel like I’m flying blind. How do we know he won’t screw us...? Who but you keeps track of his progress? Say, don’t you think it’s time I had a soul-session with him?” The idea of getting Gwinn in for confession had popped into his head as he spoke.

“Good idea Peter,” Sills said looking the Master in the eye. “Get him in and keep him on the course and maybe you have had a revelation, and he’s in it? I’ll tell him you have had a vision... He’ll love that. Pump him for information if you want, but don’t go too far and get him

thinking... To Gwinn, you're totally spiritual, you know what I mean! And Peter, don't worry so much. Gwinn is a competent man, a great land developer, one of the best ever. It's his nature to do a good job. The man amazes me."

"Okay my eunuch friend. We're getting there. Tell me what's happening to Greater Development."

Otoa laughed. "They're finished. No staff, no idea of what happened. Only one problem I see. They got a guy from Denver... I told you about him, right?" Orante nodded. "Well, this guy is here in town. Celesta and her group are on him like sticky flies. He rented a plane. We've got that covered. He's going around town talking to Connely, and the Conception Company architects. He's cold, very cold, and there's nowhere for him to go. Celesta's got your Magi studying him. He's got a short time to go... She made first contact at a place called Pick's."

"Pick's? How did he find the place?"

"Easy, our guy at the motel sent him there." Otoa grinned. He had all the bases covered; he loved to be one-up on Peter.

"You said he talked to Connely?"

"Yeah. The old fart's still ranting about generations and power groups. We've heard it for years."

"You sure he doesn't talk about anything else?"

"He would never talk about our stuff, you know. He set it up that way... And besides, I think he's put it out of his mind. Damn, he's more than ninety... Ninety-eight or nine, what can he remember?"

"So Greater Development's out and we're in. How will Gwinn take over?"

"I don't know... You know Gwinn, he has a plan."

There was one other item of business that Otoa had. He didn't want Orante to know how serious he thought it was, so he acted casually and like he had just remembered some insignificant footnote.

"One other thing might bother me a little, if you know what I mean? From what I heard, that other

development group that was exposed when Val got us the files from Nels' office? The one that made the Forest Service trade? Well, they bought land across from Tarantula Pass. I asked Gwinn, and he doesn't know why, but not to worry. Gwinn's going to get to the other company and let us know when to sic your Pioneers on them."

Orante knew Sills well enough to know the guy was withholding something. Yet, Jimmy was right. Once the other developer was ID'd, they had the perfect weapon to get him out of the canyon.

The two spiritual leaders bowed and rose together, bowing again, almost hitting heads. Then Otoa bowed as he backed out of the room while Orante went to his meager meal of rice, beans and squash, his springboard bed, and another long night alone.





## Chapter 13

If things go sour with the economy, the whole area could look like a ghost town within months." He paused and added, "Ever eat a red rock?"

MORE THAN ANYTHING I wanted to go flying. First I had to call the hospital and find out if the guy who had been shot had recovered. I had to find out why the red light was blinking on my phone, and reluctantly, I had to e-mail Mom.

"I'm sorry Mr. Martel, he is still in intensive care. His condition has been downgraded again, I'm sorry to tell you. He was gravely injured. If you are family, perhaps you should call Doctor Abbot."

The telephone message that had triggered the red light on my telephone came from Gopher Connors in Denver. I didn't understand it, but then all I had to do was follow Connors' directions. They were simple, "*Prader has been yanked another direction. I'm doing Arizona, all of it, now. You keep me informed on at least a daily basis. Do not, I repeat, do not move on anything important until you have talked with me. Don't bother Prader. Glad you're there for us.*"

The computer grabbed cyberspace and Mom's messages began downloading. With last night's, fifteen! I scanned the lot, same old same old. Love and hate shared the same backbone in our family. I know the problem is something deep within me. Bad genes?

I wrote Mom a carefully composed, "too busy to write," letter, and shut the thing off. I pried off my shoes, too lazy to lean down and unlace them. So, the big bad Gopher was now my boss. Oh well, we'd worked together on jobs before. I would survive working with the sweaty slob again! At least he was more than a thousand miles away. I'd have to keep him informed of my progress or he might appear. Landsman had told me that Connors was here before and there was no way I would give him an

excuse to come again. I would e-mail him or call him often. It was worth it to keep him away.

I wanted to fly. I felt the urgency. That same drive that got me into flight school at eighteen has caused me to look for every excuse to be airborne since. Who could I get to guide me? Landsman? No, the real estate mogul would slant everything from his point of view. I couldn't trust him. He and Kling were my number one suspects. The jerk clerk at the airpark? No way I could stand him, even though he would probably know a lot about the area. Okay, I reorganized my thoughts. What do I need from a fly over? I thought a moment. I need to see Prophet Canyon. Good, that's number one. I need to see how development works around here, how canyons are used. Okay, that's two. I need to see the Temple and get its lay, that's three and, I thought hard, I need to know how to get into the canyon without anyone seeing me. I need to find hidden trails. Okay! So who should I get to guide me?

I tried to force my foot into the shoe without untying it. The heel mashed down and was ruined. I got the heel straightened enough to get my foot back into the shoe, and limped around the room in a circle until the leather reformed and quit biting into my flesh. I called the Conception Company and got Dean. He said he was just finishing, "all that could be done today," and sure, he would love to guide me. At his query, I informed him that I had been flying for more than twenty years and that I had once been a flight instructor. It never bothers me when people ask about my competency as a pilot. If there's a screw loose in the driver, well pilots, not planes cause crashes.

I picked him up outside their office. He looked like he had just spent a day bending over drafting tables and staring at computer screens. That's what he did for a living, and it showed. When the Jeep was rolling, the hot, fresh air whipped around us. He began to energize. "Wow, look at that sky. I'm ready to be up soaring like an eagle." I

liked the guy when I first met him. Now I confirmed that, in a way, we were kindred souls.

I filed a flight plan and we headed out to the plane. The 172 sat, metal popping as the heat of the sun expanded the metal and then a passing cloud allowed it to cool. I did my visual, manually tested the flaps and rudder, and eyeballed the exhaust pipe, hoping not to see oil or excess carbon, which I didn't. I opened the side compartment with my key, and got out the gravitometer. The valve turned harder than it should have on a new plane, gas flowed into the tube and I shut it off. I wasn't expecting problems. I was following the checklist and doing routine safety checks when I saw water in the bottom bowl of the tube. My exclamation must have been heard into the office, because as I looked up I caught site of the clerk's head peering through a partially opened side door. He was watching me! Was there something he knew that I didn't?

Second test. More water. I explained to Dean that I couldn't fly her. Then I went inside and called the FAA. They had too many questions, but assured me that they were, "On it," Then I called the rental agency in Phoenix and reported the problem. To say that they were concerned... Well, if I had announced the end of the world, the guy would have been happier. "Water in the fuel? No way, that can't be allowed to happen," he bellowed. I hung up after the guy promised that their team would fly another 172 up to Sedona for me. If my report was verified, there was going to be hell to pay.

Dean was standing around during my calls, patient, eyeing the sky like an eagle with a broken wing.

"Hey Martel, we can still fly, you up for it? I'll split the cost."

I looked long and hard at him, and asked him if he had a plane stashed somewhere. He smiled and said, "No, but I know who does."

At the far end of the field we found a kindred soul. Another guy who watches the sky and can't wait until he is

up there in it. Dean introduced me to JB Mann, one of the movers at Vistas RR Aviation. Dean told him who I was and that we wanted to fly over and get a long look at Prophet Canyon. Mann gave me a once-over look that sawed through to the bone. He hadn't stopped summing me up when he asked me, "How is it that you're here the day after they discovered those two deaths up Prophet Canyon? I've been around here for over fifteen years, and yesterday is the first time anyone was ever interested in that canyon, and that's because I spotted the woman floating in the water and the body of the man."

"You did?" Both Dean and I asked at the same time.

"One of my special routes. Great things for visitors to see. I reported the girl and then I went back and helped orient the Marshal. Later, I spotted the second body. Not the sort of thing you fly for."

I had struck gold. These two guys could do more to orient me than anybody I could have hired. We got serious about who I was and what I needed. I was glad I hadn't lied to Dean. Now Mann had the same story and it was straight. I was here for Greater Development to investigate crazy things that were happening to their people and to their project in Prophet Canyon. I needed to see it from the air, and I needed to learn about the community. No, I had no idea who the dead people were. And no, I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to kill for a subdivision.

JB was one of those pilots I only wished I could become. It was hard to tell where JB ended and the plane began. He operated a plane like it was part of his body. Pilots flying with pilots see things differently than what non-pilots like Dean see. I knew the ropes. He flowed through routines and checks. I thought he was more like a computer than a fallible man.

We had Prophet Canyon under the left wing in less than fifteen minutes. JB put us right there, without once looking at a map. He was giving me a detailed description of the route and the land below. Dean was a raptor,

soaring there behind me, filled with the rapture we can never get enough of. Occasionally he pointed out a landmark or added a supplemental infobit to JB's narrative. If I had spent a fortune trying to get this much quality tutoring, I couldn't have done better. I felt that luck was on my side.

My memory is great, but I still write important things down. I had my little spiral pages leaded-in by the time JB circled the upper end of the canyon. Some of the things I had noted meant little, but I knew that the little clues make a difference. Like JB's surprise as he noted that the Cat was gone from where it had been parked at the bottom of the new road. And that a pool of water was forming at the base of a fallen sycamore tree that had been in the way of progress.

"Gentlemen, what you are seeing is the rocky mouth of Tarantula Pass. As you can see, the way the rocks have fallen into the area has made it, well rather impass-able." We laughed at the pun, "However, on the other side, across the slickrock, one could roll a golf ball all the way to the old Forest Service Road."

Dean chimed in, "It's now a county road, JB."

"So it is. And look beyond it. Why is a county road out here you should ask? Because that mess you see ripping through the landscape like one of the planet Dune's giant worms, is one of the greatest additions to this scenic country. Why gentlemen, only a mile from Tarantula Pass is that wonderful addition to our community, the waste water return line... Or at least one of three. Today's marvels leading to a new observation: 'Our shit doesn't stink, it's fit to sprinkle!'"

"Or," chimed in Dean, "It's not for people, it's for Golfers."

When JB pointed out the new road, ripped up through the canyon, I could sense his anger. "A week ago," JB said solemnly, "this canyon was as wild as eons of time could make it. Today, that wildness is gone,

probably forever. One Caterpillar, one road, and all that was there to cherish, is lost. Now, no one can argue for wilderness or preservation. One violent rape and... I hate to see it happen." He turned the plane in a gentle 180, letting it find it's own way around.

"Dean, do you know what it is that I have always admired about you?" He didn't pause for Dean to answer. "You care! And by doing what you do... By positioning yourself where you are, you save areas like this. If there is to be development, and there will be, then do it with the big picture in mind. You, your whole team, what you are doing for this community will benefit us all down through time."

Dean sat staring out at the verdure and rocks below. "JB, too often we aren't here in time. Look at that mess. The road should never have followed the drainage. It will have to be changed. Well, so what? Who'll ever know? You know what got me into this, Martel?"

I turned around, still unable to see his face, letting him know I was listening.

"JB, let's take him back over the canyon, okay?"

"Right, good buddy, we've got just enough light left."

In minutes we were passing directly over the Orante Temple complex. From 500 feet, I got the view I needed. The Temple was really a rambling, ranch style house, with three big outbuildings connected to the main by open breezeways. The main itself was at least 100 feet long. There were six small cottages built along the cliff face and into the cliff itself. Down the other side of the ridge was a giant scar; a cleared parking area. Near the north edge of the parking lot were maintenance sheds with their yards full of assorted materials, equipment and junk. Beyond that I could see four level places like giant steps gouged out of the steep ridge, paralleling the ridge line. Each step had been cleared of woody vegetation. It looked like grass had been planted. I first thought the leveled areas were playing fields. I was about to ask Dean why they had so many, when it hit me. "Septic system?"

Dean leaned forward so that I could hear him over the roar of the engine. "Leaching fields. The Health Department made them put the system in about two years ago. Prior to that, they just drilled a hole into the rock, dropped in a stick of dynamite, and started pumping in sewage. When that clogged, new drill holes, more dynamite. The only problem was that raw sewage ran out of the rock down there." He pointed to a green line of cottonwoods along the base of the ridge.

"Much bigger than you thought, right?" JB was turning the plane again, so that we would pass over the complex from the other direction.

"I thought it would be a marble temple... A monastery or something like that."

"No. This place was built to be a party-house. Then Orante added these outer structures. It's probably capable of housing more than one hundred souls."

As we left the area, I noted two things I didn't write in my little spiral because I wouldn't forget them. I felt certain that JB and Dean hadn't seen what I saw or they would have said something. Near the steep west side of Tarantula Pass I had caught a glimpse of a woman dressed in flowing white. She had been watching the plane and hid as we came near, but not fast enough. The other thing I saw that seemed unusual, was a Blazer intentionally hidden in a copse of junipers off to the left of the slickrock on the other side of the pass. It was light brown, almost sand colored. In the service I had studied enough aerial photos looking for hidden gun emplacements and dug-ins to know that someone had tried to hide that vehicle, and had done a pretty good job. JB and Dean missed both. In my mind I connected the Chevy Blazer with the woman. Maybe there was a trail into Prophet Canyon from the pass...

Dean was leaning forward. I could feel him pulling on the back of my seat. "Martel, when I was still a student, I came to this area on vacation. I had a head filled with ideas from Architectural Digest Magazine and visions of



getting wealthy designing homes and of someday doing important developments. Sedona had some very special architecture. I fell in love with the area and then I saw what we're now going to show you. It changed me! After that, I still dreamed of creative design and doing great developments, but I knew that there was a right way and a wrong way..."

"Gentlemen, I hate to interrupt, but coming up on the starboard is..." He stopped talking and adjusted the fuel mixture and trim, "the place where they're teaching trees to walk."

I didn't get it. "What?"

Dean was laughing in my ear and JB had a self-pleased look on his face.

"Say that again? Did you say?"

"Yeah, look!"

I grabbed the door-pull and leaned over as far as I could and looked down. The area we were passing over looked awful, like the bombing range in Florida. Holes everywhere, old, maybe ten years, I couldn't tell. I didn't know how fast vegetation re-conquered in this desert. There were holes, most square or rectangular, and curving strips of pavement, long abandoned because the tarmacadam was studded with young bushes and trees. We passed over and JB started his turn on my wing. I saw a forest of dead and dying trees. They were standing in crates, big wooden boxes.

"What the hell!"

"Nice way to treat a World treasure, wouldn't you say?" JB still had that comforting grin on his face, only now it was more of a smirk.

"I came upon this area while hiking," Dean was leaning forward and talking in a normal tone. There was sadness in his voice. "From down there it looks different... Worse! They use the term, 'Rape, Rip and Run.' That's what I thought happened, but no. This was done with good intentions. In fact, no one was at fault. When I investigated, I learned that 'It's the economy, stupid!'"

applied here. That made it all okay, all the rape and rip... All the bad planning! All of the greed and political games.”

I knew that we were flying over a failed subdivision. It wasn't the first I had seen. This one looked especially bad because the work to build the infrastructure had been stopped too soon, right at that place where everything is torn up and nothing is landscaped-in. Dean went on with his reactions.

“They intended to save the trees, at least the ones from the roadways and utility corridors and the ones that blocked access to lots. They dug them out and boxed them. They intended to replant them. They spent a fortune. Then the project failed. The local joke is that they were teaching the trees to walk. Now, as you saw, they stand in their crates, above ground, dead or dying. Not going anywhere!”

I felt Dean's concerns and his sadness. “How long? I mean, this is prime land. I saw electrical boxes at the lots, the road. How long has it been left this way? Why hasn't it been finished?”

“Things change. The county started to get its act together regarding subdivisions. They made a lot of mistakes including this mess. Other developers have looked it over. Who knows what it will take to repair the damage and do something with this.”

JB was taking us back to altitude. “Hey guys, remember this area has two industries, tourism and land development, and fickle they both are! All these guys who want to develop land here, well, they depend on folks who bring their bankroll with them. That travesty below is a warning. This area is livable only as long as money and services flow in from outside. If things go sour with the economy, the whole area could look like a ghost town within months.” He paused and added, “Ever eat a red rock?”

There was one other thing that I hoped JB and Dean could clear up for me. “Guys, when I flew over the area, I saw things that didn't make much sense.” I stopped

to see if I had their attention. "I saw whole communities that kinda looked like clumps of grapes hanging off the vine of highways. Only these neighborhoods... They didn't have parks or public places, like schools. They were collections of big houses with no centers. Am I making my question clear?"

Dean leaned forward. I felt the tug as he pulled himself up with my seat back. "Martel, what you saw was Sedona's biggest nightmare. You're right, the areas weren't developed as neighborhoods. Nor was there an attempt to build a community. What some were designed to be... Well, they are places where people who don't connect can hide out and wall themselves away from their neighbors and the community." He paused. "JB, head us over past the old movie set!"

The plane cut around again as JB guided us over a great, jutting mass of stone. "This one, Dean?"

"Martel, I think this is what concerns you?"

I let my eyes move along with the speed of the plane. Below were some of the most expensive houses I had seen in the area. We flew over palatial homes, some with pools and tennis courts, some with strips of lawn, and all with gorgeous roofs. One other thing most had, walls! I got the powerful feeling that these statements of wealth were as islands, floating in a sea of contempt for others.

"Exactly!" I said.

Dean patted me on the shoulder. "I can't do much about the damage already done to our community, but we are having a positive effect on what is happening now.

As we landed, Dean was telling me how he became concerned with the whole environment and its interrelated parts. How he had decided to work to see that every development, even old ones, were connected into the community.

Earlier that day, I had decided that he and his ilk were selfish and ignorant radicals bent on creating problems for companies like GD. I had thought that he was part of the problem I was here to solve. Now, I had learned

something that touched me and changed my view of things. There was a right way to do developments, and that way, that Whole Systems Approach, far outweighed the so-called individual rights of land speculators and developers. What I wouldn't allow myself to think of then was my role. Looking back, it makes me feel pretty stupid.

As we dropped off the hill, I felt the weight of the long day come down upon me. I can't remember when I ever put in such a hard day. I had intended to stop by and check out the investigation of watered fuel in my rental 172, but the place was teeming with FAA jackets. I didn't have the energy to deal with them, so we snuck out the back way and headed down. I dropped Dean off at his bike, racked near his office, and headed toward the motel. The red light was lit, as usual, and I decided that I would relax a few minutes before investigating the call.

The next I knew, sunlight was streaming in through the bathroom window, and someone was pounding on the door, yelling. I listened carefully. "Mr. Martel, you must answer your phone, it is an emergency!"



## Chapter 14

She watched his sexual energy die as dampness came to his eyes. He was so malleable. He would be so easy to deflect.

WHILE MARTEL WAS REACTING to being awakened by the motel manager, the day was already well underway for Celesta. She had awakened, showered, dressed, and, as she did every morning, assumed the position and sat in meditation. This morning, she couldn't clear her mind. Thoughts of her own problems demanded attention.

Celesta liked the name Orante had given her, but almost nothing about her inner Self. At thirty-two, lost and bewildered by the way her life was, she got her 'overs;' she got to start life again. All those years ago when she had met Orante, she let him guide her and came to believe in him. She had followed him to the Arizona desert with no ulterior motives or intent to do anything except let him direct her life. She had helped him build his following and get established in Sedona. Because she had been a part of the cult from the beginning, and because she instinctively knew the psychological makeup of others, she became a part of the Temple Cult's inner circle.

Celesta studied to become a facilitator. She learned to read the musculature of others, sense the ebb and flow of their energy better than a lie detector, and read their history and suppressed memories. Those she counseled spoke to her from every part of their bodies. She was successful, loved and secure. So why couldn't she clear her mind and find peace?

She wasn't sure what had caused her to lose faith in her purpose this time. She thought hard, seeking the trigger of her frustration. Oh, age! She felt the angst as she touched the raw thought. Too many years have passed, she moaned, I'm going to be 50! Who am I now?

Dark thoughts possessed her and her doubts returned in force. As the panic boiled up in her, she knew

something was missing. She could have had kids, marriage! Now it was too late. No, she had tried; failed.

She fought for control. She knew The Way, the Master's teachings; always the Master's teachings! If she would remember that they came first, this would never happen. She felt a calming hand around her heart and the anxiety passed. She began a chant,

*"I am a perfect light. I am one with the universe. I am the energy which is focused for good. I am perfect... I am Celesta, the instrument of pure joy, struck with life's hammers, I vibrate harmony. Never alone, never in need, always cradled in Her energy. I seek nothing."*

The energy flowed through her as it always did. Orante had taught her how to summon it. The thoughts always crept in, he had taught her that they would...and that she could deal with them. She took control and pushed her doubts away where they couldn't hurt her.

Training. Training as a soldier of The Way. Physical training which also enhanced her mental powers. Now she trained others. That's what being 50 meant. She was the leader of the Magi Pioneers, the best of them all. Now she had more responsibility and, the gift Orante had promised her. She had kept her youth! She looked over at her reflection in the mirror above the Parson's table. Thirty-five, not a day older. Most people believed that she was thirty. He had promised youth everlasting from the convergence at the sacred site. He delivered for her, and for a few of the others who were pure.

Otoa had relayed the Master's orders to her. She was to stop those opposed to their Order. She thought it through and came to realize that she was the one who could stop their enemies. If people were planning to hurt them; to do something bad that would damage the Order, she could stop them. She had weapons. Not the killing kind; better! She knew and could teach others the techniques which helped deflect people's energy away from doing harm. She had the knowledge. It was her power over others...even the guy from Denver, the

dangerous guy named Martel, who worked for Greater Development.

She left the Temple with a plan. She would watch the motel where the mark was staying and follow him when he left. Then she would make contact with him.

The first day, she had perused him from a distance, making sure that he had noticed her. This morning, she came into Pick's and seated herself facing him, at a table next to his. It was her first opportunity to study Martel close-up. He looked okay, interesting enough, but there was something about him, the way he combed his hair back and over, rather than parted and down on the sides. It was a---the connection surprised her---a crewcut grown out; still short, yet long enough to stay down. His skin was clear, with an olive hue deep down as if his skin were centimeters deep. She noted his build. There was something of the classical athlete about him. He carried himself like the actor Jimmy Stewart, she thought. Yet he wasn't a gentle man like Stewart. He had another look about him. A Roman nose. A shepherd's peak. The look of a soldier! In time, he would age and look like the patriarch of a great family. She had learned to recognize that look!

She had made eye contact at lunch the day before. Now, this morning, he was focused on his cup of brown soup, pouring in cream and sugar. He looked up and across at her table and smiled a, 'fancy-meeting-you-here' energy that shaped his face under its early morning numbness.

She knew the routine she would follow. She had perfected it. After several minutes, she held up a small area map and caught his eye. He read her.

"I don't know if I can help, I've only been here a couple of days." He was alert. She marveled at the power of her sexual energy. At fifty, she still had power over men. And better, over women.

Map in hand, she got up and moved to his table. Before he could rise, she pulled the chair out and seated



herself. She held the map in front of him to focus his attention. "Can you help me find a street named Portal Lane?"

"I can look, but I've only been here a short time. Is there a street index?"

"No. Not on this map." She began folding it and then laid it flat on the table. She looked directly at him and gave him her most thoughtful look. She turned her head, cocked just a little. "You? Please, you look very familiar to me! Do you know me?"

He stared for a moment, scanning, seeming to match brain files of photos.

"No. I don't think so."

"You look like a guy I knew in high school. Are you by any chance... No, that would be too strange. The guy I knew was named Ter... We went to Lincoln High School?"

He was taken by surprise, nodded, and tried to remember her.

"Sure! You are Ter! How many years ago? You haven't changed that much. Of course, I have. You wouldn't remember me. I was younger, two grades maybe? You were the star... I thought I was in love with you, back then. Isn't that strange? Oh, then I was Karen. Now, everybody calls me Celesta."

The hook caught and she knew she had him. "You were different from the others... The guys in your class, I mean."

It was a statement that fit everybody. All kids thought that they were different. She played the line out and let him set the next hook. He made the next move, as she knew he would.

"I noticed you in here yesterday. The waiter told me you were one of Orante's people," he almost said followers. She read his facial muscles and body language, noting that he was searching for a way to communicate effectively with her. That was a sign she needed.

She thought back through the dossier they had given her. So much there. His relationship with his mother

was probably a weakness. She decided to go for him, using that information.

“Ter, I remember. You had problems with your mother, right? I mean, I remember that there was something wrong and you couldn’t help her.”

“She was going deaf. I tried to help! Well, maybe I was too young.”

“Do you remember that you talked to me once in the cafeteria? You talked about her.” She stayed focused upon his facial muscles and the language of his body. She was in!

“Are things better now? I mean with her?”

“Jeeze, Karen...”

She had him. “Oh, you do remember me! I want you to call me Celesta now.”

“Celesta, I like that. No, things aren’t better. My mother is miserable because...”

She knew that she needed to bend that ugly energy into other areas. She went mentally back through the dossier. “That’s funny, you said the same thing to me then... That was a long time ago, except... Let me see? Oh yes, you told me you,” she watched his face, noted the narrowing of his eyelids, the tightening of his mouth, “...you couldn’t be my friend because you,” he was physically tightening as someone who was trying to hold in a secret would do, “didn’t deserve friends. You know, I remember that so clearly because you really hurt me. I really wanted to get to know you. Do you understand?”

He took the revelation that another person shared his inner fears, like a blow. His muscles tensed and, although he pretended to casually drink from his cup, his knuckles were white and the cup shook as he let it sink back to the table. He sat straight and slid as far back in the chair as he could, recoiling from her thrust.

She wanted him off center. “Are you married? Do you have love now? You deserve friends, you know!”

Too much, too fast, she thought. His reaction was deeper than she could have hoped for. He was reacting

too strongly. She had to use a strong tool to pry him away from his pain.

She moved her arm and pushed the map off the table. Then, before he could move to recover it, she pushed her chair back from the table and leaned over to reach it, letting the boat neck of her blouse fall open; letting him see her bare breasts. Then she raised her hand, knotting the top part of the blouse to her chest, intentionally forming the thin cloth around her. He was alert from the sexual energy she had charged him with. She handed him the map, touching his hand for a brief moment.

Celesta had known exactly how to move him to the next place she wanted him to be. At thirty she would have been too embarrassed to do it, but now... "You saw my... I'm sorry! Sometimes I just don't think!" She still held the top of the blouse to her chest, keeping the cloth tight. She saw him stare and then try to look as if he wasn't. She studied his reaction and knew it was okay to continue.

"You know, Ter, it felt...well, good. I mean, I liked having you see me. I hope you didn't mind?"

He nodded, with a confused look she read accurately.

It was time to jam him again. "I sense so much angst in you. I sense your pain. Ter, you send a message to me. There's something terribly wrong, isn't there!"

She watched his sexual energy die as dampness came to his eyes. He was so malleable. He would be so easy to deflect.

She reached over and touched his hand to flip him once again. "I'm alone now too, Ter. If we... *If* we like each other's company... Can we spend time together?" She wet her lips and tipped her head, looking across at him with hungry eyes.

He found some inner force, tightened even more, then focused upon his other responsibilities. Deep inside he felt manipulated. He discounted the feeling and let his sexual energy and curiosity drive him.

"I wanted to ask you about the Temple. You know, what you do? Sure, I'm alone too," she noted his pause, the sadness, "and it would be fun to have a friend."

His sincerity touched her. She felt a charge of sexual energy; her own body responding to his chemistry. Deflecting him didn't mean she couldn't... 'No,' she thought, 'I will resist that kind of feeling!'

The voice at the door kept yelling, "Mr. Martel, get up! It *is* an emergency!" I was pissed. I looked at my watch and it was only 6:30. I could have slept till 8:00. Whoever it was, kept banging. I thought of playing dead, but they would come in to investigate. I got my pants up and my shirt down over my head. At the door I yelled, "Who's there?"

"I'm the Motel Manager. Mr. Martel, you must pick-up your phone. It's the government and they aren't being very nice."

"Okay... And thanks." A nice government? Where had the guy been?

The red light was flashing away as it probably had all night. I imagined someone calling for Mom. She had probably reported me lost to missing persons. She could work the Internet like a hacker. I grabbed the barbell and held it from mouth to ear.

"Martel here."

"Thank you, Sir! I'll connect you."

I thought how nice it would be to be connected, it had been a long time. A voice came through.

"Martel? I'm Wagner with the-ahh FAA. You-ah reported a tampering?"

"I reported water in my fuel."

"Well-ahh, good thing you-ah checked. You have any reason to...ahh - let me phrase it this-a way... Anyone want you to-ahh crash that plane? Maybe -ahh want you dead? You-a got lots of-ah insurance maybe?"

I was wondering the same thing. My being in Sedona had to make somebody nervous.

"No. At least not that I know of. I have the regular insurance, half a mil as required. What did you find?"

"More-n-a pint."

"My plane the only one?"

"Yup."

"What do you need from me?"

"From you? Everything...that -ahhh- is if you want to fly out-a here. I-ah want everything you know about that-aah plane after you left it. Who-aah gassed it? Tanks were-aaah full. Who got-ah near it? Okay?"

I spent the next five minutes telling him about the Twin that cut me off when I landed and the jerk clerk in the office who fueled the plane. And, I remembered that it was the clerk who was peeking out the side door when I discovered the water. Wagner asked me more questions, some of which got me worrying. Before he let me go, I had to promise to remain where I could be contacted, agree to a locked hanger for the replacement 172 the leasing agency had flown up for me, and I was to report to him anything that I found unusual or out of character. "...you know-aah , anything!"

I hung up and the red light went back on. I picked up again, still feeling thick and sluggish. What I really needed was a cup of strong coffee. I got an ear-full of dial tone, really loud and piercing. I dropped the barbell in the cradle and the light lit again. This time I ignored it.

I wanted that coffee bad. Maybe eggs, toast and hash browns too. I got the Jeep rolling to Pick's and kept alert enough to steer.

The outside air was cool enough to be refreshing. It was a summer Sedona morning, long before eleven. Nice! I felt better as I entered the place.

Even nicer, the gal the waiter had marked as his own, the thirty-something who had been connected with the Temple for years, came in alone and sat across from my table. I wasn't in the mood to make a move on her as I

felt thick and still half asleep. When the coffee came, I decided the morning was going to turn out okay. I was almost awake enough to devise a plan to strike up a conversation with her. I needed to do something! I can take a long drought, then I really need a woman. In fact, three days without one is as long a drought as I ever want to have. Well, with Carol in Denver, and the way things were when I left, it was time to find company.

I looked at the brunette and what do I see? She is struggling with a map. I offer to help. She takes a look at me and does one of those movie things where the girl discovers her long lost dad after forty years. You know, a double-take and a frightened look followed by a... Well, almost a cry for help. 'Aren't you my long lost Daddy?' Only in this case it was, "Aren't you my long lost friend from Lincoln High?"

What was unnerving was that she knew my name and things about me that were true. It took me a while before I connected. She really was a girl I had known years ago. She said that she had had a crush on me, and she knew about Mom, and me and Mom.

So, here I am trying to wake up and get to this brunette. Her name was Karen when I knew her, now it's Celesta. I learned yesterday that she is connected with the Temple Cult. Amazing, we're old friends. There was a promise of business and of things on the monkey side of business.

I still wasn't quite sure about her. I only partially remembered her, less than I thought I should. She's really attractive. So we talk and something happened. I'm not sure what it was, but suddenly I'm focused on her bod and I have the hots for her. She's acting like she doesn't have a man in the world.

We visited for maybe a quarter of an hour, and then she told me that she had to run. She suggested we meet for lunch. As she stood, I got the full length of her. Neat! I wasn't thinking of work. But as I got up, something was really bothering me. I felt tired, exhausted. I don't

have other words to describe how I felt. I knew something was wrong. I tried, and yet I wasn't able to get in touch with it.

After she left, I got myself together and went back to the motel. I called the hospital again to get an update on Bill Speck, the recycled Hippy, nothing good. That bummed me out more. I lay back on the queen to think, suddenly it's noon. I was amazed at myself. I hadn't crashed like that since, well, high school, and thinking of high school, my long lost huggie was waiting for lunch. I wasn't quite sure about her. Had she picked me up? No! I made the moves. Now I could pump her for information about the Temple Cult and...

## Chapter 15

In his lap lay a beautiful Sinauga bowl, and in his hand, loose now in death, was a dipper still holding dried human blood and, she suspected, a strong poison.

THE PLANE CAME BACK over again. Was it the one that kept circling yesterday? Raven felt she had to know, not that it would make any difference. She slid out through the narrow crack and climbed up and out, over the fallen rubble. Then she found her footholds and worked down the slick rock to the opening. From the opening, she went around a great slab and stood, watching the plane in the perfect sky. It was the same one. What did that mean? Yesterday the plane and then... The dead girl in the water, the road they cut, the trucks, and then men poking around, following the trails, collecting bags of things as if they were archaeologists. She smiled and felt the warmth of that thought. They were like her, collecting the evidence so that they could reach a conclusion: a scientific conclusion.

The plane was gone. She could still hear it after it passed beyond the lip of Tarantula Pass. Maybe the men would be gone soon. No, it would take days for the forensic people to leave and for the.... She knew of a small pond in the rocks where she could bathe, cold, but not contaminated. Maybe a storm, the monsoons were due, would wash away the girl's death and cleanse the water hole.

What was happening in the canyon? How had the girl died? Who was with her? And who were the men who left before the marshal came? She didn't want to know, not really. She had her work to do. There had been enough distraction. The spirits of the dead, especially the girl's, were angry. She had gone to bathe before the moon made the light too bright. Now, because she had stayed to see them take the body from the water and place it in a black body-bag, she had seen the light of day. She couldn't work in the dark cave when her eyes were blinded by light. It



would be okay. She loved the sky and the counterpoints of red rock, green trees, and blue heavens. She had gone to the water hole to bathe at the right time. She had been able to sing the spirit of the girl along her way.

She mused, 'How strange The Ways.' I was led there to do the thing that was needed or the spirit would have been forever angry and vengeful. I was there because I am The Connection. But more for them, in the cave, than those out here.' She adjusted the hide wrappings on her feet and walked carefully past the edge of the opening. Her eyes would adjust as the day ended. She had time to sit and hark back to the time the ancient world opened for her.

Raven found a vantage point, sheltered by the hard red rock. She ran her hand along the smooth, dense surface: the Schnebly Hill Formation, divided by its intermittent band of gray Fort Apache limestone. Near the opening to her find, blocks of badly eroded and smashed grey-white sandstone were all that remained of over three hundred feet of Coconino sandstone that had once towered above the red rocks. Across the canyon, she could see a cap of Coconino still protecting the Schnebly Hill formation. It was almost gone. Maybe in a thousand-thousand years it would be gone.

Down canyon, she perused the broken hillside strewn with Hermit Shale, maroon, darker than where she rested. She laughed inside at the memory -- at the endless hours she and others had spent searching and surveying the area where the deep purple Hermit Shale deposits eroded out from under the harder, overlaying Schnebly Hill formation, creating shallow caves and caverns. Places where they believed the Ancient Ones hid from storms, or where they stored their food. She had wandered away and discovered the cave...not in the eroded shale, but hidden in the rockfalls, of the smoother sandstone above it.

Raven looked down at the pile of black and gray rocks she had collected in the bottom of the canyon and brought back up here as a way of defeating the hands of

time. Time, which had eaten away the ancient basalt that once capped all of the sandstones in the canyon, leaving only these dense rocks in the bottoms as reminders of volcanic times.

She picked up a black, rounded piece of basalt, looked at the sky and chanted, *"I am Raven, I am of the Earth, I am The Connection."*

She watched as the plane appeared again and circled around the ridge and Temple which Orante, the soldier, had formed. He was weak, she had sensed it. Yet, his message had helped some of her friends. Friends, she thought, if only they could come to the place she was now. Not the canyon, the place in the eternal scheme of things, the place where time is a circle. She was alone, would be alone. She had her work.

High overhead a jet heading west, seemingly pushed along by a short contrail of gas, was reflecting the power of the sunset; the colors the cloudless sky couldn't carry. The canyon was fuzzing into twilight; almost dark. The jet was lit like a vibrant torch, its red tail making it a comet in the sky. She imagined the bodies up there, forced into seats too close together, miserable voyagers shot through the sunset.

Darkness was falling now, 'if a lack of something can fall,' she thought. Too dark to see the Hermit Shale, too dark to see the wending trail of the flood bed, she rose and stretched, arms over her head, feeling the muscles pull in her inner thighs, feeling her back come together as if her wings were more than stubs. There was always light out here, none was needed in the cave except the glow she dared from a single candle. She could have brought batteries, even a generator, but she sensed their limits, and did well with only a candle's power.

Raven ducked under the great sandstone slab, found her footholds and began to climb. Then down the other side, through the ragged hole she had found and widened, she lowered herself carefully until she felt the sandy floor of the cave; her bedroll. The giant sandstone

arch had fallen and sealed this chamber which had once been an open cave in the back pocket of the arch. The mystery was that it fell at the time of the gathering, a sign, they believed, a sign they took and used to separate themselves: the survivors, anyway.

She didn't need light to find her pack and pull a plastic water bottle and three small pill bottles from it. She uncapped the water first, and squatting, held it upright between her knees. Then she opened each pill bottle and shook out an oblong pill of compressed energy. She held the pills in her mouth, almost gagging as she got them down with a hard swallow of water. She put the bottles away and found the bag of dried apricots. Chewing the sweet leathery fruits, she sat back and made her eyes wide, letting the darkness open her pupils. She closed them when she lit the candle; then, candle safely in its niche, she opened them slowly, looking away from the fire.

They sat around the long dead fire, each supported by a stone slab seat and back dug into the floor, plastered in by ancient mortar. They were meeting as they had been for over nine-hundred years -- meeting to relate their messages of connectedness, their thoughts about unity.

Raven moved forward, careful not to block the candle light as it fell on the mummified face of the oldest visitor, the one she knew to be from the northeast, the land of plenty. The man bore the mark of his people. The back of his head had been flattened. His hair was still decorated with a porcupine quill board held in place by fine buckskin ties with antler-tip ends.

She studied his face and knew his resignation to death, for it was obvious to her that all of them had come to sit this way after the collapse of the arch, awaiting their final breath.

He had gone from this body looking across the fire at the garish one. At least she knew him in that way. His frontal plates were deformed, forced back in childhood until his forehead ran sloping back into a bulge or collar, the cap of his skull, from which hair still streamed, down

and around in back, tied with macaw feathers and woven around the beaks of birds of prey and brightly dyed cotton ribbons. His lips parted to show teeth filed and inlaid with something now filmed over and lackluster. His dried skin showed off the tattooed blue designs that may have signified his rank. He wore a necklace, a copper disk with a Jaguar shape cut into its patina. He was hunched down, probably as he had been in life. His hand had fallen to his side near an amazingly beautiful inlaid staff, a shepherd's crook, laying across his knees where it had fallen as his grip died.

Raven knew them, the great travelers from the south and north. She knew them because she had been studying them for more than twenty years, even before she learned that they still existed.

The shriveled flesh of the man from the east, the ancient Hopi - she was sure he was Hopi - someone great who she imagined had traveled from the ancient high cities on the mesas, a speaker of the ancient Keresan tongue, who would have come from the place where the sun is first seen over these deserts. A visitor who knew the connection between the Sinauga and his people.

And strangely, linked to him and around the circle to every man's wrist by a woven rope of human hair, a rope a finger's-width thick, a shaved-head man with delicately carved stone rings in his ears, his skin dyed red and blue - a being, holding in his lap a mug: Chacoan. Eight inches high---tall and straight with no noticeable curve at its rim---almost bulbous at the bottom, painted exquisitely with black on white geometric patterns.

The desiccated body next to him was a powerful man who had the strong features of the Pai peoples. He was dressed simply, cotton and hide: crude. Pride and power radiated from his features. The way his jaw had relaxed, left his mouth open in a shout: maybe a war cry or the happy yell of a hunter returning to camp after a successful kill. His was a presence she felt, even away from the cave.

If there was a host, graciously providing, carefully steering the meeting, it was the man with his back to Raven. The light caught highlights in his hair, his head was flattened in back. He wore braids and was naked except for body paint and a breechcloth. His shrunken feet were bare. He was at the same time humble and powerful. In his lap lay a beautiful Sinauga bowl, and in his hand, loose now in death, was a dipper still holding dried human blood and, she suspected, a strong poison.

Raven moved into the circle, carefully finding her spot between the ancient men. She nodded and began the chant. Timbres echoed around the chamber changing as the many voices mixed. Soon the walls reverberated with the chanting. In the flickering candle light, the Ancients began to move with her life.

## Chapter 16

“My God Marshal! I heard you were up in that canyon. You look like you were in a war! Are you just now coming down?”

AUGUSTA HAD GONE INTO the Medical Center to make certain that Cain didn't slip out the back door without treatment, as he had joked that he would do. She knew that jokes were sometimes ways of testing the air, and she had a feeling that he might slip out.

“Augusta, don't worry. I'll stay here long enough for them to patch me up. You forgot, I don't have transportation. I'm stranded here.”

She looked at him. His pinks, the heavy fabric trousers that most policemen wore, were punctured where branches had jabbed him. The left pants leg, black with dried blood, bandages showing through the big V-shaped rip, was ruined. His shirt was torn in several places. She thought she could see angry bruises beneath it.

“I did forget. Can I help with that?”

“No, I've got to check in. They'll have to get me another Jeep or, maybe the one I had has a new battery by now. You should go now. Get some rest! I give you my word, I'll let them do whatever they do, then I'll go back to Prescott. If I can't get my own transportation, I'll hitch a ride with the State police.”

Augusta went behind the counter and came back with a male nurse in crisp greens. “This is Marshal Cain. Cain, meet Vanderploug. Jan, this man needs help, now! He has a javelina slash on his leg, and several other bad scrapes and contusions. I'm giving him over to you. Take care of him, he's had a rough day serving and protecting the rest of us.”

Hours later, they wheeled Cain into a private room, fluffed his pillow for him, and left him alone. The doctor had been great. Cain had come to admire him. The man's knowledge of the javelina seemed complete; his questions better than Cain would have asked under the same

circumstances. He didn't know if the javelinas had ripped Ben Carrigan's body apart, fed on it, before or after the animals attacked him. The doctor was concerned enough to scare him into compliance with anything he said or ordered. If the pig-like animal had tusks full of the bacteria from the decaying body... Well, that had to be assumed in the treatment plan. Even if Cain got his before the javelina ravaged Carrigan's body, the tusks of javelina were always crusted with filth. So, the wound was cleaned with some soapy stuff that burned more than the slice ever had, and then they poured some noxious chemicals over the slice and over the scrape on his other shin for good measure. He hadn't been in pain, or thought himself badly hurt, until they worked on him. The cure was certainly worse than the injury.

He had been injected with antibodies and "anti-javelina venom," they joked. But it wasn't funny. They wanted to keep him overnight. He was to tell them if the wound seemed hot or if he felt pains radiating up his leg. After they told him that, his mind took over and tortured him with bolts of pain shooting up from his cut, and the feeling that his cut was burning. "The mind's a wonderful thing," he said with resignation, waiting for sleep.

They woke him several times to make sure he was sleeping, checked his temperature and blood pressure and clunked around the room like they were trying on new boots. He was so tired that he chose not to react. Then he awoke again to a horrible clunking and vibrating noise. He knew that sound! He had experienced it often in Japan. It was a mild earthquake jingling things on shelves and making inanimate objects animate. The door opened and the breakfast cart clattered in. So much for earthquakes, he murmured.

They released him after the Jell-O, toast and hot tea, they called breakfast. He was given a pink telephone form that contained, among other things, a box checked next to the 'Return Call' square. He jammed it into the pocket of his torn shirt, pulled on his damaged pinks and

went over to the phone. He dialed Prescott, got the operator, told her the extension, and waited, sweet music playing in his ear. He had time to pull on a blood-stiff sock and an equally gross boot.

“Cain, goddamn it! Is that finally you?”

He winced. Good old Jack. Assistant to the assistant chief of the County Mounties. A man with no skills and no concept of what others did: a perfect politician. He held the phone away from his ear, waited as long as he could, and answered.

“It’s me.”

“You drop out of sight yesterday and now all you have to say is...”

“I’m calling from the medical center here in Sedona. I never dropped out of sight. In fact, I never dropped until they put me down.”

“The hell you didn’t! Why from there?”

“They kept me here all night, javelina bite and all.”

“What are you talking about? Fielder said he met with you, which was something anyway, up in that canyon. He said you were going to investigate the other body...the John Doe they brought in. What’s left of him anyway. Why didn’t you? Where did you go? You know, you’re in deep shit with the Commissioner, talking to an elected official that way! And with me too! Just when are you planning to come back to the office Marshal Cain?”

“Ben Carrigan. Not John Doe. Where’s my Jeep?”

“They towed it here like you asked them to. Where did you think it was? Who is Ben Carrigan?”

“You know Jack, I’d really like to come back to Prescott, but my Jeep needed a battery, not a tow to Prescott. Any ideas? Oh, and Ben Carrigan is the deceased. Check it out!”

“You really don’t know, do you! Marshal, you may not have a job when you get back. You’ve got a lot of explaining to do.”



“Yeah, I write my report. Someone reads it. If there are questions I answer them. Nothing you say changes that process Jack. That’s the way we do it.”

“Oh? Now tell me, how do you plan to get back here?”

“Jack, have a heart. I’m pig-bit and I can’t walk that far on a bum leg.”

“Talk sense, man! Why would you walk? Don’t you have transportation?”

“Thanks for acknowledging that. My Jeep will do. You get it back here to me, ASAP! Then, I’m taking the rest of today off, medical leave. Then, all hell is going to break-out when either your boss or, if necessary, the papers learn how you guys have screwed things up.” He paused to let the idle threat sink in. “That’s about all for today’s schedule, Jack, my friend. Now I do plan to drop out! Oh and Jackie, if my vehicle isn’t here in an hour and fifteen, I’ll hire a cab and charge it to you. Oh and Jack, it’s about time you learned how to keep yourself in the loop. Think you can learn how to do that? Now, one other thing, listen! What do you mean that Fielder said I didn’t investigate the other body?”

“I don’t know. That’s what he said. He said you never went up there.”

“Well Jack, I did...and you might start there if you want to know what really happened to Ben Carrigan.”

He slammed the phone down, angry with himself for overreacting. The guy was a total dud. Playing him was dumb. Oh well, Jack couldn’t comprehend that he had been played. He could enjoy the tail-twisting and Jack would go on being oblivious. He was certain that the Jeep would arrive. He hadn’t told Jack where to send it. He called the Sedona Dispatch and told him he was expecting a vehicle delivery and that he’d be at Friendly’s having something besides toast to hold the Jell-O and tea together. He left the medical center, caught a ride with a nurse who dropped him off at Friendly’s, and limped his way into the refuge.

"My God Marshal! I heard you were up in that canyon. You look like you were in a war! Are you just now coming down?"

Thank God for kind waitresses. She handed him a breakfast menu and led him to the darkest booth in the closest corner. People were staring. Everyone knew that police officers never got dirty.

"I've been down since yesterday. They had me stay over in the med center. They thought I could use a good night's sleep."

"I should think so. You got hurt! Did you find the bodies?"

"Yeah, not the part of this job I like. I'm okay, just a scratch or two, nothing I haven't hurt before."

She was really perceptive. He knew she wanted to know all the gory details she was kind enough not to ask about. There were some really great women around, if he ever got over what Debbie had done to him. He cleared his mind. What had happened to the guy Dan, and the notes he had sent up to Fielder? Why hadn't Fielder received Ben's wallet? He recalled the letters scratched into the tree and the way someone had tried to brush tracks away with a bough. He had also observed something else important. Tom and Augusta had known it too. The man hadn't fallen from the narrow step near the dead tree. He either fell from high above, like out of an airplane, or he was thrown into the brush with a force that probably killed him. Fielder would request the appointment of a detective to investigate the crimes, maybe two investigators. His job was finished, all but one last part, writing his report and getting a copy to Fielder.

Fielder called early the next morning. Too early. Cain looked at his watch, 6:00 a.m. The sun was wide awake, hiding behind a great mass of cumulus clouds east of Prescott. Cain focused, and listened as he stared at the bandage on his leg and the raw scrape on his shin.

"Yeah?"

“Remember me? Medical Examiner.”

“Sure, Doctor, how could I forget?” He wasn’t awake enough to make small talk.

“Marshal Cain, I just finished going over your report for the...man. I’ve been over it and over it. Some things stand out... Do you know what I mean?”

Cain cleared his head by shaking it quickly from side-to-side. He didn’t have a clue. “No.”

“Well Marshal, I made a list of things... I listed things that you reported that we didn’t, okay?”

He thought about Fielder’s hedging way of avoiding saying something and the tone in the medical examiner’s voice. Something was wrong.

“Doctor, you think I made some mistakes... You question my report, right?”

“Jesus Cain, I don’t know you well enough to know what to think. All I know is that you reported things that, well, that we didn’t confirm.” There was a long pause and he could hear papers being shuffled. “What if I mention a few of the things I listed and... Well, let’s try and see what flies?”

Cain was awake now, getting angry. This was the second time someone had questioned his conduct.

“Okay, let’s take a simple one. You write here,” he shuffled a paper, “that you looked in the tent and you, ah... Oh here, that you saw a plastic container for jerky strips and you saw its lid at the back of the tent with holes punched in it. Right?”

“Close enough.”

“Okay, we didn’t find either container or lid. Can you explain that?”

Cain didn’t need much time for things to connect.

“Sure. It was evidence, and maybe a key to her death. Someone removed it. Tell me Fielder, do you punch holes in the top of your jerky container? If not, why would she?”

“Do you think you know?”

"No Doctor, I don't. But if it wasn't important, why would they come back and remove it?"

"Got it! Okay, you were at the site of the...what's his moniker, Carrigan death?"

"Easy to confirm, Doc, Augusta was with me. Oh, and that guy Dan you sent along."

"Dan? He was up there with you two? Didn't he go back to town with you?"

"Doctor. We now have another clue." He was mad enough to say it in a smart-ass way. "Dan was with us up on the hill, he watched from a distance and wrote lots of notes. After, I gave him Ben Carrigan's wallet and a note I had written to you. He agreed to walk back up and deliver them."

"My God!" The MDR on the tree and everything? It had been scratched there?"

"Fielder, who is he?"

"I don't really know. He drove the Suburban I came up in. I assumed he was part of the effort... Cain, sorry about questioning your observations. Your report is well written and I no longer question it. You had a tough time, are you okay now?"

"I'm getting better. Back on duty this morning. So what now?"

"Now I conclude that foul play was involved in both deaths. I'll have my report to your guys by noon. Thanks Cain. I'll get back with you..."

"Doctor?" He heard Fielder almost hang up. "Listen, could you tell the cause of death, the girl's, I mean?"

"Definitely drowned. Water in the lungs. Preliminary autopsy showed that she was breathing when she died. We're doing chemistry now. She wasn't dressed for swimming and there were no signs of a struggle, no significant marks on the body except the bites... Personally, I think we'll find that she ran to the water to get away from something... Javelina? You had a bad experience with them, think she did?"

Cain ignored the javelina question. “What about the bites?” As he asked, it hit him hard... “Damn,” he yelled into the phone, “why would someone punch holes in the top of the jerky container? To keep bugs alive, right? Doc, no wonder they took the container, it would have told us what bit her; what she was running from. There were bugs in the tent and there was evidence in the sleeping bag...”

He heard Fielder take a deep breath, “Well I’ll be damned... I know what the bites of killer bees, black widows, brown recluse, and one of our local wolf spiders look like... What insect could bite a person like... Cain, keep thinking. I have a lot of work to do.”

## Chapter 17

Would you believe me if I told you that I have a gift? I can sense other's pain and...and you are so... Ter, if you don't get help, I fear for you.

I HAD A STRANGE morning. First, I was awakened by the motel guy knocking on my door and telling me to answer the phone. A guy name of Wagner filled me in on the FAA's investigation into the water in my 172 aviation fuel. The good thing was that I met Celesta. Her name was Karen, a girl I had a crush on at Lincoln High. Well, after I left her I went back to the motel. I made a phone call and started to list all the things I had to do, but I felt awful. The next thing I knew, I was waking from a midmorning nap. The morning was gone and it was time to meet Celesta for lunch. I had planned to call Landsman and ask him some questions, and then call Kling in Phoenix and ask him the same ones. I was still trying to sort out their involvement in the sabotage of Greater Development's efforts in Prophet Canyon. I also needed to go up to the airport and get the key to the locked hanger and the keys to the replacement 172 the Denver-Phoenix Rental Company had sent.

I was still feeling pretty bad as I got ready to go to Pick's for lunch. My neck felt like the time I had run into a neanderthal line backer in the Homecoming game at Lincoln. It was my last game due to the jamming my spine took. My shoulders ached. I had spells when I felt like I would keel over. I took a hot shower, which helped. The thought of that lady helped even more.

She wasn't there when I arrived. Neither was the waiter who had befriended me and put me on notice that he had designs on Celesta. I got a table and held my ground until she showed. I must have looked bad. The first thing she did was look me in the eyes with those beautiful browns of hers and ask me what was wrong.

She had changed into an outfit that was even looser fitting than the one she wore at breakfast. It was summer, hot, time for clothing that let the air circulate. I

liked that. Besides, it left little to the imagination and my imagination had missed some really interesting things about her. I told her that I had to go up to the airport after lunch to check out my replacement 172. She wanted to fly with me, but I explained that all we could do today was check to see if the plane had been delivered and my maps and flight stuff transferred. She smiled and agreed that would be fun. I told her about my plane and the water problems.

We ordered, ate, and made small talk. She offered to rub my shoulders. "Not here, maybe later, you look so miserable." I really didn't feel all that bad, but nobody turns down a close encounter with a honey.

She loved the Jeep and didn't seem to mind the after 11:00 a.m. blast of hot air. I did. Celesta was having so much fun letting the wind blow her hair that I kept quiet. She told me how she loved the view from the top of the hill, while I watched a giant olive-drab Huey pass over us and head toward the port. As he passed over, I saw three others, then the 'chunk-chunk chunk-chunk' sound of helicopter blades hit us. She leaned over and looked up, screaming something at me that was lost in the wind.

I knew the FAA was concerned about my water problem. I knew that Wagner said he would get to the root of the problem, but this was too much. I wanted to turn around and get off the hill. I was really scared because the military was involved. I intended to get out of there and come back later, when Celesta gave me a big smile and told me how much she would love to see one of those "Viet Nam Machines."

It was okay... I mean the way it turned out. The clerk wasn't at the counter. An older guy with long sideburns had his elbows planted, staking out the territory. I asked him if the FAA guys were getting close to solving the case, as I watched the third copter whirl-in.

"Oh, they seem to be on to something. They took my guy to Phoenix. Think he may have a problem!" He paused and ran an index finger down each sideburn and

saw Celesta watching him with a puzzled look on her face. "I sing Elvis at the Cottonwood tonight."

I had to ask. "FAA bring in the troops?"

"Them copters? Naw! Sedona has a fueling contract with the Gov. They're on maneuvers out in the desert somewhere. Need fuel every few hours."

I was so relieved I almost cried. Celesta noticed. She turned, facing me, close, and whispered, "Ter, I don't know what's going on, but... Well, Ter I'm really concerned about you! You know what I mean? You act like... No, I can see that your body really hurts. You're carrying something heavy, Ter, something is tearing you apart."

She took my hand and led me back to the Jeep. I drove to the end of the field and found the hanger in the second row where the guy had said it would be. The key fit. I went in the little door, found the latches, and punched the electrical door opener. The light fell on a perfect twin of the 172 I had flown to Sedona. Only this one, I prayed, had clean fuel.

Celesta climbed in, on and around the cabin. She wanted me to take her up, but I couldn't then. I promised her a long ride. She eased off her nagging. I checked the plane out, noting that someone had transferred my maps. She watched me shut the big door and then, when the only light in the hanger came from the little entry door, she grabbed me from behind and gave me a big, full-body hug. I turned around and had some very definite plans. She pushed me back, and asked me what was wrong. She asked about my mom. "Ter, is your mother okay? I mean are you worried about her? Is that what's wrong?"

We fell off the hill, as the cowboys say, and she told me that she would like to spend time with me. "Even run errands with you, if you don't mind." It sounded great. I still had a back rub in mind; I was really sore.

She asked me if I'd been to Mars. I think I just stared at her. She smiled and said "turn-left at the bottom of the hill." Mars to her was the Red Rock Diner, an old drive-in that had become a set for Sedona's seeker



culture. We entered past saucers of the third kind, red rock formations, and other wonderful decorative things from space and beyond. Inside, the place was a hoot. Everything was extraterrestrial, including the waitresses and the cool drinks. She ordered and we sat across from each other in a booth, knee-to-knee, eye-to-eye.

I had work to do. I felt great and then bad. I was certain that I had the flu. I couldn't be effective, so what the hell, I could enjoy one lazy afternoon and get some business done. Celesta was my access to the Temple and the guy they called Orante. She let her foot rub up and down the back of my leg. I like that about her, she lets her feelings be known.

"You seem more relaxed now, Ter. How long have you carried this... This awful burden? Oh, I'm afraid I know! Since high school. Right?"

I nodded, my neck muscles sore as a boil. "Maybe, I don't know."

"Would you believe me if I told you that I have a gift? I can sense other's pain and...and you are so... Ter, if you don't get help, I fear for you. I mean, nobody should go through life carrying so much weight; suffering so much." She rubbed the back of my leg with the top of her foot and reached over and laid her hand on mine, letting her thumb sneak inside my hand and gently rub my palm. "Is that why you are... Well, why you never married?"

I tried to explain that I wasn't really all that screwed up. That I had been working hard and had responsibility for my mother. She smiled and said she understood. She told me that I couldn't go on this way. She told me that we had chemistry; however she couldn't get close to me if I kept pushing her away. "Not physically, emotionally!" She stressed. That got through to me. I'd been told that before, more than once. I looked at my watch. "3:30," I announced. "You know, I think I've had it for today." I wanted to ask her to come back to my motel. I didn't have to.

“Do you do back rubs on the first date? I promised you a back rub.”

Just then two ladies came in. They saw Celesta and immediately headed to our booth. Celesta greeted them and I tried to stand. I made the effort anyway, and they smiled at me.

Celesta made the introductions. I can't remember their names. The blond was with her the first time I saw her, and the other one kept staring at me as if I was an alien.

“Are you okay?” she asked me like a third grade teacher would ask a boy who had just fallen on the playground. I guess I nodded. Celesta jumped the girl before I could say anything. “No, he's not, he's been working too hard, and the reason he looks so gray is that he's really hurting right now!”

The blond, looked long and hard at me and agreed. “You men! You have this macho thing. Man, you had better take care of yourself! You can, you know! Celesta, you help this boy! He's cute.”

They took over the booth as we left. Celesta took my arm and led me to the Jeep. I felt okay between bouts of flu, I was sure that's what I had, which kept hitting me without warning.

She asked me if I could drive. I assured her that I was okay. We got to the motel and I led her to my room. We made small talk, the kind that breaks the ice. Then she took over.

“Ter, I don't know you well enough to be here except as a friend who can give great back rubs, okay?”

I got her drift and shrugged. Not exactly disappointed. I knew how things could go. “That's okay Celesta. I think what I really do need is a back rub.”

“You can say that again, but it's only a temporary fix. If you want to get rid of that monster riding on your back, and to get your system back to health, you're going to have to do a lot of work. But Ter, you can do it! Now strip and lay here on the bed.”

“Strip?”

“Of course, you don’t swim with your socks on do you?”

Her logic was not debatable. I went into the bathroom, stripped, and wrapped a towel around me. I did a graceless spread onto the bed and lay, wondering if she would do both sides.

“That’s better. Now this might feel cold.” She gushed some lotion out of a small bottle she had taken from her purse.

“Brrrr.”

She kneaded me for a few seconds and stopped. I lay there wondering what she was doing...

“Ter, it’s much worse than I thought!”

“What’s worse,” I asked, afraid that I already knew the answer.

She used her thumbs to communicate the state of my condition. I know I jumped when she hit a few of the really bad knots. The rest of the time I just lay there and manned it out.

“Ter, do you know what you’ve done to your body?” She didn’t wait for my excuses. “Do you know that you could permanently cripple yourself? The knots you felt are places where poisons have built up. Toxic poisons that could kill you! I can relieve some of the pain, maybe, but what you need is a complete change of lifestyle. Honey, you are really in bad shape!”

She let her body down on top of mine and I felt her hot breath on the back of my neck. Her body was soft against mine and my imagination had all it needed to imagine. She lay there for a few minutes, one hand gently fondling my temple and the side of my face. I felt good then, really warm and secure. I guess I went to sleep.

I remember waking several times. Once, when she rolled off of me and I felt the cool blast of the air conditioner’s breath on my sweaty back. The other time, I must have rolled over on my side and put an arm over her. She said something, and I could feel her hand exploring

my chest. I moved closer to her and began to rub her back. She gave back little mewling sounds and I could feel her body tense beneath my hand. She kissed me lightly on the lips.

“No! Ter, I want to but not now! Not with you in this condition. It wouldn’t be right, you need to get help sweetie, and sex right now would not be the right thing for you.” She swung off the bed and went into the bathroom. I sat up, aching and alone.

She came out of the bathroom, brushing her hair. I had sensed it; thought it was only my imagination. She had taken off her top; she had been laying on me, skin-to-skin.

“Oh,” she said when she caught my stare, “I was afraid it would get wrinkled.” She leaned over me and got her blouse from the other side of the bed. I reached up. “Ter, I’m serious. You need to help yourself; save yourself. I have never known anyone with so much... Well, so much poison built up in their system. Please, Honey,” she stood in front of me letting the thin cotton flow over her head and down over her. “Please know that I want to be with you... I don’t want to hurt you more.” She had tears in her eyes. I felt awful. “Can you take me home? I didn’t realize it was so late.”

I got dressed and, as we gathered her purse and my keys, I tried to talk to her. She begged me to “let it be for tonight!” and I felt a level of frustration which was worse than I ever felt before. We walked out to the Jeep. She wouldn’t even look at me. I wanted to give her a hug, and was just about to take her in my arms, when a car swung into the lot and turned into the space we were in. We jumped back . The next thing I knew, she had disappeared. I tried to talk to the ladies in the Toyota that had almost hit us. Well, a lady and a young girl about sixteen, when the flu hit me so hard I could barely stand. The two newcomers had to help me back to my room. I suspected that it wasn’t the flu. Celesta was right, I was full of poisons.

I slept well, in spite of my body. My shoulders still ached as I showered and I still had a sick feeling in my gut. I hooked in the computer and flash-mailed Mom's messages. There was one from Connors. I realized that I had promised to keep him updated; I sure as hell didn't want the Gopher-man coming to Sedona to check on me.

I didn't count the messages. I guessed that Mom had written every hour. I read through some and at least she was okay and Carol was there. I was in even greater danger of losing my inheritance, as she would give it to charity where someone decent could help others with it. I was a heel, like my Uncle Patrick had been. Maybe it was genetic, from my father's side.

I wrote a quick note back, assuring her that I cared and that I was working twenty hours a day. When I unplugged the computer, I felt another wave of flu. It passed.

I thought about going to Pick's and maybe seeing Celesta there. Then something got sideways with that thought and I decided to find another place, at least for breakfast. I had visions of Celesta, great visions. Something about a woman sliding a blouse over her head kinda sticks with a man. There was something else tho', she had walked off and left me last night and that really bothered me. Something's wrong with a person who would do that.

I took one last look in the bathroom mirror and decided that I looked okay even though I was being poisoned from within. I smiled at my reflection and promised myself some time off after I got the check from this job.

As I closed the door, I noticed that the sun wasn't burning down with the intensity I was trying not to get used to. I looked over to the east and saw why. Giant clouds were floating just above the red rock rim beyond where the Schnebly Hill road wound up toward the rising sun. I had decided that clouds were alien in this desert latitude. A

dark Mexican maid saw me looking at the sky. "Monsoon Senior. It comes! Agua."

I started down the walk to the parking lot. At the corner, I literally ran into the young girl who had been in the Toyota that almost hit me. She came bounding down the steps and turned right into me.

"Hi. Remember me?"

"How could I forget? You got me to my room last night."

"Did you see the clouds? The manager says it's late, but not to get too excited. He says it's the fake monsoon. Lots of clouds but no rain yet."

"I saw them just now." I wondered if the good-looking lady that had almost run me over was with her.

"Where's your... " I almost said mom, but thought better of it."

"Oh, she's coming. She went back in for her book."

"Are you traveling..." I knew that by leaving the opening she would finish my sentence.

"Yeah, she picked me up hitchhiking in Colorado. We decided to travel together. It was either that or not getting admitted to the university, because of my Dad, you know."

I didn't. I decided to leave it alone.

We talked about how beautiful Sedona is and she asked me if I was here on vacation. I told her I was working on a project, and would be around for a week or so.

"Did you eat? You can join us for breakfast. It would be nice if you did, being as we almost ran over you and all."

"That is if you don't have other plans." The great looking driver appeared on the landing above and smiled down on us. Her long dark hair fell forward, catching the light. She looked like a sexy angel.

I liked the way the morning was progressing. "I could use some coffee and maybe... I would love to join you, where should we go?"

She came down to our level before she answered. "I don't like places that seethe with tourists. We saw a café out near the edge of town that looked like a regulars' hangout. Can we go there?"

"I'll follow you," I said, bowing graciously.

"Oh, by-the-by, my name is Ter. Terrance Martel."

The girl smiled and announced that her name was "Issy. Just Issy."

I turned to the brunette. She gave me a wholesome smile and said her name, "Misty."

In the parking lot Issy saw my open Jeep and let out a squeal. "Wow. You get to ride around in that?"

"Why don't you ride to the café with me? Okay by you, Misty? Do you mind driving there by yourself?"

We got the wind going just as the sun broke through and the clouds went to wherever clouds go on hot days. I liked the girl's energy. "So what's that about your dad and the university?"

"Well, I was supposed to start BYU this fall. They have a summer program to get kids used to their ways. I was heading that way when I met Misty. But, my dad didn't want me to go to BYU, so I was kinda going on my own. He's a bishop in our church. You know what I mean? He could just call up there and they wouldn't let me in. In fact, I think he already did. So, Misty was heading to California and we, well, it's a long story. We heard about here, and we went to the Orante Temple last night."

I turned and looked at her. Her reaction was that I doubted her.

"Oh, you think I'm too young. I'm not. I'm eighteen and I have my picture ID to prove it."

"On no, that's not it at all! You mentioned the Orante Temple. I've heard about them. I want to learn about it too."

The place the Toyota turned into was called Friendly's. From the looks of the cars and trucks in the lot, it catered to regular folks, maybe even some who worked for a living. There wasn't a Mercedes or one of those new

BMW convertibles near the place. Somehow, it didn't seem to fit in Sedona. I liked it.

Inside, we got to nonsmoking where there was plenty of room. Issy told Misty that I was interested in Orante. I smiled. She nodded. She said that's what brought them to Sedona. Issy looked at me for confirmation that I knew she hadn't been lying.

"I don't know anything about it, except that the Temple overlooks a canyon that a client of mine is doing a development in."

Misty looked at me with her great eyes and nodded. "We went there last night for an audience with the Master, Orante. We were coming back when we almost hit you and your friend."

The mention of Celesta zapped me back to the memory of the way she was last night. "Well, she's kinda a friend," I said shyly, "She's someone I met in high school, would you believe it! And we were just visiting." I didn't know why I felt that I had to explain myself except that there was something about Misty that pulled me toward her.

"We had an audience," Issy said, "and then Orante sent Misty a present."

Misty jerked back, noticeably angered by Issy's mention of the gift. "Oh, it was really nothing..."

"Oh it was too, Misty! Ter, it was a statue of Siamese Twins, joined about here." She twisted and pointed to her hip.

"It was a little gift, so what!" from her tone of voice I could tell that the present had really gotten to her.

"Why twins? It seems like a strange present." I should have kept my mouth shut. Misty sat even further back and glared at Issy, then me. I tried to soften the situation, whatever it was.

"Well, the reason I said that is that I was a twin. I had a twin. He died at birth." It was true. My mom always wondered if the other twin had lived if he would have been more loving toward her.



Misty didn't relax, she grew even tenser, if that were possible. I didn't like getting off on this tact with her. I was forming other plans. I decided to meet her glare head-on. "Okay Misty, this is getting you upset and I'm sorry. Why don't we order and talk about something else?"

She looked like someone caught picking in public. She shook her head and relaxed a little. "Ter, Issy, I'm sorry. I had a bad experience a week or so ago and it was based upon the premise that I had a lost twin... Oh, it was very complicated, but anyway, when Orante gave me that present, I thought he must have known something. It seemed to tie into the experience I had, and it wasn't pleasant."

I did some quick thinking. "Did you by any chance have to fill-out a questionnaire for the Temple? Did it ask your birth date, favorite color, medical concerns, things like that?"

Issy spoke up before Misty could process what I was hinting at. "Sure, they had us fill some general info on a form they gave us."

"And," I was on to something now, "were you born under Gemini?"

She nodded, thinking hard.

"I know how they do that. It's an old trick used by religious nuts when they work a tent meeting. They get information about participants and then make connections. Orante probably looked at your registration and gave you a gift based upon your sign. I'll bet if you could find it, there would be a closet full of statues, one for each sign. Were the twins named Castor and Pollux?"

She thought a moment. "No, something like Chang and Eng, I don't know what that means."

The waitress handed us each a menu. "I do!" she said, nonplused.

We all looked up at her. "The names you said, Chang and Eng? They were the first recorded Siamese Twin's names. They make statues of them in Thailand for

parents who have twins. I think we still have one at home in Chicago.”

“Were you a twin, then?” Misty asked.

“No, not really. But my sisters were and I was really jealous of them.”

She took their orders and went off, sharing wisdom at other tables. Misty looked relieved as if the weight of the whole world had gone from her.

“Ter, thanks!”

I looked at her, wondering what was going on in her head.

“I can’t explain. You helped me see that some things are games people play on others. I was the butt of a game that was supposed to hook me or something.” She paused and I could see red creeping up into her cheeks. “You know, I was dumb enough to think he had some inside information and that he could see into my past, my future, me... Ter, I really mean it. Thanks!”

I was curious. “Are you a twin, or just born under Gemini?”

“I don’t think I’m a twin. There is a theory that twins were considered bad luck and that I was separated from my twin at birth. I know it’s not true. It’s only an interesting concept.”

“I know that I had a twin. My mother thinks he would have turned out better than I. He died. It was tough on her.”

Issy had enough. “Okay you guys, why all this talk? We went to the Temple and had an audience. I really liked it. It’s pretty much like I thought it would be, the powerful magician and all.”

Misty looked at her and then caught my eye. We smiled. “Iss, he isn’t a magician, he’s a spiritual teacher. Magicians are masters of illusion.”

I sat, wise enough not to say anything.

“Oh, I know, but it’s like they have all this magic and stuff and they know the secret ways. Isn’t that right?” She was getting huffy.

“Right! Of course you’re right about that.” She turned to me, “Iss really liked the Temple and the people we met there.”

“And you?” I asked.

“I... I’m not sure. I have a lot to think about. I want to go back there again and learn more.” She could have stopped there. Something made her want to share. “You know Ter, I am... We all, are looking for a better way to live our lives. I’m not happy with the choices I’ve made in the past and... I’m looking hard.”

I really connected with what she was saying. It wasn’t just because Celesta had made me conscious of what I was doing to my body. I had never searched for the ring that Misty was trying to reach. Deep down I knew that someday I would have to.

“Misty, I want to learn about the Temple and this Master, Orante. The problem is, I’m working on a project that may put me into conflict with the Temple’s people. The company I’m working for is developing a property near the Temple and that puts me in a place where I can’t connect with them right now.” I stopped talking and watched her reaction. She seemed okay with what I had told her. “Misty, do you think it would be possible for me to keep in contact with you and learn what you learn... Learn from you, I mean?”

Her face lit up, the color came creeping back. I really liked that. She had the bearing of a lady and the innocence of a girl. I noted that it was a strange and intriguing combination.

Feast or famine. That is the story of my life. Women come into my life in two’s and three’s. My problem is that they left the same way.

Celesta was a woman I could go for. I felt attracted to her physically, more than spiritually. But, Celesta had something about her that kinda cut into me. It was a sharpness, a part of her personality like someone would develop who had lived a hard life and had lost the depth of

innocence that young people have. I think the word 'cynicism' fits. Deep inside her I suspected she was bitter. Pulling away from me, walking away like she did... I think that reflects scorn!

Misty was almost an exact opposite, not that I knew her well enough to judge. I sensed a completely different type of energy. She had an openness, cloaked with pain, I could sense that. Her energy was as youthful and fresh. If I could pick between the two, I would get it on with Celesta, knowing that it was just a way to play. But I would get to know Misty. She also turned me on, yet there seemed to be so much more to her.



## Chapter 18

'Uh oh,' he thought, 'she doesn't have a name. Title only, means I'm the State vs. You, you insignificant citizen!'

DENVER WAS HOT. Greater Development's offices were hot. The city was locked in a heat wave. This was the fifth day the temperature had reached over 103 degrees, a new record. Sam Prader parked his silver Lexus in the parking garage off 14<sup>th</sup> Street. At least the garage shielded the car from the sun, he thought, as he made his way to the elevator, took it down a floor, crossed over and entered the cool, dark interior of the state building. He was looking for the office of the State Archaeologist, a letter in his pocket demanding that he appear and answer questions "vital to a possible criminal prosecution."

The heat was nothing to the inner fire that burned in his chest. How had they found out? It was little more than a week since he had requested that they be involved. Who had told them? What could they do to him? They couldn't prove a thing! He had thought about bringing Guy Zills along to represent him, but then a lawyer would make it seem as if he were guilty. He was smart enough not to get trapped. Zills could tear into them later.

"Prader, here by request," he announced himself and looked around for a water cooler. "Got anything cool to drink?"

"Good afternoon, Mr. Prader. Your appointment is at 2:00, not long to wait now. Sorry, our water cooler is not working. Please take a seat."

He sat, cooling outside, still burning inside. What did they know? Maybe this was about something else? He worried through memories of what they had done.

The inner door opened and a woman about forty, built like a fireplug, came out of the office. "Mr. Prader, thank you for coming. Won't you please come in. I am the State Archaeologist."

'Uh oh,' he thought, 'she doesn't have a name. Title only, means I'm the State vs. You, you insignificant citizen!'

Two could play that game, and he wasn't about to let her get the upper hand.

"Your name, Miss?"

"It's Ms., and I am Doctor Julia Jesepps, an 's' two 'p's' and an 's.'"

"But you prefer...?"

"Doctor, when I'm at work."

He looked at her and saw everything he hated in a person. There wasn't even the slightest hint of a woman under her facade. Physically, she looked like she had dug the trenches around the Sphinx all by herself. She was dressed like a man trying to dress like a man trying not to be a woman. What he saw made him cautious.

"Nice to meet you, Doctor. I was surprised by your letter. Glad to come down and help."

She moved to the back of her desk and lick-thumbed through a stack of papers, pulling a letter out and studying it as if she had never seen it before.

"You're the Principal at Greater Development, here in Colorado?"

"I am... In fact, there are two of us."

"You own the land on Walker Road?"

"Well, no, not really. There are several land owners. Greater Development is the company hired to improve the site."

"You knew there was a cemetery there, on the land?"

"You mean on a separate property. I was told that there was a site, but that it had never been used. We avoided it in our planning, just in case..." he paused, and then played a card, "Oh, I am beginning to understand. One of our tractors...trucks or something has damaged the site?"

"If you call moving the fences and headstones damaging a site, I guess you do understand!"

“What?” he faked indignation and went on the offensive. “Doctor Jesepps! You had better not go further with that type of talk. I don’t move fences...what is your implication? If you proceed with these types of statements,” he was careful not to say ‘charges,’ “you will need to deal with me through my attorneys! Now, can we proceed civilly, or do I need to leave?”

She didn’t bat an eye. “Leave if you want to, I’m ready to take this file to the Attorney General. I’ve called him. He suggested this meeting. You may do as you like. I will proceed as I have to.”

He thought fast. They knew! How much? He would try to find out.

“Doctor, I’m totally confused.” He used a tone guaranteed to soothe and relax, “It would help me if I knew what you are talking about. Please, I can’t help if I don’t know what the problem is. Please fill me in, I promise you...you will have my full cooperation.”

It worked, the tone of voice he used was just submissive enough to hook her.

“Well, Mr. Prader, perhaps you don’t know, although I find that very hard to believe. Here is what you should know!” She jerked the file around on her desk so that he could read the top sheet. He hadn’t brought his reading glasses, and although he held the sheet out as far away as he could, he couldn’t make it out well enough to read it. “I’m very sorry, but I don’t have my reading glasses with me, damn stupid, but I didn’t bring them.” He patted his pockets again, just to make the point.

“Really! Well, here let me!” She turned the file back toward her. “I’ll summarize. This one’s from the archaeologist we hired to investigate a request made by a Mr. Sampson that my office determine the status of the Sampson Cemetery. We had no one in-house, so we contacted the finest archaeological group in the state, the Crow Canyon Archaeological Center in southwestern Colorado. They had someone in Denver waiting to present a paper at the Society of American Archaeologists annual



meeting. She had the time, and got the job done within two days. We usually wouldn't send such a highly skilled researcher to investigate a historic site like the Sampson site. Unlucky for you, I guess... Anyway, this is her report."

Prader nodded, knowing what the report said, feigning ignorance.

"Go on," he said, as if intrigued by the report.

"State was lucky. Most archaeologists would have missed the obvious. She found weed detritus under a headstone base, a broken part of one. That tipped her off. Then she traced the fence and found that it had been moved there recently... All but the south line. That's your development line, isn't it?"

"Well, maybe, I don't know the directions out there."

"Long and short of it, the fence was moved. She did a quick and dirty on your land where the pumping station goes... Guess what she found?"

"My God, you mean the site was bigger than we were told?" He wanted to plant doubt in her mind. There was always a maybe.

"Now this letter..." she thumbed out a copy of a legal document... "This is your signature, isn't it?"

He recognized the document as the release Sampson, the guy Martel had hired to pretend to be an heir, had signed stating that the site had never been used as a cemetery and giving up all future rights to it. His signature was right there, where he had placed it. Martel had it prepared. Oh no, he should have held it or postdated it. He had screwed up!

"Strange that a document like this one exists, wouldn't you say? Imagine the blunder! The fake heir you hired signed over his rights even before the archaeologist got on the site. Makes for more than interesting reading, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes... I did sign that document, I remember signing it. But, I had no idea that the archaeological work hadn't been done."

“Mr. Prader, I’m sure you can tell that to the Attorney General. He asked me to meet with you and I have fulfilled my obligation. Please have a good day. I have another appointment.”

Connors was still at the office when Prader returned, scared out of his wits, angrier than he had been in years.

“What’d the state want?” Connors was stuffed into his office chair, working on a stack of bluelines.

“Goddamn Martel! I trusted that SOB... Goddamn him to hell!”

Connors extended his neck as if gawking, then did a turtle with his head,

“Martel? What does he have to do with...” it was beginning to click, “Moving the site...he got caught?”

“He, hell! I got caught. The state AG has enough to put me away... I’ve got to get Zill. I’ve been calling him on my car phone... Then I’m going to can that SOB’s ass for not warning me not to sign that document until after. He’s probably down in Arizona mucking things up for us there. Damn...” He dropped into his desk chair, and put his head on his arms.

Gopher watched him, a big smile on his face. He cleared it, laughing inside. ‘So that damned Martel is finally going to get his wings clipped,’ he thought. ‘Prader’s damaged, may be out for a while.’ He smiled again, a big fullback grin. ‘That puts me a little closer to my goal.’ He thought about that and formed a plan he had been unwilling to implement before.

“Sammy! Sammy! We’re in this together. You get to Zill and start on that end. I know how to handle Martel... Just give me time. I don’t want to slow his work in Arizona. Okay, guy? You and me, we’ll hang Martel for this. Let me set it up, okay?”

Prader raised his head and stared at Connors. The man had been a giant pain in the butt, always a lead-ass, always more greedy than competent, but they were

partners. What happened to him could happen to Connors too. He wanted to handle Martel. "Okay, I like that. You let out the rope. Zill and I will tie the noose." He felt better. Still, he had to go home. What a day!

## Chapter 19

"Call it P-r-o-f-i-t Canyon and you'll be well into the idea, but you knew that one already."

I HAD A FULL DAY planned. I decided to drop in on Landsman and question him about GD's problems and the deaths in Prophet Canyon. Then I wanted to call Kling in Phoenix and ask him for the same information. By comparing the two perspectives, I might get a clue as to their involvement. I had also had time to process some of the information Doc Connely, the aged sociologist, had given me. I had a few bones to pick with him. Then, and I looked at the list I had made and wadded into my pocket, I wanted to hike into the canyon from the Tarantula Pass end. I hadn't seen a trail in from that end, but I had seen the girl. I liked the idea of coming from the high ground. That was something I had learned well in the military.

Paul Landsman's Continental was parked in his reserved space. I parked next to it, where the Jeep had been the night I arrived. Inside, each cubicle was occupied by an agent, and each agent had recently had her hair done and nails glued on. Each was on the phone, and the place was buzzing with Real business. Landsman's secretary could have been cut out of one of those Arrow Shirt advertisements I knew as a kid. Only problem, she was a she. I think the word is unisex, if the one sex is male.

Landsman wasn't surprised to see me.

"Martel. Thank God, you got my message."

I hadn't. "Hi Paul, what's up?"

He did a little look around and then focused on me.

"Remember when we talked the other night I told you about losing our trade with the Forest Service for Tarantula Pass? We both wondered if the outfit who got it out from under us would try to sell it to us?" I nodded.

"Well, like I said in my message, someone wants to buy out GD's interests and take over the whole project.

Here,” and he handed me a fax from Kling, “looks like this offer will be hard for GD to turn down. We thought they would try to sell the traded land to us... Now It may be the other way around.”

I read the note on the facsimile and handed it back to Landsman. The offer was open-ended or, in our lingo, a you-fill-in-the-blanks tender.

“Well, what does that do for your end of the deal?” I knew he was counting on big returns.

He handed me another fax.

I read it and understood. “So you’re in either way. I can understand that, they need you. They need good marketing and sales.”

Landsman got up and walked around the great ship of his desk. I studied a fine Navajo rug on the wall as I let things settle in my mind.

“I’m not sure. Maybe they want me to handle the takeover. Maybe they aren’t even planning to develop the canyon. I get the feeling that this offer to me isn’t about marketing and sales...” He stood, anger seemed to rage through him.

“Martel, do they think I’m stupid? He paused and sat on the edge of the desk, facing me. “I mean, they intend to remain anonymous and work through a third party? Who the hell would buy into a deal like that? I’m supposed to take it on faith that they have two sticks to rub together? I’m supposed to believe in them?”

I thought about that. No one with any sense would make a deal until the source of the money was known.

“What if they put up the bucks, an escrow or something? I mean clean money, of course.”

“Thought of that. By law, they would have to ident, so they won’t do it that way. I don’t deal with beards or ghosts. Martel, help me find out who these bastards are!”

“Paul, you had names the other night...”

“Sure, Oren Fulks. I also mentioned Dennis J. Pillar. He’s richer than Gates. He’s chair of the Temple’s board, and he’s buying up everything he can in the area,

probably with Temple money. Still, I've looked for his name or fingerprints on this... Nothing! I have people who know him and do his business. They say he's not involved, I believe them." He paused... "Pillar's involvement with the cult, his use of Temple funds, would seem to be the clue we're looking for..., but it isn't. It could be the Temple... If it is, it's someone other than Pillar calling the shots. Can you take that on my word?"

I was learning something about Landsman that helped. Now, what about Kling? I avoided answering his question.

"Paul, have you talked to Kling about this?"

"Sure have. He's hot for the deal. Sure, he can cover GD's losses and make himself look good. He's already talked to Denver and he says Prader is preoccupied. He's in some kind of trouble and Connors is looking hard at the deal. He thinks they'll go." He took out a handkerchief and wiped the corners of his mouth. "Funny thing... Kling talks as if they want you out."

"Me out? Hell, I just started!"

"Yeah, but don't you see? If you keep digging and maybe find out too much... Well Martel, you could screw their deal up. That's why I want you to work for me, but on the QT you understand? I need to know who tendered that buy." He wiped his forehead. He was sweating. "And Martel, these unknowns? They may have murdered four people!"

I must have stared right through him. He winced, and looked down.

"Four? You told me about two bodies, the ones they took from the canyon."

"I learned this morning, one of the bodies was Ben Carrigan's. He and two other Whitetops were involved in leading the opposition to development in Prophet Canyon. The other two died while out hiking several months ago, at different times. Now I don't think it was a coincidence."

"So you think Kling and Denver are getting into bed with people who murder to get what they want? Come on

now, there's no development in the world that's that important. What's up there? Gold?"

"No, no gold or any other minerals. That canyon is just like a dozen others, nothing to log, mine, extract... It's land to develop, and, have you seen the cost projections Kling's group made? The return to the developer is less than 10 per cent. Hardly a development to kill for."

"Then we can only conclude that it *is* something else. Some other economically viable return. It seems like it has to be the Temple group. I'm starting to work on that. What can you tell me about them, and bottom line, what's in it for them that is worth killing for?"

"Religion? Cult fanaticism? Maybe they bury their mistakes down there... Hell, I've spent a lot of hours trying to understand their angle. I'm not sure they even have one."

"Okay, let's think linearly. First a reason. We leave that blank. Then, someone is in charge. Who would that be?"

"It could be Pillar, but I really don't think so. There is a guy... A real estate agent and developer who made his fortune here years ago. I say him, because he gave it all up and went with the cult on the hill. Name's Gwinn. I think he would be my first choice. He'd have information anyway. I'll check him out, okay?"

"Good. Next: Organization. They don't act alone, they have to have people, a place to meet, operating funds, contacts with surveyors, contractors... Someone had to sign that Forest Service trade agreement. There has to be a money trail... Ring any bells?"

"I think I told you. They have a front organization in Prescott. That's where all the paper trails lead. It's simply a guy in an office who stamps paid on invoices all day and who signed all the papers... Nothing I could find out about his employers. It's a one-man development company with bucks, the perfect blind..."

"Paul, you could try to get information, I've seen these fronts before."

“They are ironclad, Martel! Only the Feds can get in...with cause. If it's the Temple guys, they have all the personnel and offices, but they would need contacts. You're right, Martel! They'd need a crew...specialists as you say. Okay, that means contacts with the outside world, like through the other development outfit in Prescott, or maybe even an architectural firm. What did you find out from the Conception Company guys?”

“I went in there thinking that they were the Monkey Wrench Gang. I came away admiring the way they work. No, I would almost bet it isn't them. Who else?”

“I'll start checking around... You know Martel, a lot of good people left GD. I've never understood that... I mean, they have mortgages, families... You know what? I think some of them may have gone to work for our mystery company. What do you think? Am I grasping?”

“You're right! What of your friend, any word?”

“Oh, you don't know? Bill Speck's in a coma, little chance he will ever recover. They have asked the family to move him to Barrows in Phoenix. It's hard to believe, he may become number five.”

The playing field had changed. Now Landsman and I were about to team against GD. What was it for? I had to have the answer before I could commit. If GD could sell out for big bucks, we would each get ours. I could go home. Somehow that didn't make me feel any too well. The pain came back in my shoulders. I got that tar-pit feeling in my gut. I wasn't ready to forget Arizona and get back to cool and colorful.

“Landsman, why should we worry? I mean, what if GD sells-out and we each get paid... Why not let it end there?”

“I'd agree with you Martel, except for a little thing called experience. Nothing in this business is for nothing... Guys who play at these games don't give anything away. If I believed that we would get paid and that it would end there...” he paused and was obviously thinking hard, “I would take the money and grin. But you forget. GD is out,



I'm still in. I have to work with this new group whatever happens to me."

He was right. It was my business to run interference for companies that hired me. That's what I do. If GD flaked out, I had another job waiting, an interesting one at that. I couldn't help but think of Celesta and Misty. Besides, I was beginning to like the area a lot.

"Well Paul, here's a, 'What if?' What if we both move ahead with the information gathering phase of this. Then, *if* we can't determine who the powers behind the buy-out are, we both get out. If we find out what goes, and you think you can work with it, then I'm in and I'll run interference for you. If we find murder and mayhem, we'll be forewarned and run like hell."

He offered me his hand and smiled. "A win-win situation. I'll put my detective hat on and dig deeper. You go on as you are until GD pulls the plug officially. Be careful about what you report to Connors. You may be placed in the middle of a very bad situation. You know Martel, I can't help but think that we're overlooking the obvious. I have a funny feeling that it should all connect. It doesn't yet!"

We made small talk. We were both anxious to get on with our parts. Landsman showed me to the outer door, told me I was a good man, and he thanked me.

"I am really enjoying your Jeep. It's perfect for running around this area."

"It's my son's. Well it was. He lost his driver's license. I took it away from him until he figures things out."

I stopped at a gas station and called Doc Connely. He picked up the phone on the first ring. I asked if we could get together. He didn't hesitate. I suggested the Library, he said there was a place in uptown where he liked to eat breakfast... Did I know how to get to Pick's? I agreed to meet him there within the half-hour. After I hung up, I thought better of it. I didn't want to run into Celesta,

not just yet anyway. I tried to call him back and change the location. I let it ring; he didn't answer.

She wasn't at Pick's. My waiter friend was back on duty. I had driven around on Jordan Road, killing a few minutes and thinking about Connelly. Maybe being that old gave him insights? Sure, he had to have a lot of information. What bothered me was the way he overstated his conclusions. He carried a lot of anger. What I needed from him was history about the players and the way each fit in. Information about guys like Pillar and Orante, the fellow Gwinn that Landsman had mentioned, others. I had a lot of holes in my understanding of things. I also felt that he would know the true value of Prophet Canyon. I hoped he did. It would save me a trip into the place and a lot of time.

The waiter greeted me as I stood looking around.

"You're looking for the old guy, right?"

I nodded. "How did you know?"

"He just got here. Said a guy would come looking for him. He described you. He's back there."

He pointed to a divider that stuck out into the corridor that led to the kitchen. I wouldn't have given the hallway a second look, except now I could see a latticework partition and behind it, barely visible, Connelly's head.

"Does he come here often?"

"Doc? Sure, he owns the building. He loves to sit back there and watch the customers. Pick rents from him."

I made my way back to the booth. He greeted me.

"Can't get enough, can you?"

I smiled and sat down. Instead of facing the back of the place, I sat with my back to the wall and my legs on the bench seat. That gave me a limited view of the dining area and all the view I needed of Mr. Potato.

The waiter came and placed a large plate with three eggs, sunny-side-up, four pieces of toast, a pile of hash browns that looked large enough to wear, and three

fat sausages oozing grease. He dug in, telling the waiter at the same time to get me, "...one of the same."

"No, please! I've already had breakfast. Okay, how about toast and coffee? Lots of coffee. The strongest you have."

"I depend on coffee too," he said as he ran a chunk of toast through egg yellow. Best damned laxative I know of. Some people think it's the caffeine, they're just kidding. It's the 'go' power they're addicted to."

What could I add?

"Doc, I have a bone to pick with you."

"Great expression! Do you know where it came from?"

"Doc," I started again, ignoring his side trip, "you painted a pretty bleak picture of the people here. Especially the ones from the depression generations."

"Not true to reality, but bleak. Yes I did, but you know, it's worse than I described."

"No, I don't think so. Sure there had to be some really damaged kids who were formed in the depression years. But you know what? I think most of them overcame that and went on to live good lives."

"Think whatever you want. The fact is that maybe twelve percent, fewer probably, ever got beyond their animal needs. I've projected that maybe three percent of that generation know what charity is. No, son, you're the one whose wrong!" He jammed a fork full of shredded potatoes into his mouth and kept talking, "and to the seventh generation, or so the Book says. I don't believe that, but you can see the same ugly patterns in their kids. And I guess even some of their kids, although the way people mix today, everything gets diluted, even "Only I Count" attitudes.

"You really believe that?" Dumb question, but I found that I was agreeing with him and that bothered me.

"Okay Son, what brought you here?"

"Dennis Pillar?"

He looked at me, chewing, and shook his head from side-to-side. "It's a game? I'm supposed to say the first thing that comes into my head? Okay, I'll play." He forked in a corner of yellowed toast. "Pillar. Vicious, cunning, myopic, dangerous..., political, socialite. Oh, and able to convince everybody that he paves the way to Heaven."

I winced. "He a depression baby?"

"You do believe!"

"Gwinn."

"My God, how did you learn about him?" He was searching my face. His voice told me he didn't want an answer.

"Convert, sorry, true believer, trying to make up for what he was."

"You mean a depression kid who got religion?"

"I mean a guy like myself who woke up and... How did you get his name, anyway?"

"Paul Landsman knew him."

"Landsman... Let's see, honest, shrewd, powerful, alone... Parents were depression kids. He has part of their crap."

I wouldn't have put Landsman on my list. I was glad he did.

"Orante."

"You really want to know? Okay, well... Opportunist, trapped, wise, completely controlled, spiritually powerful. Have you met him?"

"No."

"What a treat you have in store. The guy does good, what more can I say?"

"One more. Connely."

He grinned. "Wise, knowledgeable, sad. Probably lived too long. Oh, and one other thing. He's the man with the answers... If you ask the right questions."

"How am I doing?" My breakfast arrived and I let it sit in front of me.

“Hot and cold. Why don’t you ask me about Prophet Canyon?”

I smiled. “I was going to!”

“Good, because one answer is aquifer.”

I thought about that and made a note to call Kling. I was about to pursue the water issue when he continued.

“Want to know what another answer is?” I caught his eye. “Call it P-r-o-f-i-t Canyon and you’ll be *well* into the idea, but you knew that one already.”

He stopped to drink, spoon and chew.

“Doc, how many answers are there?” I didn’t like the game. He was definitely in charge and I would only get what he chose to give me.

“Oh, one more, probably, that counts. It’s the hardest one to explain. I’ll make it a riddle. What’s given up by one, coveted by another, lost to both, and the focus of both?”

“Is the answer Prophet Canyon?”

“You got it Son, but I won’t tell you more than that. Not because I’m hiding anything, I won’t because I’m not sure I’m right, it’s just a hunch. It is something very painful for me to deal with. Now, you’ve got other questions, right?”

“Who would kill for Prophet Canyon?”

He sat erect, placing his fork on the table. “I don’t know. I hope the answer to the riddle isn’t the answer to your question. More likely, historically, people kill for water. Here in the west, riparian rights are to die for.”

I was tired of the game. He would give me answers, but they weren’t complete. To him, it was a way of staying in; staying important. What he left out really bothered me.

“Where should I go next? I mean what should I do now?” I knew to ask a question that let the other person give direction. I learned a lot that way.

His plate was clean. I started on my toast, more as a way to act casual than because I was hungry.

"Where were you thinking of going? Into the canyon?"

"I was..."

"Don't!" He glared his warning at me. "Don't go where you are not equipped to go!"

"Why not?"

"You're a tenderfoot. You could get yourself killed. The canyon's wild...at least it was. I read in the paper that some, 'unknown persons' bladed a road in there. Funny thing. One day the canyon is wild and special. The next, the wildness is gone and the whole place is different. I saw it happen all around here. It was, well, necessary if we were to make a buck. We were clever. Once we broke through into an area, took its virginity, the environmentalists gave up."

"What could I learn if I went in there?"

"Not a damned thing! You're thinking you could learn about the connection between the canyon and the Temple, how the canyon's been used for the past decades, the lay of the land, the plans for development, where your company plans to put things, and... something about water? Well, think again. Those who consider you a threat would find the canyon an ideal place to kill you!"

I chose not to react to getting killed. "I planned to hike in... from the top, the pass."

"Dumb plan. You can't rock-hop. I did it once, it ain't easy, but... Hell, I'm talking to the wall. I can tell you won't listen to me." He glared at me and wiped his chin with his napkin. "Okay, but don't go alone! Enough people are dead and you'd be easy pickings." I could see that he was dead serious, and it scared me.

"Son, I honestly don't know what you can learn by going in there. Honest, I don't think you can learn anything that you can't learn from maps or aerials or talking to people... You know Son, that canyon is not the wilderness it's represented to be. Temple folks have been using it for a long time and, that aquifer? Well years ago I was told that it was part of a fault that ran along the canyon, not

unlike the Oak Creek Canyon Fault, except this one is just a little crack. Go in if you have to, but don't expect to learn anything." He paused and shifted his weight, pretending to be looking out into the big room. He continued, "One other thing comes to my mind. I was told once that the canyon was sacred. I was told that the 'spiritually attuned' thought that the energy of this entire area comes out of the earth in Prophet. That was twenty or more years ago. A guy who believed in *Earth Energy*, what the New Agers call *Vortexes*, knew about it, or so he said. Now I don't cotton to that kind of crap, but it's something I thought you might be interested in. It's a fun twist, I must say."

I wanted to ask for more information. The longer he talked the more I learned. He knew that and continued talking.

"Now, Son, I'm through with this game. Finish your breakfast and ask me about Sedona. I'm a sociologist first, remember?"

I started to get angry. The old fart was playing me. He knew I was hired to find out what was going on in Prophet Canyon, he took pleasure in baiting me. Well, that was the price of his information. I didn't like it, but it was better than nothing.

"Okay, tell me about people who choose to live in mansions isolated from each other, in a town that doesn't seem to have a center."

"Oh, you want me to talk about old unhappy people, rich unhappy people, lonely people, disconnected people, lost... You might get the idea that I disagree with their choice to live the way they do."

I laughed. He was good at making his points.

"Oh, and you probably forgot that I explained it once before. These generations are so isolated and unable to interrelate to others in a positive supporting way that they seek isolation. Want to see how damaging it is? Go to the schools and see what their way of life does to their children and grandchildren. Drive through the places where they cluster their isolated mansions. Hold onto your

heart. You'll meet kids who are so isolated and lost... kids who have no sense of belonging to or being a part of the community, or anything, kids that act more like zombies than human babies. I call them, 'The Suffering Issue.' At the least, they're disconnected souls damaged forever by their guardians' inability to live in harmony with others."

"Doc, I'm glad you don't have trouble expressing yourself! Do you really believe it? I mean, good God! What you describe is..."

"You're right! It is! And when you see it, you'll know what causes it, thanks to me."

I wanted to get out of there. This great Potato of a man saw everything through the eyes of one at the end of the trail. I'd read about the phenomena. As people age they go through phases. The young are optimistic because the future is ahead of them. As we age, we tend to think that society---the whole world --- has aged. We begin to see the world at its end, because we are at the end. Connely was old. I decided that the world he saw was an old man's world. I discounted his perceptions of things. I knew I would form my own conceptions. In many ways the guy seemed to exude the evils he professed to hate.

We got more coffee and I could see that Connely was watching people from his blind. I turned my head and focused in on the crowd, mostly locals, who had come in for breakfast. As I watched, Celesta entered and stood looking the room over. Connely reached across and laid his hand on my arm.

"See that woman who just came in?"

I nodded, and was about to say her name.

"You want to know about that cult on the hill? Anything, you get to know her! She calls herself Celesta. She's been with Orante since the beginning... Came here with him. She knows him better than anybody. In fact, she's in charge of the people who make sure Orante is safe and that no harm comes to the Temple. She's one tough lady. I don't know if you can get close to her, but... Want me to introduce you to her?"



I had so many emotions triggering at the same time that I almost said “yes.” I caught myself.

“No! Not now anyway, I’ve got to get to work. I’ll make contact. Connelly, thank you.”

I watched her search the room and then leave. I wanted to go after her; I decided to wait. I wondered if she was looking for me? I started to slide out of the booth.

“Wait just a minute, there Son, I want you to know about something else happening here. I’m a voyeur. I sit here in the cook’s booth and watch the flow. Do you know what I’m seeing?” He grabbed a fast breath so that I couldn’t answer. “I’m seeing something that gives me hope. I’m seeing people...not kids, but forties, fifties maybe, male and female, rich and poor, even racially different people who play together and like to be together... ‘Play!’ It’s not a dirty four letter word, you know!” He rubbed his nose and looked at me to see if I got it.

“I’m seeing other signs too. You been over to the new city offices complex? There’s a square there and occasionally they’re having live music at lunchtime. I never thought I would see that! Some people here are beginning to form a broad-based, economically diverse, cross-age, racially mixed, healthy community... literally over our dead bodies!” He pointed a fat finger at his chest and paused.

“In the past, wealthy individuals tried to define themselves socially by the organizations they created. ‘Only I Counts,’ started all types of clubs and programs so that they could be seen and so that they could be in control. They only let people in whom they thought could raise their own social standing. If someone dared to have a different perspective, there was hell-to-pay and the groups split often. That’s why Sedona has so many closed groups. Hey, and lest I forget, on the positive side there’s even a Boy’s and Girl’s Club in Sedona now. Son, I may be old, but I have hope, even though we still attract our share of people who want sterile, ‘Adults Only,’ warehouses to die in.”

I was closer to the back door, so I left a fiver on the table and went out that way.

The door opened upon a narrow path that split into alleys. I took the right alley and came out near where I had parked my Jeep. The heat hit me like steam; it smelled of moisture. The great clouds were building over the rocks to the north and the whole climate was charged. The light outside in the alley was blinding. I stopped long enough for my glasses to gray, looking around the parking lot. On the far side, standing in the shade of a large juniper, I could see one of the ladies Celesta had introduced me to the previous day. She was watching the door to Pick's and obviously annoyed about it. Even from my hidden vantage point, I could see that she was hot and bothered; angry! Across the street, I saw the other 'lady.' It clicked. These women worked together, and what was it Connely had said, "...she's in charge of the people who make sure Orante is safe and that no harm comes to the Temple." I felt a cold chill run down my back. So, I was being watched. Celesta was more than she let on. It wasn't the first time, either. I thought back to my arrival at the airport in Phoenix. I had been stalked there too.

I knew what to do. I went back through Pick's and out the front door, as if I was on my way to an important meeting. I didn't look around as I swung up into the Jeep and started the engine. As I backed out of my space, I caught sight of the blond ducking into a green Chevy Nova. I couldn't tell where the other lady was. I managed to get out of the parking lot and into traffic, beeping my way in front of a big Caddy from Texas. The green machine couldn't get into the line of cars. As I sped away, I saw it inching out into the line of traffic, unable to follow.

As I turned onto 179, I saw Celesta driving a white Ford Van, pointed the other way. She was waiting for the light. She saw my Jeep and tried to attract my attention by waving. I looked straight ahead and kept driving. The van had a cellular phone antenna. I imagined that she was already in contact with her crew. My adrenaline was

flowing, I was enjoying the game of ditch-'em, then it hit me! What was I running from? Why didn't I want to see Celesta? The answer scared me. She probed into my scabbed-over sores. Being with Celesta was like being with a therapist. She used sex to hook me and then gaffed me with some awful thing about myself. I didn't know if she wanted to screw or stomp grapes.

I pulled around back and parked next to Landsman's Continental. No one followed, so I assumed that they had lost me. Inside I got to the back and went in without knocking. Landsman looked up and smiled.

"Back so soon? What's up?"

"Want to go into Prophet Canyon with me?"

"Martel, it's over a hundred degrees outside, the Monsoons are due any time, and today the humidity's already over sixty percent. You're dressed for a walk in a mall, and I'm not that dumb!"

"I can buy boots and stuff. Paul, I feel like it's time I went in there and learned about the place."

"I think you are! What can you learn? You flew over it, you have the maps. Martel, do you know something I don't?"

I had to admit that he was probably right. "I think the answer to our conundrum lies in there, somewhere. I don't know what it is, but..."

"It might, I don't think so, but it might. Even if you're right, it'll be more than 130 degrees against the rocks down there. You could probably drive up that new road cut... What would you look for? The police are still in there going over the ground... No, Martel, you better not go in there!"

"If I did, you wouldn't go with me?"

"No. I'm not in shape for that, and I was in there once. A canyon is a canyon... I have a bad feeling about this! Martel, that is one big canyon! It's rugged, especially at the upper end. Look at the cost estimates GD made to get a road out that way. Hell, man, even if they got the Forest Service trade land, I think they would have given up

on the road idea. In fact, I always wondered how they were going to do that. If you go, don't try hiking through Tarantula Pass."

"Okay, so who do I ask to the dance?"

"There might be someone. I'm thinking of someone who knows the use the Orante people have made of the place. That would help us know just how serious the Temple freaks are about protecting it. He could guide you, maybe... He's a flake. Well, let me say that he's a unique human being. Talk to him! See if he will guide you."

"Thanks Paul, where can I find this 'unique human?'"

"Oh, he's close to here. He stays under the highway bridge at Tlaquepaque on hot days. I think he probably considers the place his summer residence... That is, until the monsoon floods drive him out anyway. His name is Bill. Anasazi Bill, if you can believe that. You'll have to park in the lot at Tlaquepaque and walk up the creek to find him. Careful, there's a whole underworld in Sedona. Lots of people live in culverts and under bridges, anywhere it's cool. It beats a camp in the National Forest. Some are dangerous! The bums live out of dumpsters and eat human flesh, you know."

I asked Landsman to direct me to a sporting goods store so that I could equip myself for the canyon trek. He gave me directions, warned me once again not to go into Prophet Canyon, and told me to be careful in the underworld. He was dead serious and that got to me the same way Connely's warning had.

I came out of the outfitter's store with my last armload of gear and dropped it in the Jeep. My expense account would shock Prader, but that was our deal. The clouds had moved in and the humidity and heat combination were almost unbearable. I wondered what it would be like in the canyon. Maybe tomorrow morning, I decided.

I slid into the seat, feeling the heat of the plastic through my jeans. The air was in from tropical Mexico; hard to breathe. I sat for a minute trying to decide what it was that I should do. I saw the white Ford Van and Celesta at the same moment. The van was parked two down from me. Celesta was standing by my doorless side.

"What is all that stuff for?" She said, in a voice filled with wonder.

"Oh this stuff? I'm going to get out into the wilds. I'm going camping."

"Without me? I love to camp... You were going to ask me, weren't you?"

I was leery of the lady, but something in her voice made me feel at ease. She was dressed in thin cotton, looking cool to me. I imagined her in my new tent, spread out under a sycamore; next to me.

"I never thought of you as a camper. But then, I never gave it a thought. Sorry. Everybody tells me I'm crazy to go into the canyons this time of year. Heat, and now this threat of violent thunderstorms...flash floods."

"You're kidding! You aren't going up near Flag where it's cool?"

"No. I'm from Colorado. We've got mountains there. I'm out to see the Canyon Country."

"Try Fall! Do it next Spring! But Ter my friend, don't go into the canyons in summertime. It's no fun, believe me."

I felt her angst and decided that it was for real reasons. I didn't want her to know where I was going, but I liked the idea of her company. I decided to change the subject.

"Okay, bad idea, I hear you. What are you doing here? I thought you worked."

"I've been looking for you all morning. I saw you at the 'Y,' when you were shooting down 179. I lost you. I have some time off, and I... You know how I feel about you Ter. I wanted to spend it with you."

“Okay! I like a woman who knows her mind,” I said, laughing and wondering at the same time if she was setting me up for a jab again.

“I’m dying in this heat. Let’s go some place cool. Does your motel have a pool?”

It was the way she said it, sexy and provocative. She had a way of communicating that I wanted to become familiar with. It was flattery...a chemical cocktail.

She followed me to the motel parking lot. I swung in and found my regular place. She turned into a slot facing the other direction. As I got out of the Jeep, I read her bumper sticker:

A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle.

I thought it was funny until I really thought about it. That sixth sense uneasiness came back.

“Your van?”

“I love it! I do a lot of van camping. Maybe that’s what we could do?”

“Ford. Had it long?” I was fishing for an explanation about the bumper sticker that didn’t imply what I thought it implied.

“Almost ten years. I had an old Dodge before. I love vans!”

“That’s a strange bumper sticker.”

“You really think so? It makes me laugh. Picture a fish on a bicycle, that’s funny, isn’t it?”

I nodded, and let the subject pass. She didn’t know that I knew a lot about her. I was gathering more information, keeping my guard up, I hoped.

She went back to the van for a plastic grocery bag with her swimsuit in it. We went to my room and changed. She shucked-off her scant clothing and stood naked, facing me as she fought her way into her tank-type suit. She put on the kind of show that seemed so natural that it took me a while to figure out just how unnatural it was. Nudity was a cheap shot, so I stripped and shot right back at her.

My mind was wending its way along Oak Creek looking for Anasazi Bill under the bridge. I couldn't help it. Celesta wanted horseplay, and I was the horse. She wanted to swim under the water, and I was the bridge. The water felt great, the clouds hid the burning rays of the sun, and I couldn't think of anything but a meeting with a flake under a bridge. I've had days like that before.

There was very little doubt that we were playing our way into the physical phase of our relationship. I wanted out of the pool and back to the room and bed. She seemed to agree, and we dried each other with fluffy motel towels and headed home. When I was little, I never had visions of sugar plums dancing in my head, but now as a man, I had visions dancing there that would have made a much more exciting Christmas.

Celesta made small talk as I carded the door and let us in. Inside, she went over and sat on the bed.

"Something has really changed about you, Ter. I mean, you are so much more relaxed today. The other night, I had so much of your negative side that I just had to leave. Do you forgive me?"

I nodded. "I was really uptight, wasn't I?"

"I was really worried about you. I've had first-hand experience with people who developed serious illnesses, even cancer, because they poisoned themselves from inside. I don't want that to happen to you. Ter, you must work out all that bad stuff. A male's relationship with his mother is the single most important relationship in his life. If that relationship is skewed, then you can never love or lead a life at peace with yourself. Understand my concern? Your mother is the key!"

One minute I'm having visions of a reverse peeling and the next, I'm processing my relationship with Mom. I had flashes, honest, it's hard to believe, but I had mental flashes of her body and my mom watching. I wanted out of there!

"And Ter, I can sense that the only thing standing between us... I mean physically and emotionally, is this

relationship thing you haven't worked out. Please take time to get that work done. You can do it. Get help! Change your life, and get separate from her! Start now! Drop whatever you are doing and get help! Then..." She stood up and began to fumble with the straps to her suit.

I locked the bathroom door before turning on the shower. She had a habit of just barging in, not being considerate of my privacy---my mom did, that is. I wanted time to clear my emotions. I heard her try the door, and then let it be. I let the water flow over me, wondering if I still worked. Celesta had touched something in me. A part that connected her with...?

Jeeze! I knew I couldn't touch her now. I wondered what was going to happen to me.

She showered, not locking the door. I wasn't even tempted to go in. I dressed, goosed the bleeper, got CNN, and waited.

She came out and dried her hair, all smiles and chatty.

"Thanks for not putting us into a compromising position," she said in a relaxed and friendly way. "You know, there will be plenty of time for...for just being together. I have so much I can help you with and your mom would be between us... Are we going camping?"

She caught me off guard. I answered before I had time to think it through.

"I know you don't want to camp down here, especially in a canyon. Maybe we can go up near Flag next week?"

She heard "canyon" and couldn't conceal her reaction. She noted that I saw it.

"The canyon? In this heat? Prophet Canyon is that important?"

I had to lay it out. "You know I worked for GD and that they had a development planned there!"

She didn't react. "I knew you did, but why go in there? It's a wilderness... And besides, it's terribly hot and when the monsoons come, the whole bottom could be



swept by a dangerous flash flood. Ter, get serious! No one goes into a canyon like that this time of year. And what do you mean, 'had?'"

I wanted to draw her out. "Two people just did. They died in there."

"Of course Ter. That's what I've been trying to tell you. It's not the time of year to go camping in a canyon. And you said "had," what did you mean?"

I wanted the conversation to end right there. My back hurt and I felt as if the entire motel was resting on my shoulders. I ignored her question again and gave her a long, sweet smile.

"I've got to get back to work, Celesta. Thanks for a great swim and the counseling."

"Oh Ter," she came over and snuggled into my arms. Her hair was wet. She smelled like some exotic flower. "I don't want you to carry all of that shit around with you. Please tell me that you'll take time off, right away before it's too late, and work through your stuff. I'd be there for you..."

We made some small talk, then I started unpacking the stuff I had purchased. She got the hint and put her swimming suit back in the plastic grocery bag.

"I've got errands to run. Can we get together for breakfast tomorrow?"

I was relieved about dinner.

"What time...how about 7:30?" She nodded, I walked over to the door and opened it for her.

"Promise me you won't go camping...at least until the weather cools."

"Okay, I'm not in a hurry. Don't worry."

I went to the phone and dialed Denver. I knew Connors wanted me to report to him, but I preferred to talk with Prader.

"May I please speak with Sam Prader. Terrance Martel calling."

“Hi Mr. Martel. Haven’t you heard? Oh of course not! It’s so sad, and no one was prepared. Ter, I don’t know how to tell you... Mr. Prader committed... Well, I guess I must come right out and tell you... You see Mr. Martel, Sam took his own life last night. He was at home, alone. He had some sort of legal trouble, no one thought that he would take it so hard.”

I reacted as shock dictated. She told me that Connors was in his office and that he was depressed and no one could talk to him. I asked her to tell him I was on the line.

“Ter? God! You heard?”

“Just now, from Katie.”

“He was acting so strange these last few days. I should have known. I don’t understand it, the losses in Arizona weren’t that bad, and his legal troubles were... he was shook, but... Ter, he shot himself with my old 45. He’s had it for years, ever since that time he was threatened... My God, he was here and we were working together yesterday.”

My mind was racing. I needed Sam as my advocate. What could have driven him to suicide?

“What kind of legal problems? You mentioned that before.”

“Oh, I’m not certain. Something personal he was involved in. I didn’t think it was that serious...”

I told him that I was very sorry. I knew they had been friends and partners for years, and that I knew he wouldn’t want to discuss work; that I’d call him tomorrow. He responded in a way that I hadn’t expected.

“Work? Hell yes I’m going to keep working! It’s all I’ve got. I can’t sit around here with time to think. What the hell are you up to down there?”

I gave him a brief report on Landsman and our meetings. I told him about my intention to go into the canyon and my intention to get more info about Orante and his crew.

“Damn, but I would have thought you would have something by now. Don’t waste time tramping around in the woods... Stay out of that goddamn canyon! Work with Kling in Phoenix and don’t count on much from Landsman... Oh, and forget about that Orante bunch! I can tell you you’d be wasting your time! Kling will tell you what’s happening. You may be almost finished down there.”

He didn’t know that Landsman had filled me in on the status of the project, and that I knew I was going to get the ax. I lied. “Okay,” and asked him what would happen to GD now that Sam was gone?

“GD will survive. Sammy and I had an agreement, a Surviving Partner thing. I intend to continue as in the past. Oh, and as you know, I was always against that Prophet Canyon development deal. Now, I may count my losses, lick my wounds, and get GD back into the lucrative markets. Don’t be surprised if I pull you out.”

I heard him but reacted too slowly to come back at him. I hung up stunned at his revisionist history. Gopher Connors had always been the one pushing for Prophet Canyon. I had been privy to arguments between the two of them. Prader trying to dissuade Gopher about pursuing the development, Connors vehement about doing it. There was no question in my mind that Gopher was doing his rodent thing; trying to make it look like it was Sam who got the company into trouble in Arizona. I thought about that and came to an uneasy understanding of Connors’ game. Something else was going on, but what?”

Prader’s death unnerved me. I felt more yuck in my gut, and the weight that had been hunching my shoulders into my chest seemed to grow even heavier. I sat on the bed and remembered Sam. He wasn’t the kind of guy who would shoot himself. I knew Sam well enough to know that if he decided to take himself out he would do it in his Corvette at 100 miles per. Sam would a pick a bridge support, he was that kind of man...and no one would know

if it was suicide or not; that's the way Prader thought. I knew that for a fact.



## Chapter 20

He lifted her again and turned her upside down. I watched her legs go round and round. Then I saw her fangs!

I PULLED THE JEEP into the creek side of Tlaquepaque, and made certain that the metal compartment in the back was locked. I had my new hiking boots on; they hurt around my ankles. It was humid and hot, but there was a cool breeze as I slid down the steep embankment and began walking toward the bridge. I was looking for bums and a man who had taken the name the Navajos gave to the ancient Pueblo peoples who had lived in the land centuries before the first Navajos came wandering in: Anasazi. I had read that roughly translated it meant, "Ancient Cannibal Peoples." The Sinagua people who inhabited this land might be confused with the Anasazi folks, but from what I had read, they were a different people. So, I already knew a lot about this guy. He didn't know his history and probably didn't want to be confused with facts.

All I found under the bridge was a big boulder on the left side with gear stuffed behind it. I walked through the tunnel and stood in the dappled light on the other side.

"You Martel?"

I did a quick leap out of my skin and came awkwardly back in. I looked around unable to see anybody.

"Mister, if you ain't, you better be off!"

"I'm Martel. How did you know?" I was looking everywhere for the owner of the voice. When he spoke again, I saw him where he sat, back up against a tree. He was dressed in military camouflage, some things from Viet Nam and some from Desert Storm. He had used the brush growing around the tree to conceal himself. He noted my fix on him and waved me over.

"Got Landsman's note. Someone dropped it over. I'm not looking for trouble. You'll forget I'm here, right?"

I nodded. He didn't bother to get up and as I approached I could see why. He saw me looking,

"Ain't she just the nicest one you ever saw?"

'She,' was a reddish brown Tarantula about the size of a saucer, legs and all. Her body was larger than a 15 watt light bulb. The bony part, where her hairy legs were attached, was at least two inches long and maybe that wide. The spider was up on her legs, walking across his. He reached across and got her boney section between his thumb and forefinger, lifted her off his leg and offered her to me.

I backed away, declining contact. I watched as 'she' tried to walk on air, legs moving as if they were revolving around her body.

"Found her over there," he said, pointing his chin toward a fallen sycamore and a bunch of flood debris. She's thirty if a day. He put her back on his leg. She relaxed down on her legs.

"Thirty years old?" I was surprised.

"Oh yes! The female lives a long time; they're very wise by this age. See that little guy over there?" He was pointing to his coat at the base of the tree. I didn't see it at first, then it moved and I saw a smaller, darker version of the one on his leg.

"Male. They're dumb! In a few months, October maybe, he'll be walking around holding one leg out in front of him. Know why?"

I couldn't guess. I shook my head, wondering how many other giant spiders were crawling around.

"They don't screw. He puts the sperm on his foot and goes after her. If she accepts him, she lets him deposit it in her. If not, she kills him and eats him. Nice! Ever know a woman like that? Wouldn't touch her with a ten-foot pole?" He laughed at his humor, and I liked him for it.

I said something like, "No shit!" and kept watching the spiders. The male wanted to get away, but not anymore than I did.

“Now she’s a prize! Delicate too. If I was to lift her... Oh, maybe say six inches off the ground and drop her, splat! She’d die. It could take a day or so, but she’d be a goner. They can’t support all that body in a fall.”

“How come she doesn’t bite you?” I really did want to know.

“Do I look like spider food? Hell, I said she’s smart. She has fangs, want to see them?” He lifted her again and turned her upside down. I watched her legs go round and round. Then I saw her fangs. I didn’t like the thought of looking into a spiders mouth. The fangs were shiny black and sharp. He held her close to me so that I could see. I saw all that I ever wanted to see. Now I knew more than I ever wanted to know about tarantulas.

“Thirty years. What do you think she’s learned in all that time?” I asked the question, dumb as it was.

“Well one thing I can tell you, Martel, is that she has learned to survive her worst enemies, the hawks.”

“Hawks eat tarantulas? Hawks?”

“Not bird Hawks, Tarantula Hawks. They’re wasps, big, black and orange. They hunt tarantulas. This one here knows how to fight them. If not, the hawk stings her and paralyzes her, then lays her eggs on the spider’s belly. When the eggs hatch, the maggots eat the tarantula alive. Ain’t Nature an evil thing? You think we’s got it bad, how’d you like to be a tarantula spider?”

We were coming to some type of agreement. He put the giant spider down and let her walk toward the deep recesses of her world.

“Got to keep this here male around for a while till she’s gone. They both was out, trying to get up and away from the creek. In hot weather they comes down here to feed where the insects hide. Means the monsoons are almost here. ‘Watch the critters and be prepared,’ I learned a long time ago.”

“Thanks Bill. Landsman write why I was looking for you?”



"Nope. Just that you was and he was obliged to me for helping."

"Ever been in Prophet Canyon?"

"Sure, who hasn't?"

"I haven't. But I am planning to go in, from the top, Tarantula Pass."

"Naw, you ain't." He let the male spider go and got up slowly, brushing off his behind and looking around for other spiders, I guessed.

"I'm serious. I need to see it."

He scratched a mosquito bite on his hairy cheek, looked at the blood under his fingernails and cursed.

"Son-of-a-bitch, I been kissed again!" He wiped his fingers off on his pants and cleaned the blood out from under the nails by running the nails over a tooth, one-by-one. He spat, and turned his whiskered cheek toward me, pointing at the bite.

"How bad?"

"It's big," I observed. "Looks like that mosquito sat and drank for awhile."

"Mosquito my ass!" He yelled. "You ever see a mosquito leave a welt like this?"

He was pointing to his cheek again, feeling the edges of the bite.

"I could die, right here afront of you. Don't you know I been bit again by a Kissing Bug?"

I gave him the hunched shoulders, 'I don't understand' signal.

"You don't, do you? This here bite is from an assassin bug. It's bad medicine. The Assassin Bug and the Kissing Bug are the same bugs. They bite and spit in their bad bug juice in exchange for blood. Some people go into shock and never live to tell about it. I've been bit too many times... Not since last summer tho', and maybe that's why I'm standing here talking to you. Doc said the poison stays in your system like a bee's does. Then one bite too many and...you are in anaphylaxis!"

I imagined a bug like a bat that was a blood sucker and injected spit when she sucked blood. As for anaph...

“You’re in what?”

“Anaphylactic Shock. You lose pressure... Blood pressure I think, and you have trouble breathing. Some get hives, inside and out. Without epinephrine injections, you die, and I don’t have my kit with me!”

There was little I could say or do for the man. I got up close and looked him over.

“Bill, you look okay to me. No sign of shock. Maybe this assassin bug was clean.”

“Down south, Mexico, Africa, places like that, the assassin bug kisses you and then turns around and shits in the wound. You scratch and the shit is mixed with your body juices. Then you and about fifteen million other people die each year of the fever. Reduviid fever, Doc called it. It has lots of names.”

I looked him over again.

“Bill, I think you’re going to skip a reaction this time. Maybe it was a mosquito.”

“Naw, I’m right. Lookithere.” He bent to his knees and picked up a thing from the ground. “Knew it! They’re slow. I slapped and got him. See the way his head forms a kind of probe? See the way the top of his thorax has these here boney kind of points? See the way the wings kinda have an X on them? Well, we’s looking at the very thing. Damn, I’m lucky. Can’t be out without my kit after this. You know, I ain’t usually bit outside. These critters like to get into your bedding. Before, I been bit while asleep.”

In less than fifteen minutes I had learned about tarantula love making and vampire bugs that assassinate people. If my relationship with this guy meant a whole new dimension to my education, I decided to pass before taking the course. Then I got to thinking. If I went into the canyon alone, not knowing about these critters, and who knows what else, I probably would die. I decided to tap into the teacher’s trove. It was the wise thing to do.

“Bill, no doubt about it, I’m a tenderfoot. But I’m in shape, I’ve had Special Forces training, and I’m a quick learner. Another thing, I’m obligated to the people I work for to go into Prophet. I can show my appreciation for your help... I’m not looking for a freebie.”

“You know why they calls me Anasazi?”

I shook my head, wondering if he was answering my question or changing the subject.

“I was born up north on the Ute Mountain Ute Reservation in Colorado. My old dad was a trader to the Utes... Most Utes thought he was a traitor to the Utes, and in fact he was, later. He was a scammer, a good one. They was easy to scam, because they gave away their power and their per-capita checks. What my old dad did wasn’t right, but it was lucrative, and I got to grow up running them hills above the Mancos River. I was wild and free as a kid, and the others gave me my name. My real name is Tom Johnson, but only the Social Security and the Veterans people care about that. I go by Bill, cause I’m usually not paid for what I do. I seldom collect. You say you’ll pay?”

I gave him my hand, “Glad to meet you Anasazi Bill. You’re right, Anasazi Tom just doesn’t sound right. I thought at first you had named yourself and got it wrong. Nice to know you really are an Anasazi. Damn right, I’ll pay in advance!” I poured cream on the relationship, hoping he would see me as a guy he could guide into Prophet.

“You know man, summer ain’t the time to go into any place around here. You know, don’t you, that right now, summer or no, that place is teeming with cops and news junkies? They found a lady floating up there in the only water hole worth swimming in. Then they found a Whitetop dead where he fell hiking. I ain’t saying it’s strange, not in that canyon, but the reason most people go in there is to watch the culties flapping around in the water or soaking up sunrays on the rocks. I go there to watch, or I used to. You know, seeing all that young skin is good fer

a man... I don't get much out of them rental tapes or Channel 99 stuff, but I like them women, religious or no."

"How do you get in?"

"Me? Oh, well that's the fun of it. I come down from the Temple on the trail at night. No one's out there then, 'specially when they all sit around making Oooooommm sounds. I know there's another way in from the top, but I never found it. The Temple trail is steep, but easy, 'specially in the dark."

"Can we find the way in from the top?"

"Lots of that Schnebly Hill Sandstone has come tumbling down in there. I ain't much good at rock climbing. You got a boat?"

I looked at him, afraid that I had missed some important piece of information.

"A what? A boat?"

"Well man, see over there," he pointed to a small clearing not far from the end of the bridge. "See that Arizona King?"

I did! I saw the damned thing slithering across the clearing and up along the bridge embankment.

"Know why he's getting out of here? Well I'll give you a clue. Tomorrow this time there could be a flood along here. He smells the humidity in the air. Rains coming and whatever hits upper Oak Creek Canyon, well, it don't soak in. Same's true of Prophet. Best I can tell you is that after the rains you can find water to drink for a few days. Other than that, if you get the picture here on Oak Creek, imagine a place where the rain hits flat rock for miles and miles around and then comes into Prophet not only from the top and sides, but from a dozen hidden springs inside that just start sprouting water as if they was hit by the cane of one of them Old Testament prophets. That's where it got it's name, you know. A nut case who was in there long before Orante and his ilk, walked around and struck the rocks and within days, water came out of them. Nice scam, but the guy disappeared about the time that

professor fellow Doc Connely got hold of the place and built that fancy playhouse of his on the ridge. Temple hell!”

I was taken totally off guard. Connely? The Potato Man once owned the canyon? So what was his game? He was playing me, I knew that, and he kept alluding to the fact that he had been one of them before he gave it all up. So, thanks to good old Anasazi Bill, I was learning something that bugged me in a better way.

“Bill, I’ve studied the maps and I’ve flown over the canyon. If all that water comes in, why isn’t there a channel the size of this,” and I pointed to the Creek bottom around us, “in Prophet? Where does all that water go?”

“Ever see a sinkhole?”

I shook my head.

“Place where underground water flows...sometimes collapse. You’ll be walkin’ along and suddenly you’ll come upon a round or square place where the ground has just fallen in. Steep sides, usually no way out. Dangerous to cattle and life as we know it. You find them all over this area, but most is in Prophet. I sat watching a nudie tootie one time and heard water running. I searched around and finally decided that there was a stream under the rocks I was perched on. You know, most of the runoff never gets to the bottom of the canyon. Out it comes, and then, it just kinda disappears into the rocks again. That canyon, it’s full of mysteries. Even the birds fly different when they come there.”

“Birds fly... What?”

“Now take this with a grain of sand... There’s a place near the place where the canyon first starts to pinch, up above the hole where they swim. That’s where the birds fly counterclockwise. I’m serious, I never seen it myself, but I trust the observations of them that has. They comes by, flying clockwise as usual. Suddenly they hits this place and they jerk around and fly backward...at least the other direction. It’s strange. The old guy who performed the water miracles called the place a powerful meditation site. Orante and his crew call it a Vortex.”

We talked on, occasionally drowned out by the noise of a big truck crossing the bridge. I had the feeling that he would guide me in, but that changed when he told me about the blue-eyed spiders that he was also allergic to and that I should look out for.

“Martel, I got to level with you. I got the knees and the back of a man my age. Know how old I got to be? Well, let’s just say that I was a man when FDR smoked his first cigarette in its cutsy holder in the White House. I can’t go anyplace that requires climbing and bending and walking over rocks. Not that I don’t want to...”

I registered my disappointment and concern.

“Now, if you know about snakes...?”

“I think so... you mean rattlers and coral?”

“Yeah, there ain’t no others here to be afeared of. Well, if you know how to avoid those rascals... And Black Widder Spiders?”

I nodded.

“All you got to learn about to survive the wild life is two more creatures. Well, make that three!” He looked around as a particularly noisy truck went over the bridge, scratched at his cheek, and spit at a leaf that turned out to be a praying mantis.

“Here’s the three: Pigs, cats, and blue-eyed spiders.”

I must have shown my confusion. “You mean cougars?” He nodded. “And do you mean javelina?” He nodded again. “And?”

“They’s what some call Wolf Spiders. Bad bite! They have real long legs, a smooth, sleek abdomen that can get as big as catsup bottle top, and they have blue eyes. At night they shine blue fire back at you...and even in the day, you can see the blue. You can’t pick ‘em up neither, they’s mean and goes for you! Boy are they fast!” He picked up a stick that had some kind of bug on it and stared at the creature for a few breaths.

“You know, in this area these blue-eyed spiders love to come into houses. They can squeeze through tiny

cracks and people see a lot of them on the ceilings. Use a suction type vacuum cleaner to git 'em, it's better than being bit! Them are real mean and they'll go fer ya!"

I thought I knew about cougars, we had our share in Colorado. The javelina? Well as you can guess, I was afraid to ask. I had visions of blue-eyed wolf spiders with big brown bodies and long legs.

"Thanks Bill, I feel better knowing what to look out for. Is there anything else I should know about Prophet?"

He thought a moment, running his fingernails over his teeth and examining them to see if he missed anything black.

"Yup. Stay away from them pack rat nests, you know, the ones full of cactus spines and sticks and things. Them rats is hosts to assassin bugs. Oh, and don't get jabbed by one of them Spanish bayonet plants or any kind of yucca type thing with sharp needle ends. You'll hurt for days if you get pricked. Oh sure, then there's catclaw and other plants with hooks and spines... Don't never trust any plant in the desert, every one is out to get ya."

He paused again and then smiled at me, a friendly and enduring smile.

"Man, don't go in there if you don't have to! Why would anyone? 'Specially now that the water's contaminated from that dead girl, and the cutsies can't swim." He paused and scratched. "And you know about scorpions?"

By the time I got back to my Jeep I was itching. He said it was from the lemonade sumac, aka skunk bush, aka poison sumac bushes, we were brushing against. I looked the Jeep over for spiders, slid behind the wheel and headed towards the shower. I was beginning to think that maybe I could learn a lot about Prophet Canyon from maps and aerials.

I placed my new boots side-by-side next to the bed and rubbed the sore places on my ankles. You know how tough I am, yet all I did was walk down to the creek and I

was seeing things and scratching. My mind told me that he had forgotten to tell me what to do about scorpions. I don't know how he missed explaining them, even the high school teams are named after those sweet stingers.

What I needed after a shower was another approach to the problems at hand. I imagined Misty having a bite at Friendly's and decided that she was my next best hope. If she could get into the Temple and get information about their plans for the canyon... That was it! I'd put off my wilderness expedition until I was sure there was no other way.

Good news was that soap and water, especially hair shampoo, removed the sumac oils from my skin and I stopped itching. Bad news was that I imagined blue-eyed spiders running across the ceiling and dropping onto my head. I checked the place out thoroughly and left. There were webs hanging from my Jeep's roll bars, but nothing with eight legs waiting to bite me. I still felt horrible about Prader's death. I was chewing on Connor's denial of his involvement in Arizona. I must have looked like some sort of space cadet when I walked into the café. The tall, amicable waitress greeted me. I slid into a booth, noting as I did that Misty and Issy weren't dining.

"Hi again. You by yourself?"

"Yeah, I was hoping the ladies I was with this morning were here."

"Nope. Haven't seen them. You look beat."

I needed someone sane to talk with. The place was almost empty and she seemed to have time.

"Are you from around here?"

She smiled and nodded. "For the past twenty years. I guess you can say I'm the closest thing to a native you'll meet."

"I was going to hike into Prophet Canyon. Would you think I was crazy to do it this time of year, and all?"

"It's amazing! Suddenly everyone is talking about Prophet Canyon. People are dying up there, police are swarming around. It's good for business, but why all of a



sudden Prophet Canyon? Why not Song Canyon or Ray Canyon?”

“It’s a proposed area for a development... There’s bucks to be made, I guess, and so it’s getting traffic. You ever been up there?”

She handed me a menu and gave me a warm smile, not one from her ‘Hi Customer,’ stash, but a really connecting smile.

“No, I work all the time on my feet. My idea of a vacation is to put my feet up and sit by a pool or in front of a TV. But you know, if you want to talk to someone who has been up there, see that police guy?” She pointed to a big man sitting alone. He was wearing a beige uniform shirt with the traditional epaulets. I could see his officers’ cap next to him on the table. “That’s Marshal Cain, County Mouny. He was up there a night or so ago and found the bodies. Came back all bloodied and torn-up. He’s nice, why don’t you talk to him?”

## Chapter 21

He called it a Kissing Bug or Assassin Bug. One bit him and he said he could die from it.

THEY HAD THANKED CAIN for his report, and the assistant to the assistant told him that it was, "All in good hands now." He had talked to Fielder the medical examiner once more, confirming that the wallet had cash in it, credit cards, and Carrigan's ID. Fielder had griped about the way the detectives were going about the investigation and the fact that the brilliant investigators had decided that Carrigan's body showed no signs of foul play--if they discounted a badly broken body from a deadly fall on a hillside covered with brush where the furthest one could drop was zip.

Cain was happy to be out of it. His night in the canyon had taught him that he wasn't prepared for life on the wild-side of Arizona. Next time, he'd call for help and wait for the experts. Today had been relaxing. He had avoided several traffic altercations by showing his police Jeep and letting the violators control their own urges. He was stiff and his shin wasn't even trying to heal.

Every time he got off guard, he found his mind working on the case. That was one of the things he liked best about police work. He imagined that he should have gone into investigations, but a desk in a stuffy government building wasn't his style.

He made Friendly's late. The place was almost deserted. The waitress was friendly as ever. He let her bring him the special. He knew he shouldn't eat heavy foods, but then, why not? What if he died of a heart attack instead of old age, senile, rotting away in a nursing home? He hoped the steak was fat and rare.

The waitress came over and topped-off his coffee cup, although he had hardly touched it.

"Marshal, see that man over there? Well, he's interested in Prophet Canyon and... Well, I..."

“You want me to talk to him?” He smiled at her, his warmest. “Have him come over, I don’t mind visiting, in fact, I like it.” She knew the message was meant for her, and gave him her best vibes.

She brought Martel over to Cain’s table and asked if she could serve him there. Martel looked at the Marshal. Cain nodded, and he slid into the booth.

“Hi Officer. I’m Ter Martel, from Denver. Here working for Greater Development on their project in Prophet Canyon.”

Cain was surprised. “A development project?”

“Yes Sir, GD had plans to do a subdivision in Prophet. They had big problems so they sent me here. I’m my own company; I contract with companies like GD. I run interference for them.”

“You the folks who bulldozed a road up there last week?”

“No! We had no part in that. I understand there was a court order. I want to know who did it.”

“Not your Cat or... You ever been in there?”

Martel couldn’t help but laugh. He caught himself and apologized.

“What’s so funny about that?”

“I was planning to go into the canyon. In fact, about an hour ago I met with a wild man whom I thought I could get to guide me. By the time he filled me in on all the insects and dangers... I’ve had second thoughts.”

“It isn’t a picnic. I had a hell of a night in there.”

“That’s what the waitress said. That’s why I wanted to talk to you. Do you think I can go in there?”

“There’s a road in there now. You can drive to the water hole. Good idea to take a four-wheel drive. I can check to see if the area is still closed for the investigations if you like.”

“I was thinking of coming in from the top. I could park and walk up, that may be better. Did you, ah, see anything in there that indicated why two people would be killed?”

"I wrote my report. Until it's released, I can't talk about my observations regarding the deaths. What did your guide guy tell you?"

"I'm still itching from poison sumac and looking out for spiders. The guy loves tarantulas. He warned me about blue-eyed wolf spiders and javelina, snakes and..."

"Blue-eyed what?"

"Jeeze, don't tell me he was pulling my leg. He said there was a wolf spider around here, body could get as big as a catsup bottle top, and that it had long legs and eyes that shine blue."

"I think I know the spider. They get into my apartment and crawl across the ceiling. But blue-eyed? I'll reserve judgment on that."

"Did you see snakes?"

"Nope, not one. In fact, the only things I saw were coyotes, skunks and javelina. I was attacked by a javelina, he slit my leg... Could have been a lot worse. I was lucky."

"No shit! It attacked you?"

"It was dark... It knew I was there and was checking me out. I'm going to learn how to deal with them; they're all around here."

"See any big tarantulas?"

"Nope. But I see them on the roads from time to time. They tell me fall is the time the males move."

"That's what he said. The guy's name is Anasazi Bill, he's at least in his seventies. He's a character. He would have taken me into the canyon, except he's too old. Told me a lot. Ever hear of a bug that assassinates people?"

Cain shot to attention as if an electric bolt had gone through him.

"What's that?"

Martel wondered what had made Cain react. Was it something he had done? What had he said?

"He called it a Kissing Bug or Assassin Bug. One bit him and he said he could die from it. They're kinda like mosquitoes in that to get blood they inject saliva. The

saliva causes anaphylactic shock, hives and stuff. He said that enough bites, even over time, could kill a person. He's supposed to carry epinephrine."

Cain leaned forward, his attention riveted upon Martel. "Did you happen to see one?"

"Yes, in fact he showed me the one that bit him. It was reddish brown, beetle-like without a divided body. It had boney horns at the top of the thorax and a head that looked like a probe. It had wings and... Kinda like an X marking on it's back."

Cain was sliding out of the booth as Martel finished his description. "Can you stay right here? I've got a phone call to make."

He didn't wait for an answer and in seconds was out the door, hitting 'O' on the pay phone.

In less than five minutes Cain was back. He slid into the booth, grunting with the effort.

"Mr. Martel, you may have just solved a major mystery for me. I can't tell you how, but your information may make a major difference in a case I'm working on." He sat back and smiled. The waitress brought Martel's check. Someone played Rocky Mountain High on the jukebox.

"I still can't believe he's dead."

"Me neither. I could listen to Denver all the time."

"It was about that assassin bug, right?"

"Yeah, what other pearls of wisdom did that Anasazi guy give you?"

Cain had called Fielder at the medical examiner's office in Prescott and told him that the bugs he had seen in the tent and in the bag were assassin bugs. The medical examiner had whistled and commended him on his great investigative prowess. He asked if there was anything else, and Cain told him that he was working on a whole string of new leads.

"Cain, I didn't think you were on the case."

"I'm not. But Doc, I can't not follow up, know what I mean?"

Fielder thanked him again, asked about his leg, then hung up before he could answer.

Martel was pleased that he had been helpful. The marshal had turned real friendly. He knew that he had useful information.

“Marshal, some strange things have happened to the people who work... I mean ‘worked’ for Greater Development. They were all functioning well as a team, planning a development for the canyon which would have about eighty sites in the lower, wider part and golfing greens that would wind from midway to somewhere above where the water hole is. They had surveyors flag sites, estimate the best routes for roads, and generally try to establish where the greens would be. There was also a plan for a road access from Tarantula Pass. When the Forest Service screwed GD, GD became aware that there was a problem with some other developer. By then, all but two of the Phoenix staff quit, some never bothering to pick up their last pay, according to Stan Kling, my contact. So, of the two remaining employees, one was shot in the head and is now in Phoenix at Barrows, and the other is Stan Kling, the man in charge of the Phoenix Office.”

Cain’s reaction was anything but mild.

“Jeezeus, you just laid a load of information on me. Now let me get this straight. Your people quit mysteriously and the Forest Service screwed you?”

“Sorry Marshal. GD had to get the land around Tarantula Pass from the Forest Service. To do that they had to buy a parcel down near Tucson that the Forest Service wanted and trade it for the land GD wanted. “It was going as planned, when suddenly another player emerged and traded the Forest Service a parcel they wanted a lot more than ours. The other developer ended up with the pass and the land that connects to the county road on the other side. The mystery player has an office in Prescott. It’s nothing but a front. There is no way for us to trace those behind that blind. I’m supposed to find out who

the other player is, and something tells me that when I do, you'll have answers to your questions as well."

"Martel, why did your people quit?" Cain's mind was working on a dozen connections and trying to sort them out.

"I think I know three reasons why. One, they were offered better jobs with whoever. Two, they were scared off... I've been told that they were scared so badly that they ran. Three, they were killed, maybe. I say that 'cause of the one guy who was shot."

"And you've tried to trace them?"

"No Sir. Not yet. I've been on the job three days now. I could really use your help in that department. Oh, and Marshal, there might be a fourth reason... I don't know, but it is possible that some of the employees who left joined the Orante Temple group. Paul Landsman, you know Landsman Realty on 179? He told me that at least one did. I could get the name..."

"Martel, I've got to tell you that investigation is not in my job description. I ride the roads and try to keep the peace. I can network through the department and get some information. Not for you, but to help solve these...these recent deaths. I went up that canyon blind, thinking it was a wilderness that no one wanted. Now I find that the whole place is seething with intrigue. What else can you tell me? I'm not going to leave this mystery alone, not after what I went through."

The two men talked quietly for another fifteen minutes. The waitress refilled their coffee cups as often as she could, dying with curiosity. She could hear sketches of their conversation, but not enough to understand what they were head-to-head about.

"Martel, you get me those employee's names and addresses, you know, social security numbers, anything that will help my people trace them. Get me the name of that front organization in Prescott, the one the other developer works through. Then, *if* we find anything that

leads us to the other developer, I'll make sure you know what it is." He paused and took a long sip of coffee.

"Also, I'd advise you not to go into Prophet at this time. Two reasons. One, we may still have people up there doing their thing. The other is personal... Well, I should say the request comes from 'personal experience.' Don't go into that canyon alone. Don't go in at all if you don't have to!"

Cain left shortly after Martel, stopping to thank the waitress. He wasn't a shy man, although now he was embarrassed.

"Mam, if you'll forgive me, I don't know your name, and I'd surely like to!"

"Well Sir, sometimes I think my name is Waitress, but those I call friends know I'm Susan Mars." She held out her hand and took his, "It's nice to start being friends, Marshal. Thanks for making the effort." He was out the door before he realized that he hadn't given her his name...

"Waitress." "Marshal." It did make a difference and he had screwed up!

Outside at the pay phone he called the medical examiner back.

"Doctor, I'm going to need your help. I'm not on the case, remember? So I'd only get my ass chewed if I asked for this stuff myself. I think I have a great lead, maybe more than ten of them. Will you front for me on this? No one will question your requests."

"Cain, you've provided almost every solid lead so far. I don't know you, but I know competent police work. What can I do?"





## Chapter 22

In the beginning, the male had only seasonal urges as animals do. They tended to wander on their own or with other males, unconcerned about women and children.

“CELESTA, THE REPRODUCTIVE ACT was a function of Earth animals necessary to procreate. The act didn't have much appeal to the first creatures the Pleiadians merged with here on the planet. Our new species was in danger of dying out. Other problematic things were happening. Men and women in the new species were behaving like bears and other mammals... They got together to mate, but they didn't stay together. That was their animal nature and it did not please the Masters. So, *She*, that has a name we cannot say---you know Celesta, that does not mean that we are forbidden to say Her name, it means that we don't have the ability to pronounce Her name---looked at the female of our new species and gave her 'life force' centers that are capable of energizing her body. These centers are stimulated by reproductive activity and make the physical act pleasurable for her. Because of these centers, women of our kind are able to attract their mates, hold them responsible for offspring, and take pleasure at the same time.

“In the beginning, the male had only seasonal urges as animals do. They tended to wander on their own or with other males, unconcerned about women and children. The Mistress changed males. She led them to the company of women by their...their need to have closeness and sexual release. She made males crave women and so women, to men, became things to possess and things that were desired. From those modifications, humans as we, and human communities --- the family --- came to exist.”

“But Otoa, the Master taught us to alter the life force centers...at least some of them, so that we couldn't reproduce. Why? What makes us better, this way?”

Otoa, squeezed his legs together until he could feel the pressure on his testicles. It was Orante's idea, not his. Back then, Orante envisioned himself with many lovers. Having tubes tied, or things removed, was a way of protecting themselves from imagined paternity suits and embarrassing accusations. That bastard Orante! Peter had thought that people would think he, the faithful Otoa, was special if it was believed that he had castrated himself with a sharpened spoon.

"Celesta, we are near the end of mankind's long journey. All of the souls that can get out of these animal forms and become Starbeings once again, are on Earth now. If you had a child, what would become of him? Worse, what would become of you if you had to leave the child behind?"

"Yes... It's so beautiful! Of course I understand. And it freed me... I can do it with a man, you know, without consequences. But I was chosen by Her because I can only love those who are like Her."

"You are wise beyond the need to be wise. You have sat beside the Warrior Spirit side of Her, and you have served Her well. In Orante, you see that all Pleiadians are female and that even the male side is female."

He looked up to see if she was questioning him. She had her eyes closed, an angelic smile on her face.

"Celesta, you too are a warrior! The Master has asked you to stop the harmful potential of Greater Development... Have you accomplished this?"

He saw that she tightened her muscles and bowed forward, head closer to the mat.

"I haven't completely deflected the last man. He is eaten-through with guilt and self-anger. I am using that as a tool to change his purpose. He is like the others we deflected; he has many weaknesses. It takes time, maybe more for him than the others because he's so twisted inside."

"How much time?"

“Not much longer. In your wisdom today, you have given me a clue as to the real nature of man; the way She used his sex to control him. I use that too, but now I know the key. I think he’s afraid of me because I touch his pain. Now... Well let’s just say I know another way to get to him, a better way to deflect Martel. He will relate to the male in me.”

“Good. The Master wants you to know this. Listen!

*We of Her Temple must open the gates for the Pleiadians, for Her. The energy center in the heart of the canyon is the place where this will happen. We are charged with creating a development there that is to the secular world, real. In fact, it will be. He wants you to know that hidden in the recreation center of the community we build will be a place, at the Vortex, which is the clitoral connection to the world beyond.*

“And this Martel, and the others... Now I see. They were going to develop the canyon. They were going to destroy Her sacred spot.”

“As you see it, Celesta! I have more from Her, through Orante. Listen!

*There is someone else... Some other individuals who wish to take the canyon and it’s sacred energy. The Master believes that they are Procyons, our enemies. We do not know what form they have taken, but we must be ready for them.*

“Oh Mother! You warned us about the evil forces in Canis Minor. Otoa, this is really the time of the enlightenment then! I have lived again so that I could experience this time and the transition. Holy Mother, thank you!”

“How’d it go with Celesta?” Orante held his lotus position and pretended to be relaying his thoughts from meditation.

“Great! She really responds to that lesbian stuff. You’ve had her pegged for years. She’s so loyal she squeaks.” Otoa bowed slightly as he answered, pretending to absorb wisdom from the Master.

“I know that. Did you meet with Gwinn again? Did you ask him... Damn it! Bow and OM, that guardian is staring at us.”

“OOMmmm, OMmmmmmm”

“Who finds these guardians anyway?”

“Peter, that’s the downside. Celesta does.”

“And you can’t screen them?”

“Believe me brother, she won’t let me even see a roster. You, my friend, are protected whether you like it or not. You belong to the Amazons.”

“Damn you Sills! That’s why this plan has to work. What did Gwinn say?”

“Our plan for getting GD out of the canyon worked well. Celesta’s team did a great job. There’s one more guy, but guess who’s on him?”

“Celesta.”

“Yup! And the money is in place to buy the options. The GD guys in Phoenix and Denver are ready to sell, and of course, some of our people already own parts. We can work with the realty guy and get him to do the whole shebang. I think we go for permits by Halloween. Well, that is if...”

“Damn you Otoa, you always have an ‘if!’”

“Peter, you know we didn’t kill those people! If our friendly accountant killed his ex-secretary, I can’t find a connection. Somebody else wants the canyon. Want to know who I think it is?”

“You’ll tell me, right?”

“I think whoever it is, even if it’s the Dog Star people from Sirius, or the Orion Giants, they want us out. They want the Temple, canyon and all... Everything!” He

paused and did a holy bow, "Peter, you ever think it could be... Well, the Spooies from space?"

"Are you nuts? Where do you get this crazy space stuff anyway?"

"Damn you Peter. I've asked you to read. Hell, I've begged you for years to pick up a book or an emergence publication and read about this stuff. Oh no, you think you're so damned smart! Well, if you read just one book about emergence... Just one book about our cosmic destiny... Well maybe then you'd... Oh, what's the use! You know man, you've been locked up here for so long you've lost touch."

"I know that."

"Well, do something you chickenshit! I have to do everything. You sit around pontificating and I have to do all the work. I'm really tired of it man! I'm really tired of it!"

The great Orante rose to his feet, staring at a point somewhere beyond the ceiling. Soon the guardians called others and they came into the room and surrounded the Holy Man.

"Otoa, my voice, arise and look with me into space. See wonders beyond us!"

Otoa stifled a grin and got to his feet. At least Peter was doing something.

"Walk with me! You women there! Open the door and guide me into the night!"

The guardians opened the door and watched their Master walk, staring into space at something beautiful they saw reflected on his face. They were afraid for him; unable to stop him. He walked, possessed! They looked up at the place he stared... Nothing?

"Yes, Yes! See Otoa! Can you see forever?"

"Oh yes, Master. I see into the universe, it's a corridor to Heaven... You have opened a corridor to Heaven! He has done it! He has done it!"

Orante looked quickly at Otoa, he was too convincing. Did he really see something?

"Master, you must follow it!"

“OMMmmm, OOMMMm. OOOOOOMMMMM.”

“Master, throw off your clothes!”

Orante shot him a terrible look.

“All but your sacred robe.”

Orante stopped in front of the guardian’s quarters and raised his hands high above his uplifted face. He was surrounded by guardians.

“Listen! It is The Word! I am to be transfixed!” He meant transformed, but he caught his error too late. He went with it: “Gaagh!” He screamed as he fell to his knees, pretending that a spear of light had struck him through the head.

The guardians formed a phalanx around him, to a woman, concentrating on his agony and fearing the worst, as he seemed about to die, but then came back with powerful energy.

“No! I shall never fear again. Yes! I will dismiss them! Yes, they will go! From now on, nothing mortal can harm me!”

Otoa was holding back his laughter. To hide it he yelled at the guardians.

“Guardians, you have witnessed this and you are blessed! Understood? Did you see? Did you hear? The Power has dismissed you... The Power has guaranteed the Master’s safety and made him go beyond mortal death. Go forth, and do good for there is no need of guardians now. Go to Celesta and tell her of this miracle! Go forth, for your work here is finished!”

They stood on the balcony. Orante leaned over the rail and looked at the lights of Sedona, far off in the distant valley. They were alone.

“Easier than I thought. It’s nice to have power. Now, if I can be let alone to walk around and...maybe have a woman? A trip to town?”

“Fat chance! You may get the run of the Temple, but I don’t think your vision will take you to town. Want a

woman? Well screw you buddy! You get one when I do, okay!"

On the way back to Orante's room, Otoa dropped the wooden hatch cover over the guardian's peep hole.

"Celesta will probably want to talk to me."

"Tell her to go with the message. Tell her anything, but don't let her put the guards back on me."

They sat, backs against the wall, at ease together for the first time in years.

"Kinda feels like the day in Hanoi when they let us out."

"Does, doesn't it. Sills, where does Gwinn get the money? Hell, I don't even know how much money we have."

"I take care of that. It's complicated. I put a system in place years ago... You and me Brother, we skim. Nels is my inside man. I cut him in. He doesn't know it's me. He gets his and keeps his yap shut... And... Well, there's no way the board would ever find out. Nels puts the money from the sale of donated homes, cars, stock, stuff like that, in an account called Christmas Charity, up in Flag. Only Gwinn and I have access. Gwinn knows he's working for you. For you he'd do anything. Nice, huh?"

"Why can't we just take that money and run?"

"Thought of that! In fact, that's what I originally intended. We'd last about a minute. The money, and there isn't enough, would be reported stolen, we'd be thieves. Only thing worse than a guy who believes like Gwinn, is us, I guess."

"Yeah, every scam's a trap."

"What time 'ya got?"

"Almost 10:00."

"Cripe, we got to go. Sorry Peter, but it's time to be Orante again. You up for it? This audience is with the old timers."

"I am. You know, I kinda enjoy this part. They really need me, and I need them."

Otoa reached over and held his friend's arm.



“I know you do Peter. And you know what? You’re good at it! Love ‘ya guy. It won’t be much longer until we can get out of here.”

He arranged himself on his pillows and gave Otoa the high sign. The large meditation room filled quickly. He listened to the rustling of their clothes and their attempts to control their breathing as they sat. He reached forward and lifted the bell. Otoa clapped loudly. He shook the bell and listened to it jingle.

They all sat, coming into their special space. Otoa waited until he thought everyone was ready and began. He gave each suggestion and paused, waiting for the right length of time before giving the next.

*Your eyes are closed.*

*What are you feeling from within?*

*Start with your thought probe. Move it from your feet slowly up through your body. Know each part of yourself.*

*Who are you? Probe your mind; your knowledge of who you are.*

*Now probe beyond the top of your head. Feel the energy that flows up your spine and out into the aura above you. Know your soul.*

*Probe away from your body. Explore non-self space.*

*Find the Master and let your thought-probe enter him.*

Orante lifted the bell and rang it.

“Now, we are one and we may begin.”

“You have questions. I have questions, and so we have answers! Begin!”

An older woman, trim and healthy looking, spoke. “When I meditate, I lose myself, I have for years. I am able to clear my mind. Now what? What happens after you have taken this step Master?”

Orante opened his eyes a squint and looked at her. He knew her, liked her, respected her. She was losing direction.

“If you are at the beginning, why do you stop?”

He saw her squirm. Maybe he was being too hard on her.

“Do you ask me to go deeper?”

“If you feel deeper is something that you do for yourself and for others?”

“And should I give up pure concentration?”

“Have you given up then, when you open yourself that way?”

She opened her eyes and stared at him. He nodded at her. She smiled and relaxed. She got it! Wonderful!

The others shifted, against their wills.

“Master?” A man in his fifties that Orante had known for years spoke up. “In God all things are perfect. I truly keep the God-force within me. Why am I ill?”

Orante almost winced from the impact of the question. Otoa looked away and mumbled something to himself.

“Did you embrace God to defeat the cycle of Her plan?”

The man looked shocked and then relaxed. A beautiful smile crossed his face. Otoa knew that he was filled with cancer.

A man’s voice. He perceived Gwinn.

“Great Teacher, how will we know if we are ready to ascend into a higher level with the Pleiadians?”

Tough question. Otoa became uneasy, waiting for Orante’s answer.

“How do you know you are not already there?”

Gwinn sat straighter. “But?”

“When are you not there?”

Gwinn still wasn’t getting it.

“You mean I’m already at that level?”

“Aren’t you here?”

The session lasted longer than usual. Orante loved to be with this group at the end of each day. After, he had learned to watch their faces for feedback about his effectiveness. They needed solace. They needed him. He felt deep empathy for them. Each was as a mule, a sterile human hybrid, beautifully formed, strong of mind and body, nothing more. They were without the genetic substance or inner drives that would carry their particular genes forward. He had freed them from a life of consuming, processing and self-aggrandizement. He grimaced as he acknowledged that they were the dead-end branches of the species.

## Chapter 23

You have been wandering through lives, lost from us. Now, in this time, you are aware of us again and you are seeking that peace; coming home.

MISTY LAY IN BED, eyes closed, listening to cartoon madness from the TV. She reluctantly opened her eyes. The TV was blaring and flashing only for her. Issy was gone. She had left the TV on; a note stuck to the TV screen. She found the bleeper and hit the red button. Silence!

After a few minutes she stretched in bed then let her feet find the floor. She felt good. Yesterday had been fun. Breakfast with the guy they had almost run into, and then a day of sightseeing. They had enjoyed themselves. Twice they had cooled off in Oak Creek. Once at Slide Rock, later at Red Rock Crossing across from the beautiful Cathedral Rock. From there they hiked an easy trail to a point where they could see down the length of a rocky ridge called The Transept. They came back by the High School on a road that was difficult to drive. It twisted and curved and it seemed that all of the hairpins were sloping the wrong way. At every sharp curve they met another car or truck. Each time, the other vehicles were partly in their lane.

They met a man from Nevada at the crossing who told them he had found a great place to eat. He explained how to get to Page Springs, suggested that they order ribs, and told them where to sit so that they could have the best view of Oak Creek. After an hour at the crossing they went back to the motel to change, rested for about an hour, then headed west. It was getting dark when they finished their ribs and the waiter brought desert. They didn't talk, they sat by the window overlooking Oak Creek, ate and watched twilight change the scene below them. It had been a wonderful day. She felt more connected with life than she had in a long time.

Issy woke a little before 7:00. She found the bleeper and hunted for her favorite cartoon programs. She watched, got bored, and went in and took a quick-rinse shower. Misty was zonked. She didn't want to wake her. She played with her hair, arranging it in a French roll and then let it hang in a pony tail. She fixed it into place with an elastic band, dressed, and wrote a quick note for Misty.

Outside, the air was humid. Great white clouds were forming in the east. She imagined that she could run into Ter again and get him to take her through town in his Jeep. His Jeep was gone. Below the motel, overlooking the main drag, was a coffee shop. She headed that way, window shopping as she walked by the small specialty shops.

'It's early, perhaps that's the problem,' she thought as she noted that the place was full. There was a long bench with people seated uncomfortably, waiting to get in. She joined them, sitting next to a man that she guessed was in his late twenties. She felt a surge of interest. If Misty got it on with Ter, she would need a man too.

"Is that a USA Today?" She knew it was, but it was worth a try. The guy wasn't wearing a wedding band.

"Oh yeah, sure, it is. I'm almost through with it. Want it when I'm done? It belongs here."

"I've never been here before. Is this a good place for breakfast?"

"I eat here. I like it. I like the prices best. Ever try to eat breakfast in this town? Kiss a tenner goodbye."

"You live in Sedona then?"

"Well, just outside. I work up at the Temple. They give me a place to stay and a living wage. I'm not religious, they need a good computer expert; me!"

"Wow, computers? I miss my computer. Isn't it funny how you become attached to them? I mean, I think of my computer like it was a member of the family."

"Yeah, I know. It's because the way computer operating systems work and the way the brain works are

similar. What are you doing here? Do you go to Red Rock High?”

She was devastated. She looked so young! This guy was a lot older. Maybe seven or eight years, but still!

“Thank’s for the compliment. I’m nineteen,” a little white lie wouldn’t hurt. “I may start at the university this fall.” She knew that the best way to stop questions was to ask them.

“I like to be called Issy. What’s your name?”

He smiled, took a second look at her and liked what he saw. He thought, ‘jail bait,’ but decided that she could be nineteen.

“Daniel. But please call me Dan. Would you share a table with me? I think we could get served sooner if we shared.”

“Sure. Dan, I like that name! Do they ever call you Danny? What do you do around here... I mean, it’s a small town and... What’s fun?”

“I don’t like it as much as just plain Dan. We go to Cottonwood or Flag. But, if you like to hike and do outdoors things...?”

“Do you? I can imagine all the neat hikes you can take around here.”

“Sure. Well, not so much when it’s hot like it’s been. Although just the other day I got to go up a wild canyon I’d never been up before. I got paid, too, in cash!”

“Wow! That sounds pretty neat. What do you do up in Flagstaff?”

They had breakfast together, then he had to leave. She told him how to contact her and gave him a smile that communicated her interest. He left, picking up the bill and acting cool about it. In a minute he was back.

“Issy, why don’t we get together for lunch, or even before? I could pick you up around eleven. Then I could kinda show you around and we could visit. Maybe we could take a sandwich out and eat it somewhere. Okay?”

Misty was waiting when Issy let herself in.

“Hi Iss, how was your jaunt around?”

“Great. Oh, sorry, but I met a neat guy, he bought me breakfast. Do you mind?”

“You’re a free person Iss. Who’d you meet?”

“His name’s Dan, and he’s maybe six feet, slim, handsome... And guess what? He works at the Temple and lives there too. He’s not a cultie, he does their computers. Oh, and he asked me to go on a picnic with him today. He’ll get me at eleven.”

Misty was feeling left out. She hadn’t thought of being alone.

“That’s wonderful! I hope he turns out to be someone fun you like.”

“We ate at that little place down below here. I’ll go with you if you want. I just need to be back here by eleven.”

During breakfast, Misty realized that she was looking for Ter. Every time the door opened she looked up, hoping to see him. She smiled inwardly, knowing that she wasn’t ready to be alone. Maybe she could accidentally run into him. He might come by the motel, it was a small town.

Dan picked Issy up at eleven. Misty walked around the balconies of the motel, watching for Martel’s Jeep and trying to decide what it was she wanted. Then she knew. She needed to go back to the Temple and find out one way or another if her answers were there.

She parked in the lower lot, thinking that the walk up would help her clear her mind. Out of breath, sweaty, she stopped at the top level near the connecting walk. In the north, she heard a deep rumble; far-off thunder. Awesome clouds were forming above the red rocks and even at that distance she could see flashes of lightning. There was an energy here that she felt attracted to. As a girl, she had loved violent thunder storms. The way the clouds were forming above the red rock canyons gave her a sense of awe and insignificance. There was a power in nature beyond anything tiny humans could explain.

“Do you have an appointment?”

She turned away from the storm and looked for the person who had spoken. She heard a crackle of static and saw the speaker box the voice had come from.

“No, but Orante invited me to come back.”

“Wait one moment, please.”

She turned and watched the light show in the clouds again. A strong breeze caught her. She felt the power of the storm sweeping down across the red rocks.

“It will not come here today. When it does, pray for all the creatures caught in the canyons.”

Misty turned and looked with surprise at a small woman, wrapped in white muslin and wearing flowers in her hair.

“Don’t they know to get away?”

“You’re right, they may... Orante did invite you back?”

“Night before last. He gave me a gift... I didn’t think to call ahead.”

“No, that wouldn’t have been expected. You are?”

“Misty.” She was reluctant to give the woman any other information. She remembered the parlor trick.

“Will you follow me... No, come walk beside me. I didn’t mean follow, I meant...”

“Thank you. I understand. Do you feel the energy in the air? The storm is still so far away.”

“I think you would feel energy in the air here even on a clear day. This place is special. The Vortex energy here is uplifting.”

They walked along balconies that led into the complex.

“There are so many rooms with no furniture. Are they...?”

“Meditation rooms. Areas of quiet beauty for meditation. We live in dorms and cottages below.”

“I saw Orante’s room on the tour.”



“He lives on this level. He and his immediate staff. Did you see how simply he lives? He really doesn’t need much in this material world. Misty, what can I do for you?”

“Well, I’m kinda on a quest. I’m searching for...”

“For the reasons? For your identity? For...?”

“All of those things, I guess. I’ve screwed up the first part of my life. I think I can do better from here on out. I need help.”

“Are you ready to be an initiate?”

“I don’t know, what does that entail?” She knew, and she certainly wasn’t ready to give it all up and jump in.

“I can sense that you don’t know yet. That is to be expected. I was that way once. It takes time and information to make the decision... You have time, and today, I know you are here for information. Come along with me, please.”

They walked to a staircase and down two levels. Her guide turned along a dark corridor and stopped.

“You are here for information. Will you accept our way of starting this process?”

“I think so, what is it?”

“You will enter into our garden. First you must be cleansed and made ready. Do not be alarmed, you will have privacy in your bath and the masseuse is a woman, like us.”

“You want me to bathe and then...”

“Brenda will work the soreness and stress out of your muscles. That will help clear your mind and you will feel ready to learn about us. Come, if you are ready I will show you the bath.”

They entered a grotto beneath the Temple. It seemed carved into the red rock, yet it had marble floors and panels of exquisite polished alabaster along the walls. At one end, bubbling merrily, was a seastar-shaped pool. Next to the pool were light panels which changed colors with the music she heard playing in the background. From incense cairns on little stands came wonderful scents.

“This is beautiful!”

“You can undress behind that partition. There are towels. Please enjoy yourself. Brenda will be with you, but not until you are ready. Call for her when you are. I will come for you later. Enjoy, dear. This is the beginning of something beautiful for you.” She started to walk away, “Oh and dear, you have total privacy while you are bathing. You are totally alone here until you ask for Brenda. Be with yourself and let your senses guide you!”

Misty sensed an invitation in the way the woman had told her she would be alone. What was she communicating? There was something sensual about the room, its colors, sounds and smells. She placed her clothes on the rack and hooks provided, stepped from her sandals into the thin cotton and vinyl house slippers, and grabbed a large, heavy towel as she walked to the pool. The water was hot. She slid in, aware that her skin tightened and then relaxed as the water numbed her. Perfume rose from the water. She breathed it in, then sank down until the water touched her chin. She sat that way, out of touch with her body, a floating head in a perfect pond.

Thoughts bombarded her. Fears about being here, angst about the courts and those whom she was certain were searching for her. She recalled the women in Denver, and the fear the witch had charged her with. She moved about the pool, on her belly now, then on her back. The water seemed hot again when she moved. She let it take the stress from her. Gradually, she sensed her body. She ran her hands down her sides and all the way past her knees. She felt her breasts and marveled that they floated, free. She caressed herself, as a lover might.

In time, she felt so relaxed that she feared she would sleep. Without considering what she would lose, she called Brenda, and that phase of her transformation ended abruptly.

“Got to get you out of there now, girl. Come on, get up! Here’s your towel, come more alert now... Come with me!”

The air felt cold. The woman herded her into an adjoining room positioning her under a shower head jutting from the wall. She felt a blast of cold water; gasped as if she had been hit in the solar plexus. Then her body was being rubbed violently with a course towel. She opened her eyes and saw the woman pick up a thing that looked like a juniper branch and began to lightly slap her with it. Her body tingled and came alive. She smelled the pungent odor of gin; juniper berries. The lights were too bright. Her whole body was screaming.

“Good for you now! Lay down here, face up, do you hear?”

She held the towel against her breasts with one hand and her lower body with the other.

“That’s good now. Just lay there and control your breathing. Here, I’ll arrange the towel if you’re modest. Put your hands at your sides and relax them.”

She had never felt as vulnerable, even when Blanchard had come into her room and demanded sex with her; raped her. She lay under the lights, open and helpless, exposed. The woman poured a sweet oil on her stomach and began to spread it around with a counterclockwise motion of both hands. Then the woman’s strong oily hands were spreading her toes, pulling them and rubbing oils between each. She relaxed. The masseuse began to work the lactic poisons from each limb and muscle of her body.

“Don’t you worry girl, I’m a woman too and I don’t think as I work. I’m not a Lesbo. I am a professional! Relax and let me work the pain out of you!”

Misty wasn’t sure how long it lasted. After a while the pain was tolerable, even desired. Brenda released it with her hands, bit-by-bit. The areas she had worked seemed numb, putty-like. Her mind let pain be pulled from it, out through her temples, out from the lobes of her ears. Her thoughts became easy and jumbled as if they were

flowers tumbling to the ground from the basket of her mind.

She knew, in her fog of pleasure, that the working had stopped. She sensed that she was alone, coming back from a dreamland of spirits.

“You back with me? If so, I’ll help you to your feet. You got to get dressed in these, now, and go up. I’ll call Mabel.”

She was given a white cotton sarong which she wrapped about her waist, and a thicker woven cotton blouse that she slid over her head and tied with its two straps around her middle. Mabel brought flowers for her hair; blue asters.

As Mabel combed her hair out, braiding it loosely, she fixed the flowers in place. Misty looked around for a mirror, there were none in the room.

“See yourself in your mind’s eye and you’ll have a better reflection of how you look than a mirror could give you.” Mabel offered.

The small woman led her from the red rock and marble grottos, out to an atrium where rays of the early afternoon sun were moving up the far wall. The space was hot, with a dryness that felt good to Misty.

“Sit here, dear, five minutes while I go ahead and make sure Sandi is ready for you.” She left, sliding a glass door open. She didn’t close it behind her. Misty could see plush furniture inside a room that seemed to be painted rosy pink.

The radiating light from the sun and the parched air dried her hair as it pulled the moisture of her bath from her body. She felt thirst; the start of perspiration on her forehead and back.

“The desert pulls moisture from us. Are you ready?”

Misty looked at the opening into the pink room and saw a thin woman with gray hair cut page-boy style

motioning for her to come in. She had a fleeting thought...  
'Ready for what?'

The woman handed her a glass of water, no ice, cool.

"I'm Sandi, I will be your guide. Come, have a seat and stay relaxed."

Misty could hear soft music in the background. She focused on it.

"You hear the music? Do you know the Pleiades Ascension Frequencies?"

"No, but it sounds familiar. It could be Brahms, he blended classical tradition with romantic impulse..."

"It may sound similar. All great music does. No, there is no other music on Earth like this."

Misty felt anger rise in her. 'I stand corrected,' she thought. She let the thought go. Her body went to a relaxed state again; she was calm.

"I need you to sit quietly while I go into a meditative state. When I talk to you again, it will not be me. It will be the one who channels through me. Do you understand channeling?"

"Someone from the past, a Tibetan Monk or an Indian Shaman talks through you?"

"I channel an ancient from Atlantis. Melzeikanak. He will be with you. Oh, and of course he speaks his native tongue, yet through me, he hears and speaks English."

Misty nodded. 'Everybody must wonder about that,' she thought. 'Convenient.'

"Please, there is no cause for doubt. Let it be, you will see."

'Gad, she reads my thoughts,' Misty tightened her muscles, getting ready.

Sandi sat Lotus, crossing her legs under her, hands on knees, thumbs and forefingers forming 'O's.' She began her mantras. To Misty it sounded like chanting. Soon she began to sweat and move her body in circles from her waist. Her eyes opened and she let out a silent

scream, as if penetrated by a force. Then she let her body sink into a comfortable position, locked it there, and began to speak. The voice that came out was Sandi's with a strange accent.

"Dorothy, there is so much you have forgotten since your soul left here. You can remember past lives! You are here because it is almost time. You have known me in so many lives! Remember me! I am your teacher, a part of your soul."

Misty tried, but she had nothing to go by. Nothing connected her to the voice.

"Your confusion mystifies me. Why are you confused when in your heart you know what you are doing and why you are here?"

In her heart, she believed she did know. And how did he know she was Dorothy, not Misty?

"You seek peace. You ache for the belonging that you have had.

You have been wandering through lives, lost from us. Now, in this time, you are aware of us again and you are seeking that peace; coming home. You are coming back to us, back to the spirit. I now command you to do these things!"

Sandi hadn't moved, yet she was sweating and starting to shake. Misty felt sorry for her. It must be awful to give your body over to something dead.

"You will move from the material realm into the spiritual! You will move from the animal to the being! You will clear your mind of meaningless thoughts! You will learn to meditate again and then all will be as it should be for you! You will find peace and joy."

Sandi snorted, fell forward, barely catching herself with her hands. She broke out of her Lotus, legs jutting-out in front of her, leaning back on her hands.

"Did I get through?"

Misty wasn't certain how to react. Had it been an act? It was a good one.

"I think so."

“Did you meet Melzeikanak? Did he know you?”

“He said he did.”

“He knew private things about you then?”

“I think so.” Misty thought about her --- his words. He hadn't said anything that was private information. What he said could fit anybody.

“You look skeptical.”

Misty waited a long time to answer. She went back over what she could remember of the ‘meeting.’

“I... I don't know for sure.”

Sandi's body tensed and she sat upright, swinging sideways, bringing her legs around so that they supported her.

“Of course you don't. This is all so new, so strange, isn't it? Was there anything he said that you don't know in your heart is right?”

“No. He asked me to meditate and to become more spiritual. He told me, really. He didn't ask me, I mean.”

“Beautiful! You know, it may not seem like it, but you were handed something very sacred and special. It seems too simple to be of great worth, think about it! You were given the direction you seek, right?”

Misty decided it was easier to agree. What Melze...what's his name, ordered her to do seemed right.

Sandi took a long sip from her plastic water bottle, snapped the button down, and got up slowly.

“How long was he here?”

Misty watched her closely. The woman was exhausted.

“Oh not long, maybe three minutes?”

“I never know. Any longer and I would probably need hours to recuperate. Come, I want you to meet Zieah. He will know your soul from ancient times. He was also a priest in Atlantis, he dates back to the First Conversion.”

“Conversion?”

“That’s when the Starbeings came to Earth and merged with the animal form of man here. They are our souls...and Zieah is one of the oldest.”

Sandi led her out into the atrium again, then through a door in the opposite wall. They wound up a metal circular staircase and came out, head first, into one of the meditation rooms Misty had seen on her tour.

A man in his forties, Misty guessed, dressed in gray sweats, came forward and greeted her. He smiled warmly, an effeminate smile with no energy behind it.

“Dear one. How nice that you have come to sit with us. Did Sandi tell you that I could help you determine your Ascension Status?”

Misty smiled and shook her head.

“Well dear, we have work to do.” He led her across the room to one of the many sets of pillows on the floor. “Please sit! You will have questions. I am not the Master, but I can answer some of them.” He smiled again, the sickly sweet smile of someone who oozes, she decided.

“I’m Zieah, and I am here to help others. My life is dedicated to those who are on the path of ascension. What I do well is help each of you find out where you are now...your status, if you will. Do you know?”

Misty had questions. He was asking his.

“I am at the beginning, I guess.”

“Oh so right! I happen to know your soul. You are almost to the top. You have lived many times and worked through so much. Now, in this life, you were given adversity to overcome. It was the final test. You changed your life and came seeking your soulmates. That is why you are here Dorothy, you were misty... in the true meaning of the word, now you are moving to be a leader of the Explorer Race. You may have your own name back. You are of the ones who can stop the Giant Hunters of Orion. Your name is Geminius. Remember?”

Misty tried, nothing clicked. She shook her head slowly, sad in a way because it sounded so important.



“You will, Dear. We need you with us now. It’s almost time!”

Misty felt pulled toward him. It had been a long time since someone told her she was needed.

“What could I do?”

“Only the Master knows that. I would think that you would continue your past work. You are Geminius, I know your soul. In time you will come to remember. It is so good to have you back.”

Misty felt good. Her body felt better than it had, maybe ever. She felt needed and content. “There is one thing, and then I would like to ask you some questions.”

“I’m here for you. What is it?”

“I have to... Is there a restroom nearby? Can I go and then come right back?”

In the sanitary safeness of the john, she had time to think about what was happening to her. She did feel good, this seemed like a nice way to take care of herself. Here, it seemed that the mundane Mickey Mouse of the world was put aside to get it out of the way of true purpose. Maybe she had lived before? Maybe her name was Geminius? It seemed odd that she wouldn’t remember. She knew nothing of Orion or the giant hunters --- Or, were they Giant Hunters? --- It was confusing. “Oh!” she had a flash. Geminius...Gemini, the Twins. “Oh no!” she pleaded, her words amplified by the hardness of the walls. “Not that again!”

“Zieah, Why am I called Geminius? Am I a twin?”

“Of course, Dear, we all are.”

“Really? Everybody?”

“Of course, there are at least two sides to us all. There is at least one shadow from everything under all suns.”

“When you said my name was Geminius? What does it mean?”

“That you were warrior-born, under Gemini. That you were a defender of the spirit of all beings.”

“As a twin then, do I have a positive and a negative side? If I’m positive, do I attract negative energy?”

“Yes Dear. You see, you do remember! That’s what makes you so important to us all.”

That rattled her. She decided to let it drop.

“Who are the Starbeings you mentioned before?”

“Our souls came from the Pleiades. We are all descendants of the souls who inhabit planets in the system of the Seven Stars. In battles with the evil creatures of Orion, who kept us from uniting with the souls from Gemini and Taurus, and with the Procyon who came from Canis and used giants to hunt us, the Earth was considered a safe haven. The Starbeings came here and planted souls in the mammals called humans. Then, there followed a period of war and strife which swept the universe. Millennia passed. We were abandoned here, or so we thought. Then, a new age began. Our fathers, who are from Heaven, sacred be their names, came to free us and take us home. They have forgiven us our sins and asked us to forgive them if we felt that they have sinned against us. They are coming! Some are here now to lead us away from the animal temptations and back to our pureness. Geminius, ours is the kingdom and the glory which goes on forever and ever, and we are to be a part of it again.”

Wow! Misty was impressed. There was so much to learn. He was so certain that she was Geminius --- Maybe?

“How do you know about the system of the Seven Stars you mentioned?”

“We have the Greeks to thank for that. In those ancient times, the wisdom of Atlantis and the knowledge that has since been lost by most, was still known. One of the greater Souls was known to the Greeks as Atlas. Atlas had seven daughters who left the Earth. In those days, they could still go back and forth. He gave kingdoms to each, on seven stars. Maia, Electra, Celaeno, Taygeta, Merope, Alcyone, and Sterope. Thanks to the Greeks, we know about them.”

Misty nodded, even more impressed. "Sandi said she was channeling someone from Atlantis. I don't understand."

"You will! In fact, when you meditate you may open a door to the past and find a soul who will come out through you. There are good ones and evil ones... Make certain that... Well, when the time is right we will help you if you even need it. Each of us can form a channel. Each of us can help rebuild the wisdom we once had, but lost as the animal form began to dominate us. When you seek, you will find the energy and the old wisdom." He paused and smiled at Misty.

"Let me give you this information as a gift that will help you on your way. When you clear your mind and come to a true state of grace through meditation, you will walk through the valley of the dead. But fear no evil! Our force and staff will comfort you! No evil shall touch you, for you are one with them!"

Misty nodded, it sounded so familiar... Maybe she was remembering.

"You said the time is almost right, or something like that?"

"Good question, Dear. The mysteries are known. Oh, don't be swayed by those who do not understand. The secular world waited for the calendar year to turn 2,000. Stupid! Even when it was pointed out that the calendar is wrong, they still sat and waited. Forgive me for being upset. I have really tried to explain it to them. No, they think the millennium was then." He paused and wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

Misty was confused. She had read about the Y2K bugs and computers and more.

"Dear. It passed before many knew it. The New Millennium began way back in October, 1997. That's what's so beautiful! We have long been on our way! Orante is here, the place of contact is known, and... Oh dear Gemini, that's why you are here too!"

Dorothy. Misty. Geminius. She could pick her identity and be one of her three parts. She smiled, imagining herself as Dorothy again. No, Dorothy was dead and should stay dead. Geminius? She didn't feel like a man or like a warrior. No, she would remain Misty for now. She knew her head was filled with information she didn't understand or even accept as true. If she had time to sort it out then maybe...?

"Zieah, you have been very kind. May I see you again?"

"Of course, any time. I can come to your room, call for me, extension 401, and I will be there."

"In the motel?"

"Oh, silly of me. You're not staying here now?"

"No, I would, but I have obligations... My animal has things to do." She knew he couldn't argue with that.

"Of course. One must bring that life to closure. That takes time. Will you go then?"

"I've got to. But..."

"You want to ask me how to return? I will give..."

"Oh, no. What I was going to ask is where are my clothes? Where can I change back and get my purse and stuff?"

"Silly old me. I'll call Martha. Bye-bye dear."



## Chapter 24

“Like hell you do!” She screamed above the engine’s roar. “You see one of the most contemptible acts ever committed against life in Arizona!”

I WAS IN PICK’S on time. It was 7:50, no sign of Celesta. I let the waiter place me at a table for two and waited. When she left the motel yesterday, she had said “7:30.” She said, “breakfast,” I remembered that clearly. I looked my nails over and grabbed a copy of the Red Rock News from the window bench. Pick’s was busy. I couldn’t tie-up a table without ordering. I looked around. Lots of faces I had seen before, most older than me, well maybe, I think of myself as young. I’m probably close to their ages. They’re maybe forty-five. Fifty? I’ve got a few years to go before I’m like them.

“Hi! Got room at the table for a mechanic?”

“Celesta. I was about to get worried.” I noted that her fingertips were smeared with engine grease; she had wiped her face at least twice.

“My van. Well, did you know that spark plug wires will burn and short-out if they touch the manifold?”

“It was missing?”

“Or I was. I was almost, but I figured it out. I’m a pretty good mechanic... Does that bother you?”

“Bother me?” I was seeing a whole new part of Celesta. She was dressed differently, blue jeans and one of those faded blue denim work shirts the kids in the ‘60s would kill for. Her hair was different, somehow, and instead of sandals she wore work boots.

“I mean, I’m a fair mechanic and I like camping... fixing things and sports.”

“Bother me? Why would I be bothered by that?”

“You got to know me in my hot weather mode. I was worried that you might not like me as myself. I’m really a tomboy. The van wouldn’t start and, well here I am.”

She pulled back her chair and sat heavily, letting her weight drop like a man.

I must have reacted in a strange way. She stared at me, holding my gaze until I looked down.

“So Ter, what’s the matter?”

I thought about it. I liked the way she acted now. She was so much more natural.

“You have grease on your cheek and forehead. Here, take my napkin.”

“Oh. I thought you might...”

She didn’t finish her sentence. Everything about her seemed different to me. If we had problems before... I felt at ease with her for the first time since we met.

“Ter, I really am a tomboy. Do you still like me?”

“I usually don’t go for boys, but in this case, okay, stay for breakfast.”

We ate slowly. Every time the waiter came to our table he gave me a dirty look. He had told me that Celesta was his. He hadn’t told her. I shrugged it off.

“Would you show me how to fly?”

“Show you?”

“I mean, take me flying with you and show me how you do it?”

The plane was up on Airport Mesa sitting in its hanger. I was always looking for any excuse to fly.

“I’m going up this morning. I flew the area the other day with some other guys, now I’d like to go back and take my time studying the canyon and the area from the air.”

“Don’t you care about the clouds?”

“Yes, I do! The boomers get bad in the afternoon. That’s why I want to fly early.”

“The monsoon is coming. You can’t imagine what a difference it makes.”

I agreed, although I never expected the changes that occurred.

“Ter, what are you looking for when you fly? I mean, I know things about this area that will amaze you. Can I be your guide today?”

It sounded good to me. I decided to probe and see if she would share her real identity with me.

“You work at the Temple. What do you do?”

“I’m in charge of security. Not police work stuff, but protecting the interests of our people. There are forces that want to hurt Orante and destroy our work. I try to understand them and deflect their energy away from us.”

“Am I one of those forces? You tried to deflect me, didn’t you?”

Her body jerked just a tiny bit, enough to let me know that I had struck a nerve.

“You work for a company that wanted to change Prophet Canyon... Put houses, a golf course, a big recreation center in there.”

“Yes, but development is inevitable...”

“Is it Ter? What have you learned about the canyon so far?”

I laughed. “Not very much. Everybody has told me that it is wild and dangerous; not to go in there.”

“And?”

“Well, I guess they’re right. It’s too hot this time of year, I don’t understand the flora and fauna, there may be flash floods...”

“And?”

“And? It sounds like a hell-hole to me.”

“Think about it Ter. If it’s that hot, that dangerous and that bad why would anybody want to build houses in there? Or a golf course?”

I must have let my jaw drop as I stared at her. What she said was so obvious. Landsman had tried to tell me, yet I had missed it. My ego did a down-turn and I cursed my cockiness at thinking that I was a developer’s best friend.

“Ter, close your mouth! I mean, don’t look so surprised. I’m right, aren’t I?”

I borrowed a gasoline-driven tractor, one of the two-wheel kind that hook onto the front axle of the plane,



and let it pull the 172 out of the hanger. Outside, I returned the tractor and began a pre-flight check. I wasn't taking any chances. Someone had put water in the fuel of my first plane. Maybe they had tampered with this one also.

I explained each of the control surfaces to Celesta as I checked them. Then, very carefully, I got the gravitometer and checked the fuel. Nothing settled to the bottom. There was no water in these tanks.

Celesta was on my elbow through everything I did. She seemed to understand mechanical things. I enjoyed explaining the plane's systems to her. In no time we were out on the taxi way.

"Wow, you could keep taxiing and be airborne?"

"Well, almost. This mesa keeps pilots honest. There's no room for error."

"Ter, I was serious about being your guide. Let me show you the country as I see it, okay?"

She gave me directions that headed us back to the place that Mann and my architect friend Dean, had pointed out.

"I flew over here and saw the failed subdivision."

"Really? You did? Okay, let me show you what I see. Go over it and then turn around."

I flew north, then did a 180. We were heading back toward the failed development where they were teaching trees to walk.

"Okay, go-slow Ter. See the long mesa? Look at it!"

I tipped the plane to port and studied the mesa top. I could see a water tank, and a road that looked like it was new. I saw several small circles of rocks on the flat red formations. Then we were over it, looking down upon junk littered slabs where houses once stood or where they once planned to build them. All around, the same destruction I had seen before. Holes, ripped earth, devastation of the natural environment, trees dying.

"Did you see the circles on the mesa top?"

I leveled the plane and started a 180 that would take us back north. "I saw three."

"To me, and lots of others, that mesa is a sacred place. The circles are prayer wheels. Some call them Medicine Wheels. Lots of really good people believe that there is a special energy there and that it is one of the places on Earth where minds in harmony can pray for Peace on Earth. To us, it is a place of wonder!"

I nodded and gave her an understanding smile and nod. "Why that mesa?"

"There are places like it all over the Earth. Some have been known since ancient times. They are 'good energy' places. In Europe, most of these places have churches built on them. They are special points where the energy of the universe is pure."

We were coming back over the failed development again.

"Ter, if you never believe in the battle of the forces of good vs. evil, at least believe what you see below and on the mesa itself. See! The exact opposite of peace and beauty is destruction and death! Here is a place where the two forces are in conflict. Evil forces have laid waste to the forests at our feet. The evil ones are striking at the very heart of the mesa's energy. See that new road? See, it's like a spear-thrust along the top of the mesa, pointed at the very heart of the sacred site!"

The tone of her voice stabbed into me. She was right. All that was evil and unnecessary, all that was destruction and death lay below us in tangled messes of raped and ruined earth. Only the tip of the mesa seemed to be unaffected by the ugliness.

"A woman named Rachael saved that knoll."

When I turned to her, Celesta had tears running down her cheeks.

I wanted away from there! I pulled back, adjusting the fuel and trim as we began to climb high above the tangled formations.

"We have another half hour maybe. The storm clouds are building faster than they forecasted."

She was staring out the windscreen, still crying.

"Where to, guide?"

"You really want to see more of my world?"

I hadn't thought about it until she mentioned it. Her world was one of conflicts; out of sync with the world most of us are aware of.

"Okay then, can you head back toward Cottonwood and then come toward Sedona from there?"

"What are we looking for?"

"Something else that is so... It's hard to find words to describe how absolutely wrong it is! I'll show you something that is obscene! It is a loathsome act of a few very evil people... Obscene! It's just Obscene! I don't know another word that I can use to tell you how I feel about it."

I couldn't imagine anything that could evoke that kind of reaction in anybody. I had flown over the area the day I arrived. I hadn't seen anything that fit her description.

"Ter, do you know about deserts?"

I looked over at her.

"Out here, in this arid zone --- Get it? Arizona? --- There are vast areas where almost no rain falls. Cottonwood averages less than eleven inches of rain a year. There are other places where in a whole year's time, only four or five inches of rain fall. Luckily, the San Francisco Peaks stop a lot of water. I mean, they get rain and snow. That water percolates down through the rock and lays in aquifers. Some of it runs off and that makes the Verde River and Oak Creek. There is little water, too little, and it is precious." She paused, wiped her eyes and then dabbed her nose with the sleeve of her denim shirt.

"Because of greed and ignorance, more than ninety percent of the natural riparian areas in the state are gone. The State of Arizona is drying up. Water is life, and..."

I told her I had read a little about that. I understood.

"Now look there, what do you see?"

We were flying over green fields with powerful sprinklers throwing water in arcs.

“Irrigation.”

“Like hell you do!” She screamed above the engine’s roar. “You see one of the most contemptible acts ever committed against life in Arizona!”

I was confused. She saw it on my face.

“Ter, the evil ones are evaporating water to get rid of it!”

It hit me then, I had seen the sewage treatment plant across the road, the settling ponds...

“You’re kidding. Why?”

“Because they don’t like the idea of doing what is right.”

I was confused again. “Don’t like it?”

“What’s right, is that you clean the water and put it back, or at least, recycle it and use it again.”

“Yuck! Recycle sewage water?”

“Oh yuck yourself, Ter! You think like they do. You live in Denver, right? You flush, they process, and the water goes into the Platte. Right? Then what?”

“You’re right! The next city down the Platte takes the water and uses it again.”

“Okay, now think of Sedona. It has Oak Creek, but they don’t take the water from there. They have wells and pump it out of the aquifers. They are pumping so much, pumping so hard, some of the wells are already giving out. Nobody knows how long it will last. Then, instead of recycling the water, maybe putting it into Oak Creek or back into the aquifers, these stupid, ignorant, selfish creeps evaporate it! Why? Because they don’t like the idea or the cost of recycled water. Honest. They’re really that stupid!”

I was watching for other planes as I circled around the sewage treatment plant. If she was right... I knew she was! As we came around the north side I saw the raw sore of a recently dug line that reminded me of the water line JB had pointed out on the other side of Tarantula Pass.

"Celesta, that line below...it's a wastewater return line isn't it?"

"Sure. I read about it. They want to waste some of the water by selling it to golf courses which they will build to get rid of water. Ever read about the chemicals they use on golf courses? Try to recycle them! They are obscene and each one of them --- the individuals who did this --- should be left, staked-out on the desert without water... Left to die!"

"Celesta!"

"I'm sorry Ter. It's wrong to let those feelings get the best of me. But!"

"So what would you do?"

"Me? I'm just an ignorant woman. I'd say that the cost of water includes recycling it as potable water. Does that sound dumb?"

The storm clouds were building fast. I corrected for a strong north wind when gusts from the south buffeted the plane.

"I'm heading back to the barn, the storm is building fast."

"I wanted to see Prophet Canyon from the air."

"Maybe another time, besides, I'm not sure I can take any more of your insights." I looked over at her and gave her a silly grin. She didn't like what I had said, and my grin didn't change her mind. She kept staring at me; probing into my core. I made a note to prepare for a scathing attack.

It took a half hour to get the plane back in the hanger. I usually fueled when I landed. I liked full tanks. This time I decided to wait. I wanted to stand there and watch the whole operation. Call it a fear of falling.

I asked her if she wanted lunch.

"I'm not hungry. If you are, we can stop and get something."

"I'm not either. I wouldn't mind a quiet place and a cup of coffee."

“Ter, I’ve been watching you, your body that is.”

I gave her a corny grin.

“No, not that way. I mean you fly with your whole body. You don’t relax. Every muscle is tight... Would you like a back rub? You know I’m good at it. I think I can release more of that poison that’s there.”

I was not going to be the first man in the history of the planet to turn down such an offer. We went to my room She advised me to take a hot shower first, which I did while she read a Mechanics Illustrated magazine I had picked up. I tried to relax in the shower. I couldn’t. I mentally put together several trial excuses for the comment I had made while flying, none of which would get her off my case. What could I say to her? I knew that she could see right through me.

I came out of the shower with a towel wrapped around me like a sarong. She had pulled the tails of the faded blue denim shirt out of her jeans and tied them together, leaving her midriff bare. She went into the john and brought out one of the little bottles of skin lotion which she opened and spread on her hands.

“Look. I still have grease around my cuticles.” She showed me as I lay face down on the bed.

“Here, don’t lie on your stomach without a pillow under your middle. It’s not good for your back.”

She stuffed a pillow under me as I arched up for her.

“First I’ll spread this lotion over your back.”

I felt her hands and the cool lotion as she spread it.

“Ter, I can feel hot spots on your back. I’ll push them. You tell me what comes to mind!”

I felt the pain before I realized that her thumb was jabbing into a sore knot near my shoulder blade.

“What are you thinking of?”

I was about to say “pain,” when I had a sensation of lifting the plane off the ground.

“Like I’m lifting the plane into the air.”

“And this?”

“Ye-ouch! Anger... My mom’s. I haven’t e-mailed her.”

“And this?”

This one was different. I felt sexy.

“Kinda sexy...good!”

“And this?”

This time both thumbs hit points near my spine. I felt shame. My mother was crying. She held her thumbs in place and the pressure on the sore points began to ease.

“Well?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You are sure! Get in touch with it!”

“Shame, something to do with my mother... Me.”

“And?”

“I hurt her again, somehow.”

“Here, try again.”

Both thumbs dug in again. I saw myself naked.

“Are you in touch with it?”

“No, nothing! The pain went away, though.”

“Ter!”

“Really. That helped!”

She kept putting pressure on knots in my back. Sometimes the pain was so bad I rolled away from her. She stopped asking what I recalled. I think she knew that I wasn’t going to share anything after that.

“You’re a mess big fella. If you were my van I’d give you a complete overhaul. Ter, you’re not a developer, are you?”

I caught up with her fast switch! She must have known that I wasn’t. I only worked for them.

“No. I contract with developers... Anybody that needs help. I have my own business. They pay me to troubleshoot; make things happen.”

“Do you see that some developers are ruthless?”

“I know that. They usually have to be.”

“Well, what if I told you that Orante wants to protect a special place in Prophet Canyon that is sacred to a lot of people... Like the place I showed you from the air?”

"I wouldn't have any problem with that."

"And this company you work for? What if they destroy something beautiful? Do you care about trees, animals, the Spirit of Nature?"

"You don't have to worry about that. GD is out of it. What I'm trying to find out now is who put them out and who the new players are. And yes, I guess I care about Nature."

"What do you mean? There is another development planned? Another developer involved?"

"Celesta, a lot happened to get GD off the field. Some other outfit got the Forest Service to exchange land. Somebody else may have killed four people because of Prophet Canyon. It wasn't GD. I think I know it wasn't Orante, but if not, who was it?"

She pulled a chair up next to the bed and sat down hard. "Ter, you really believe that there is someone else? Someone who would kill for... It makes sense." She paused, thinking. I let her have time.

"Did GD put the road in?"

"Absolutely not! Their plans called for roads, but not up a drainage!"

"You know of course, our people wouldn't have put a road in. There is someone else then! Damn, we thought it was all GD's work. How much do you know about Orante's plans?"

"Not much more than you've told me."

"He only wants to protect a sacred site. Believe me, none of us would kill...anything. If I tell you something, will you listen and not fly off the handle until we have discussed it?"

I agreed. She seemed distraught and unsure of herself.

"We... I, am the one who worked on the people who were doing your planning. I got them to leave your company. Now I see that it was too easy. I was stupid!"

"I don't follow."



"We teamed against GD. We got to members of the staff and got them to change direction. Remember, I called it deflecting?"

"Like you were doing to me? Any so they quit?"

"I thought we did it. But now I don't know..."

"Someone else got to them?"

"We probably softened them up. Then? Who knows why they left. I thought that GD was our main enemy until just now."

"Okay, I suspected that the Temple had a hand in it... Don't you have a clue?"

"No. Oh I know what our plans are, and believe me we wouldn't kill or cut roads in drainage's or... We love and protect. I can tell you honestly that we may want to do something in Prophet Canyon, but it has to do with protecting a sacred place not destroying it."

We sat around playing with ideas. Someone was out there who was willing to kill for a canyon that wasn't a good prospect for development. Why? I felt that I was back at the beginning of the problem. Funny, Connors had told me that the Temple wasn't involved. How had he known? Then I remembered that he had been in Sedona at one time. I recalled his words back in Denver when he described the naked people at the water hole. Connors? Water hole? How could that obese gopher get to the water hole?

"Celesta, before they bulldozed in the road, was there any other way to the water hole other than the trail from the Temple?"

"Well, yes, maybe. You mean other than the trail from the bottom, right? There is one from the top, but you'd have to be a mountain goat to use it. It's almost impassable."

"How hard is your trail... I mean, could a fat man, an out of shape man, get in and out?"

"Sure, but not without lots of help. The climb from the bottom to the Temple is almost straight up. I have

trouble getting in and out of there. It's hard, sure it's possible, we've done it. Why?"

"Oh, a man I know mentioned that he had been in there. I doubt it now."

I decided not to tell her any more than that. I trusted her, but... She changed the subject.

"Ter, while we were flying today I made an observation about you. Want to know what it was?"

I frowned. Here it came, I knew she had bookmarked her observations and that she would blast me with them.

"You have a depth of feeling for all things beautiful. The way you feel about flying gave me the first clue that you are something more than you let on. You do care...and when you learn about wrongs, you hurt just like me."

This wasn't quite as scathing as I had expected. I looked up as she went on.

"Ter Martel, you put yourself out to the world as if you were a two-dimensional character. You like to think that if you suppress your true Self, act tough, that you will be successful and desirable. I sensed that inside you hid the Spirit of a sensitive and kind human being. Maybe you only let that Spirit out when you are alone, flying. I just wanted to tell you that the two-dimensional character part you play is killing the real you." She paused, observing me. "Don't look at me that way! Don't be trying to think of a reply! I don't want a comeback, I just wanted you to know what I observed."

When she left I felt good. Not because she left, but because we were friends now, the sexual tension was gone. We might even work together. If we ever got it on, well that would come naturally. I couldn't remember having a friendship with a woman before, especially one who saw through me and still thought I was okay.

I got the computer hooked up and tried to read the messages that flowed from the "You have mail," file. Mom

could say the same thing so many ways. She wrote lengthy notes I didn't bother to read. I found myself skimming her diatribes looking for anything that stood out. Carol was leaving for the weekend. She would be alone and I should care. Connors had called our house, and Carol had given him the name of my motel. Someone from the state archaeologist's office had called and talked to Carol. She told them I was out of town. Carol had typed the message. I read it carefully.

After talking to Mr. Connors again, and with the death of Samuel Prader, we have determined that you have information regarding the Sampson Cemetery. Please contact us or the Denver County District Attorney's office as soon as possible.

Connors had set them on me? "Talking to Connors again?" What did that mean? Had the archaeologists discovered our ruse? Had they gone after Prader? The way I had left it, Sam was responsible for completing the plan. Had he screwed up?

I was shaking. What kind of trouble was I in? Why hadn't Connors mentioned it when I called him yesterday? I got up and walked around the motel room. That helped. I got cooled down enough to sit back down and e-mail Mom. After that I decided that now was a good time to call Connors and give him my daily report. I wouldn't mention the problem with the Cemetery. I would feel him out.

"Bob. This is Martel. I'm near a phone and I thought you'd be in the office. I wanted to fill you in on..."

"Martel! You got my message? That was fast!"

"No, no message, I'm calling in like you asked me to."

"Martel, things are happening here. I found a way to rescue the whole Phoenix operation. Things are settled there. You can come home!"

Landsman had tipped me off and I already knew that I was no longer a GD employee. I acted surprised, caught cold.

“What about my fees and expenses?”

“No problem. Turn them in as usual, you’ll be paid up through... Well to be fair, GD will pay you through tomorrow. That will cover you until you get back here. Fair?”

“I lose a week’s pay I had counted on?”

He waited a few seconds to answer. “Well how about we split the difference? Okay? Fair?”

I knew I wouldn’t do better than that. “Okay, oh and Bob, is there anything else happening that I need to know about?”

He didn’t pause. “No. Did you talk to Kling like I told you?”

“Not yet.”

“Well, no reason to now. He won’t be there anymore, anyway. The deal’s cut, we’re out with losses, but not great ones, and you can get out of the heat. Check in with me when you get back and rested.” The phone went dead.

Connors! There were many reasons I disliked him. Sure he would lie about GD’s involvement in Sedona. He’d squirm out of anything he screwed up and blame someone else. I had seen him do that before. Of course he would accept any offer to get out of Prophet Canyon. He knew the deal was cooked and he could pretend to be the rescuer. The man I knew was a spoiled, self-surfeiting bastard. He had taught me the meaning of the word disgust. If I got part of my contracted money from him --- It hit me hard. When I got back to Big D, I would get slapped with a suit or something from the state. He had called the state archaeologist. He probably turned in Prader to get Prader out of his way. They were partners, yet since I had known them, nothing but ill will existed between them. Was he responsible for Prader’s death? I felt somehow he was. The man was as amoral as a fund raiser. He would refuse to pay me on the grounds that I owed the company. I would be the fall-guy for the cemetery deal.

I walked the room, thinking. Kling was bailed-out when Connors accepted the deal with --- I still had no idea who that was. Landsman? Paul was the one person who might not benefit from all of this. I knew that a housing and recreational development in the canyon would never go. What need was there for an agent to market and sell property? He had offered me a job and I had accepted. Now I was out of GD by Connors direct orders. What did I want to do? Denver? No! I wasn't ready to face the state AG, and I wasn't ready to get back into the routine.

I needed time. Time to sort things out; personal things... And I loved to play detective. I was dying to know what this whole Prophet Canyon thing was about and who had the power to shake so many trees.

I opened the motel room door and the wind whipped me with raindrops. I stepped back and watched torrents of water pouring off the balcony above. I hadn't expected the violence of the storm. I felt a charge of energy as lightning struck something about a block away. They say you can tell how many miles away by counting the seconds until the thunder. From where I stood the flash and the smacking blast of sound came together.

The power of the storm seemed to drain the fear and confusion from me. I knew what I would do. I knew what I wanted. I stood there until the storm moved off to the south. The Jeep's seats were wet and water was still sloshing on the floor. I got a towel out of the lockbox and wiped the seat down. It was hot and now so humid that my shirt was sticking to my back. As I drove out of the lot, I cut through streams of red water angrily running toward Oak Creek.

It was after 2:00. My stomach was directing me. I thought of Misty and headed to Friendly's.

"Well! You like the food here?"

"Yeah and the company." I perused the joint not seeing anyone I knew.

“Not today... At least not yet. Marshal sometimes comes in about this time. The ladies? Haven’t seen them today.”

She led me to a booth with a commanding view of the door and told me to “keep watch!” I slid in.

“Thanks for introducing me to Cain.”

“I thought you two would get along. How old do you think he is?”

I knew what she was doing. I added my two-bits to her file.

“Forty-five, no more.”

“I guess that too. I like him!”

“I can see that.”

“Uh, did you catch his first name?” She was blushing.

“I saw it on his notebook. The brown leather one he writes in. It’s Arnie.”

“Arnie? Is that short for something?”

“No, I don’t think so. Well, maybe Archibald.”

“Isn’t that Archie?”

“Thanks. And your name is...”

“Martel, Ter Martel.”

“Hi, I’m Susan. Want the special?”

“That’s other than you, right?”

She laughed and wrote something on the order form. The special seemed okay to me.

There must have been a dozen Jeeps like Landsman’s son’s in Sedona. Luck would have it that I parked mine where those driving 89A could see it. Issy was the first in. She looked for me, saw me and came over. Susan gave me a big smile.

“Ter, we knew that was your Jeep! How come you’re eating so late?”

I smiled and waved her into the booth. Misty came in, saw us and walked over, smooth and sexy, I noticed.

“Hi Ter. We saw your Jeep and Issy wanted to stop and say hi. Hi!”

Her smile was open and friendly.

“Did we tell you that Misty went up to the Temple and had a bath?”

I must have looked strange.

“Don’t look that way!” Misty said, laughing. “She means that I went through an initiation process. As part of that you get to soak in a starfish shaped hot pool, get a rub down, and have someone tell you about a past life or two.”

I nodded, imagining what she had done. It sounded fun.

“She has a name, Geronimo or something.”

Before I could grin, Misty corrected her. “Geminus!”

I didn’t have a quick response. I caught Misty’s eye and winked.

“How was it up there? What were your impressions?”

Misty leaned forward in the booth, both elbows on the table.

“It was great. Loving, kind, nurturing, warm... The only adjectives I have are positive ones.”

“Did you join up?”

Issy answered. “No, she’s a dummy! She wants to think about it some more.”

“You would have?”

Issy looked threatened. “Well, I might have.”

“Misty, did you sense anything...anything that might be a problem?”

She put her hands in her lap and looked at me. “No, what I sensed was love. Everyone was... It was so strong that it was almost too much at times. I mean, they were all so soft and easy. It was like falling into a feather bed, one that you sink into until it completely covers you.”

“Suffocates you?”

“No, but it probably could. Ter, these are really good people. I know they truly believe in the way they live and it would be so easy to flow with them.”

“But you didn’t...?”

“No, I can’t tell you why, I don’t know. I do know that there is something else I have to work out.”

Susan came with my lunch.

“Hey, look who just parked in front.”

I saw a white Jeep Cherokee with gum balls. I scooted over, hoping Cain would join us. As he came in, I heard Susan greet him.

“Hi Arnie. A little late today, aren’t you?”

I slid back across the seat and stood. “Marshal, please join us. I’d like you to meet two friends of mine.”

Cain’s face lit up. I imagined that he’d had a bad day. I also knew that cops seldom had friends who weren’t cops. If they weren’t with other cops, they ate alone.

I introduced Issy first, then Misty. Cain studied their faces, smiled after perusing each, and slid into the booth next to me.

“Special Arnie?”

“Thanks, I’m ready for some fuel.”

We made small talk about the storm and eating so late in the afternoon. Misty had questions about Prescott. Issy seemed left out. I decided to hook her into the conversation.

“Issy, what did you do while Misty was up at the Temple?”

All eyes focused upon the girl. She absorbed the attention and began to radiate.

“I met the neatest guy. His name is Dan and he’s a computer whiz. He works and lives up at the Temple, but he’s not a cultie.”

I asked how she met him and got the story. She said he loved to hike and that he promised to take her to Cottonwood this weekend to party.

“We had a picnic yesterday. He bought everything, even wine.” She looked at the Marshal, worried I guessed that she was too young to legally drink wine. He ignored the information and leaned over to catch Susan’s eye.



“He made a lot of money a few days ago. Some guys paid him to go into a canyon and do some stuff for them. They paid him a lot!”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Cain come to attention. He put his mental cop hat on again. I could see that something Issy had said caught his attention.

He paused, obviously thinking of a tact to take with the girl. “Issy, it sounds like you’re having a great time here. Your guy sounds great. Maybe I know him. Describe him to me, it would be neat if he’s the friend I have in mind.”

Misty had also noticed Cain’s change of tack. I saw her concern as Issy began to describe her friend Dan.

“Oh, he’s well not exactly handsome, but he’s really pretty smart. He’s about six feet tall, has brown hair and hazel eyes, I think. He’s slim but not skinny. He wears his hair pretty long, but not past his collar or anything.”

Cain was intense. Misty noted that too. He smiled at Issy.

“Nope, the guy I was thinking of doesn’t look that neat. You have fun, there’s lots to do in this area.”

He wasn’t sincere. I knew it was because he knew the guy she had met. Misty was thinking the same thing. Why would a cop know Dan? Issy may have hooked-up with a loser.

I asked Cain if he had any word on the list I had given him. He shook his head and said it would take a few days. We visited. The girls had coffee while the Marshal and I wolfed down our food. It was a nice lunch, social and fun. Cain excused himself and went up to talk to Susan. Issy asked if I was going back to the motel. I nodded. Misty gave me a warm smile, I couldn’t tell if it was because of Issy or... I hoped it was an invitation.

On the way out, Susan leaned over toward me as I paid the bill. “Arnie wants you to call him. Here’s his home number. He said to call tonight! Anytime after 6:00.”

## PART II

### Chapter 1

"And here is the reflection of Janet that fell off the mirror in the hall!"

THE PENNSYLVANIA AIR WAS laden with moisture. Inside the Blanchard mansion, Mrs. Jefferson Blanchard the third, Mrs. Dorothy Bowes Blanchard, sat on the edge of her marriage bed, head in hands, her silky, long brown hair flowing over her fingers and down around her forearms. In front of her on the floor lay the jumbled remnants of her hope chest and trousseau; the accumulated wealth of seven years and hundreds of shopping expeditions; the bribes she had accepted.

Dorothy looked down at the material encumbrances she had settled for as compensation for staying in a marriage to a man with no character. In exchange for the possessions, she had protected a totally amoral man from the consequences of his sickness. The 'gifts' were given to make a 'sweet young thing,' as his mother had called her, an accomplice in the Blanchard family cover up.

Her mother-in-law was a socially acceptable beard who, for over thirty years, had covered for the elder Blanchard male, Jeff's sicko father. Now, like her mother-in-law, she was a 'woman of substance' for another Blanchard to hide behind. She had known what was expected more than seven years ago, when she married Jeff. She had decided that the tradeoffs were worth it. Now, he was with his latest boy or whatever, hiding from his creditors and the law. She was leaving. She rose from the quilted bed and walked across the room, dragging her feet through the silks and satins. She kicked at a necklace presented as diamonds, which she now knew were cubic zircons.

She went across the room and found the necklace where it landed, picked it up and held it. Of all her jewelry, it best represented her marriage. At the window, she

pulled back the sheer curtain. The mists from the storm swept across the glass and around the corner of the house. "Like cotton candy wisps," she said softly. "Mist...I'm misty like that inside. She paused, thinking. "That's the new me! Misty! Misty is my name... Dorothy is dead!"

The weeks had passed quickly as she prepared for this day. Each shock of discovery had rocked her until she became numb. She had the opportunity to run and hide, and almost nothing more. The only money she had was the \$11,700.00 dollars she had been able to secret away from the sale of jewelry and the painting. Jeff had never put her on the accounts. She carried his plastic...and what little cash he doled out to her. Recently, he had closed all of his accounts as the banks closed in on him.

Carl Elder, truly a friend and a competent attorney, couldn't do anything for her. Nothing was in her name. Those few things in Jeff's name that she could have claimed to be half hers, were encumbered by debts. Debts that Carl warned her she might have to pay if he was unable to get the court to protect her.

She had to admit that she had received what they promised... They had provided a great house to live in, clothes, jewelry, a fine Cadillac to drive, and social mobility that had actually been upward at one time.

Carl had helped her find the little gray Toyota. He had registered it in a corporate name, and given her a letter saying that it was assigned to her. He had urged her to pack necessary things, sign all the divorce papers and the power-of-attorney, and then disappear until the legal storms passed. Carl talked to her about a new life, "A real one this time!" he had said judgmentally.

"Dorothy," he had lectured her, "you are lovable and very attractive. You will find the right man and a new life. Change your name. Be open to new ways and new things. Don't go to Mexico, try California or even some place like Tucson! Whatever you do, know that Carolyn

and I are your friends and we will be here for you if things get too bad.”

She had hoped that Carl would make a pass at her. It had been a long time since a real man was in her life. When he didn't come on to her, she feared that it was because she was no longer attractive. She decided that his lack of interest confirmed that she had lost her power. She had lost everything! The whole world had turned against her! Every thought she had was negative. She knew that she was a complete schmuck!

‘What would Misty wear?’ she thought as she selected everyday items for the big suitcase. She threw designer jeans and some sweaters into the case. ‘Misty wears jeans and loafers or sandals, and she slouches around like she is ready for a stint of housework. That's Misty. No heels, one simple bra, if any. Socks, never stockings. Cotton briefs that say Fruit of The Loom. Misty's crotch would itch if she wore silks and satins like Dorothy had. A rain jacket and a parka. No coats. Misty is a simple shit who can always work at Wal Mart. That's me, the new me. Dorothy is dead, remembered only in Jeff's perversions. She's lying in his grandparent's arms.’

The radio in the little Toyota was able to pull in stations from places whose names she had never ever heard. Talk radio was new to her, and enlightening. As the set grabbed stations out of the air, she imagined that she was becoming reacquainted with America and the common people she had once felt so much a part of. Dorothy had to pretend that the masses were dirty and unwashed and not able to comprehend the life of the nobility, the upper crust. Dorothy had known better, but she had made her deal with the devils and a crust developed around her soul.

Misty had a lot of work to do to reclaim the curious and wonderful girl that had grabbed for a ring attached to the pustules of the Blanchard's condition. Dorothy had

married a man she didn't love. At the time she thought it didn't matter.

In her negative state of mind, she listened to the hate mongers raging over the airwaves. A man, with a name that sounded like some kind of cheese, wove his weird perceptions of life and politics on the undulating, static-filled energy waves that caught and held other weak-minded and sick people who called in and told him how wonderful he was. Ministers serving anthropomorphic gods, expelled others from grace and quoted scriptures to mask their biases. The airwaves were full of paranoia and vileness. Driving and listening she became aware that she was not as sick as she had imagined. Their hatred and perversions caused her to examine her own values and perceptions. About five hundred miles away from home, Misty sat straighter and began to talk back to the cheese guy and the ministers. She noted that she had a healthy crap detector and a strong sense of right and wrong. She decided that that part of Dorothy should live on.

Early into her third day, crossing the hundredth meridian, she fumbled with the radio dial trying to find a clear station. She tuned the little red marker toward her, to a place on the dial she had never gone before. Somewhere in the high eighties she heard, "Dum Dee Dat Da... This is National Public Radio, and this a summary of the morning news." One hour later she was hooked on NPR. As she drove out of range of one, she tuned the lower ranges of the radio spectrum and always found another NPR station. That was the beginning of Misty's Being and Dorothy's salvation.

Two nights in Holiday Inns hadn't separated her from thoughts of her suite in the Blanchard mansion. Dorothy missed the things she had traded her life's happiness for. Misty cut through that crap, but Dorothy was still unable to overcome her sense of futility. Both nights she cried herself to sleep with great weepy, sobbing wails of grief. Once, near the Colorado line, she had to pull over as her deep sobs led to racking, jabbing, catching fits

of sadness and futility. Afterwards, she was so weak that she could barely drive. In one roadside pullover she noted that a State Policeman was watching her. She made herself get out of the car, stretch, and go into the toilet. When she came out, she made herself smile at him, get into the car and drive carefully away.

The cop gave her some sense of safety. After all, she was carrying more than eleven thousand dollars hidden in several parts of her purse, luggage and car. Carl had warned her about using her real name or paying with credit cards --- not that she had any --- or even using travelers checks which she would have to sign. He had warned her that if the divorce got sticky, they might come after her. She was careful to use her new name, adding Ailer, at the motels. She paid in cash, and noted that they became suspicious. She told them that American Express had sent her emergency cash when she lost all her cards and "everything!" They smiled and nodded. That was an explanation they thought plausible. They watched TV too.

Misty knew that her fits of grief and futility came on suddenly without much warning. She drove carefully, holding the needle just over the red 65 mark, focusing upon the blah high prairie and the radio. 'Colorado,' she thought. 'I should feel something. This is supposed to be a great state. Where are the mountains? What should I see here? Where can I go? Ninety miles to Denver? There's nothing out here!'

The gas jockey at the Phillips station had turned out to be helpful. She had asked, in what she thought was a hip and off-the-top way, where people her age hung out in Denver. He had suggested that the coolest people hung out down around the hospital district. "Look for Children's Hospital down around 18th Avenue and west of University, and drive around that area. You'll see lots of coffee houses and hangouts. Used to be hippies there, now just young working stiffs like us who like to get out. Watch out though! There are always bad guys around. Around everywhere."

'What can I lose,' she thought? 'I'm dead now, I've got to get into things even if I get killed doing it.' An hour later she parked in front of a funky looking place on Pearl Street. Girls dressed as she was were going in, some by themselves. She locked the car and stood, suddenly feeling extreme pressure in her lower bowel and another urge to sob. The urgency within her lower tract made the decision for her. She put her head down and moved inside as fast as she could, forcing her way through a gaggle of people and into the Ladies. By the time she sat down, the pains had passed. 'Psychological,' she thought. 'Damn what a mess I am. Thanks a hell of a lot Dorothy! Why didn't you just shoot yourself!'

She came out of the john thinking that she could hide in a dark corner and get her thoughts together. She decided that she had picked a place where she could meld into the woodwork. As she made her way past the end of the bar, heading toward the tables at the far right side, she had to excuse her way through tight groups of standing patrons, most with drinks in hand, talking loudly to be heard over the noise in the place. The bodies around her couldn't give way to let her through. The space in front of the bar was packed. She felt like a piece of lint being mashed into felt. She was tall enough to see a throng of heads, but not tall enough to see over them and plot a course. Someone pressed a bowl of popcorn into her hand and ordered, "Pass it along!" Someone else jammed into her, and used her arm to catch their balance, mumbling "excuse me's" in a line like a man reading a script.

Misty got some comfort from the press of bodies. Many of the girls around her wore nurses' uniforms and were obviously well acquainted. There was a certain energy level in the voices of friends that sounded high pitched and 'squeally.' She remembered those certain sounds from her years in the Tri Delt house. The press of bodies and the familiar sounds gave her a sense of well-being. Then, a shock went through her. A girl that looked

like her reflection was directly in front of her. She stared into her eyes.

“My God, who are you?” the girl asked, obviously as shocked as Misty at their resemblance.

“I’m... Jeeze, even your hair is long like mine. I’m Dor... Misty. How can this be?”

Several other girls had pushed closer, turning so that they could peruse the two. A tall girl with a cardigan sweater over her nurse’s blouse grabbed each by an arm and announced, “And here is the reflection of Janet that fell off the mirror in the hall!”

Other girls pushed even closer and stared. The tall girl still held her arm tightly. “I sense something,” the tall nurse said, “your sign is Gemini, isn’t it?” Misty nodded. “That’s Jan’s sign too. She told me once she must have a twin. This is cosmic! Come ladies, let’s move to that corner booth.”

Misty was unable to process well. Her overloaded brain couldn’t sort through the events around her. She found herself sitting next to Janet, squeezed with seven others into the booth. Janet was looking at her hands and comparing them to her own. “At least our hands and fingers are different,” she said, as if surprised.

The tall nurse thrust out her hand. “I’m Jinny, who in the blazes are you and why haven’t we seen you before?”

“Misty. I just drove here from Pennsylvania. Hi, I just came in and there I was.”

The whole booth shook with laughter. Each girl caught her eye and introduced herself. Misty couldn’t remember their names.

“And where are you staying?” Jinny asked. She was obviously a take-charge kind of person.

“I’ll have to find a motel. I just drove here and...”

“Now don’t tell us more, Misty. You were directed here, you had no choice. That’s the way it works.”

Misty wanted to ask ‘What works? What is ‘It?’ but her mind didn’t function fast enough to ask, or to make



anything out of an answer given. She sat back and tears came to her eyes. Her shoulders sagged and she felt weight pressing upon her. "I'm so tired," she said, and that was all she remembered clearly until waking late in the night.

She came awake knowing first that she had to pee, bad. Eyes still closed, she smelled the musty strangeness of a basement...that damp concrete smell she had known when she played in the cool basement of her home in Harrisburg, years ago, long before... She felt the softness of a blanket over her, knew that her shoes were off, her socks still on. She opened her eyes and observed the curlicues left by a plaster's trowel on the ceiling. Turning away from the high back of the old couch, she viewed the dusty and age-browned shade of a table lamp, then a coffee table with stacks of papers and books, some held open by others, an empty McDonald's drink container with a canted plastic lid, and chewed straw. Across the table, the women named Jinny, and her look alike, Janet, were asleep in comfortable old chairs. She sensed that they had been watching her when they fell asleep.

Across the small room was a narrow door. 'Bathroom,' she thought, and quiet as she could be, placed her feet on the carpet and raised herself. In the bathroom she noted things that suggested she had been here before, the same brand of Colgate, the same type of hair dryer. Janet's stuff. Was that her twin asleep out there? How could it be?

It was impossible to pee quietly. She closed the door...but what if the others awoke? They were still asleep when she came out. She had time to examine the face and form of her twin. 'Not identical,' she observed. 'We are really quite different.' She studied Janet's body beneath the occlusion of her sweater and the tightness of her skirt. Then she looked down at her own body. She noted that they looked about the same. 'We're built alike, but her face

is really not mine. We're not twins. I don't have a twin. We just look somewhat alike.'

Jinny's white shoes had been placed neatly, side-by-side, next to her chair. Janet's brown penny loafers were laying where they fell when she kicked them off. Both slept soundly in spite of their seated positions. Jinny was a big woman, big boned and strong looking. Her face appeared long and horselike because of the way her jaw relaxed as she slept. Misty couldn't keep her eyes off of Janet. The girl, "younger than I." she said aloud, probably came from Slavic stock or... Irish maybe, mixed anyway, like me, she decided. They had been reading something. The coffee table was strewn with books.

A fat brown volume with a star-studded cover and the words 'Astrologer's Guide' on the front, was holding another book open to a page she couldn't see clearly. She reached over and turned the open book so that she could read the paragraph underlined in pencil.

"Gemini is the sign most feared among the ancients. Many cultures killed twins at birth. Almost every culture on this planet, and many on other planets, felt that the birth of twins bodes evil. It was well known by the Ancients that twins were a soul divided, in great spiritual pain."

Misty read and felt the shock of what was printed on the yellowed page of the old text. She refocused, scanned down the page, and read on:

"Many families from eastern Europe brought their knowledge about twin births to America. Since infanticide was punishable as murder, these families separated twins at birth and sent the weakest one as far away as possible. Thus, in that way, the evil inherent in twins born under the sign was spread across the land and given a chance to grow."

Misty read on, frightened by what she was learning.

"The forces of evil are nurtured by this. The evil ones seek out the twins and breed with them in order to grow their terrible cause. We in the true service of the Spirit, must find the separated soul and unite it and by our power make the divided one, one with the universe again."

Misty sat back and looked up. Jinny hadn't moved, but her eyes were open and she was staring at her.

"I'm not a twin!" Misty argued in frustration. "Look at us, we're obviously not related."

Jinny brought her body forward, moving her left arm until it contacted Janet. She found Janet's side and gave her a poke. "I think you are, else, how did you get here? How was it that you came to Janet across the whole country? Forces brought you together. Nothing happens by accident. You were brought to Janet, and that's understandable. That's as it should be. That is the power of the force that counteracts evil."

Janet was awake enough to comprehend what Jinny was saying. She didn't know that Misty had read from the book they studied. "That's why you're here, you are my twin and together we can become one soul as we were supposed to be. Oh Misty, I'm so happy! Do you know what this means? All my life I think I've known about you. Now, here you are!" Janet slipped forward on her chair and reached across the low table for Misty's hand.

Misty pulled her hands and body away and stood. "Look ladies, look carefully! I'm older than Janet. I'm older by at least five years. I'm thirty! Janet's..."

Janet looked down and said, "twenty-six, well, twenty-seven, really."

And, "Misty continued as thoughts flashed across her mind which she put together so that they made sense, "it is obvious that we are not identical twins. If that book is right, it's written about identical twins --- you know, one sperm, one egg, two embryos! We aren't even sisters. We may have some of the same genetic stock, but it's common. Look, I have had enough of this for now. How did I get here? Where are we?"

Jinny was looking at Janet and nodding agreement. "You may be right Misty," she said in a voice that said she didn't believe it. "But... Well, it's just that these things happen for a reason and...and we knew you were coming. Don't reject what is, yet... You're at Janet's. This is about five blocks from the place we met."

"What about my car?"

"We didn't know you had one. Where did you park?"

"On the street. Pearl Street I think, across from the place."

"It'll be safe," Janet said. But you have to get it moved before 2:00 a.m.. They boot cars left overnight."

Misty had an eerie feeling. She felt energy coming from Jinny that she didn't like. When she looked up, Jinny was staring at her and turned her eyes quickly away.

"My stuff's in my car. I should get it now!"

Janet was openly concerned and agreeable. "Okay, got your keys? I'll walk you over and then we can come back. You're welcome to the couch. Only thing is, I've got to work tomorrow. I get up at five. Let's go, I'll be exhausted at work tomorrow if I don't get enough sleep."

Misty looked back at Jinny. Her face was tight and her lips were curled in an angry kind of... It was almost a snarl.

"Look," Jinny said through clenched teeth, "there may be more important things than cars and sleep. You two go out at this hour and... Remember, they don't want you together. Remember Janet, why they want you!"

The night was cool, beautiful. The breeze seemed to caress Misty's face like the hands of a loving ghost. Janet was sleepy, mumbling as they walked. "Jinny's so dramatic," she spoke so quietly that Misty could barely hear her. "She knows a lot, and she has the gift. I just don't think we're twins, I mean..."

As Janet walked, she was changing her stride in a way that made her body jerk. Misty watched Janet's

strange gait and became aware that her supposed twin was changing her stride to avoid stepping on the cracks between concrete sections of the sidewalk.

"I mean," Janet continued after shuffling and changing her lead so that she could avoid several expansion joints, "she reads a lot and she channels."

"What do you mean? What's 'channels?'"

Janet gave her a friendly look, then turned her head back down and continued to pick her way along. "Jinny has a special soul that advises her. He's her spiritual guide. He's been her soul mate in many past lives, sometimes as a woman when she was a man, sometimes a man, but always connected to her. They got separated in this life because of an accident. He wasn't supposed to die. He's with her, but not in body."

Misty stopped walking and turned toward Janet, grabbing her arm and stopping her. "Do you... Janet, I hardly know you, but... Do you believe that?"

"I didn't. But I do now. You see, she proved it to me. She asked him questions that only I knew the answers to. It's hard to explain, but, well, he knew things. He also got my grandfather and talked to him for me." She was hugging herself as she talked, avoiding Misty's eyes. She started to pull away from Misty's grip, felt the strength of it, and hung her head. "I can't believe it either, but it happened!"

A wrecker pulled up alongside the Toyota just as they reached it. She examined her little car and saw that there was a red tag fixed under the wiper on the driver's side. A man in white coveralls got out of the truck. As he came around the back he reached into the bed and, grunting, lifted a strange yellow-orange object out. The weight of the question mark shaped thing was more than he cared to lug. He let it fall to the pavement.

"What's that thing?" Misty yelled across at him.

"Your car lady?" The workman seemed not to have noticed them.

"My car! I'm moving it!"

The workman stood straighter and pushed his hat back with one hand, revealing a very narrow face and small dark eyes. "The car's been tagged. Police got your number. But, well, take it! I won't boot it and leave you stranded out here this late."

Janet was looking at the workman and pushing Misty in the small of the back. "We've got to get out of here, now! Get us in. That's got to be one of them! We've got to go!"

The workman was lifting the metal thing back into the truck as Misty unlocked her door and slid into the driver's seat. Janet was banging on the passenger side window. Misty reached over and pulled the lever, unlocking Janet's door. Janet, gasping with fear, slid into the seat, slamming and locking her door as fast as she could. Misty sat watching her, confused by the other's fear.

"Get it started! Get going!" Janet ordered.

The Toyota started and Misty noted that the workman waved as she pulled out into the street. "What was all of that about?" she asked, surprised by the meek girl's sudden animation.

Janet had her head cradled in her hands, elbows on knees. "Did you see his face? Did you see it? He was one of them! I know why he was there. There are no coincidences."

Jinny hadn't gone home as they thought. She was in the basement apartment waiting for them. She was exhausted, she had told them, but she wanted to know that they were safe. "How'd it go?"

Misty started to speak, but Janet spoke first. "There was one there," her voice had edges of terror. "There was one there, and we got away."

Misty leaned over against the wall, letting her heavy suitcase down at her side. "There was a truck from the city and a workman who wanted to boot my car. He was nice. He let us go."

Jinny was wide awake, the weariness that had been so evident on her face when they came in was gone. She walked around them and sat on the back of the couch. "You're twins, and I know it. Misty, is it possible that you were given a false birth certificate? That you are actually younger than you think?"

Misty's mind was racing. She was still foggy from her ordeal at home and her uprooting. "No, I was in school at the right time. I have family, brothers, and we all fit together, age-wise, I mean."

Jinny was looking at Janet, her eyes seeming to probe. "Then it's you, Janet! You were the weak one sent away. Did you ever think you might be older?"

Janet's eyes watered. She wiped tears away with her sleeve and then her fingers. "I always thought I was adopted. I never felt like they loved me or that I belonged."

Jinny stood and moved toward them in a "take charge" way. "Then I was wrong. Misty, you are the strong one. You are the one the other must meld into." She changed her balance and stood on the other foot. "Did that man approach you? I mean, did he do anything?"

They both said "No."

"Then that proves it!" Jinny said with satisfaction. "Together, Misty and you have the power to keep them at bay. You're both safe for now. I'll find out what we do next."

With that, Jinny opened the door and left. Janet smiled a relieved, meek little smile and excused herself into her bedroom. In a minute she was back, telling Misty to make herself at home and to sleep well. Then Misty was alone with only her thoughts and confusion.

The brown book still lay open on the coffee table. She scanned down the paragraphs, turned the page and read:

Split temporal spirits wander the secular world in search of their other. Each is charged with negative and positive electrical energy. Each has a weak side and a strong side. The wavelengths they

broadcast that are alike, repel. The wavelengths of the sides that are not alike, attract. The stronger of the two halves, the dominant twin, is constantly generating macro astral waves of energy that either attract or repel, depending upon their polarity. If the dominant twin's power is primarily negative, she will attract positive energy. But if her power is positive, she will attract and draw in negative forces and evil. Although both twins have this power to attract, the weakest twin is usually negative dominant. The dominant twin, if positive, is in danger.

Misty looked across the room, her eyes staring not at objects but into space. This book is... She closed the pages over her finger, marking her place and looked at the cover. COUNTERS FOR SIDEREAL PHYSICS. She reopened the book and shrugged. She didn't have a clue as to what it all meant.

Misty lay back on the lumpy old couch thinking that she would never get to sleep. Then Janet was shaking her shoulder.

"I've got to go. I didn't want to wake you it's so early, but I'm due at work. Make yourself breakfast. Don't worry about a thing. Rest and relax, I'll call you at noon." With that she was out the door and the apartment was quiet.

Misty fell back into a deep sleep. At 10:00, the phone started ringing. Groggy, Misty put her feet on the floor and looked across the room toward the sound. She studied the place in the room where the ringing was coming from. No phone. Then she saw it, an oversized plastic hamburger phone, betrayed by its cord. By the time she got to the shelf where the hamburger reverberated, and picked up the bun, she heard a clank on the other end as someone slammed the receiver down. If she had known what Jinny on the other end was thinking, she would have fled to Mexico.

Misty opened the front door and walked carefully up the five steps to the street level. Midday light filtered



through the great elm trees that lined the block. There were parking spaces now, not like last night when they had to drive down the street, turn around and come back to a parking slot on the other side that she could barely fit the Toyota into. Heat was building...she guessed that it was already in the high eighties. It wasn't like Pennsylvania. Here there was a sharpness, a clarity in the air. Low humidity, she decided. Maybe it's being a mile high. Now, assured that she was alone, she went back to the basement apartment to get her bag.

As she pulled the apartment door closed behind her and her eyes began to adjust to the dim light, she saw Janet. Her supposed twin was sitting on her suitcase, waiting for her. A sharp pull tightened her chest.

"Janet, how did you? Were you in here all morning?" She felt her chest constrict even more. She was weak, scared.

"I just came down from upstairs. I stopped in to see if Mrs. Blumenthal, my landlady, needed anything. Are you leaving?"

Misty realized that she had not even thought about an upstairs... The idea of an internal staircase hadn't been a glimmer in her perceptions. She still felt weak and disoriented. She felt dumb! Helpless. "I need to go!"

"Are you afraid of Jinny?" Janet asked in a way that communicated that *she* was.

"I'm..." Janet's question struck right to the core of Misty's fear. "I'm not sure... No, I think I am... I mean, I am a little afraid of her, at least some of the things she said and the way she looks at me."

Janet lowered her head and said in a scary little voice, "She wants to be, in fact I think she is now, a thaumaturgist." She paused and watched Misty for a reaction. "You know what that is? It's a witch."

"You've got to be kidding, Janet? Why would she want to be a thauma...a witch?"

"She told me that she had always been. That she had work to do and that I was her bonded servant. She

told me about you and told me you would come. She knows how to reunite our... that's if we are twins...our soul."

Misty's fear was dissipating. Jinny was a kook, nothing more. "Jinny is wrong, Janet. We know that it's impossible for us to be twins. You have access to a lab don't you? We could have tests done to prove it."

"What if the tests proved that we were?"

"Then that wouldn't necessarily prove anything... What is it she thinks we are, anyway?"

"Jinny told me months ago that one of us is a magnet for evil, a vessel that the evil ones can use to enter into this world." Her voice had a quake in it and tears were filling her eyes.

Misty had read stuff like that in the old book... She knew where it came from. "That's pure nonsense! Janet, that's medieval! Why have you let Jinny stay around?"

"You've seen her. You've seen how she is. She adopted me and she overpowers me. I mean I can't think clearly when she's around. But... Misty, she is a friend and I need friends. Besides, she's taken my hair and blood and...things."

"I'm going on. I can't stay here."

Janet got up from her seat on the edge of the suitcase and stepped toward Misty. "Please, if you wait a few days I can go with you. You can see I need to get away, but I have people who count on me... I have to tell them!"

"I can't wait... Well," her soft heart won the battle against good sense. "I can put off going until tomorrow. Tomorrow noon? Can you settle things by then?"

Janet's eyes got big and she looked strange. She started to speak and then backed away.

"She can't be ready by anytime, not to go with you!" Jinny had come in and stood, hands-on-hips, behind Misty. "Janet, damn you! You're so weak!"

Misty could hear Janet as she moved back into the apartment, whimpering little gasps of self-pity. She faced Jinny.

The large woman stood in the doorway with her arms away from her sides and her shoulders raised and out to make herself seem large and formidable. She was glaring at Misty with all the evil-eye energy she could muster while she began to hiss chants in some strange tongue. The room was filled with awful tension. Janet let out a wail and then began coughing and gasping for breath. Jinny hissed and chanted louder as she began to move toward Misty. She stank of sweat.

Misty didn't back away. Something in the other's actions cut through her fear and gave her perspective. She saw the witch approaching her as someone from some stupid movie. Instead of the fear Jinny had hoped to generate by her actions, Misty was filled with humor. She leaned toward Jinny, smiled and said mockingly, "Good God woman, your breath smells!" Misty stared into the eyes of the strange apparition in her path. "And you act like some sort of hen that's all ruffled up and futzing around. Get a hold of yourself Jinny, quit acting like a puff-bag grouse!"

The energy in the room generated by the arrival of the thaumaturgist broke with an almost audible pop. Jinny's eyes rolled, showing the whites as flashing crescents. Her arms came down with her shoulders and her head drooped faster than she could raise her face and keep her gaze on Misty. She stank of sweat and urine, and her breath, which Misty imagined should smell like sulfur, smelled of onions and tuna fish. She leaned against the door frame, fighting for composure.

Janet slowly got up off the floor where she had assumed the fetal position. She brushed off her skirt and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. Misty felt more power and control than she had in years. She glared at the witch would-be and then turned toward Janet.

“Girl,” she began, “your friend here has caused you a lot of grief. Look at her! She’s just a lost soul who thought what she read in old books had to be true. She has no power over you or anyone. She is just a...” She hunted for the right word, “...a girl,” she finally said, thinking that the harsher adjectives that had been on her tongue were unnecessary now.

Jinny made her way along the wall past Misty and stopped near the bathroom door. There was a puddle of pee where she had been standing and a dribbled trail followed her. “Too late,” she mumbled, turning from the bathroom door and slumping, back to the wall, down to a wet seat on the floor. “What happened?” she asked, looking and sounding like the dazed victim of an accident.

Since the confrontation, Misty had felt energized and centered. She didn’t know why she had confronted Jinny, but her instincts had been right on. Dorothy always had great instincts. Janet had been shaky for a long time after the confrontation, but gradually did a weak-sister dance around the still confused Jinny. The slumping woman had talked sweetly to her and acted as if nothing had happened. The monster she had tried to be a few minutes before was gone. The only comment she made about the whole episode, and that quietly under her breath so that only Misty could hear, was, “You took my power, you’re more powerful than I!” Misty knew on some inner level that was true. She also knew that she hadn’t taken anything. She had confronted nonsense and it went away.

Janet and Jinny had failed to return to their jobs after lunch. Both had a lot of explaining to do, and how they would do that was the main subject of discussion around a meal of scrambled eggs, salsa and celery sticks. As the afternoon passed, Misty felt her energy discharging. Even lifting her arm made her feel weary. Jinny was pleasant and actually nice to be around. Janet was her adaptive self, but with a difference Misty could sense. She hoped that Janet would never let Jinny use her

again. After Jinny left, Misty tried to think of things she wanted to talk with Janet about. They made small talk, but both were tired and made excuses to turn in early.

Before making her bed on the couch Misty closed the books strewn about the coffee table and stacked them to one side. Then, tempted by some strange curiosity, she retrieved the volume she had read from the night before. The book's binding had been forced at the page she had read. It fell open to that page as if it knew her mind. Near the bottom, she saw a short paragraph that stood out amid the long, complex writings. She read,

The positive twin will confront lesser positives and absorb their power. In time, that twin will gain insights and abilities and become even more attractive to the negative. As this happens for the one, the negative twin will lose the power to attract positive energy. Out of balance, that weaker twin will die if the two parts are not united. If united, the negative twin will absorb all of the other's power, as good, not evil is the direction of the universe. This is the meaning of the scriptures which tell us that the meek shall inherit the Earth.

Even before she opened her eyes Misty was aware that Janet was moving about the basement apartment. She lay on the couch listening and watching as Janet brought a bowl of cereal into the living room. Janet sat on the arm of one of the chairs across from the couch Misty was using as a bed. She was spooning crunchies into her mouth as fast as she could chew and swallow. She was dressed, ready to go to work. In many ways, Misty observed, she did look like a twin... Well maybe a sister at least.

"Janet, good morning," Misty said sleepily, "how do you feel today?"

The girl's body tensed. She had assumed that Misty was sleeping. "Tired, but I'll be okay when I get going." She wiped a drool of milk from the edge of her mouth and looked over at Misty.

Misty gave her a questioning look. "I mean, about yesterday... Jinny? That whole witch thing she did?"

"Oh that," Janet said with little energy as if talking about a lost scarf or...

"Janet!" Misty blasted back at her with anger and command in her voice.

Janet shrugged. "Jinny was really pretending, you know? She likes to pretend that she's in touch with magic and spirits."

"Just pretending? You knew it all the time!" she said sarcastically.

"Oh sure, she's really nice you know. But, she doesn't like you. She begged me not to go with you."

Misty was flabbergasted. What had happened was no act! She made it clear that Janet was not going with her. Her would-be twin was on her own!

"You're not going with me. We decided that. I'm leaving this morning... And Jinny was not pretending, she's nuts! You know she's sick, Janet. She needs help!"

Janet looked up, placed the spoon back in her bowl and smiled.

"She is a little eccentric, but aren't we all?"

Misty was disgusted by the weak girl's avoidance and culpability. She lay back on the couch pretending to go back to sleep. Janet moved around the apartment doing chores and gathering her things. Then, without looking at Misty or trying to say goodbye, she went quietly into the morning.



## Chapter 2

Issy sat back, relaxed. "Oh my God, thank God! Do you know how scared I've been?"

WHEN SHE WAS CERTAIN that Janet was gone, Misty got up and went to the door of the inside staircase. As she shut the door, she found the lock on the knob and turned it. She had to make certain that no one could enter the apartment from above. She tried to turn the knob. It was locked. Back in the living room, she checked the street access door. It had locked automatically when Janet closed it. She showered quickly, her senses scanning the apartment through the open bathroom door to make certain that she was alone. She put on a fresh blouse, panties and jeans, checked that her bag was zipped with everything in it, got her car keys in hand, and left the apartment, slamming the door behind her.

Outside in the cool early morning, she shook the dampness from her hair as she crossed the street. She paused and looked around as she unlocked her Toyota. The street was deserted. The morning sun was filtering through the trees in bands of yellow light. She slipped behind the wheel, watching the gauges come alive when she turned the key. The gas tank registered almost full. As she started the car, a strange feeling made her look toward the apartment steps. She saw Jinny come up from the apartment and stop at the sidewalk. Misty let the car creep out from the curb. Her eyes were focused upon the apparition. Jinny was shaking her head, hair flying side-to-side, eyes wide. She held both hands, fingers splayed like Medusa's snakes, out in front of her as if she could shoot lightning from her fingertips.

Misty's foot hit the gas pedal, pushing it to the floorboard. The Toyota's engine coughed and caught and the car lurched forward. Once out of the neighborhood, she looked for signs that would tell her how to get back on Highways 6 and 40. Only then, after she was blocks away,



did Jinny's appearance register for what it was. Jinny had come from the apartment! Misty felt a tightening of her body; a force constricting her muscles. Had Jinny been in there all night? She began to shiver. The power she had gained by confronting Jinny the day before, left her, replaced by weakness and fear. She felt weak again the way she had been when she arrived, a lost soul uprooted and out. A woman who had screwed-up and was desperate to start over.

She drove west through Denver. The highway wound up into the Rocky Mountains. She drove on, too possessed by her own travails to notice the beauty. She snapped out of her lethargy when the car entered a long tunnel. As the white tiles flashed by, she imagined that she was in the Hudson Tunnel, entering Manhattan. When the Toyota came out into the light, she gasped. Before her lay a rugged and beautiful panorama of mountain valleys and majestic peaks. The road dropped away in a steep, seemingly never ending down ramp. She held the steering wheel in a death grip and pushed against the back of her seat as the hill fell away in front of her. The car gained speed as it fell forward. Her mind's eye was set for Manhattan. The shock of the sight before her awakened her and gave her the distance she needed from Janet's world...and Jinny's, the witch, with a capital B! What did Janet call her, a thaumaturgist?

When the steep hill leveled and Misty could relax her grip on the wheel and enjoy the beauty, she rolled her window down and let the crisp thin air circulate around her. She thought of her stay in Denver and smiled. "Weird!" she said as loud as she could. "Boy did I fall in with a weird bunch of creeps!" She adjusted the rear view mirror. She could see her eyes and part of her face. She smiled at herself, the skin around her eyes crinkly. "I do attract a bunch of shit!" she said to her reflection. "That's one thing that book was right about. I've attracted enough negative energy in my life to..." She couldn't think of what to say.

“I’ve got to watch it! I sure as hell don’t need any more of that crap.”

After winding up and over Vail Pass, and driving on through a long valley, she steered her little car into a pullout about 500 feet from an intersection. Did she want to head for Grand Junction? She noted that she had little choice if she followed the Interstate. She studied her AAA map. What did it matter? She got back on the highway as she fumbled with the radio.

She turned the dial clear to the left and then slowly tuned it to the right. Static, occasional music or voices from what sounded like an NPR station, then more static. She tuned past 90 and a station came in loud and clear. She looked at the gas gauge; she had almost half a tank, then she focused on the passing countryside. The radio voice which she had assumed came from an NPR station, was high-pitched and authoritative. She listened.

That you have assumed that your will was greater than his... That you have sinned against him by placing your will above his... That you have had the audacity to believe you were in control, not him... Well brothers and sisters that is why you are suffering and alone now. If you hear me, then you need never be alone again.

Organ music flowed through the car’s speakers and filled the little vehicle with smooth energy. A man’s voice came on and urged the listeners to bring this message of salvation to others:

In return for your help, we will send Doctor Favor’s complete plan of salvation for you. The personally blessed and autographed plan is free of course, through the generosity of people like you! Remember that there is never a charge for Christ’s blessings or the work of Doctor Favor’s mission. Please enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

A woman’s voice:

If you would like to support this important work for Christ, enclose a gift that will help us reach others. Your gift is a way of saying, "God Bless your mission, Doctor Favor."

Another man's voice:

Address your requests and generous donations to: Doctor Eugene Favor, DIC, P.O. Box 666, Justin, Missouri. 64104. Again, that's Doctor Favor, Disciple In Christ, Box 666, Justin, Missouri. 64104.

A man's voice:

This is Christian Radio, serving eastern Utah and Western Colorado from our transmitter in beautiful River, Utah.

Another man's voice:

And now ladies and gentlemen, in keeping with Christ's blessings, we have fifteen minutes of uninterrupted inspirational music just for Christians. Welcome to The Salvation Hour!

The music reminded her of church camp. 'It wasn't a coincidence,' she thought, 'Something made me turn the radio on just at this time and to that station.' The message was familiar. It was the basis of her faith. It was the message she was given over and over again as she grew up. She remembered the songs they had sung so long ago, "*Put your hand..., I took Jesus...*" She hummed the tunes, remembering. When she was young, the message had always been the same. "Give yourself over to Jesus and He would take care of you." How wonderful that sounded now... Even now, even coming out of the radio speakers from some preacher in Missouri. The message was true, she knew in her heart that it was. Give yourself over to Him and He would take charge of your life. If only she could believe enough to do that. How many times had she tried to give herself over to Him? Old anguish rose within her like fetors. In high school she had believed, but not enough. "Look what happened. Look what I did to myself," she said aloud. "I thought I was in His care and look what happened. Maybe now I can find someone to watch over me..." She realized that station was playing it,

“...someone to watch over me.” Her eyes teared as she sang along, only slightly changing the words, “Someone to...to take charge of me and get me straightened out.”

She was through Grand Junction before she decided to stop for gas. Her body was stiff as she got out of the Toyota and walked toward the Ladies. The place was old, but clean enough. She almost gagged when she smelled the sanitizing junk they sprayed on the fixtures. Back near the island, she took off the gas cap, got the nozzle and raised the lever which was supposed to turn on the pump. She put the end of the nozzle into the tube and squeezed. Nothing. She tried again. Nothing! She re-hung the nozzle and looked around helplessly.

“Honey. You have to prepay!” A sweet voice behind her said. She looked around at an old lady who was filling the tank of her Buick.

“Thanks, do I go in?”

“Inside! Give them as much money as you think your tank will take. They turn it on, honey, and if you give them too much they’ll give you change after.”

She nodded and smiled for the lady. As she walked toward the station office she pulled a twenty out of her jeans. Inside, the cashier asked her for her pump number.

“I forgot to look. It’s right over there, my car’s dark gray.” She felt stupid, and the look she got from the short cashier was not one of admiration.

“Okay, you got twenty. Going to Salt Lake?” Misty nodded. She’d seen on the map that she would have to go to Salt Lake City to connect with I-80 if she wanted to go west. “Go on out, it’ll work now.”

The Toyota took a little more than eight gallons before the nozzle thumped off. She squeezed the lever and let a little more gas in, then hung the gun up and looked at the pump. \$11.68.

She stood, trying to remember what the old lady had said. She must have looked vacant because another voice near her said, “Go in and get your change before they clear the pump!” She looked around toward a girl

dressed in jeans and a faded blue cowboy shirt with shell inlaid snaps. The girl smiled at her and pointed toward the office. "I'll go with you and make certain that Brenda doesn't rip you off."

The girl inside was named Brenda. She could see the name tag slanting at a strange angle where it was pinned on top of an ample breast.

"Here's change for that twenty, unless you want something else?"

"I do," Misty said impulsively. She turned and grabbed some Fritos and a Snickers bar, laying them on the counter. Brenda pushed buttons on the register and its screen lit next to the 'Correct Change' sign. Coins rolled into a tray next to the register like balls returning in a pinball machine. Brenda handed her two bills. She was too nervous to count the change.

"Most people don't count it," Brenda said as Misty jammed the coins and bills into her jeans. She had noted that one bill was a five.

"They should though!" the girl who had helped her outside volunteered.

Brenda looked past Misty at the other girl. "Did you ask her?"

Misty knew that they were talking about asking her something. She turned toward the girl in the cowboy shirt, looked right at her and waited.

"I live here in Junction. I've got to get to Provo. I can share expenses. Gas, whatever. Brenda here will tell you I'm not a screw-off. Can I ride with you?"

"She's okay. Her dad's our bishop. She's going to BYU. Give her a lift if you can, better than her hitching with some guy."

Misty thought it over. The girl looked harmless enough, she wasn't some homeless hitchhiker. Brenda worked here and she knew her. But how could a bishop be married and have a kid? Then she remembered. BYU was the Mormon school, and Mormons also had bishops. She had read about the religion in college.

“Your dad is an LSD Bishop?” She asked, attempting to show her knowledge of the Latter Day Saints.

“Yeah, it’s LDS though,” she said with a big smile, “but I survive in spite of him.” The girl swished her shoulder length, silvery-blond hair to one side and revealed a forehead spotted with tiny pimples. She was young, maybe eighteen, but Misty guessed that she was fifteen or sixteen, too young to go to BYU.

“You look too young to be in college.” Misty said, watching the girl closely for a reaction.

“I’m not! I’ll be a freshman. I’m eighteen, here...” she reached behind her and pulled a wallet from her hip pocket. “Here, look!” She handed the wallet over, not opening it for Misty. Misty opened it, found a Colorado drivers license in a plastic sleeve. The photo made the girl look even younger.

“Okay Clairissa Johnson, you are!”

“Issy, call me Issy... I hate Clairissa! Don’t call me that!”

“Do you have a bag?”

“Backpack! It’s on the island by your car.”

Issy put her seat back as far back as it would go and slid down until her head was below the window opening. “Boring!” she announced. She kicked her shoes off and put her stocking feet against the dash.

Misty looked over and felt a twinge of anger. At least her socks wouldn’t scratch the dash. What was so boring, anyway? “What’s boring?”

“I hate this drive. I don’t even want to look out the window. I wish I could fly or just wish myself there.” She turned and gave Misty a weak smile. “My dad could fly me, but he’s so mad that he won’t.”

“Mad at you?” Misty knew that the girl had something to get off her back.

"I'm not his perfect little Miss Passive Adaptive anymore. I had the audacity to question his Mr. Macho interpretation of the world."

Misty had her own problems to think about; her energy had drained into her own wasteland of introspection. Still, she was curious. "What does that mean?"

"He said I should study homemaking. He said I didn't have any business taking up space and resources at the university."

"You mean he thought you would flunk-out?"

"No, I've always been a good student. I got 959 on the SAT. He thinks women have a place, and that they shouldn't compete with men."

Misty looked over at the slouching girl. She was small-boned, not skinny, delicate. Her skin, except where the angry pimples spread like a rash, was almost translucent. She was probably of Swedish extraction, maybe Norwegian. Issy saw her looking and blushed, rosy color flowing from the back of her neck around to her cheeks and then across her forehead.

"Watch the road, Misty," Issy ordered in a tight little voice. "You were looking at me, why?"

Misty was put off by the question. She thought a moment and then looked back at Issy. "I'm trying to figure you out. What's up with you? Why hitch to school? I think things don't add up with you...and it bothers me!"

Issy shrank even lower in the reclined seat. Her face paled. "He said I couldn't enroll. He said I should get religious training and learn how women were meant to live with grace." She reached over and took Misty's sunglasses off the console and began fidgeting with them. "He... My mom too, believes that women are..." She paused, trying to think of an appropriate word, "servants. Inferior."

Misty looked away from the road again, "Jeeze, I didn't think anybody felt that way in this day and age. What about women's lib? What about..." She paused, wondering if she should ask the question that popped into her mind,

“Is this a Mormon thing? I mean, is this the way Mormon men are?”

“Most.” Issy pulled her butt back a little and raised her head. “Some of the religious believe that... I mean, not all are as strict as my daddy, but a lot of people feel that the problems the Saints are having today could be solved if women went back to the ways of 100 years ago.”

“You would share a husband?”

“Are you kidding? The church and I parted company when they tried to convince me that I’m flawed because I’m a woman. You should see my dad. He emotionally abuses my mother, putting her down all the time while telling her how wonderful she is because she’s doing God’s will. I bought into that until I hit puberty, I guess, by then I wanted to have the same rights as my brothers. I even wanted to go on a mission. I got whipped!”

“Whipped?” Misty couldn’t believe what she had heard.

“With his thick belt! He prayed as he hit me, asking God why He was forcing him to discipline ‘His child.’”

“What did you do? Did you run away?” Misty was having a hard time keeping her eyes on the road.

“Where to? My pop is a bishop. Everyone has to support him. There was no place to run except to college. I planned for years to get away from him in a way that would help him save face, but he’s trying to control me.” She paused and Misty could see that her eyes were shiny with anger. “The thing is, the whole church will back him. There’s no place for me to get help. They’ll get me!”

“So that’s why you’re hitching? To get away to school?”

“Yeah.” She slumped down again, her body curved to fit the seat.

“But when you get there, do you have a place to live? Money? Have you been admitted to BYU?”

“I took his money. I have enough to get started... A year maybe if I’m careful. The problem is, he wrote some high mucky-mucks, men like him, and asked them not to



let me enroll. I'm going to try, but I think they won't let me in."

Misty felt the girl's anguish. "You stole the money? Won't they... Won't the police come after you?"

"They might. Most of the police are Saints. They do what the church tells them to do. But," she paused again and sat straight up in the seat this time, reaching around the side and pulling the lever out so that the seat back came upright. "He would be ashamed to tell anyone that I stole his wad. Besides, I think the cash wasn't exactly money he could admit he had. It's about eight thousand."

The car was quiet for several long minutes. Both seemed occupied with their own thoughts. Misty was imagining Issy's life and problems. Her own agony was pushed aside for the first time in months. "Issy, why are you going to BYU if you know that they won't let you enroll? Won't they catch you and hold you? Are you really going to do that?" The questions came out before Misty could phrase them tactfully.

"I know, that's dumb, isn't it?" Issy hung her head. Misty could barely hear her. "I know it's dumb, but I had no other plan. I just wanted to get to Provo and I thought everything would turn out right."

"What about another place? Another school? Don't you think you should get out of Mormon controlled space?"

Issy looked up and a big smile took over her face. "Beam me up Scotty, get me out of Mormon Controlled Space!" she said, laughter in her voice for the first time since Misty had met her.

"Well, Issy, isn't Utah a church-state?" Misty remembered something she had read.

"Well, yes! Yes it is. Nothing happens in Utah that the church doesn't approve of or run. You're right Misty. In other places the church wouldn't be able to do my father's bidding... At least not as openly. We're strong in Idaho and...parts of other states. I'd have a chance in California maybe...maybe back east." She paused and looked at

Misty, forming a thought. "Why are you going to Salt Lake City?"

Misty smiled and shrugged. "Maybe I'm not. I'm just driving west."

They stopped in a small town off I-70 and found a café where truckers' rigs were three-deep in the yard. Misty said that she had heard that truckers always knew where the best food was served. Issy looked around the lot hoping that no one she knew had parked there. She didn't recognize a car or van, but she feared that one of her father's friend's cars could be hidden behind one of the big Freightliners.

Inside, they took turns in the restroom, each guarding the door for the other. Then they found a booth and a waitress handed them menus.

"Smoky in here," Issy noted as she squinted her eyes acknowledging that the smoke stung them. She looked around satisfying herself that there were no familiar faces in the place.

"I like it here. Look at all these characters! Look at those guys over there... Is that the Willie Nelson look?"

Issy turned and looked. "These guys don't own shares in Gillette, and they've never heard of exercise. Are these the 'Real Men' we've heard about?"

"I think so. Look at these fine examples of superior beings. Obviously we are inferior. Woman, how can we compete?"

The waitress appeared through the smoke and confusion of bodies. Several of the men were making a point of noticing the girls in the booth.

"Hamburgs is great. Not much on the menu that ain't hot Mex."

"Okay. I'll have a hamburger," Misty said as she handed the waitress her menu.

"Me too."

"I'll be right back if'n I don't keel over from black lung," the waitress joked as she took Issy's menu, stacked

the two against the table top and, leaning over to reach the rack at the back of their table, bared herself to her navel. Then she was off, pushing her way through the school of men.

“Must help with tips,” Misty quipped.

“Not from me,” Issy said grinning. “Did you see the stretch marks? Maybe they were cantaloupes.”

Back on the road again Misty felt refreshed and optimistic. Maybe her problems would go away. That preacher was right! If you trusted God and focused upon Him, then... That sounded so wonderful! It was obviously the solution to her problems. Only, ‘how do I do it the right way?’ she pleaded to her inner Self. Issy interrupted her thoughts.

“I’d be fooling myself if I believed I could ever get into BYU. Besides, I don’t have enough money and...” She paused, letting reality get to her.

“I agree. You’ll have to get to some place where you can work and get started on your own. You said California was okay. Have you ever been there?”

Issy broke from her depressing thoughts. “I was, once. Northern California though. It’s not a place I’d feel comfortable living and working. I think LA is probably best. Nearby is Disneyland and probably lots of people my age. And jobs.”

“I could go there. It sounds good to me, but we still have to go through Provo and Salt Lake City. We don’t have to stop though.”

“Do you mean it? Don’t you have a place you’re supposed to be? What goes with you, anyhow?”

Misty grinned. ‘No place I’m supposed to be,’ she thought, ‘no place at all.’ Issy wanted to know what she was doing. ‘What am I doing, anyway? How do I explain me in a nutshell?’ She laughed at the picture created in her mind. ‘I’m a nut in a shell, all right.’

“What’s so funny?”

"I was just thinking how hard it was to describe yourself to someone else. I mean, what to say that really communicates who you are."

"You mean who *you* are. You talk like you are talking about someone else. You mean to say, 'Who I am,' not who you are. Do you know what I mean?"

Misty got a sudden flash of insight. "I was talking as if I were talking about someone else, is that what you mean?"

"Exactly. I took a class once and we learned to listen to others and ourselves and... Well, it helped me."

Misty paused and smiled a guilty little smile that only she could feel. She composed herself and started. "I'm Dorothy Blanchard. I'm married to a man I married for money and identity, not love. I'm running from seven years of plenty; seven years of hell! I..." She paused to see what effect her revelation was having on Issy. The girl sat, attentive, but not overtly reacting. "I was once an honor student like you. I was attractive, popular, and on my way up, if you know what I mean? I lived in a nice town in Pennsylvania, had a... Had good parents!" she had a quick thought-flash of her mom and was about to say 'a parent who loved me and a parent who competed with me for my father's affection,' but she didn't, "and I had a future that everyone said was bright. I became a Born Again Christian, and thought I was in God's hands. I had turned my life over to Jesus, and I tried to be pure. I went to college, was graduated, and found myself in the work-a-day world. I dated a lot. I met a guy who had everything, or so I thought. I knew his values were skewed, but I made a deal with the devil and jumped from worker class to master class by saying, 'I do.' How's that for a life in a nutshell? Oh, and now I'm Misty, and I'm in search of the Grail."

Issy didn't say anything for what seemed a long time. Then she looked at Misty, lowered her eyes, and asked, "You sure screwed yourself. Would you do it again?"

Misty was stunned. Of course she... Her thoughts raced. Would I? "I think so, only I wouldn't pick such a loser."

"Even if you didn't love the guy?"

"I'm not certain. Issy, I don't think I know what love is. I liked being a member of the ruling cast. I liked not having to work at some dumb-ass job. I liked nice things. The only problem was what I had to trade to stay there. I lost myself."

They drove into the twilight talking about things that weren't personal. Misty felt her fears and angst returning. Issy was drowsing. Suddenly, she sat up.

"Misty, I just had a strong premonition to stay away from Provo. Can I see the map?"

Misty reached between the seats and pulled out her "AAA Indian Country map. "Here, this is Utah, and we are...approximately...right here! We just passed through Green River."

"Then we have to go back to...to this junction," she pointed to a Highway labeled 191. "It's not back very far, I think."

"Is it that important? Look at that road," Misty admonished, as she looked away from the highway again and located the proposed route on the map. "See, it goes south and then," she looked up and centered the car in her lane again, "it goes through what looks like desert and it ends in Arizona at... Nowhere!"

"Moab! It goes through Moab! I've been there and you'd like it!" Issy said with as much authority as she could muster.

"Issy, is that what you want to do? Okay, we can go back and down that way. Do you think we can find gas and a motel?"

"I remember lots of places down there. We'll find a place. Thanks Misty, I had a sudden realization, I guess you could call it that. It was a warning not to go to Provo."

Misty was amused. "You said 'I guess you could call it that.' I wouldn't have called it that."

“You’re right Misty. I guess I called it a realization because that’s what it was. A voice in my head warned me loud and clear. That sounds dumb, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe. Maybe it was Jesus or Moroni or whoever you Mormons turn your lives over to... Maybe it was your spiritual counselor?” Issy stiffened, anger reddening her face. Misty knew she had hit a nerve and that the girl thought she was making fun of her. “I’m not serious Issy, don’t give me that look! But maybe the voices we hear do come from our protectors... We’ve got to go with it! Look for a turn around.”

Issy’s anger turned to agreement.

Misty looked over at Issy, then back at the highway. The Utah state route wasn’t as good as the Interstate they had been on, but it was okay. Except where it wound around mountains or when it was too dark outside to see anything, driving was easy if she kept her focus. She had tried to relax after finding the 191 turnoff and heading the Toyota south. She reached over and turned the radio on. Issy was quiet. She didn’t know if her passenger was awake or not. She assumed that she was asleep.

The radio dial connected with an NPR station. She was paying some attention to a report on menopause and women over forty. It didn’t concern her, yet.

Issy sat up, resetting her seat back.

“Misty, did you leave your religion?”

Misty had to refocus her mind and think about what Issy had asked. “I will never leave my religion...my faith in God, but... Issy, do you mean did I leave my church?”

“Oh, I see,” Issy said, “You think religion and church are separate things? I wonder, no, I don’t think they are... Are they?”

Issy’s question reminded Misty of late night discussions she and her friends had in college. The bull sessions had been, she remembered, the most valuable

part of her four years at Penn State. The separation of Church from Religion had often been discussed.

“My Church, the one I was in because my parents were, was run by a splinter group of the Southern Baptists. They called themselves American Reformed. There were differences that I never understood that made our minister feel that his way was the right way.” She turned to see if Issy understood. The girl’s face was screwed to communicate that she didn’t.

“I don’t understand. How can...” She had made connections while she spoke and turned her question into an answer. “You mean it’s like the Danites, and groups that want to maintain polygamy? Yeah, we have them too.” She thought a second and continued, “but Misty, did you quit The Church?”

Misty smiled a secret smile. She knew where the conversation was going and she was comfortable with it. “I was afraid to. You see, they taught us that ours was the one true way and that if we rejected Christ, God’s Church, their version, we were doomed to eternal damnation.”

Issy leaned forward and reached for Misty’s arm, her hand closing tightly near the older woman’s elbow. “No! That can’t be,” she fought against making the connection. “They said that? Then...” She paused and sat back as if the wind had been knocked out of her. Misty let her have time to think.

“Misty, that’s what they taught us! They said that if we were once aware of the church’s teachings and rejected them... Or even questioned them, my dad said, that we were doomed to eternal hellfire and damnation.” She turned toward Misty again. “How can that be? How can there be two absolute rights? Why should I believe you?”

Misty smiled again and concluded in a smart-ass voice, “And that my children, is the difference between church and religion.”

Issy sat back, relaxed. “Oh my God, thank God! Do you know how scared I’ve been?” There was so much

relief in her voice that at first Misty didn't know what Issy was thinking. Then she knew that Issy had made a major jump. What did they call it, cathecting?

"Misty, the worst part... The misery I've experienced for several years now, was the fear that in being true to myself I was writing my ticket to eternal damnation."

"I know, honey, I went through that hell too. At the time, I thought it would make me an agnostic. It didn't. I still have God and that end of religion."

Issy was sitting with the seat back straight up. "Damn them! Damn them to hell! They don't believe God's message is strong enough to reach others, so they... They think they have to imprison us with fear!" She had a haughty tone in her voice like one spoiling for a fight.

"Yeah," Misty responded, "fear is like having a lead rope tied into your brain. They take you where they want."

"They use that on us because we're women, don't they?" Issy observed.

"Man has created woman in the image he thinks he wants, the image of a servant and inferior. Well, that's not exactly true. I think true men seek out women who are equals and partners. I know men who don't want a doormat. They want an equal, a partner, a person with a brain." She paused and let her thoughts congeal around that idea. "You know what Issy? What each of us has to do is find a church that teaches that all human beings are equal, not a church of, by and for insecure men." Then she added as an afterthought, "Did you ever get the idea as you read the Bible that the men who wrote it were weak? Maybe homo's or something? They seemed to fear and loathe women."

"Gad, Misty, stop it! You want lightening to strike the car? My father would kill me... I mean it, he would literally kill me if he knew what we were talking about."

"Well, that's his right, isn't it? As a man, I mean!"

They needed a breather. Misty reached over and turned up the radio.



...and the medical doctor who is leading this movement on the mind/body connection is Doctor Deepak Chopra. He claims to be able to share with his followers the 6,000 year old secret of how to tap into a miraculous power to create perfect health and total well-being. He offers to show us how to let our mind and body remember... He claims that when our spontaneous inner energies awaken a transformation takes place.

Doctor Chopra is an M.D. who believes that there is a body of knowledge within us and that each of us can tap into that knowledge if we learn to keep a silent mind. He offers us an old Indian saying: All the struggling to learn when all we have to do is remember.

For this reporter, the idea that we can tap into all knowledge is certainly intriguing. How nice it would be to stop searching and going to school and having experiences. All we might have to do is keep a silent mind. Would that be wonderful or deadly?

Thanks for listening to My Search  
Reporting from Washington...

Classical music filled the car's interior. Misty drove carefully, wondering what the country looked like. She watched for deer on the curving road, as the signs advised. "Moab. 34 miles. Dead Horse Point. 34 miles. Colorado River Crossing. 34 miles." She read the signs aloud, wondering how places that sounded so different could all be the same distance away.

"How could that be? All those places can't be the same place. Did we miss something?" Issy was relaxed and having fun.

"I'll bet there's a turn-off for the Dead Horse and another one for the River. I don't think they would have a dead horse in the water, do you? Or in Moab, either." Misty was smiling and feeling silly.

"Moab! *The land of Moab!* She changed her voice to sound like the narrator of the Ten Commandments.

*“And after wandering for years they entered into the desert of Moab and sacrificed a sheep to the Lord and fell to their knees praying that her father’s men wouldn’t find them there.”* Issy broke into fits of laughter. She couldn’t stop, and the more she tried the more she hooked Misty into her glee. The two laughed until breathing became difficult. Misty slowed the car, looking out at the highway through tears.

She saw signs ahead and an intersection. “I’ll bet this is it,” she pointed so that Issy could see the junction. The sign was lit for a few seconds by their headlights.

“That’s it,” Issy exclaimed. “See: Dead Horse Point State Park.”

“Okay, that leaves the Colorado River and Moab. Does Moab float?” They both laughed again. Exaltations of pent-up glee.

“I didn’t know I had so much energy left in me,” Issy observed. “I really thought I had lost my funny bone.”

“That’s the first time I have laughed like that...” she paused, thinking, “laughed at all, in a long time. It’s good to know we still have funny bones. Let’s use them, okay?”

They crossed the Colorado River at the bottom of a long hill. Lights along the river gave them some idea of how wide it was. Reflected light indicated that high cliffs held the river in. Then they were coming into the lights of the town. There were motel signs and billboards everywhere. Traffic increased and soon they were stopped at a red light, surrounded by cars.

“Welcome to the big city,” Misty said, the energy level in her voice still high from the laughter she had released.

“I remember it!” Issy cried. “Go a few more blocks and... Look for a motel that has a big signboard. I think it’s on the left.”

Misty noted the sandstone block buildings and the western look of the stores. Red lights caught them at every corner, but she didn’t mind. They gave her time to look about and study the town. She rolled down her window

and a hot blast of air overcame the air conditioning. "Hot here!" she observed. "Why is it so hot at this time of night?"

Issy looked out at the people walking past them in the crosswalk. "You can't see it at night, but we've come down into a red rock desert. Moab bakes in a sandstone valley." The walkers were dressed in minimal attire, especially the women. "Misty, do you get the feeling that we're overdressed?"

They both laughed again.

The motel had a billboard out front advertising a band called, "Red, Rock and Randy." Misty read the billboard and pretending to be shocked, asked Issy, "Are you going to corrupt me by suggesting that we stay in a place of sin like this?"

"Hey, lady, I'm the young and innocent here. Protect me and I'll never forgive you."

They were laughing as Misty got the car into a slot and prepared to go inside to register.

"I can sleep in the car. It's no problem. You take the room! Let me sleep out here, really, I don't mind."

"Thanks Issy, but we can share the room, I don't mind, really. We're lucky they still had a room left." She was already feeling awkward about sleeping in the bed with another woman, but why not? There was nothing wrong with two women sharing a bed.

Issy took the key and went ahead to open the door. Misty got her bag and made certain that her stashes of money were in it before she lugged it out and carried it into the motel. Two things hit her at the same time. One was the smell. Did every motel in the world have that same damp-sweet musty odor? The other thing were the beds. The room had two queens.

Issy was bouncing on her back on one bed. Misty sat and slowly lay back. If the bed were snow, she would have made an angel. It felt that good.

"I'd like to shower and then get something to eat, okay!" Misty stated.

“Me too, can we eat in the part where the band is playing? I would love to hear a band.”

The place still had empty booths and a few tables, one up front near the bandstand. As they were seated by the host in a high-backed, button-studded vinyl booth, Misty looked around. There were people coming in numbers now, soon the place would be full. The band was squeaking instruments and twanging strings to try and tune, behind a five foot high sign that assured everyone out front that they really and truly were the Red Rock & Randy Band.

A lady about Misty’s age came to their table and handed them each a menu. Misty asked her if there was a special tonight. The waitress looked at the back of her order pad and shrugged.

“Yeah, there’s Chicken Fried with real white gravy, green peas and Jell-O for desert. Or There’s a 16-ounce T-bone steak with fries and Jell-O for desert. The Chicken Fried is \$6.95. The steak’s \$9.95. What’ll it be?”

Issy, who had been looking at the menu, ordered a fajita plate with hot green on the side. Misty looked over at her, not understanding what Issy had ordered.

“Oh, I guess I’ll have the chicken...” She paused and thought about the last chicken fried she had seen, swimming in grease and covered with white gravy. “Fried chicken would be just right. Crispy!”

The band had its first act together and turned the mike on with a loud click that brought the place to attention. Then the mike whined a pitch that almost took the paint off the walls. The leader put his hand over the mike and the drummer turned to adjust the amp. Misty smiled and turned back to Issy. “I don’t think I’ve ever been to one of these things that didn’t start exactly that way.” Their eyes met and they smiled up the juices of the laughter they had found.

By the end of the first set their ears were so blasted that they had to shout at each other to be heard.

“The music is country,” Misty commented during a lull in the gig, “It’s just that I can’t tell which country.”

“I like it!” Issy was all over her side of the booth, moving to the beat.

The waitress came with the bill in a green leatherette folder that matched the vinyl on the booth. Misty looked it over, did some quick arithmetic and handed it to Issy. “What say we split this in two?” They wiggled so that they could get their hands into their pockets and each drew out a wad of cash. People around them noticed. Issy sorted out a ten. Misty counted out ten ones. They put the money due in the folder and forced the rest back into their jeans. Then they waited, watching the crowd more than the band.

There was an odd assortment of people filling the hall. The place was hot, although Misty could see big fans in the walls. The girls wore skimpy halter tops, short-shorts, cowboy boots. One had a holster and a pistol at her side.

The waiter came and took the folder. “Girls, would it be asking too much for you to share your booth? There’s a couple of other ladies that would sure be obliged.”

Issy nodded to Misty, then scooted over to her side. The waitress returned and seated two women dressed in long, white, fringed dresses that Issy’s dad would have called Squaw Dresses. Both women had long hair, held in back by beaded ties. Neither looked Indian. Misty noted that the sleek hair of the woman across from her had streaks of silver running through it. She decided that the woman’s hair was natural and that she was in her late forties.

The woman next to Issy smiled and introduced herself, trying to be heard over the band and crowd.

“I’m Thalia, and my friend is Shantal. Do you come here often?”

Misty shouted over the noise, “I’m Misty and this is Issy,” she watched to see the women’s reactions. Evidently

they both heard their names. "We're on the road, just stopped here for the night."

The women nodded and smiled. Thalia started to raise her voice to be heard above the band, when the music ended and the sound dropped away with an almost physical tug, as if, Misty thought, she had been leaning into the music.

Thalia lowered her voice, smiled and let her eyes send warmth toward Misty. "We are on the road too, but we stopped over here for a while... We're looking for a special place, a red rock place where..." she paused and changed her approach. "We've been along the front range near Denver. There's places south of there like the Garden of the Gods, but it wasn't there. We went into the McElmo Canyon which is east of here, but that wasn't it either, although the red rocks were beautiful. Then we heard that Moab was it...I mean the place. We've been all over this area and, well, we don't think this is it either. This is our last night, and," she gave Misty an apologetic smile, "we came in here for... It looked like the place all the people our ages go and we were hoping to, you know, have fun."

The other woman, Shantal, added, "We were drawn here because of the red rocks and the special energy the desert is supposed to have around here." She folded her hands on the table top. Misty thought the way she worked her hands were like flower petals interlocking.

Issy caught her breath when the music stopped. The band was great! She listened to the others and had time to study the way they were dressed. "The way you're both dressed... Are you from an Ashram or some place like that?"

Shantal nodded. We are! It's a long way from here though, in Colorado, near Aspen."

"I thought so. You both look so... Well, together and centered and relaxed." She thought a moment and added, "I'm surprised to see you in a place like this."

Both women smiled. Thalia looked down at the table and then up and into Issy's eyes. "We're seeking a

place. There is a special place where the energy is balanced and one can center oneself. It's a place where red rocks lie at the foot of snow capped mountains. Our Sensei saw it in a vision. He sent us on this quest because he was told in his vision that we must all seek this energy center; go there, and let the energy flow through us. That's why we're here. We thought that this... Isn't it a beautiful place?"

Misty looked down and shrugged her shoulders. "We don't know. We got here after dark. We really don't know where we are."

Issy wasn't interested in the Ashram women's explanations. She watched the dancers, and thought of ways of getting out there herself. "Let me out!" she ordered as she pushed against Misty and made her new friend slip out of the booth so that she could get past. "I'm here to have some fun! Come on Misty, you can dance!" She looked back at the other two, motioning with her hand, "You too! We can all dance and maybe even meet some guys."

Misty started to slide back into the booth, thought about it, and throwing her napkin on the table, followed Issy to the center of the floor. Issy was already moving to the music. As soon as the two were away from the booth, men who had been eyeing them began to move toward them like fifth grade boys going to lunch.

As the evening progressed, the visitors were given physical workouts, their soles worn by desert sand instead of cornmeal, and their bodies tried by desert heat and rough manipulation. There were opportunities to test the desert air, to go to parties, and to get acquainted with River Rats who told stories of adventure on the Colorado River.

When Misty looked back at their booth the two Ashram women were gone. She wondered if they would find their magic place. She hoped they would. Before she could get depressed about her own plight, a cowboy grabbed her arm and away she went again.

Someone was banging on the door. She came to slowly, trying to remember where she was. She heard the sound of a key being placed in their lock. Issy had pushed herself off her pillow, like a tired soldier doing pushups. She wasn't focused yet.

"Who's there?" Misty could see the chain in place on the door, and that gave her some comfort. The door came open to the chain. A woman's voice with a deep Mexican accent said, "I'm sorry. You still here? I come back, maybe one hour?"

Issy said, "My God, do you realize it's after nine?" She was talking to Misty.

"Si Senora, I am sorry."

Misty looked at Issy and started laughing. Issy began to giggle and lay back on her stomach, muffling her laughter in the pillow.

"What a night!" Misty said, awake and feeling great.

Issy sat up suddenly, pushing the thin sheet back off her legs. "It's been a long time since I woke up laughing."

Misty nodded. She hadn't awakened happy since college.

When they left the room the view that greeted them made Misty gasp. "My God, this is... Well, it's... Issy, are we on Mars?" The panorama they saw from the motel porch was unlike any she had seen before. The entire end of the valley was fringed by massive red cliffs, not smooth and even, but jumbled and ragged and some parts seemed twisted as if someone had wrung them out of red sand and left them to set in the hot sun.

"I told you you would like it!" Issy taunted as she took in the beauty and immensity of the valley. "And see up there," she pointed and made sure that Misty was looking, "those are the mountains the Ashram women were talking about. I think they are the LaSals... Yeah, they call them the Manti-La Sals, I remember."



"I can see why people think this is a magic place. Look, there's a big bird... Do you think it's an eagle? Is it?" She moved so that Issy could see by her and around the roof overhang and through the pads of a large cactus growing outside the porch rail.

"It's a young eagle! Do you know how I can tell?" She didn't wait for Misty to answer. "See, it has white T's in its wings... Little white T-bones."

"Let's eat in there," Misty said pointing to a café located on the hillside above the motel. "Look, it has great windows. We can see everything!"

After breakfast and almost an hour of looking at the view, Misty felt the need to get going. Except, where were they going? What was wrong with here? She got Issy's attention by clunking the water pitcher down.

"What if we stayed here?"

Issy turned away from the view, lifted her sunglasses and, from the look on her face, pondered the proposition for a second.

"No. This is still controlled space... Well, not entirely, as you saw last night, but all the police, government and all that stuff is church-state stuff. They probably know I'm here right now."

Misty sat back, surprised. "How could that be? We registered under my name."

Issy smiled a secret-sharing smile, "Misty you have no concept of how the church works. Everything is controlled! They know every *intimate* detail about everyone else's life, and I do mean intimate! The church even knows... Well, everyone is watched, everyone watches, and guys like my dad have all the info." She paused, thinking of other ways to say what she meant, "Just believe me Misty, someone here has seen us...and by now they know who we are and what we're doing."

"Issy, that's spooky!"

"Well, think of it as a family... At least that's how mom described it to me. She once confided in me that the church was family with a few fathers who have almost total

power and are totally corrupted by power. You know, Misty, she wasn't bothered by that. When I asked her about it she told me, 'That's the way the world works best. Look how prosperous we are!' She blew me away. You know, I understand her a little better now than I did then. After all, the only information she was allowed to have... Well, she could only think about what she knew, and she doesn't read or get involved in the news or anything like that. I mean, it's like she's programmed... I didn't let them do that to me!"

"Okay, you are ready to leave... Where are we going?"

Misty had several other questions, but Issy was up and moving down the long steps to the street. She turned back to Misty and yelled, "Look who's coming, our friends from last night."

Misty collected the change from the waiter's tray, got her purse and sunglasses, and followed. By the time she got to the bottom of the steps, Issy had stopped the two women in white and was chatting with them.

"Come on Misty, listen to this!"

Thalia stopped talking and waited for Misty to come up. She nodded to Misty and started talking again. "I was telling Issy that we have given up the search. We are certain that this area isn't the energy center we're looking for. It's really disappointing."

"But how would you know? I mean, how would you find an energy thingy?" Issy was intrigued and sincerely trying to understand the women's mission.

"We could see it with our inner eye... What I mean, Issy, is that the flow of energy in that place is felt inside one's mind... It's a fountain of light and a tingling feeling. It's not here, though, and we're out of money and time. We have to go back. There's only one other place we thought of checking, and that's a long way from here. I can't imagine that place is special, after all, it's in the center of Arizona, and that's desert. Flat, hot, sandy desert!"

Issy wasn't through with them yet. "Can you tell me what it's like to be in a community...an Ashram, where you have a Guru or Sensei or whatever?"

"It's very nice. There is meditation throughout the day and when we're not meditating, we work in the gardens or, in the winter, for example, we make things to sell. Mostly, we take instruction from the Sensei, the teacher, and focus on peace and harmony within ourselves and the world."

"Are there men there?" Issy asked as if she were reluctant to hear the answer.

"Sure," Shantal, the quiet one answered with a broad smile. "but we aren't focused on sex...I mean the sex of a person. We can have sexual bliss, but that is not why we are there. In our community, there is a respect for our bodies, and natural things are...well, natural."

"Are there kids?" Misty was trying to envision the type of community they lived in.

Thalia looked down and nodded, more a tapping of her head at pain than a "yes" or "no." "No, no children. In fact, both of us... Most of the women have been... It's something the Sensei was instructed to have us do. We are not here on Earth to procreate. We are here to bring peace and sanity to the world."

"Oh," Issy said quietly, looking across at Misty. "I don't want kids either. Not in this screwed up world!"

## Chapter 3

She felt herself falling into an empty void; spinning without purpose like a motor shaft when the current is turned off.

“MY GOD, WHERE ARE we going!” Misty said in a voice meant as a call for help. “This road leads to nowhere! Look at this map! Tiny towns: Monticello, Blanding, Bluff, and then it drops into Arizona and there’s nothing there!”

Issy looked at the map and gasped. “Gad! We’d better have plenty of food and water and get an early start. Look, follow this line. There isn’t a city of any size until, look, way over here, Tuba City. Then just west of there, let’s see, eleven miles, it turns south and goes to... Hey, I’ve heard of Flagstaff. Flagstaff is supposed to be a great place. There’s even a university there.”

“How far do you think we have to go?” She turned the map and began mentally adding the mileage between cities. “I get about two hundred miles, at least. All desert I think. Indian Reservation. Jeeze, Issy, if we are going, we’d better scoot.”

“Lady,” Issy said in a serious and controlled voice, “We go through some of the strangest parts of Mormon space. This part of Utah is... Well, my dad often talked about moving down here. He claims things are still right down here. I hope we can keep going, let’s not plan to stop, okay? Ever read Zane Gray’s, *Riders of the Purple Sage*? No? I read it because it was on the list of books we weren’t supposed to read. Well, this is the country he wrote about and it hasn’t changed.”

Four and one half hours later the gray Toyota came down through the pines and entered Flagstaff. Misty hadn’t stopped in Utah. They had entered Arizona, turned west and fled across the vast empty reaches of the Navajo Reservation. That’s when the topography and open space got to them. They talked in little spurts; lame conversations. Issy had thought of sleeping, but the

strange beauty of the land seemed printed on the inside of her eyelids so that open or shut she could see the rolling sandstone desert and the bare rock where the wind was working the sand.

Near Kayenta, Issy observed, "There's no lack of red rocks and mountains in the world. I wonder if those Ashram gals know that what they're looking for could exist anywhere between here and Moab. It seems common out here." Then she slept until Tuba City and then, butt-weary, sat watching the country pass as Misty, trapped in thoughts of her own, drove on into the afternoon.

"I didn't expect we'd find a forest," Misty said for the third time. "We came out of the desert and up here we're in trees! That's amazing, isn't it?"

Issy thought so. "It's cooler here too. I wonder why we never knew Arizona had mountains and forests and was cool and had water?"

"Not enough Discovery Channel TV," Misty said with a big smile. "Issy, we made it out of Mormon Controlled Space! Do you think we will like it here? Or should we stay over a night and then keep going for California? I see on the map that Interstate 40 heads right out from here and goes to, let's see, all the way to L.A., I'll bet."

Issy looked out the window at the scenery and then studied the people in the cars and trucks around theirs. There were several rad pickups with what seemed to be college kids in them. They were having fun, and one guy in the pickup across from them at the light, waved to them. A kind of a salute, she thought.

"I want to check this place out!" She answered.

"Check it out!" Misty repeated. Let's find the student center near the, what did that sign say, NAU?"

The motel they picked seemed to be in the center of the university area. The town was neat and clean and had a western flavor that they liked. Misty checked in while Issy sat in the Toyota and waited. When Misty came out,

she had a key and a stack of brochures and magazines about the area. "Boy did we strike gold!" she exclaimed as she handed the trove to Issy. "We drive around back...we're on the third floor. The motel people were really nice. I told them I was bringing you up here to see the university. When I said that, they couldn't do enough to help me. I like it here already."

Issy was sorting through the stack of materials Misty had piled on her lap. "My God, would you look at this!" She said with enough force to distract Misty so that Misty drove past the parking space assigned for their room.

"What is it?"

Issy held out a magazine with a vivid photo on the cover of ragged and beautiful columns of red rocks. In the background there was a mountain range with snow-capped peaks.

"Sedona Magazine? Where's Sedona?"

Flagstaff was a place the girls took to immediately. The two, separated by more than ten years, had different tastes, yet they each sought what they needed in the town. Issy took off the next morning, telling Misty that she was going to "hang" at the college. She walked off into the warm morning, dressed in a way that caused Misty to have 'parental-type' reactions, although she was smart enough not to comment.

"Mrs. Dorothy Blanchard the third would hate it here," Misty said aloud as she drove the course suggested by the motel clerk and found San Francisco Avenue. She parked the gray Toyota, grabbed her purse, locked the car and headed along the street eyeing displays in shop windows.

Misty walked and shopped until she began feeling dizzy from the heat. "It's the altitude, Honey," a sales lady in a sporting goods store told her. "Better find a nice place, have a big cool drink, eat something... It's more than 7,000 feet here, you know!"

Issy made her way along the curving streets looking for kids her age. She took a side street and found a small shopping area made up of second-hand stores and used books and music shops. The area was teeming with people dressed like her and acting as she thought people should. She moved into a group in front of a second hand clothing store and stood listening. They were talking about music, concerts and something called the Snowbowl. A nice looking guy was leaning up against the outside brick wainscoting of the building. She smiled and moved over next to him. He had a great eagle tattoo on his shoulder, a white sleeveless shirt, baggy jeans with walked-down cuffs and striped shorts pulled up out of his low slung jeans. He was smoking Camels, and playing with his cuticles.

He realized that she was giving him the once-over, smiled, bit off the loose part of the nail he was gnawing and spit it to one side.

“Any action around here?”

“Last night. Slow this morning...everybody's getting over it.”

“What?” She thought about the conversations she had overheard and guessed, “You mean the concert?”

“Yeah.”

“I was hoping for some...some action now.” She looked at him to see if what she was hoping for registered.

“Got anything?” He looked her over and smiled.

She smiled back, “No. Do you?”

“Probably.” What she was doing registered. She was serious. “You serious?”

She moved next to him and took his arm in the crook of hers.

“It's at my digs... You want...?”

She let him lead her, walking and feeling the warmth of contact with his arm, occasionally rubbing side-to-side intentionally.

“How come you're not in class?”

“Boring! I need to be alive. You?”

"I'm out for a while. Couldn't see the purpose... I'm going to get a job until ski season, then work the lifts or something."

His room was small, uninteresting. There were no signs of books or school stuff, just skis in the corner and posters of Veil and Copper Mountain on the walls. His bed was unmade, as was the one across from it which had piles of clothing and a backpack stacked on it.

She looked at the bed. "Roommate?"

"Yeah, he's moving out, back to Phoenix. He's there now, looking for a place. His folks won't support him, gotta find his own."

He took a backpack out of the closet and uncapped one of the aluminum tubes. Tied to the cap was a thin fish line, and tied to that, when he pulled it up, was a plastic cigar tube. He shook the tube and a lumpy, poorly rolled joint fell into his hand. He smelled it, reached over and let her smell, licked it, and started patting his pockets for a match.

"This is stuff that is so great, you only need one hit and you're in a parallel dimension."

Issy found a book of motel matches and struck one, letting the phosphorus burn off before she let the guy lean over and light the twisted paper.

"I'm Issy, what's yours?"

"Everybody calls me Jetter. I go for speed."

She took the bulging joint, wet her finger and dampened the paper on the side where it was starting to burn down unevenly. Then she took a long hit, hoping that she wouldn't cough. She held it in, choked twice without losing any smoke, and handed it back to him.

"One more for me, he said, sucking smoke and air into his lungs. He held his breath and looked toward the ceiling. She took the 'J' and sucked a long drag mixed with air into her lungs, and held it. She could already feel the high starting. He put the joint out and sat back on the bed. Then he lay back, staring at the ceiling again.

"Wow, what'd I tell you? Powerful stuff...hey?"



She felt energized and then dizzy. She sat next to him on the bed and closed her eyes.

"Wow is right! This is great!" She giggled and heard him laughing beside her. He was trying to sit up and grabbed her arm for assistance. He pulled himself up beside her and put his arm around her shoulders. She turned to him and kissed him, letting her hand move to her breasts stroking one then the other. She reached for his hand and raised it to her breast. He felt her through the cotton pullover and then moved his hand down until he could get it under the cloth. Inside, he found petite mounds of bare flesh and small erect nipples.

Issy let the feelings sweep her along, not certain how she felt, knowing what she wanted. She unbuttoned her jeans and slid her hand down, seeking gratification. He moved her away and pulled her top over her head as she raised her arms. She stood and dropped her jean shorts and panties, reaching again, fondling herself. He came up on his knees and pushed her back on the bed, his mouth nuzzling a nipple. She drifted along on an energy wave of pleasure, her eyes closed, hand busy with herself. He stood a moment and then was back on top of her using his knee to spread her legs. She pulled her knees up as far as she could and felt the force of him pushing inside. He pushed her ahead on the bed with the force of his entry. Sensations powered her reactions and she squeezed and pulled and forced back with her hips. He stiffened and relaxed on top of her. They lay for a moment then he rolled off, twisting away; reaching for a cigarette. She felt herself falling into an empty void; spinning without purpose like a motor's shaft when the current is turned off. There was no meaning or feeling. She sat up, looked for her clothes and started pulling them on. He lay on the bed, out, not asleep; in a world of his own.

"Great grass!" she exclaimed, as if their earlier conversation had never been interrupted.

He smiled and took a drag on his Camel.

Issy went into the john and sat, wondering why she felt so empty, so bored. Sex was like this. Passion and then... Nothing. Sex was a drive, she thought, more exciting as a drive than an action. That's good, she murmured to herself, I'll have to remember that, that's really great! She finished, caught a quick look in the mirror, and walked to the edge of the bed. He lay there taking a drag and smiling; not opening his eyes. She studied his body. Genitals were small and kinda ugly, mine and his, she thought. So what's the big deal?

"Hey thanks, Jetter. I'll see you around I hope." She was out the door, if he answered, she didn't care.

The warmth of the sun felt great. She walked, seeing things in the cracks of the sidewalk and the curbs that amazed her with her brilliantly clear insights into the world. She sat watching a squirrel run about gathering things and knew that she was seeing the heart of the universe. Someone had left a McDonald's bag on the bench. She picked it up and studied the complex patterns of printing, the grain of the paper, a splotch of catsup, aware that she was truly alive and in touch with being.

Suddenly her stomach hurt. She was so hungry! She looked around and remembered that they had walked by a Burger King on the way to Jetter's place. Her mouth watered as she oriented herself and started back. As she passed a public building, she caught sight of a fountain where dolphins were jetting water into a pool. The sparks of light reflected from the falling water changed her focus. She forgot where she was going and sat on the ground in front of the fountain watching the waters fall. In time, she felt sleepy. She pulled herself over against the wall and slept.

Misty found a cute little corner café with a railroad motif. She entered, realizing that she was hungry. She had been window shopping and walking the streets for almost two hours. The waitress asked her if she was waiting for anyone else. She answered. "Then you're alone?" The

woman said, accentuating “alone.” She was given a table for two off to one side of the room. The good thing about it, Misty observed, was that she had a vantage point from which she could study everyone in the place.

She ordered and waited as the place filled. Evidently it was a place where couples met. They came in arm-in-arm, giving each other looks as friends and lovers do, laughing and speaking in energetic voices.

She sat and watched and wondered when, if ever, someone would greet her and talk and laugh with her.

“Ham, sugar-cured, and rye. Right?”

“Thank you.”

Everyone in the place was busy talking and smiling. Her loneliness returned with a force that hurt. “It hurts,” she said quietly, her appetite gone. She was past thirty, no longer young like most of the women here. She was alone, hiding out with only rotten memories---not one good memory to comfort her. She had wasted her life and burned all of her bridges before her. She sat, morose, defeated. ‘The reality is that I’m paying for greed. That’s what it was,’ she thought, ‘pure greed.’ Now she had no friends, no guidance.

“That be all Ma’am?”

She paused, “Yes, that’s all for me,” she said, taking the check from the waitress and letting self-pity flow.

Issy hadn’t returned to the motel room when Misty let herself in and flopped on the bed. She dozed and then awakened, sweaty and irritated by Issy’s entry into the room.

“Hi Misty, don’t you just love this town!”

Misty was groggy, gronked after too long an afternoon nap. “I... Well, I walked around and shopped...”

“I had a ball! I got stoned and I got laid and I spent the rest of the time by this great fountain...”

“Issy! What are you talking about?”

“Well, I did everything I needed to do to have a great time. It was fun.”

“You don’t sound convinced. What did you do?”

“I told you... I did what any woman would do to have a good time. I had fun! What did you do for fun?”

“Well, first I window shopped and walked around the old part of town. Then I found this great little place and had lunch...alone.”

“Sounds like something my mother would do. Did you have fun?”

“Did you?”

Issy shook her head, “No, not really.”

“I didn’t either. Oh it was nice, the town and shopping and all, but...”

“Misty, you’re grown, you have experience. I thought you would know what it’s all about?”

“I should... In fact, I think on some level I do know... But living as I did...do now, is empty. I miss purpose, like when I was in college...like I had when I was your age.”

“My age? You mean I’m supposed to have a purpose? I’m supposed to know what to do for fun? Misty, I do everything... I mean everything! I do what I’m supposed to do, but it... Well, it doesn’t mean anything. I want to feel like I’ve been somewhere after I’ve been out... I can’t explain it, but I’m empty inside, even after I do all the right things... Understand?”

Misty slumped back onto the bed. “Issy, we are years apart in age and we’re from different times... Yet, there’s one thing that’s the same. We need something to believe in. Both of us do...and you know what? We need someone who is not judgmental to look out after us... Someone to watch over us...” She went off on her internal pain and let those memories run through her.

“Everybody always wanted for me what was best for them... I mean, my dad. He didn’t know me or want me to be me, he just wanted to be King Shit and start himself on the path to becoming a God. My mom, she wanted me to keep quiet and not make her feel her own lack of purpose. My... Everybody else knew what I was supposed to be or not be...”

"Issy, I think you're very special. Did you really get high and get laid today?" Issy's first comments had worried Misty a lot.

"Yeah, the grass was really good. The sex? Well, it was just sex."

"Girl, you don't have to get stoned or have sex to have fun!"

"Sure, Misty, what's the alternative? Just go out and mope around the streets like you did? Be alone and be down? I've tried having fun without grass, it's not much fun. I tried sex once without being stoned. It was embarrassing. What do you know that I don't... I don't think you know anything better, do you?"

"I would hope so! But Issy, one thing I'm certain about is that drugs and random sex are wrong. What about aids, herpes, syph? Aren't you concerned?"

"Oh come on, we're too young for that! Those things attack older people."

"Issy, you're wrong. They happen to... You don't know what your partner has picked up. You can die---horribly!"

"I could get hit by a truck, too. I can't go around afraid of everything now, can I!"

"Oh Issy, think about it... Look, I know there's a better way to live and find...not fun Issy. Not fun, but joy! Aren't we both really looking for Joy?"

Issy sat looking across the room at Misty, head cocked and seemingly frozen in a frame. "I can't imagine joy, but just saying it feels good... Kinda like saying 'happiness.'"

Misty rose and went around her bed toward the bathroom door. "Let's make a deal... Okay? Let's both start looking now... I mean looking hard and find out how others get joy and, okay, fun too, in their lives. Deal? We look for happiness!"

Issy was smiling. "We can find it! We've got to find it. I can't stand to feel this way. I want to live. I want to have fun. I want it to be... Great!"

Misty lay in bed thinking of Issy's stupid attempts to find what she called fun, and her own attempts to find success and security. Nothing in her life had shown her the way. Religion had all the answers, but what she tried didn't work for her. Issy had an upbringing about as controlled as it was possible to get. It hadn't prepared her for her own feelings and her search for vitality. They were very screwed-up ladies. She let her thoughts flow and memories she had suppressed came flooding in.

She got in touch with the fact that she had avoided taking responsibility for her decisions. She admitted to herself, for the first time, that she had the information she needed about her wrong choices and chose not to deal with it. She had known of her dishonesty and self-destructive behavior at the time she married Blanchard. She had known what he was, and how he was using her. She knew then that he did not love her and that he wasn't interested in her as a human being. Yet with all of that information and the pain it caused her, she had elected to stay with him because of Cadillacs and social status. She had known that she was wrong, and she had suppressed the parts of herself that were honest and sincere.

She rolled over and stared at the wall. What Dorothy did, indicated that there was a basic flaw in her character. Her mother and father had known. They had tried to help her and she had turned on them; driven them away. She had isolated herself in the Blanchard tomb.

What she had to deal with was the ugly fact that she never decided to do what was right. She left because he got caught, not because she saw the moral wrong and decided to change. There was a part of her that was sick. How could she change it? Could Jesus change it for her?

She rolled back and stared across the room at the other wall. Dorothy was dead! If she, as Misty, changed, it would have to come from inside. She had to find something in life that she valued more than physical comfort and social status. If Misty wanted to have a good

life she would have to create a life of purpose and worth. She could start by being true to herself.

She rolled over and grabbed the pillow and hugged it to her. They had made a pact. They would find an answer to what made life rich and full. Not things like she had traded seven years of her life for, but qualities. Maybe that is what spiritual meant, 'quality of life.' Nuns didn't have things, they didn't play, didn't laugh much, didn't have lives of their own. They were supposed to be happy. Maybe? No, no way! If finding joy meant no body, then she was doomed to be unhappy. She needed sex and she was not one who could give up pleasures. Good food, love... Oh gad! She realized that she was stuck at the same level as Issy. She defined pleasure and joy as physical things that satiated her.

Issy was honestly pursuing the things she had been told made people happy. Every child in America --- No, everyone is bombarded with messages aimed directly at these same frustrations. You can't have fun unless...and the advertisers fill in the blank: beer, diamonds, cigarettes, clothes, foods, cars, sex. So, everybody must have this problem. She rolled over on her back, eyes staring at nothing. She was seeking another level. Issy was too. There must be a path, a well-worn path that people who wanted to experience life on a level above material and physical things, took. Issy was right! They had to find that path. Living was too empty otherwise.

She lay processing and reprocessing the same ideas, arriving at the same conclusion. Her watch beeped. She touched the button, 1:00 a.m. She rolled onto her side and puffed the pillow. She heard Issy do the same. Then Issy coughed, letting her know that she was awake.

"Iss? You awake?"

"Can't sleep. All I do is lay here and think how dumb I am."

Misty sat up and turned on the light. "I read that if this happens you have to get up, do something else, and

then go back to bed when you're ready." She rolled around and let her feet hit the floor.

"Misty, what time is it?"

"A little after 1:00."

"Hey, it's early. Let's go out for a while... You know, just walk around."

Misty was up, throwing her long T-shirt off and pulling her jeans on. She turned away from Issy, fumbling for her bra. "We should find some cool place to go like a hangout, only not for college kids, for people my age who are maybe into what we're looking for. Okay?"

"They'll think I'm too young... I can't get in, they're all twenty-one places."

"Not a bar... I mean some place that has, well, like veggies and teas..."

The night was warm and there was a surprising amount of traffic. Misty looked at her watch... "Friday. Friday night. That's why there are so many people out."

Issy was ready to go. "Where do you suppose a place is?"

"I guess we could ask the motel lady."

A couple were checking in and Misty waited in line at the counter while Issy went over to the brochure rack to see if there was anything there they didn't already have.

Misty asked the lady at the desk if there was a place where religious people hung out. The lady was confused.

"You vant a Kurch?"

Misty smiled. "No, I don't know what the word is for it... We're looking for a place where people into alternatives hang out." The lady's face was round. She wore her hair rolled into a bun on the back of her head. Misty guessed she was German, she looked German and she had an accent.

"Oh sure, you are looking for the New Age," she was nodding and smiling. "I think that is what you like, ja? A place where people go who vant to study things that maybe really aren't, but maybe should be?"



"Is there such a place around here?"

"Vel yes of course. Not far. Here..." she reached down the counter and grabbed a pad of maps, ripped one free, and with her pencil held like a beak, pecked little checks on the map. "See you are here...drive to just here...you turn here, and you put your car away as soon as you can. Then you walk here," she made a bigger check on the map, "and go in. You can see the big sign."

Misty checked the map to orient herself. "Thank you. Do you think they will still be open this late?"

"Depends, but sure. Teachers ist here for summer school...and tourists. They stay open this time of year, later."

Despite the directions, Misty got lost. She drove around several blocks in what she thought was the area where the lady told her to park.

"I think that's got to be it," Issy was pointing at a house that sat back from the street.

"That's a house," Misty countered. "But... I think you're right. Can you see the sign over the door?"

Issy squinted, trying to see better in the dim streetlight. "It may be a restaurant...a crab place."

Misty slowed the car and began looking for a parking place. "That crab place is what we're looking for."

"To eat? At this hour?"

Misty laughed. "Cancer! That's the Zodiac sign for Cancer the Crab."

Leaving the car, Issy still wasn't sure. "You said the lady said, 'New Age.' Are you sure we should go in?"

"Look!" Misty stopped in front of the old house and pointed to the sign above the door. "See, 'New Age Center,' and look around the edge. All the signs of the Zodiac."

Issy stopped, unwilling to go further.

"Iss, what's wrong?"

"I... You know so much! I... Misty, what's a Zodiac? What do you mean signs? And why advertise cancer?"

Misty felt laughter welling-up inside of her. She looked at Issy. The girl was serious.

“Iss, the Zodiac is a band in the sky around the Earth that represents the path of the planets, moon and sun. The band is divided into twelve parts called signs, and each sign represents a constellation named for things... Crab, Leo the Lion, Virgo, Gemini, Scorpio... Names given by the ancients to constellations they saw in the sky. Understand?” She waited for Issy to nod.

“If the sun or moon or certain planets are in a part of the sky that corresponds to the time you were born, then you are under that sign and those influences... That’s what astrologers believe, anyway.”

“I never knew how it worked. I knew I had a sign and a horoscope. I’ve read it in the paper.”

Misty smiled. “Horoscope means the hour and season. Astrologers predict what will happen to you based upon that and the alignment of the planets and all... It’s very complicated.”

“Do you believe they can tell you things?”

“Sure. And if they’re good they can write them in such a way that they fit almost everybody. It’s so much bull... Only thing is, tho’, people often fit their signs. I mean a Scorpio gets even... A Virgo knows what’s right for everybody else. That’s the strange part. Maybe when you are born does make a difference. Maybe the constellations determine your character and fate. I don’t think so, but...”

“This place may be weird. Are you sure we should go in?” Issy was looking back toward the car.

Misty took her arm and started in. “You’re with me, Babe. Don’t sweat the small stuff.”

The old house had been remodeled into a large room with lots of cubicles along its interior walls. There was a long bar at the far end with back-counter shelves filled with mugs and colored boxes of what looked like teas and herbs. The entire room was filled with mismatched tables and chairs, all with brightly flowered plastic table cloths. Most of the tables were taken. She saw an open

table with three chairs. Still holding Issy's arm, she steered her toward the table.

"Misty..." She leaned into her and whispered, "Look how some of these people are dressed! Rad! Action City!"

Misty had been collecting her own set of reactions to the way some of the people were dressed. The women, a majority, wore long cotton dresses with embroidered designs, mostly flowers and dyed patterns; bright colors. Most had long hair held back with flowered head clips or braided back, or woven in what her mom called Swedish Style, tied with ribbons and graced with flowers. She had seen clips of the flower children of the '60s, but these women were different. They were clean and well groomed. Their dress was intended to be formal rather than casual. She realized they were wearing what her mom called their Sunday-go-to-meeting best.

The men wore jeans and T-shirts, except a few who wore long white cotton sheets, probably like they thought Jesus wore. "Tunic Troopers," she said aloud, pointing with her hand at table level, hidden behind her purse, at several of the long-haired men standing together talking to a group of women dressed in normal sports clothes. "And look at their feet!" she giggled. Issy started laughing and made it worse by trying to conceal her glee.

A woman at a table near them leaned over and smiled. "Did you call them 'Tunic Troopers?' I love it! All evening I've been watching them circulate and play their games. I don't think they deserve the handle 'Troopers,' though. They're about as sweet and gentle a bunch of boys as you could find. Don't let their size fool you."

Misty was trying hard to control her laughter. She looked at Issy and they both snorted at the same time. Then all three women let go, releasing pent-up energy and finding release.

"I'm glad you ladies are enjoying yourselves. May I take your orders?" The waitress was irritated. It was late and instead of slowing down, the place was getting energized. She'd never get home.

“Try the Batavia Black, caffeine free! It’s heavenly.”  
Both women nodded.

The waitress went as quickly as she had come. Issy watched her and almost started laughing again.

“Hi, my name is Linda. I teach at the U here. You two look like you’re having fun. I overheard your analogy. Sorry if I butted into your...”

“No!” Misty interrupted her. “You’re welcome. In fact, we were hoping to meet someone who could help us understand this New Age...” she swept her hand around indicating the room.

“I wish I could. I don’t think I understand it all myself. You see, today New Age means so many things...” She wrinkled her face, seeming to float her nose. “I can tell you a little, the part that appeals to me. Do you know what metaphysical means?”

Issy sat back hard. “Meta who’sical?”

“Meta, it means later in time, beyond or transcending, and of course you know what physical means. So, it’s the term for beyond or transcending oneself.” She stopped, looking first at Misty and then at Issy to read their comprehension. Both gave her a positive nod.

“If there are forces beyond our bodies but comprehensible to our minds, and if these forces can be tapped, and... Do you follow? There are those that believe that there is a Force out there and that our minds can tap into it.” She stopped, smiled, and added, “The theme of ‘Star Wars,’ remember?” They nodded, so she continued.

“Some see two forces, good and evil. Others see forces broadcast from the Starbeings who planted man here, and with whom they believe they are in contact. Some teach that all we have to do is achieve a state of perfect silence and the truth will come flowing in. Others believe that we have a special organ, the Pineal body, in our heads that is a receiver and transmitter. Some believe in the spirits of the dead... that they are all around us and that we can contact them. Others, people I have met,

believe that they can channel spirits and get advice and information. I... Damn but I do talk on... Have I triggered anything?"

Issy was rapt in thought. She wanted time to think. Misty had followed every explanation. "I met a woman who thought she was a witch. She was caught-up in thoughts about evil forces and...mostly she was dominating a weaker girl. She told me I was a twin and that... It seems dumb, but..."

Linda turned in her chair and motioned with her chin toward three women in long white dresses. "Those women over there? They think they are White Witches. If you read about King Arthur and the days of Merlin, you know where they get their information. That woman with the brocaded shawl? The one sitting alone... She thinks she's the Earth Mother. I think she read *The Mists of Avalon* and got the idea. Her problem is that everyone knows the real Earth Mother is Raven who lives in a canyon down by Sedona. What I'm trying to indicate is that some people are nuts... They see a movie or read something and clicko! They become someone else. I think your witch friend was simply that. Of course, I don't happen to believe in witches."

Misty nodded agreement. "I don't either. It's hard for me to believe in the forces of evil."

Linda stared at Misty a moment and then dropped her eyes. "What I have learned here, teaching women's issues at the university, is that I deal with only those who are good. I've heard all the crap about the devil and evil, but I have never encountered it. I don't believe in the devil. The thing that attracted me in the beginning, and that holds me now, is that every one of these people...every woman I meet through my courses...all of the group that think of themselves as New Age, are focused upon doing good." She paused and searched Misty's face. "Can you imagine that? They all represent the power of good!"

Misty considered the idea of good people seeking good. "But, well, I mean, what about black witches and the forces of evil?"

"The witches here think of themselves as White Witches. I have never met a woman who wanted to be a Black Witch. Oh, I guess they exist, everything exists, but I've never met one." She was observing Issy as she spoke. She had gained Issy's full attention.

"Linda, but you said there was a witch who was greater than that woman sitting alone over there... Raven? I think you called her Raven?"

"Well, I didn't exactly say that, but it is true. Let me tell you about her. I first met her when she enrolled in a class I was teaching... It was about five years ago. My classes attracted many professionals then, more than now. I saw her name on the register and felt threatened. She, and I won't tell you her real name, was perhaps the most famous academic anthropologist in the southwest. She headed a major archaeological program investigating the interrelatedness of past cultures in this area... You know, the Anasazi, Sinauga, Hohokam: the ancient Pueblo peoples of the region. She was known as a powerful intellect and a driven woman. I feared that she would tear me to pieces, I really did!" She paused and pulled her chair closer to their table.

Issy leaned forward staring at Linda. Misty's attention was equally focused.

Linda drew a deep breath and continued, "All that angst! She was a woman just like the rest of us, searching for meaning, searching for joy. As I got to know her, I realized that her genius bordered upon... It was like she existed at the edge of another dimension. It seemed like madness. It wasn't really. She was overworked, driven by furies that I couldn't begin to comprehend. She had always been that way, since a little girl, she told me, and she was searching for meaning. She was as driven in her search for her womanhood as she was in her quest for knowledge."

She paused and seemed to reexamine the memory, "We became friends. She was spending her spare time, weekends and vacations mostly, searching for answers to her own identity and to the questions she posed in her research. By that time, and I told her to be careful, the two quests were intertwined. She told me that she had discovered something big. She called it, and why she called it that still puzzles me, 'The Continuation.'

"I knew what she had discovered was important. She had been doing extensive survey work to the south of here in the canyons around Sedona. She told me that many things were coming together and it was then that I saw madness in her eyes for the first time. She would come to Flag and we would talk... not about normal things. She wanted to know about the woman inside her... The raw, animal woman who had always been. The woman whose job it was to tend to the Earth.

"I met with her about once a week that semester. I saw her go into that other place. One day she came to me. She had been gone a long time, maybe a month since I had last seen her. She told me that her research was finished; she had found the answers. She was radiating madness, her eyes shining with a strange energy when she looked at me. She told me she was 'Raven,' and that she was the Earth Mother, that she was 'The Continuation.'"

Issy waited for more, but Linda was sitting back looking tired; remembering something else, Issy decided.

"And? What happened to her?"

Linda looked at Issy, thought about how to end her story, and began again. "She left. She locked her place and left. People thought she had been kidnapped or something. I knew. The police came, and I told them where to find her."

"Where?" Issy couldn't contain herself.

"She appears in Sedona. She goes into town every month or so to shop. She drives a dun-colored old Blazer. She buys food, bottles of pills, cotton cloth. Then she

drives way back into the Secret Mountain Wilderness, parks her Blazer and goes on foot to God knows where. She tells all that she is the Earth Mother. I never see her now." She paused and let the end of the story sink in. "Well ladies, that is the making of a witch. There is nothing evil, just a poor overworked and tortured soul. A sister lost to us."

Misty was shaken by the story. She felt lost herself. "Linda," she hesitated, looked around the room at all the people conversing and having fun, "how do we keep from getting lost? I mean, I've been lost... Oh, not like Raven, but I have lived years of my life for nothing." She remembered that is why they had come to this place, and added, "I mean, we're healthy enough to know that we need to get help. To not get lost I mean."

"Who is your teacher?"

"Teacher? What do you mean?"

Linda smiled and looked toward Issy, "Sensei, Guru, Master, Teacher... whatever the name, you have to have a personal spiritual advocate, someone who will lead you through your quest, a spiritual being who will guide you."

Issy was listening and trying hard to understand. "You mean we need one of those swarthy India kinda guys who wear cloth wrapped around their heads and ride around in Rolls Royce cars?"

Linda laughed and the women once again let humor release their tensions.

"You may not feel very connected with the swarthy Indian Guru models... Me either! Hey ladies, there is a Master you would like, Orante. He was a soldier and a '60s type guy who got enlightenment. He's a mixture: soldier and teacher. You'd like him I think, and I hear he's really great."

"Really!" Issy whispered. She wanted to believe that there was such a man, but was afraid she was going to be disappointed.

Linda looked over at Misty. "Interested?"



Misty was.

“Okay, ladies. Here’s what you do...”

## Chapter 4

Later, as the sun disappeared, they saw what Misty called an "Omen" in the western sky.

THEY HAD RETURNED FROM the New Age Center charged-up and ready for their next adventure. Issy had a hard time going to sleep even though it was after three and she was physically blasted.

"Misty, are you awake?"

"Yeah, barely."

"Were you surprised that all those New Agers were so well dressed? I mean, didn't you think they would be like...like grubby or something?"

"Kinda. I knew that most weren't kids. The people in the Center were mostly my age, had lives before, most were probably parents and...I wasn't surprised, it confirmed something for me."

"What, that the New Age is for old farts?"

"Come on now Iss, I don't think I fit into that category, and most of the people we met certainly don't."

"I was just kidding, don't blow a bubble."

"A bubble? Do you mean a fuse or maybe a gasket?" She started to laugh, looked across the room at Issy, and snorted.

Issy couldn't deflect Misty's glee. She rolled over onto her stomach and hid her head in the pillow. Her muffled sounds seemed more like a pig snorting than laughter. Misty laughed harder, stopping only to catch quick breaths.

Issy looked up, stopped laughing and frowned. "I don't like it when you make fun of me!"

The counter registered and Misty held her breath, stopping her laughter by choking it. She looked at Issy, saw she was serious, pointed her finger and exploded again. Issy couldn't hold her negative thought. She rolled around on the bed, laughter flowing from deep within her.

Misty let the energy slowly fade and lay back ready for sleep. In all her life she had never laughed so much, and over stupid little things. Issy was good for her.

"Iss, are you sure you want to find that Guru guy? I mean, maybe we should go on to LA and get jobs?"

"No Misty, let's go there and at least see. I don't think we're crazy... We agreed before that we needed to find something, right?"

"I hate to leave Flagstaff," Misty said as she found the I-17 turnoff at the Sedona - Phoenix sign.

Issy was studying the directions the German lady at the motel had given them. "Okay, now it's only two miles to the cut off, watch for it! It'll say Oak Creek Canyon."

They found the exit and turned onto the state road.

"I love these trees. The forest looks so clean, like it was groomed or something."

"It was, Iss. The Forest Service goes in and takes out all the underbrush and crooked trees. To them it's a crop. They weed the fields so that only a tree crop can grow. They spend a fortune of taxpayers' money and then sell the trees to lumber companies for almost nothing."

"Oh bull! Really? How would you know?"

"I dated a guy who was in the School of Forestry. He thought they were destroying all the wild places to subsidize the timber industry. They flunked him out."

"Gee Misty, you've done a lot of things. I forget sometimes that you're so much older than me." She paused, thinking. "Misty, do you think we'll have to split up when we get to that place? I mean, do you think they'll treat us both the same?"

"I don't know. We can say no... We don't have to do anything we don't want to do."

"But you know Misty, if they are as good as she said, they can do anything they want. They use brain control."

"Oh Iss, I don't believe that. Really. Do you?"

The road through the pines came to the edge of the Mogollon Rim at the head of Oak Creek Canyon, turned sharply right and headed down the switchbacks. Misty read the signs and took in all the warnings as she applied the brake and slowed the Toyota against the pull of the grade.

“God! This is beauty!” Issy exclaimed.

“Issy, don’t make me look! I have to keep my eyes on this road.”

Finally, a narrow bridge and the road seemed to straighten out. Misty relaxed, not sure that they were really safe. “I didn’t expect that road, or the amount traffic. Did you see all those cars behind that camper? Did you see the bus...busses! There’s one behind us! I’m pulling off.” She steered the car into a dirt pull-out and got it stopped. The bus roared past, thrilled at having intimidated the Pennsylvania Toyota.

“Misty?” There was something in Issy’s voice that made her pay attention. “Do you think... Do you suppose...” She sat with the door open and her feet on the ground, head turned back toward Misty. She started again. “Do you think they have sex? I mean with us, that we would have to prove ourselves or give ourselves to the priests, like in the movies?”

“Maybe... But I don’t think so. I think there are sex cults, but the way she described this Orante group, they aren’t that way.”

“What if they are the other way? Like priests and nuns who give it up?”

“That’s what we have to find out. We don’t have to stay or do anything we don’t want to. We’re on a shopping trip, we’ll find something here or go some place else, right?”

All Misty could remember of the upper part of the canyon was curving pavement, ragged rock walls, and drop-offs. Now that the road was straighter, with fewer curves and no switchbacks, she could catch glimpses of the high rocky sides of the canyon. To her, the rocks

seemed like lacy pillars and monuments cut out of colored sand. She saw how the reds of the lower rocks turned into lighter grays and the cloudy whites of the highest spires, wondering how Nature could make such a beautiful place.

They stopped at Slide Rock, a natural water slide, and watched what seemed to be a thousand had-to-be sore-assed-tourists bump down the sandstone trough, squealing as they would in an amusement park.

They stopped again at Midgley Bridge and gazed into the jumbled cleft. Issy leaned way over the rail, looking down at the parachute shapes of sycamore tops, noting a fisherman way down there in the beauty.

"This is a tiny town." Issy noted as they came out of Oak Creek Canyon and entered the old part of Sedona, where every square inch is some sort of tourist attraction.

"It may be tiny, but there are enough people here to fill South Philly. Gad, what a beautiful setting!" Misty slowed as people crossed the street in gangs, whole clutches unloading from busses. It was like a subway station at rush hour.

"I think this place has been discovered!" Issy announced as she rolled down her window and got a blast of hot air.

"Roll it back up quick! Gad, it must be twenty degrees hotter than Flag. Here we are ladies and gentlemen, in the desert, in a canyon," she sang, "excavating our way through mobs of people."

"Drive on, oh brave Captain! I mean, get us out of here if you can!"

They settled in and began to explore Sedona. By noon the next day they had driven the few roads, walked through a dozen art galleries, and sat under the sycamores at Tlaquepaque, an art center re-creation of the town square of Hermosillo, Mexico. Misty decided that she could sit by the banks of Oak Creek forever, looking at the water and then gazing up into the intricacies of red

rock formations. Later, as the sun disappeared, they saw what Misty called an “Omen” in the western sky.

“Okay smarty, what does ‘O Men’ mean?”

Misty gave her a look that communicated disdain. “A prophetic sign. I’m sure it’s meant for us. The Gods are speaking to us, telling us that this is the way.”

“It’s an airplane, isn’t it? Sure, the sun is still hitting it, that’s why it’s so red. See the contrail?”

“I think it portends good.”

“Portents? Did you say portends? Okay, what’s that?”

“It’s a prediction, a forecast of our luck here. It’s kinda our eagle-on-a-cactus-with-a-snake sign.”

Issy stared at her. “I’m not even going to ask what you mean by that.”

Misty was serious about finding answers to their problems. As they walked past storefronts reading posters taped in the windows, read handouts, and perused the bulletin boards, she became aware of a whole new dimension of spiritual and magical offerings. They read about things which seemed impossible and exciting at the same time. Most didn’t make sense. She borrowed Issy’s little spiral-bound notebook and wrote down some of the new concepts, believing that she would research them later.

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“Gad Misty, what are you going to do with that list?”

“Don’t you think we should know about these things?”

A woman who had been watching them interrupted. “Oh, you won’t want to research those things, they’re hooks for suckers. None of that is real. If you’re really

looking for answers you should go to the Temple... Orante's Temple. Call them!"

Misty reacted negatively to the woman's interference. "Who are you? How do you know?"

The woman smiled and nodded. "I'm sorry. I work here. Everyday people read this stuff and... I try to help. Unless you are really into fantasy and magic, put your energy into something proven. I don't go for magic. I do believe in Orante."

Linda had mentioned Orante and they already had plans to contact him. The woman seemed sincere and the list of weird offerings didn't appeal to her. They would try the Temple. It was just that she didn't like being pushed there by a stranger. Back at the motel, Issy announced that she was going to see Orante, even if Misty wasn't.

The next morning Misty called the Orante Temple and made an appointment to meet a representative whom, she was told, "...would be in town at lunch time, and could meet there with them and save them the trip up to the Temple." They were to be at a place called Sand's, in a local shopping plaza at 1:00. They walked back to their motel and "freshened-up," as her mother called wiping grime off one's face, adding a layer of make-up, new deodorant and a splash of perfume.

The woman waiting for them in the inside foyer of Sand's was in her late forties, dumpy, and not in any way what one would call energetic. Her hair was shoulder length, worn pushed back from her ears. Its dull gray appearance reminded Misty of soap scum on a glass shower door. She wore glasses which seemed to lack a place to sit on her bridgeless nose. They had slipped down so many times that the woman didn't even bother to push them back anymore. 'If this person is a reflection of Orante's group,' Misty thought, 'then...?'

"Hi, I'm here to answer your questions. Do you have any?"

Misty could see that Issy was about to react to the woman's dumb opening. She answered immediately.

“Thank you for coming down to answer our questions. Shouldn’t we get a table? A booth maybe? How’s the food here?”

Issy, who associated most of what she saw new in the world with what she had seen on television, turned and whispered to Misty, “Gray Lady Down! This person gives me the creeps!”

Misty whispered back, “She does look like a sunken hulk, but let’s not judge too soon, okay?”

The woman seemed not to notice or care that they were whispering to each other. She went ahead and sat, made a production out of spreading her paper napkin, put her elbows on the table and her thumbs against her temples, waiting. When they were seated, she began.

“You should know, ladies, that I cannot talk except in generalities to you together. What I have to say of importance I may not wish to say to you both, as it would be for one or the other.” She grabbed a breath and continued without looking at either of them. Misty could see that the woman’s eyes were closed. “I am here to see if you are ready to learn our ways... That is, each of you, are you...” she opened her eyes and looked at Issy, “ready?” She turned her eyes toward Misty. “Are you?”

“I hope so! Ready for what?” Issy asked.

Misty was almost amused, anger got through over that. “Please, Ms...”

“I’m, Sarah.”

“Sarah, we don’t know much about Orante or anything about what you believe in. That’s why I called. Can you give us enough information so that we can each choose whether we want to know more about what you do?”

“Of course, that’s why I’m here as I said.” She had her eyes closed again as she began to speak. “It is really clear, Orante is our spiritual leader. He is a man of this time who has connected with the past and future... He is from the warriors’ caste and his strength is both spiritual and physical. He is still young, and now so pure that his



life of austerity and sacrifice is a model for us all. He leads by having us answer our questions. In the way of a Master, he turns our questions into our answers..." She opened her eyes and grabbed a quick look around. The place was busy. The waitress hadn't made her way to the table yet.

"Ladies, you should not seek Orante's wisdom unless you are ready to change your lives. In Orante, there is no ownership, no personal wealth, no private life away from him. Only those who truly seek joy and understanding, who wish the richest life imaginable, should turn to Orante."

Issy was getting antsy. "But what if I wanted to? What would I need to do?"

Sarah opened her eyes to a squint and nodded. "Yes, you would meet him in an audience with the others who are seeking him. Then, well it would be up to us..." She opened her eyes and saw Misty's reaction. "and of course you too, if it went from there. Then you would have time to change your mind as you learned more of his ways. Then, and I can't tell you how long it would take, it's different for each of us, you might choose his way and join us all."

There was something about that process that bothered Misty. Sure, give up everything and gain everything. That was a trade she would have to consider carefully. Issy though, came from a structured home and community. She was used to external controls. The thought of having everything she needed come to her through the community, wasn't alien to Iss. Misty knew, deep down, that she could never give up having things and having her own life. Yet, maybe there was something?

Sarah talked her way through sandwiches and iced tea. Then she ordered a piece of peach pie with vanilla ice cream. As the waitress put the treat down, she matter-of-fact explained that, "Of course I don't get to eat this way often, we have no money you know. The only time I get to treat myself is when people like you take me out to lunch."

Issy sneered. "Do you meet with people like us often?"

"Oh sure," she said through a mouth full of pie. "It's my job. Some days I meet with more than just..." It dawned upon her. Issy had set her up.

Misty imagined living as this woman did. She couldn't resist, the woman irritated her. "How long have you been a convert to Orante?"

Sarah put her fork at rest and licked the ice cream from her lips. "Almost ten years. I'm special tho', I'm a field person. I'm not much for the spiritual stuff and, what I'm doing now, that's what I can do. They would let me in, only I'm not ready yet."

Okay, that was the answer she needed. Now she understood. She grabbed the check and said loudly, "Oh please, let me get it," while winking at Issy and making a wry face. "Sarah, what we need is for you to set up a time when we can join an audience. You can do that, won't you!"

Sarah nodded and caught a little burp with the back of her teeth and the tip of her tongue. She raised her hand to her mouth and said, "Gee, it must be the peaches. Sure, I can do that. In fact, since you are genuine, I can invite you to an audience for visitors and prospective members tonight...I think? I'll have to call, okay?"

"Gee, maybe we can turn out to be just like her," Issy teased as they drove back to the motel. "Do you really think she's running without being plugged in... What did you call it?"

"Running four cylinders with two spark plugs? But whatever works..."

"Well I didn't feel that she communicated much confidence in the organization!"

"Me either, but think about it. Wouldn't that be a good way to discourage people who were flakes?"

Issy thought about that. "It almost discouraged me. But I can hardly wait until tonight!"

After Sarah had phoned in their reservation for the audience, she had given them a map showing them how to drive to the Temple and where to park. "Be there at 7:45, or you won't get in after 8:00. Sharp!"

## Chapter 5

"I could lead you, but not in your path. Do you go around peace, always around it, never contacting it?"

ORANTE WAS CENTERED AT the far side of the room. His head capped by a shiny black cap, a white cotton robe with a canvas belt over white...they seemed like silk, pajamas. He sat with his legs crossed, back straight, looking very uncomfortable as he tried to look serene. He was nice looking, in a strong sort of way. It was hard to see his face clearly. The light was dim, his face masked by shadow.

Bells rang and someone at the side clapped loudly evoking gasps from the fifteen or so people kneeling in audience.

The Master began. "You are here to answer questions. Good. I will ask you to ask with your inner being and listen with your inner ear. The answers are within you. Your questions suggest that you have not connected with them. What can you do to connect?"

Issy started to follow his explanations, but he lost her at the first turn. That scared her. What if she was too out of it to understand him? She wanted to turn to Misty and ask for her interpretation, she could not.

"This reality is here because it serves a need. Do you want someone to fill your needs? If so, you are in the wrong place. Here is a place where each of us fill our own plate. We depend upon others for our shared energies of life. We do not ride the shadows of others. To be here is to be strong and capable of getting where you must be. I teach a way toward inner strength and a way to reveal yourself. I am here to lead a few into the next existence... Those few of you who truly wish to know where we came from, and where we are going."

A tinkly bell was rung three times. From the side of the room a man's voice, "Ask the Master! In forming the question make certain that you want the answer!"

The bell was tingled again.

"I am listening."

"Mr. Orante, I'm Stevens and I'm from Dallas. I've got to find some inner peace before my wife throws me out of the house. My question is about sexuality. Well, 'er..., will you speak to us about that?"

Orante was obviously amused, although Misty could tell that he was doing his best to conceal it. He reached forward and took a little bell by the handle, rang it and cleared his throat. "Do you know it and enjoy it? Have you gone on from there?"

The Texan smiled and sat back on his pillow, digesting the invisible.

"Sensei, I have lived so long without inner peace, yet I crave it. I have tried to find it, but I feel like I'm going in circles. I heard of you and I've come here hoping you could lead me there. Tell me how to get there."

"I could lead you, but not in *your* path. Do you go around peace, always around it, never contacting it? If you have spent so much time going around it, have you created a circle? Your life will be pointless until you can answer that question."

Misty snuffed, gently, communicating her disdain for the answer. She saw Orante looking at her. He shrugged, his body language saying, 'What could I say?'

Issy started talking at the same time as a man in the back row. He nodded deference to her, and she started again.

"I'm pretty young, but I know that life can be pretty empty. I want to do good things, help others, build a bridge, even. If I was one of your people, what would I do?"

Orante snuck a look at Misty, caught her eyes, lowered his.

"Would you then let an old and very precious soul back into the world?"

Misty was waiting for his look. She gave him a smile and a quick nod, raising her right hand slightly and giving a quick thumbs-up.

Issy saw the tightened-fist signal, and thought it was for her. She let his answer empower her. 'Misty likes him too,' she thought.

The room was quiet. There were several other exchanges, none remarkable. She wondered if someone from the press would be here asking questions in the way they did which made statements of their opinions seem like fact. None were. It was nice not to feel manipulated by people like that. The session was ending. She could sense it. She had a question; she guessed it was a question. 'What the heck,' she thought, 'I'll ask.'

"Sir, does your way require that I give up control of my body, my needs, my own direction?"

He got that little smile again. She couldn't tell if it was amusement at her naiveté or recognition of their almost subliminal communication.

"To you, does 'giving up' mean losing control?"

She gave him the thumb's up again, and he nodded as he reached for the bell.

Issy was ready to join the cult of Orante. Misty was not certain that it was for her. She liked the audience and the 'Man.' Perhaps things would continue to be interesting.

They were given a tour of the Temple buildings. Misty realized that they were in a big, rambling home that had been added to dozens of times. The view must have been spectacular in daylight. Now, all she could see were car headlights down by the parking lot. She went along, imagining how the spaces were used. Most were meeting rooms. Why so many? They were led down a long hall, then each stopped to look into the living quarters of Orante. In her turn, she looked in through the lattice and saw his bed of boards in the stark living space. She heard the guard state with pride that the Master had lived this

simple way for more than twenty years. All he had, all of his worldly possessions, were visible in the room.

Their guide, a normal looking guy with an English nose, balding past the 'receding hairline stage,' dressed in a white, button-down Oxford shirt, khaki pants, and shower shoes, answered their questions and offered them tea in what seemed to be the home's original dining room.

Issy leaned over to Misty and whispered, "Don't you just love this!"

"Why not?" Misty couldn't share Issy's way of looking at the place.

She placed her cup back on the saucer and was looking around for the john, she really had to pee bad, when the man came in who had been at the side of the hall during the audience. He was the one, she remembered, who clapped and who announced. He looked right at her and came across, standing over her as she registered surprise at being singled out.

"The Master has asked if you need anything? He would like you to know that you are welcome here, and that he knows your soul."

Misty tightened her sphincter muscles and wondered what he would do if she told him what she really needed. "He knows my soul?"

The man bowed. "It happens rarely. Did you not feel a connection?"

She nodded. She had.

"It is possible that soon, after you have time, you could meet the Master and trace that connection. For now, he has asked me to give you this." He opened his yukata and took out a small ivory statue, siamese twins joined at the hips. She let him put it in her hand. Each had a name carved into the ivory. One was Chang and the other Eng. She could barely move. Her emotions were locked back upon thoughts and fears which had been crawling inside of her since Denver, like the tendrils of a parasite.

Later, as they drove back to the motel, she broke the silence. "Iss, I've got to tell you something. It's strange,

but something happened tonight that has really shaken me. First, I felt like I connected with Orante... I mean, in a special way. Then, after? That man? The carving he gave me? Well it had special meaning that no one would know. It's spooky. I'm really having a hard time with it, okay?"

"Oh I understand Misty. I really do. You saw me? I felt it too. I want to be there, but it scares me too. How do they do that? I mean, he saw right through me and he touched me. I had the experience too!"

Misty looked over at her young friend. "We did something, didn't we. Well, what do you think we should do next?"

She wasn't paying attention as she swung into the motel parking lot. A man and a woman were standing next to a little Jeep, in the shadows. She almost hit them as she swung into what she had thought was an empty space. Issy screamed, she hit the brakes and pushed gravel right up to where the couple were standing. The woman turned and walked quickly toward the street. The man put his hand on the hood of the Toyota, and pretended to push them back.

"Dark night, isn't it? Are you ladies in a hurry?"

He stepped to her side of the car, came forward and stopped. Acting the bull fighter, he motioned her out of the car. She didn't think. She opened the door and got out, holding the door between them. "I'm sorry. It's so dark and I...I wasn't paying attention."

He bowed; seemed to stiffen. She sensed that something was wrong with him. He was a man in pain. Her immediate response to his carriage was, "Oh my god, I didn't hit you did I?"

"No," he leaned against the side of the car and she could tell that he was having difficulty standing up.

"Are you... Have you been drinking?"

"No, nothing. I...I just don't know what's wrong." He held onto the car and pulled his body into contact with the door to hold himself up.



Issy came around and stood behind him on the sidewalk. "Misty, what's wrong?"

"Please, I have a room here." He pulled a card key from his pocket, knees bending, as he handed it over the door to Misty. He was weak and terribly light-headed.

"Can we get him to his room?" Issy asked.

"I think so. Mister, can you walk if we help you?"

"Yeah. I'll be okay, I think it's the flu or something like that. I've got some aspirin. Seems like I need some help along..."

By the time Misty got his door open, he was standing strait, breathing hard, but obviously much better. He sat on the edge of the bed, his face so pale it seemed gray.

"I don't know what hit me... Oh, it wasn't you, I know. I was standing there talking with a woman I met today and suddenly I felt like hell. Where did she go?"

"The woman you were with? I saw her walk toward the street. She just left you?"

"Something like that. Wow, thanks for helping me. In Denver no one would help."

"They would where I'm from," Issy offered. "You looked bad!"

"I'm better now. It hit me earlier today, too. It must be the flu. Get on out, you don't want to catch it!"

"Are you certain that you're okay?"

"Now I am, thanks to you gals. My name's Ter. Yours?" He looked first at Misty. As bad as he felt, she had an energy that got through to him, an energy that tweaked something.

"I'm Misty. We're staying in the motel too. One level up."

"I'm Issy. Glad you're feeling better Ter. We'll check on you tomorrow, okay?"

## PART III

### Chapter 1

A woman with three children, carrying one, trying to drag the others, seemed frozen in his way.

PAUL LANDSMAN LEFT THE office early through his private door. The rain had stopped and the coolness it brought was pure energy. He walked across to his Continental and got in. He debated whether to go back and get his cellular phone, thought it unnecessary, and started the car. On 179, he headed toward the Village of Oak Creek, V-O-C, as the locals called it. He would try to get a round of golf in, maybe the storm didn't dump over there. Even if it did, there hadn't been that much rain.

He had to get out of the office and do something. He needed time to process the information that was flooding in, the figures that didn't add up, the mixed messages he was receiving from Kling, and Connors.

The figures GD had first given him showed a twenty percent profit from the development in the canyon. He had since learned that they were false, but why had Kling and Connors falsified them? He knew. Even if all 80 sites were sold, the profits were marginal. And selling 80 sites was not possible. Too few people would want to buy a lot in the canyon itself. It was too narrow, too hot in summer, too dark in winter, and he couldn't imagine playing golf in there either. "I knew that," he mumbled. "I knew that canyon wasn't fit for development, even if other canyons have been developed successfully. How did I get sucked in? My greed, my old enemy greed! Dammit! I saw all those sales commissions and association fees coming my way. That's what got me, the Sedona get-rich-quick sickness... Dumb! I keep learning the same lessons over and over."

Red brake lights flashed on the cars ahead of him, the whole line was slowing; stopping abruptly. He brought the car to a stop a few feet behind a plumbing truck with a

big pipe rack. He knew what was going on; he was trapped. People were getting out of their vehicles and standing on the road trying to see what had blocked traffic. Could he turn around? Both lanes were blocked up the hill and around the next curve. He looked ahead and then in his side mirror intending to swing out, turn, and go back. Others were doing the same thing. Several cars and a large truck were already sideways trying to make the U-turn. The road was narrow with an embankment on one side, a guard rail on the other. Back up the hill he had just come down, a flatbed lumber delivery truck was unable to make the turn. It stalled, then rolled back until its rear bumper jumped over and hooked onto the guard rail. It sat across the road blocking the only way back. He waited, trying for the local radio station; knowing that there would be no news about a common occurrence, another traffic jam. He got out and stood on the high part of the pavement.

He heard the wail of sirens long before he saw the flashing lights approaching. At the top of the hill, back toward Sedona, he saw them now. A fire engine and behind it...another engine and...ambulances. One, two..., he counted three. They came to the stalled lumber truck and men jumped out trying to understand the problem. Behind him, back toward VOC, other cars and trucks had tried to turn and go back. The road was now blocked both ways. Far off in the distance he heard other sirens. The VOC Police Department were on the job, thank God. They'll clean this up in no time. He went back to his car, planning to wait it out. As he got in, he looked ahead again. He saw a flash like lightning and heard an explosion that shook his car. A great plume of black oily smoke rose into the sky close by; just around the uphill curve. He imagined a gas tanker exploding, the ball of fire and smoke was that big.

He reached for his cellular phone, realizing as he did that he hadn't brought it. He sat with the heavy door open, waiting. Firefighters and men in EMT garb came

running past the car. He felt the ground shake, a blast of air, then another horrific blast. Another plume of black smoke went skyward. It looked like a miniature mushroom cloud. The ground shook again and again. The vibrations and noise were deafening. He could see flames now and people running back his way along the road. He was parked near the bottom of the hill, the road curved up and around to the left. On the right side of the road he saw pinon trees flare-up and explode, sending brands of fired limbs into the forest. The flames were moving through the crown of the forest now, and even though the storm had dampened the trees, internally they were tinder dry. More trees burst into flame. The whole right side of the road seemed engulfed by fire. He knew it was spreading his way, although the smoke was too thick to see much.

Screaming people were running past his car. He got out and was almost knocked down by a fireman carrying a victim with burned clothing and no hair. More explosions. He saw a river of fire running toward him down the barrow ditch. Cars along the route were caught in the flames. Gas tanks were exploding. Panic paralyzed him. He held on to the side of his car, unable to think. An EMT grabbed his arm and yelled something at him. He realized that he had to run. He forced his way into the throng of panicked people. People trying to make way around the abandoned vehicles clogging both lanes. Others were leaving their cars. There were suddenly more people than road space. The mob moved forward, slowed by half as older people tripped and fell. Women carrying and dragging children tried to get ahead of the horror pursuing them.

He turned and looked back as he tried to run. The whole right side of the road was burning. More cars were on fire. Mushroom clouds of black smoke shot up after each ear shattering explosion. He felt a strong wind from ahead. A woman with three children, carrying one, trying to drag the others, seemed frozen in his way. He picked up the two larger children and forced forwards. If she followed

with the other, he couldn't tell. He felt the road begin to curve up the hill before he could see that he had passed the bottom. The mass of bodies was thinning as more people fell and others tripped over them. He felt the cool wind on his face, the heat on his back. He forced himself forward, arms cramping with the weight of the children. He knew that each step forward was a step away from a burning hell. He grabbed a quick look back again. His car was somewhere back there. Nothing! The fire was carried high into the air on a powerful thermal tornado. As high as he could see, sparks and flame filled the sky.

As he forced his way along, often letting others break a path for him, he could hear the screaming. How many people were trapped? He had to keep going. He felt someone grab hold of his belt; a hand in the small of his back. He looked around. The woman whose children he carried was hooked to him now. She had the baby cradled like a football in the crook of her other arm. Her face showed her terror. She pushed him when he slowed and was pulled along when he shot forward.

The hill grew steeper and more people faltered, fell or were slowed. Gray-haired couples tried to help each other along. EMT's and firemen were helping those they could reach. Someone with a bullhorn was yelling, "Keep Going!"

He could feel the heat of the fire at his back. The cool fresh air was blowing with force against his progress. The exodus was moving faster now. Most of the older people had fallen, too exhausted to rise. He held the children tightly and ran when he could. In front, he could see engines and the ambulances backing away as fast as they could clear the road of cars which had turned around, only to be stopped by more emergency vehicles and cars trying to get to the scene. They were almost to the top of the hill. To his left, the firestorm was circling around the hill. It was moving so fast it would soon be in front of them.

The whole road was clogged with cars, abandoned now, their owners fleeing back along 179 toward perceived

safety. He could see policemen with radios, evidently trying to get a lane open again. A wrecker was pushing cars into the ditches to make way. The highway seemed to be clogged for miles back.

No matter how far he thought he had run, he could still feel the heat of the fire and feel the blasts as gas tanks exploded. He imagined that he couldn't get away. The woman tripped, steadied herself by her grip on his belt, panting and crying, begging him to slow down. The children were crying. He could barely hear them over the roar behind them.

He had to stop, just for a moment. They had reached the top of the hill. He could see nothing but confusion and chaos ahead of him. Behind them the firestorm was gaining. His car was long gone, he knew that. He noted that the forest was burning on the right side of the road as far as he could see. On the left a few trees were burning, but the inferno was nothing like that on the right. He knew the area. From the top of this hill a hiking trail led off into the forest and headed toward red rock spires about an eighth of a mile away. If he could get to the rocks... He made the decision, pulled the woman up close and yelled at her over the noise. "The fire is sweeping around us. We won't be safe ahead. I know a trail, follow me!"

Several others saw them leave the road and head out on the trail. Someone yelled for them to come back. "Get out of the forest! You'll be burned alive!"

As they entered the trees, the noise of the explosions and the roaring firestorm abated some. The woman was panting; he felt as if his lungs would burst. They slowed to a fast walk. He struggled along the trail, higher now, as they got closer to the rocks. She tripped, barely catching herself. He wondered if he could put the children down and let them walk on their own. A tree only a few hundred yards in back of them exploded. Brands of flaming branches fell in the forest around them. He yelled at her, and they started out again, not running; going as

fast as they could. The trail was irregular; rocky, crossed by roots and drainages. He saw the rocks ahead, drew on his last well of strength, and got them to the base of the rock spires. The tree line was in back of them. They climbed into the shelter of the sandstone and inched up and away from the forest floor. They saw more trees explode behind them as the fire came racing toward the rocks, then slowed as the trees thinned. He fought their way up and into a small, sand-filled basin between spires. They collapsed, the woman too exhausted to cry, the children strangely quiet. The noise of trees exploding, and further away, automobiles, was almost unbearable.

Landsman ached for water. He knew the children and their mom, brave woman, felt worse than he. Smoke boiled up and around them. The firestorm passed. He smelled the damp sweetness of the afternoon rain. In the distance, as the smoke cleared, he could see that the firestorm was still raging. He saw homes on the far hillsides burst into flame, and somewhere in the sky, he thought he heard a helicopter. It seemed unreal. How many survived?

An hour passed. The forest floor cooled until only embers shone in the dark. The children were quiet, he was thankful for that. Was it shock? Their mother had started to shake. He had his shirt, a summer short-sleeved shirt to cover her with. He thought of building a fire, but the thought of fire terrorized him. He knew he had to get them out of there. What way should they go? It was quiet now except for the sirens off in the distance. Dark. He got them up and led them down the way they had come. At the base of the rocks they turned toward Sedona. The fire had cleared hundred of acres. They walked until the children cried to be carried again. In his arms, they were safe, or so he hoped. They rounded a great outcropping and saw lights which shone from the windows of a house. As they came closer, he could see people standing on the porch. He yelled, a dry, scratchy yell. Then he fell to his knees, sobbing.

## Chapter 2

No one knew what had happened...only that it was something awful and that it was still happening.

ISSY HAD SEEN AN advertisement for a Gallery Open House in Hillside Plaza. As I paid the lunch bill, she talked with Misty urging her to come to the Gallery with her. Misty wanted to be with me, I could tell. She also wanted Issy to know that she wouldn't abandon her. She thought a moment and made a decision.

"Ter, would you escort the two of us to an Art Happening?"

"Well, sure. Where?"

"Oh, it's not far from the motel. We could leave your Jeep there. I'll drive us in my car."

It was an offer I couldn't refuse. They followed me back to the motel where I left the Jeep. Issy got into the back of the Toyota coupe. I squeezed into the front seat next to Misty.

Traffic on 179 was heavy; usual for late afternoon. We waited to turn into Hillside, with a long line of cars stopped behind us and seemingly no break in the traffic coming toward us. Finally, as people behind began to honk at us and Misty considered giving up the plan, a car in the other lane slowed and let us cut through.

"Gad! This is like driving in an amusement park!"

I shook my head in sympathy.

We parked and Issy led us up a flight of stairs to an upper level. The first gallery was full of beautiful things.

"It's like visiting a great museum," Misty commented. "I get so creative when I see what artists have done."

We were leaving the second gallery when an explosion sent shock waves through the buildings.

"Earthquake!" Issy yelled, crouching down, expecting the ground to buckle.



I looked in the direction of the sound, but a hill was in the way. I couldn't see anything.

"Something just blew! Something big, like a bomb!"

We felt the shockwaves of other explosions. Then, above the crest of the hill, we saw the first plume of black smoke.

"Something awful is happening!" Misty grabbed my arm and pulled herself close to me.

From the road below we heard the blare of dozens of horns. We walked to the top of the stairs and looked down at the highway. Nothing was moving. For as far as we could see in both directions the roadway was a parking lot. People were starting to get out of their cars and stand helplessly in the road.

"We can't get out!" Misty's voice had a tinge of fear in it.

I saw the expression on her face and the way Issy was picking-up on it.

"Hey Ladies, we can always walk back to the motel, we're not that far away."

The muffled impacts of explosions filled the air, seemingly far away. Storekeepers were coming out into the courtyard to try to understand what was happening. Some shop keepers were lowering steel shutters as they shoed people out. No one knew what had happened...only that it was something awful and that it was still happening. Everyone grimaced each time shock waves reverberated off the buildings.

"We should walk!" I realized that it would be hours before the traffic jam was cleared out.

"I agree." Misty was still holding me tightly.

"What about your car Misty?" Issy was wide-eyed.

I answered for her. "It's safe here. One thing I can guarantee you, nobody can steal it."

Even moving back on foot was difficult. People stood in groups near their cars discussing the nature of the emergency, unwilling to leave their vehicles, uncertain about what to do. Some had tried to turn their cars around.

Those cars sat across the road locking traffic both ways. We hurried along the roadway toward the bridge. We were almost stopped by people surging toward us.

“They’re coming from town; trying to get to where they can see the accident or whatever. Keep up so we don’t become separated!” I shouted above the cacophony of horns and voices.

We pushed our way against the oncoming mob and made it across the bridge. From there it was easier. As we worked our way uphill toward the Y, we could see that cars were already stopped and unable to move there too. At the Y, traffic was blocked as far as we could see to the west, and all the way into uptown. People on bicycles and pedestrians were moving; nothing else. Sirens wailed, but there was no way an emergency vehicle could pass.

We reached the motel.

“Come up to our room. We can try the TV.”

I stopped and sniffed the air, trying understand what was happening and ease the panic we all felt. “Smell that! The rain makes everything so fresh. I don’t think I have ever smelled anything so good.”

We stood on the balcony savoring the moist air; getting control. In the west, the sun was setting and remnants of great anvil clouds had silver linings. Color was seeping into the sky the way it would if an artist’s brush pulled watercolors out from the horizon and into the heavens.

Misty knew that I was trying to put them at ease. “In spite of what is happening, this place is beautiful!”



## Chapter 3

He pulled into the barrow pit and passed the cars ahead of him, siren blaring, lights flashing; tires throwing rooster tails of mud.

CAIN WAS HALF WAY back to Prescott when he got the call. He turned around and worked his way back down the mountain, using his siren and lights one time as he moved through the tourist traffic in the old Town of Jerome. As he left Cottonwood on 89A and climbed out of the Verde River Valley, he could see a black plume of smoke ahead. His radio crackled with calls for fire and police assistance. He had orders to find the Engine Company that had left Cottonwood to provide assistance and had become snarled in traffic. From the radio commands, he began to form a picture of what was happening. Fire Companies from as far away as Camp Verde and Flagstaff were responding to the desperate calls from Sedona and from the Village of Oak Creek. No one was sure where the disaster had occurred. Coconino and Yavapai companies were acting as one. Roads which carried up to twenty thousand visitors per day plus local traffic, were clogged, both directions. Fire companies and ambulances desperately needed by the officers calling in from the scene of the fire were unable to get within miles of the scene. Reality was setting in; no one could get in or out of there.

He pulled into the barrow pit and passed the cars ahead of him, siren blaring, lights flashing; tires throwing rooster tails of mud. Far ahead he could see the flashing lights of the big engines. They were still more than three miles from Sedona. There was no way they could get there. Dozens of impatient drivers trying to get to Sedona had tried to pass the stalled line in front of them, drove across the highway divider strip, only to end up head-on with cars coming from Sedona. For as far as he could see the new four lane road was blocked. He radioed the information to Sedona Dispatch as he continued working

his way along the side of the road, through the brush when necessary, and on until he got to the Engine Company. One man was standing on top of the big engine's cab, trying to find a way to get through the mess.

"Officer," a Fireman leaned over and looked in at him. "We can't move. Maybe you can get up there and help clear the way for us!"

Cain nodded, and looked for a way to go around. So far he had been lucky. His four wheel drive vehicle hadn't gotten stuck in the muddy ditches.

"...and Officer, have you heard? A motor home hit the back of a gas tanker. There's a firestorm... Hundreds trapped. 179 is completely closed. They can't get the injured out, or help in. We heard them call for air support. They're getting a few to the medical center on the west end of Sedona... I hear that some from the VOC side are being taken to Flag... Man, it's horrible and we can't help!"

"I'm going to see if I can clear your path. Wish me luck!"

Cain radioed for instructions, or at least he tried to, the airwaves were jammed with emergency communications. He got out and started working to sort out the mess.

## Chapter 4

He would call it The Continuation Center of the Universe. That made everything fit.

OTOA TOOK THE STAIRS to the lower level and followed the path along the cliff face toward Gwinn's cottage. Gwinn had privacy and one of the best views imaginable. The door was open, screen closed. Otoa knocked.

"Hey Otoa, my friend. Thank you for coming down. I'm glad to see you. It has been too long a time since you visited me in my home."

Otoa watched as the man came toward him from the cool interior of his space. He was compact, with a muscular upper body and skinny legs that bowed out at the knees below his Bermuda shorts. His hairy chest was covered with silver hair. A long scar ran from his sternum to his navel. His face was round and looked as if it was stuck onto the front of a rounder head. Gwinn was balding with fringes of sideburns grown wild.

Otoa waited until they were inside and Gwinn had offered him, "a place to rest your weary bones."

"I came directly to you. Are we alone? Can we talk?"

Gwinn opened his palms. "No one is around. No one can hear."

"I learned today that Greater Development, is out. They had an offer to sell, and accepted it. Did you make that offer?"

Gwinn was suddenly agitated. "What? What are you telling me? Kling wouldn't take me seriously. I thought we were still negotiating. But..."

Otoa grimaced, "I was afraid you would say that. Do you know who's offer they took?"

Gwinn got up and started to pace back and forth in front of Otoa's chair. "I don't know, but... Gads, Otoa, I knew some outfit went for the pass, but..." He went into the kitchen and came back with a handful of nuts. "I don't get

it! They have money. Can you imagine what it took to buy GD off? They want it so bad they killed people!" He paused and looked at Otoa. "Oh, I know there's no proof they did, but... Well, four people as involved as those were don't die accidentally. One, maybe. Four? Otoa, whoever it is, and whatever for, I'm scared."

"Gwinn, we can find out. We have connections. Think, man, who would it be?"

"And why? Did you ever wonder why?"

"It has to be... Gwinn, we want to preserve the place of contact. Who would want to stop us from doing that?"

"Procyons! The Rigel evil, maybe?"

Otoa was tempted to believe; it would be easy to blame it on the forces who opposed the Pleiadians. Easy, if he believed that... He checked himself. He couldn't get hooked on that kind of thinking. The only value the canyon really had was the money he and Peter could make from it.

Money they would use to get away.

"No, those forces are strong, only they're not that smart. Gwinn, it's something else! Who would want Prophet Canyon besides us?"

Gwinn sat down on the edge of his chair and closed his eyes.

"Otoa, the hardest thing I've had to do regarding this development thing is to hide the... Well, when you look at the canyon, how rugged it is, how hot in summer, how hard to live in, well, it's been very hard for me to convince others that a development should go in there. Know what I mean?"

Otoa nodded. He was learning.

"Well, no one in their right mind would want to develop that canyon... Except GD did for some reason, and us, because we have a job to do, right?"

"Right!"

"So, whoever wants that canyon, wants the spot, the energy, the vortex, our contact point! There's nothing

else. I keep waking up at night afraid... What happens if they get it and we don't?"

Otoa began to feel a sense of failure and sadness. The whole plan was based upon them getting money from a development. The profits were to have gone into the account in Flagstaff. Gwinn was right. No one would buy in there. No money would be made. They were still trapped! He sagged, physically and mentally hurting; defeated.

"My God man, don't take it so hard. It won't be lost, I'll do everything I can to save it!"

All Otoa could do was smile weakly. How could he tell Orante?

"I'll go and talk to the Master. Perhaps the spot can be moved." He got to his feet and began to shuffle toward the door.

Gwinn didn't want him to leave in his depressed state. "My God, Otoa, I had no idea it was so important. I mean I knew, but... Man, don't let it take you down. I'll do everything I can."

Otoa didn't know how to tell Orante that the canyon wasn't fit to develop. Now they were trapped for sure...unless... There had to be something of worth in the canyon. GD had gone for it. Now some other outfit wanted it so badly they would kill for it. But what? He made his way up to the top level and Orante's quarters. He knocked. As he did, a far away explosion shook the glass in the windows and rattled tea sets and brass bells on their shelves. Other smaller explosions followed. Within seconds people were coming out of rooms and going to the balconies overlooking Sedona. Orante came out, saw him, and came to stand near him.

"Explosions!"

"A big one and some... Listen! They're still going off."

In the distance they watched a ball of black smoke rise above Sedona.

"My God, is it the Town?"



“It looks like it!”

Gwinn felt awful. He had contacted Stan Kling with an offer to buy-out GD. Kling had spent a lot of energy trying to convince him that he should drop his interests in Prophet Canyon. He had refused to listen to “any more of his nonsense.” The buy-out offer was more than fair. Kling’s response didn’t make sense. Kling had offered *him* money if the Temple would drop its plan. What did he care about money! Kling had offered to donate to the Temple. What did that matter? The thing that mattered was the contact point where they would join with the Starbeings once again. They would all be gone in a few months anyway.

Then Gwinn had learned that Pillar, as chairman of the board, had somehow gained control of the money that he and Nels had put aside for the purchase. Pillar? What were his motives? He had to find out where Pillar hid the money... But now it was too late. Someone else had purchased GD interests.

Kling wanted the Temple out. And now GD had sold to someone else. Why? He pondered the question and then he knew. Stan Kling represented the forces that wanted the conversion to fail. He sensed that Kling was evil; a part of the Dog Star Conspiracy against them. Kling was a tool, simply a tool. The good thing was that tools had the fingerprints of their masters on them.

The room shook, a sonic boom, he thought. Kling could lead him to the forces of Orion or the Sirians. Kling was the key, and through him, Gwinn knew that he alone could guarantee the safety of the canyon. He knew without doubt that was his mission.

Orante let the spring boards bounce with his exercise. He tried to stay in shape by tightening and releasing his stomach muscles; mini-sit-ups. At least he liked to think of them that way. He loved his bed and the quiet simplicity of his room. He stretched, remembering

the time when he was shut into a tiny bamboo cage, unable to lay flat. He had wanted life any way he could get it. He remembered his commitment to himself. He would be someone, not a hood, not a grunt, not some garbage in a cage.

He wanted to make people know that he was unique; that he wasn't dumb like they accused him of being in school. Peter Hill was someone! He knew that. He had prayed that if he ever got out, he would become someone others would respect.

They respected him. He had that. They listened to him and prayed with him. He had strength...and so they believed in him. He was a leader. People who were looking for a way to give away their power were drawn to him. He forced them to take back their power and empower themselves. Nothing wrong with that! It was real work, challenging and worthwhile. He was good at it. Little Peter Hill, dropout, dopehead, take-the-easy-way weakling. He had pulled himself out of that. He believed in Orante and empowering people. He was happy except --- Peter Hill was a man. He needed a woman and life with a woman. Peter Hill had to have love before Orante could live here happily. There must be a way?

He lay on the springboards imaging a way. He had really goofed when he convinced Sills to play the role of a eunuch. It had been wrong to ask people to sterilize themselves. His problem, his sin! He thought they would have harems. He never understood, back then, that he was their creation, not his own. He was to be celibate. Stupid! He was trapped by being stupid. Now he knew that most Guru's preach sexual expression. Now he knew they were wiser.

So much was scary, especially now. Gwinn was a true believer; a fanatic. He had turned his power over to Orante, and now? Now the little man was on a crusade to save the Temple. Wherever they directed him, he did their bidding. Thanks to Otoa, Gwinn was going against the powerful who controlled the Temple Board. He had his

teeth set for Pillar and guys like Nels who he believed betrayed them. Gwinn was winning. He told Otoa that he thought he knew where the secret cache of cash that Pillar had taken was hidden. Had he been trying to buy out Greater Development? Why? It was all too confusing. Gwinn said he knew how to get the cash back. What if he did? What if? Orante felt sick to his stomach.

If Gwinn succeeded. If he got the cash and if Sills and he took it and went...? Went where? Where would they go, Mexico? He didn't want to live there. Hawaii? Someone would find them there. Where would they go? He sat up, the springboards bending with his weight. He didn't want to leave. He liked what he was doing. He loved the people. All he needed was to change things. A revelation? Of course!

He lay back, trying to take the spring out of the boards by stiffening his body. Celesta. Celesta and the others. What of them? They had their jobs and their spirituality. They had each other at night. If they wanted a man, he supposed they found one. For them, the Temple was a perfect heaven. They would lose everything if he left. He owed them. They were like his children.

There were so many hungry women, normal women. He could pick one. Maybe more? A revelation, that's all it would take. Maybe not. He had promised that the end was coming. If not the end, at least the emergence, the continuation, the melding of the loyal souls of Earth with the Starbeings from the Pleiades in the star system Taurus. How could he stay and go on if they found out there was no end? But then, no one ever said exactly what would happen. The 'end' could be a beginning. So!

His energy had the springboards hopping. What if the emergence came about through progeny? The mating of Starbeings or, and it had happened before and no one thought it strange, a Starbeing and a mortal. The Greeks were always doing that! It was a time-tested way of maintaining one's power. Maybe he could perform a

miracle that would give Sills back his --- He stiffened. The springboards stopped. It would be a special mating; many matings! They would go to the sacred meeting place near the sacred site in the canyon. He would call it *The Continuation Center of the Universe*. That made everything fit. He would continue their efforts to preserve the sacred site Connely had revealed to him. Then, progeny! The answer from the stars would be revealed. Wow! Wait until Otoa knew this revelation!



## Chapter 5

He was a case! One of those Hell, Fire, and Brimstone guys who know what's right for everybody else, but are screwed-up snakes themselves.

I STAYED IN ISSY'S and Misty's motel room trying to watch the coverage on TV. It was difficult. The power kept going off, flickering, and then coming back on only to flicker or fail again. I called the desk to ask about it. From my flights, I knew that the major feeds came from the north and were not affected by the fires.

"We're on a crazy power grid," the lady told me. "Sedona loses power all the time. It's the squirrels! They tell us that they get in the transformers and knock the power off. If it is, there aren't any of those little creatures left in northern Arizona! Tonight, I think it's the fires and the dampness from the storm. Try to keep your TV off. It's really hard on our appliances."

Between the blackouts, we saw pictures of things we would never forget.

"I wish we could help." Issy said, as we watched a TV picture of a helicopter arriving at the Flagstaff Medical Center.

Misty looked up. "They say 'No...' They've asked everyone to stay away."

I wasn't sure what to do. I wanted to help, yet I was trained to wait until someone asked for help. Volunteers took energy away from those who had to concentrate on what they were trained to do. "I think Misty's right. We can help when they ask for it. For now, the best we can do is to stay out of the way."

Issy accepted the answer as fact. "Can we eat?"

"We can try. Somewhere close. We can't take the Jeep out. The roads are clogged."

We left the motel room and joined dozens of others on the balconies, walkways and in the drive-thru. The motel was full, there hadn't been a vacancy since they arrived.

“Are all of these people staying here?” Issy asked.

I realized that most of the people were waiting, stranded in uptown.

“They’re not staying here, they’re waiting until the roads are open.”

An older gentleman near them had heard Issy’s question. “They have 89A open to Flag, but we can’t use it. They’re taking the injured out that way. Lots of people... May take hours yet. See, they’re using every type of truck and vehicle. There are so many people...”

Another man told us that the road up Oak Creek Canyon was the only one open. His wife said she had heard that the road to Cottonwood was blocked all the way to the Page Springs junction.

People were visiting, but here was none of the energy one would expect to find in such a large gathering. Every voice was modulated, serious; sad.

We walked down to street level and pushed gently through the crowd of people. Many, I decided, were those who left their cars on 179 and walked here. There was really nowhere else for them to go. Outside of Pick’s, a line wound into the street.

Misty took my arm, sliding hers into the crook I made for her. “I thought the restaurants would be closed.”

“Why close when there’s nowhere to go? Most of these workers live in Cottonwood or out in the Village. They can’t get home.”

The tragedy made people want to be close to each other and talk. Groups formed and reformed as people moved around sharing information. Some carried radios, but most depended upon word of mouth to keep advised. As people left places of business that had TV, they shared what they had learned with those outside. Issy went from group to group, listening, sharing information and staying occupied. Almost an hour had passed, the line had barely moved. Those inside were in no hurry to come out and stand in the street again. I felt someone come close. I turned and faced my waiter friend.

“Hey, Connely wants you to come around back... You know the way? He’s at his booth, room for you. Horrible day, isn’t it!”

“I’m with two ladies.”

“He knows. Said, ‘bring-’em all.’”

I told Misty of the invitation.

“It’s not fair. I don’t like to cut ahead of the others.”

“It’s okay. He has a booth in back he’ll share. Get Issy, I know the back way in.”

Connely greeted them warmly, pretending to rise, but not really intending to.

“And who might these two charming ladies be?”

I did the honors. I told Misty and Issy that, “Doc Connely helped build Sedona. He’s a professor-turned businessman, turned observer. I met him several days ago. All I know about Sedona is what he’s told me.”

Connely hooted! “Now that’s the kind of student I like. I’m giving you a test, boy. I want back everything I’ve taught you.” He paused, seemed to deflate, and reached over for Misty’s hand. “Terrible night! We knew it could happen, never dreamed it really would. Heavy traffic, roads always clogged now. More people coming in and going out than we ever dreamed possible. Business people always want more. Years ago we reached a saturation point. More people than services; more vehicles than road space. Still, they advertise for more business. Most don’t live here. Won’t stay around here after they’ve made their pile. Quality of life issues don’t make sense to them. Greed rules!”

He had Issy’s rapt attention. “You mean they knew this could happen?”

Connely laughed, his great mashed potatoes laugh. He saw how Issy was reacting to him and stopped, “I’m not laughing at your question, it was a good question. No, I heard you refer to ‘them’ as ‘they,’ and that triggered my funny bone. Know why?”

She shook her head.



“You learn to listen as you get older or you stop learning. Something goes wrong, and ‘They’ are to blame. A UFO cover-up is suspected and ‘They’ are covering it up. The magical ‘They,’ or sometimes it’s ‘Them!’ If I ask, ‘Who?’ No one knows, or it’s the government. Wonderful! ‘They’ is ‘Them!’ Oh, we might vote a politician out of office. We might get the city council to fire someone. We might even pass new laws. It’s great. *We the People* have devised a system of government that protects the guilty and directs our attention toward the ‘Them’s and ‘They’s’ and away from the incompetent, self-serving and guilty. Great System at work! If you want to be a politician, know that you will never be held personally responsible for your screw-ups.”

Issy thought she followed his logic. “But ‘They’ know, don’t they? I mean, if ‘They’ screw up, don’t they know it in their heart-of-hearts? Isn’t that what counts?”

He tossed a grandfatherly smile to her with his chin. “No, I don’t think so. They have the time-honored excuse that, ‘They made me do it!’ If you are the victim, and all politicians know how to be, you don’t have to take responsibility for your actions.”

Misty reacted first with anger and then with amusement. “Doc, you are a trouble maker!”

He grinned that special stuck-on grin.

I got in. “I’ve had the honor of sitting with the professor before. You’re right, Misty. He carries a sharp stick... Watch your eyes!”

“So,” Connely continued with a glint in his eye, “what happened this afternoon is awful. The fact that it could have been prevented... Well, ‘They’ didn’t have the money. Or, the state didn’t listen. Or, try this one... ‘We do our best. Sometimes these terrible things happen. We have no control over them.’ Do you like that one? Ever heard it before? Well, Martel... Do you accept that?”

“I would, but you know I did read about an alternative transportation plan. It looked good, wise even. The argument against it was that people wouldn’t leave

their cars. It's a stupid argument, proven wrong hundreds of times, but..."

Connelly filled himself with air and hooted. "You see! That's the way 'They' approach everything. They believe it is their right to drive their cars everywhere so that they don't have to walk. They refuse to see that a public transportation system would be better for the community... Hell, did you read the studies? It might even build a community! People can leave their cars outside of the congested areas and get around on public funicular systems. Locals can leave their cars at home and... Damn, it makes sense! I wouldn't go for it, I want to drive where I want to go... But it is what's got to happen!"

I took the floor back. "'They' felt like you do, I guess. Those few 'They' wouldn't support alternative transportation systems, and those, 'They,' always to be unknown and protected of course, are in a way responsible for what happened out there this afternoon."

"Martel, there's hope for you! Did you read the plan? It wasn't discounted because of economic viability, was it!"

"No, in fact the figures were impressive. I'd have invested my retirement money, I think."

"So the collective, 'They,' in this case, do have an identity?"

Misty was shaking her head. "Wait a minute guys, 'They' is used to refer to the generic. You are using 'Them' as the predicate nominative. Now you think the generic refers to a specific...? Can you do that?"

Issy was shaking her head and tugging at one ear. "Misty, did you learn that in English class? It sounds like the stuff they taught that means nothing to anybody."

"I can do that very easily," Connelly announced, ignoring the youngster. "But of course, I know who the, 'Them and They' are. They're members of the, 'Only I Count' generations."

I held my head. "No! No! Not that again!"

“My friend, it always comes back to that. Their mind-set is limited to Now and Facility. Besides, you never let me finish telling about them... I wanted to tell you about those they made crazy. You know, their kids and the hustlers who came here and had to deal with them. Right now, right here in Red Rock City, there are dozens of people in their thirties, forties and fifties... Ones who have been here a long time, maybe even grew up here. They learned how to hate and take the offensive from the...”

Issy was pissed. She wasn't sure she knew what they were talking about. “Can we change the subject now! I mean, who cares about this stuff anyway?”

Connely knew he was boxed and moved to change their direction.

“Did you know that in the 1950s a Preacher with a Mission in Jerome came down here and proclaimed that this area was the site of the coming Armageddon?”

He had their attention. Issy looked at him skeptically, he winked, and she sat back to listen.

“He was a case! One of those Hell, Fire, and Brimstone guys who know what's right for everybody else, but are screwed-up snakes themselves. I knew him --- better than I wanted to. I met him here, down by where the old orchard was, not far from where we sit. He was down to shirt-sleeves and it was a cold March day. He was making a map. I was buying property in those days. It was so cheap you wouldn't believe it! I worried that he was up to the same thing.”

I couldn't see the street, although every time the café door opened I could hear vehicles passing, still heading to Flagstaff with the injured.

“Now back in the '60s most people were in the area because of copper. Lots of folks had come over here to look at the rocks, but few saw any future in this area. You can't believe how remote this place was back then. In those days if you couldn't eat it or exploit it you ignored it.

"I asked him what he was mapping. He asked me if I believed in Jesus. I told him I did. It was a white lie. It wasn't any of his business.

"'I'm mapping the energy centers around here,' he said, 'I found enough to know that this place is where we need to be.'

"I asked him, 'Why?' and he told me that from all his studies, from some guy name of Nostradamus, and from his spiritual guide who was an Old Testament prophet, he knew that this place was to be the site of Armageddon; the site of the final battle between good and evil. In those days all I thought about was economics. So, I asked him what that would do to property values?

"You people sit here thinking I'm just telling a story. Wrong! That crazy man described exactly what has happened, only then I thought he was drinking jimsonweed tea and trying to get ahold of land. He showed me his map and then drew concentric circles around one spot. He told me, 'This here spot is the exact epicenter of where it'll come. I'm going to build a shrine there and try to stop it. Me and Jesus is.'

"Well, I had to have that spot. I knew that he was from Jerome and that he hung out with all of those miners up there. He knew something, and now I thought I knew it."

Issy was into it. "What did you do?"

"Girl, I knew who homesteaded there. Worthless place. Even the cattle kept leaving. I went to Camp Verde where the old preacher worked. In those days the place was closing down. The whole valley was still barren and poisoned by the noxious gasses from the copper smelters. What the Cattle Barons hadn't destroyed of the local vegetation, the gasses did. It was awful down there! Anyway, I bought the canyon, site of Armageddon, and all."

I nodded. "Prophet Canyon, right?"

Connelly nodded. "Right. Know how it got its name?"

I knew, Anasazi Bill had told me. I let the Professor tell the others.

"I kept an eye on that squirrel. He moved into the canyon and stacked rocks. He didn't seem to care that I owned the place. I went in to see him... A difficult trip. Had to walk in, no way to ride. He'd let his hair grow long and wore a toga, or something like it. He was carrying a cane... You know, like they use to herd sheep. It had a big crook at the end. He chanted and prayed day and night. I don't know what he ate, I didn't care. I figured that in time he would lead me to the treasure, the minerals. Copper I hoped, maybe gold or silver."

I wanted to order, but there was no way. The front of the place was packed and the line was unending. I was glad to have a seat.

"I went in there about this time of year... No, it was later come to think of it. The monsoons were almost over. Some rain at night, you know how it is. I felt safe going in there because I knew It wouldn't flood. It must have been late August. You know, just before the second spring."

"What's that?" Issy snapped.

"Oh! Well around here there's winter that kills back everything and then spring. And then there's summer that kills back everything, and then spring again. It's my favorite time of year. The grasses green again, things bloom. It's cooler and... Well, anyway, the Preacher pretends that he's in tune with the spirits. He turns his head this way and that way, listening I guessed. Then he picks up his cane and walks up canyon a ways, goes over to a pile of rocks, sticks the cane in and wiggles it around and then strikes the rocks hard, mouthing some kind of chant. You know what? Water starts to gurgle out of the hillside near where he hit it. Scared me! The water comes out, good flow, and then goes down a ways and goes into the ground again; into the rocks. I look at him, standing there with his long hair and his flowing toga... looked like Moses or one of the Prophets."

Connely paused, peeking over the wad of his napkin to see the ladies' reactions.

He had Misty's rapt attention. "What did you do then?"

"I told him to get out! I told him it was my land and that I wanted him off it."

Issy couldn't believe it. "You're kidding! You wouldn't have done that. He was just an old man and maybe he was a Prophet."

"Yeah, that's what the Judge said. I think he would have let the old man go back in there, except..." He paused for effect, acting like he had lost his train of thought. "They found him dead a day later. Heart attack. The old man died before the judge could rule." He stopped, pretending that the story was over. "We should order, if we can."

"What happened then," Issy almost screamed at Connely, "That's *it*? That's all of the story? It isn't it is it?"

"What happened? Well, I got religion. I decided he was right about the canyon and I started protecting it, not that anybody was around that I needed to protect it from. I liked the energy there, so when I could, I built my house on the ridge overlooking the canyon. I built some kind of place! Later, when I married and had a family and my life changed in other ways, what with the IRS and all, I knew that the old man's spirit would thank me if I gave the place to a good cause. Orante and his crew came here about that time. I gave my place to them and sold the land in the canyon to local ranchers. I never looked back. I did the right thing."

"So you think he was a Prophet?" Misty believed that he was.

"I've gone hot and cold about that. Now? Well, I think he was a crazy that observed the natural world and tried to make it fit his religious perceptions. Maybe we all do that. Whatever, he was unable to separate the two."

"And his cane? The springs of water?"

“Natural phenomena. Springs flow after rains. Nothing unusual about that. He listened for the sound of water, moved a rock that let it surface, and pretended to be God.”

“Really!” Misty and Issy expressed at the same time.

I didn't know then that, because this part of the country doesn't have natural disasters, no hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, tidal waves, things that most of the rest of the country deal with, they were totally unprepared for a disaster of this magnitude. The fact that the roads clogged and became impassable within minutes didn't take a wizard to figure out. Highway 179 came in from I-17. It joined 89A at the Y, and 89A either went up Oak Creek Canyon to Flag or southwest to Cottonwood. Except for an unimproved jeep trail up Schnebly Hill, and some connecting roads far out on Dry Creek Road, there was no other way out of Sedona.

The uptown was starting to clear out. Somehow the road to Cottonwood had been reopened. The company that contracts for school bus service provided big yellow taxi cabs which shuttled people to the Verde Valley where they were able to find motels. Some cars were moving. Most were either stranded where they were pushed or locked into the traffic snarl, unmovable. The best thing for us to do was call it a night.

Back at the motel, Issy had the good sense to take off on errands of her own. Misty and I had a chance to sit and talk. It was strange, as I think back about it, how we avoided talking about the horror around us and focused upon personal things about ourselves. When I told Misty about my mom, she was sad. She told me that it must be hard, a grown man still trapped the way I was. She suggested that I let my mom get on with her own life; that I get on with mine. Coming from her, it sounded sensible

and confirmed the validity of a plan of action I was forming in my mind.

I wanted to talk about the observation Celesta had made about my character. I hadn't processed the whole bag of angst yet, and I didn't want to talk to Misty about Celesta. Still, I tried to let out the parts of me that I had long suppressed. I told Misty about my love of flying and Nature. If Misty's reaction was a clue, I was losing my two-dimensional facade.

Issy came back and I left. I wanted to walk around and see if I could help. Maybe if I got out there where they could ask me, I could do something.

I wanted to help, except that now it was a job for tow trucks and tractors. They were working to clear the roads; I knew that it would be hours until traffic could move again. From what people along the way told me, the injured had all been taken out...and the dead. Those bodies that were easily recovered were bagged and on their way to a temporary morgue in the Village. There were crews working the mess from both sides. A man who passed told me that the fires hadn't burned back that way. "The gas ran downhill, back toward Sedona." A woman who had walked all the way from the Village, past all of the carnage, told me that the Bell Rock Vortex had not allowed the fires to burn that direction. She had been there, maybe she knew something that I didn't. I made a mental note to learn more about these things called vortexes.

I started walking back to the motel. I had a nagging, powerful feeling that there was something I could do, some way I could help. I kept looking as I walked, for something --- Nothing! It was as if I were riding along through this terrible emergency and all I could do was eat and talk. I've never had a feeling like that before. I felt useless. All I could do was consume. People were suffering. People had died violently. Yet here I was walking along enjoying the fresh air of a beautiful Arizona night, with no part in helping.

"Martel? Martel, is that you?"



I swung around. Marshal Cain was walking my way.

"Marshal!" I suddenly felt ever guiltier. I had done nothing to help. "I'm just out walking, tried to help, but..."

"There's nothing either of us can do now. I'm just off duty, 1:00 a.m., it's in the clean-up crew's hands now."

"Were you up there?"

Cain joined me and we walked Uptown together.

"No, I was almost home when I got the call. I helped get 89A open from the Cottonwood end. I finished a few minutes ago. I'm beat."

"How many died?"

"More than forty at last report. Mostly Seniors. Over a hundred being treated for everything from burns to trampling. I can't imagine what it was like."

We walked along Jordan Road, deserted now.

I looked at the sky. In the flashes of lightning and moonlight I could see clouds building overhead.

"Rain again. Maybe tonight."

"By morning. You know, my Jeep's way back at the Page Springs Junction. I was coming up here to find the firehouse and maybe get them to give me a ride back to it. The Sedona Police lost almost all of their vehicles in the traffic mess."

I got us turned around and led the way back toward the fire station. The lights were on. It was empty.

"Of course, these vehicles would have been the first in... They may be the ones that burned."

I knew he was blown away by the empty station. "Look Marshal. My Jeep is in the lot over at the motel. I'd be glad to take you to your Jeep... Can I get back? I mean, will they let me back into town?"

I felt better. I was doing something of service. We were driving, caution lights flashing. I drove slowly around the abandoned cars.

"Fielder will be pulled off the Prophet Canyon stuff now. We should be prepared for a delay. You know Martel, I would be willing to bet that we'll never prove foul play in

Carrigan's death. Like the others, the site was destroyed, no evidence.

I thought about that and wondered out loud, "Unless he has a bullet in him or something?"

"No! Preliminaries said 'no.'"

"The girl?"

"Valerie Lewis. A Cultie. Had been a secretary for Cal Nels, local CPA. She quit over a week ago. Moved-in up at the Temple. I don't know anything more, yet... Hey, wait a minute!"

I slowed the vehicle thinking that he had seen something.

"I picked up an ID bracelet... One of those flat silver kind. On it was inscribed VAL on top and something like Love Cal on the back. No chain... It could have been ripped off!"

I asked if they could tell.

"Fielder can check for marks on her wrist."

I drove around an eighteen wheeler. Lights in the sleeper cab told me someone was home. "I wonder if it was the Assassin Bugs?"

"I can only guess. Damn I hope Fielder can stay on this case. If not, someone gets away free." He paused. "You know Martel, I was in that canyon. Why develop it? I can't imagine buying a place there, can you?"

I filled him in on what I had learned. He wanted to know why GD had been interested in developing the canyon if there were so many problems. We decided that the answer to that question would probably lead to the answers to a lot more. I started to tell him about Connors, then thought better of it. For the first time since landing here, I thought things were starting to add up. Connors, Kling and what about Landsman? Why did the new outfit want a real estate agent involved if they weren't going to develop the canyon?

"Martel, are you still planning to go in there?"

I told him that everybody had advised against it.

"You still think the answer lies in there?"

"I can't find any other answers. There's something of value in there that people kill for."

We were coming to a roadblock and I could see a State Patrol car parked across the road.

"You can let me out here, don't go through that roadblock!"

I pulled up. He got out and stood facing me.

"I want to go back in there, not officially, and not alone. I'll contact you if you're game?"

I told him that I was.

"Oh, I almost forgot. I think that guy your friend met, the young girl, is the guy who stole evidence I gathered at the Carrigan site. I think he can lead me to someone who may have killed Carrigan."

"She said he was paid to do something up in the canyon."

"That's the one. Dan, right?"

I asked him how I could help. He told me to learn about the guy, meet him and start gathering information. He reached in and offered his hand. I grasped his firmly, knowing that he was a man I could respect.

I had a hard time going to sleep. I still had the feeling that I should be out there helping.

At 8:00, when the alarm went off, I still felt guilty. Here I sat on a comfortable bed while outside hundreds of workers were busting it to get the road open and the community operational. It wasn't my town... Strange, but I imagined that a lot of people felt that way. Even people who lived here or worked here. Sedonans were disconnected. Maybe Doc Connely was right, those in power ran such a strong offense that they drove away new energy. Strange! I dressed, wondering what it would be like to live here. I was learning a lot.

Sedona didn't form around a central square or shared community space. It wasn't a market town or a distribution center. Sedona had formed because the beauty and the climate here were desirable. At first it was

like a movie set, unreal. As it grew, it became what some call a 'Rubber Tomahawk' place. A wide spot in the road with a business community that sold 'Indian' goods to tourists. Only after the population grew was an effort made to form one community. In spite of what Connely kept preaching, I was gaining respect for the Sedonans. They had to create something that worked without many of the basic elements necessary to form a community.

I noted that the red light wasn't lit on my telephone. I picked up the receiver; no dial tone. I punched '9' and waited. Nothing. I knew things were going to be jumbled and broken. Still, I needed to talk with Kling and I had several questions for Landsman. Then, I checked my stash of new gear. When Cain got his stuff together, I was ready for the canyon.

I left my room and went around to the staircase, stepping over pop cans and trash left by last night's stranded visitors, and made my way to Misty's room. I lifted the brass ring and tapped it against the plate on the door. No answer. I tapped it again, louder. I heard someone inside.

"Go away, it's too early to clean our room. Go away, por favor!"

"Sheet inspection! You have ten minutes to open up!"

I heard the chain being slipped. The door opened a crack and Issy's face appeared.

"Do you know what time it is?"

I answered, "Yes!"

The door closed. I waited. It opened a crack again. Issy's face appeared again.

"Ter, can you meet us at the little café down below in half an hour?"

I left laughing. Inside the room I had heard Misty mumbling and cursing as she tripped over something and then slammed the bathroom door.

I went down and found the café closed. A sign on the door read:

NO DELIVERIES NO FOOD NOT ABLE TO OPEN  
TODAY ONLY

I walked up to Pick's. It too was closed. In fact, the whole uptown seemed deserted like it would be on a Sunday morning. I wasn't surprised.

I returned to the motel and waited by the steps, on my level. In less than fifteen minutes, I heard their door shut and heard them walking my way. The thing that made my morning was what I overheard. Misty was saying that she really liked me.

"Maybe we can get to west Sedona." I had driven through there last night. I figured that they would let regular traffic through this morning.

We made it to Friendly's. The place was open. I was surprised that there were so few people inside. Misty said that the TV had asked people to stay home today and keep off the highways. Susan informed us that they had never closed.

"We stayed open all night."

I told her that Cain and I had driven by about 1:00 and that we couldn't tell that they were open. She responded with a shrug.

"I didn't say we had power all that time. We served by candlelight from about 11:00 until maybe 3:00."

"Candlelight? Cain missed an opportunity!"

"No, I was too tired. I was a real bitch!"

"I took the Marshal to his vehicle... Down by the Page Springs Junction. He was exhausted too."

"At least he's alive. Last night I heard that several firemen and policemen were caught in the fires trying to rescue people. It's so horrible! I'm afraid every time the phone rings that it will be bad news about someone I know."

I asked her if the phone was working now.

“Sure. Cookie was talking to his mother, minutes ago. Need it?”

I asked Misty to order for me. She didn't ask “what?” she agreed to order for me and I left. That was so unusual that half way to the phone I turned and looked at her. She had anticipated my attention and gave me a smile and a nod. I liked that a lot.

Stan Kling might be somewhere in Phoenix, but the recording I got when I dialed GD's office spoke only of disconnect. Connors had said that I couldn't reach him. If Kling was a player --- I knew he was! He would turn up here.

I got through to Landsman's office. “Haven't you heard? No? I guess not. His car was burned. They didn't find him. He was right near where the worst explosions and fires started,” she sobbed. I could picture her Arrow Shirt countenance and tears. She was certain that he was --- she couldn't say the word. I assured her that if they hadn't found him, he was safe. I hoped so. Now what?

I got back to the booth and told them that my friend was one of the missing. Breakfast came and our moods were blue. Issy sat without looking around or talking. Misty kept looking at me. I took her hand and we three sat there, caught in the aftermath of the tragedy. I knew I had to do something, but what?



## Chapter 6

Pillar had timeshare properties he wanted to develop that were held up by water and sewer policies.

IT HAD RAINED DURING the wee small hours of the morning. The stench of smoke had been cleared from the air and what remained of the smoky fires died. Landsman smelled coffee. He opened his eyes and tried to move. Every muscle screamed. Then he remembered the horror. The children? The woman? Did they...did he get them out?

He heard tapping and saw the heavy carved door move. Someone tapped again. The door opened a little more. He forced himself to a sitting position, reaching around, jamming a pillow behind his back. A child peered in through the partially opened door.

“Are you awaked?”

“I’m awake. Will you come in?”

As the door opened, he saw the carvings; the color-stained motif. He knew where he was. He had sold this lot and helped design the house for the Pillars about a year ago. Each interior door, in fact all of the woodwork, was carved and color-stained with beautiful southwestern designs.

“And who are you?”

“Don’t you recognize me?”

“From yesterday?” He thought this small boy could be one of the two children he had carried from the fires. He wasn’t sure.

“You saved Mommy. You carried me and Nita and...”

“And we came here. Do you live here?”

“No, silly. I live with my mommy.”

“What’s your name?”

“Billy. Want to know my sister’s?”

“Is it Nita?”

The boy ignored him. “I’ll bet you don’t know mommy’s name!”



He wanted to say 'Mother?' but he was too tired.  
"Tell me?"

The door opened wide and the woman he led out of the fires came in...if she was the one...he couldn't be certain. She had a comfortable, friendly look that made her attractive.

"Hi! You look great considering... I told Billy not to wake you."

"Mommy! He wasn't sleeping!"

She came to the foot of the bed.

"Breakfast? The people here, they know you! Breakfast is ready when you are. We'll get out so that you can get up. She gave me these clothes for you."

Dressed, he was led to the large family room and Mrs. Pillar. "Paul, you can't believe what it was like! We were watching the fires die out and then, out of the black and ash, we see these apparitions appear. It was like some scary movie! You came as far as the fence and dropped. Wonder you weren't all burned. We didn't know it was you until we got you inside. We checked you over. You have some little burns, nothing bad. Boy were you four lucky."

"Thanks! The kids? All okay then?"

"Resilient little guys. They're up and going as if nothing happened."

Their mother nodded. "He led us out of that hell. He carried these two, and he saved us. Near the top of the hill...I couldn't go any further with all three."

"Damn, 'Sophie's Choice!' Almost, anyway." Mrs. Pillar injected as she crossed the room carrying a tray of juice.

"Thanks Mrs. Pillar. When I saw lights...people standing on the porch, I thought I was dreaming. Oh, and thanks for these..." He ran his hands over the clothes she had provided. "They fit, too!"

"You're trapped here with us for a while. From the TV reports the highway will be closed all day. You can

relax, too. The phone is out and our cellular is in our car, out in the road mess.”

“Paul, Dennis and I invited you to visit us... Now we get our wish. Please make yourself at home. I’ve already talked with Mrs. Kemptke and she’s now a member of our clan. We’ll get word out that you are all safe. Our son will go out soon, if he ever gets up.”

Dennis Pillar had overheard his wife’s last remarks. He entered the room and stood, staring at Landsman. “You know I’ve wanted to get you alone where we could talk about the decisions the water board is making. You’re president now, aren’t you? When we’ve eaten and you feel better, we can talk!”

He nodded. Pillar had timeshare properties he wanted to develop that were held up by water and sewer policies. He would talk, but Pillar might not like what he had to say.

From the porch they could see the highway. Mrs. Pillar noted sadly that the trees were gone that had blocked the view. She asked how long it would take for the forests to grow back. Betty Kemptke said she thought it took about three hundred years for a P-J forest to regrow and become mature. Both Pillars stared at her, unable to comment.

They could hear the sounds of trucks and sometimes complaining metal as vehicles were pushed or dragged out of the way. Glints of sunlight off moving vehicles gave them hope that the road would be opened again soon.

About 10:30, the younger Pillar came up from his basement apartment. He was dressed as if he were ready for a stroll across the Princeton campus, wearing the teenage uniform of a preppie. His mom greeted him; his dad ignored him.

“I’ve got to get to the airport. I told Uncle Bob that I would pick him up in Phoenix... He’ll be mad as hell if I’m late.”

“Denny,” his mother said in a whiny little voice that seemed to Landsman to be reserved for her son, “You know he’s heard about the road closure, he’ll understand.”

“Not Uncle Bob! He’s like you Mom. He wants everything when he wants it!”

Dennis looked over and growled, “He’s not like your mother at all. Knock that shit off!”

Landsman had the good sense to give the family space. “I’m going to walk around and get the kinks out. Let me know if there is anything I can do.”

After he left the room and they heard the hall door close, Pillar turned to his wife and smiled. “What luck! Now I can work on that bastard! I can get him to come around to our way of thinking... He can sway the others. We may have something to tell your goddamned brother that will get him off my back.”

Landsman walked down a half flight of steps in the hall, studying beautifully framed photographs along the wall. He stopped at one that didn’t seem to fit. An eight-by-ten photo of a football team wearing Colorado University Buffalo’s uniforms. There were over forty faces, all young. Typed below were lists of names. He scanned the list. *Robert ‘Gopher’ Connely, Guard*. He found the face in the third row. It was Gopher all right! But why would they have this photograph hanging on the wall? He searched the list for other names he knew. Connors was the only one... Except, *Stanley Cater Kling, LB*. Kling and Gopher played football together at CU? He did an, ‘aha,’ Connors and Kling! He read the legend again. They had misspelled Connor’s name.

He heard the roar of a motorcycle engine as someone revved it up, goosed it three times and then started down the road. He found a window and saw the young Pillar rooster-tailing gravel and dirt as he accelerated toward the highway. Betty Kemptke came up behind him.

“They sent him out to tell the cops that we’re safe.”

“Maybe he’ll bring good news. I’d like to get home, and I’m sure you and the kids have a lot to do.”

“Mr. Landsman, I don’t think I thanked you enough. What you did was... You know we would have died out there. I’m hoping that there is something I can do to repay you.”

“Seeing those kids of yours... The baby? Boy or girl?”

“Sarah. She is the best baby... Mr. Landsman,” he interrupted her.

“Paul.”

She gave him her warmest and most loving smile. “Paul, I’m an artist...that’s what I try to be, anyway. I sculpt scenes in stone, clay and copper. I’m working on a piece now. Do you like art? If so, I’d like to give this one to you when I’ve finished it.”

“I like art a lot. Have I seen your work? Are you in any galleries?”

“Some. But not around here. When my husband died, I came here to start again. We lived in Scottsdale. I was in a prominent 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue gallery down there.”

“You’re alone then. You’re brave to come here to start...” He didn’t want to say “over,” it sounded cruel somehow.

“We had plenty of time to plan, I mean after he found out. He wanted me to come here. I saw the car burn... Most of my papers and things were in there. We have enough money I think. Only, it’s so... We count blessings! We are alive, thanks to you.” She came closer and gave him a tight hug. He didn’t tell her that except for his son away in college, he was alone too.

When Landsman saw the younger Pillar leave on his motorcycle he guessed that he would tell the police to phone his office. They would call Martel at the motel and tell him that he was safe. Something was nagging at the back of his mind. He passed the feeling off to the trauma he had experienced. He watched for the Pillar kid’s return.

When he didn't come back, he went into the family room and found Mrs. Pillar. He saw her standing, looking out the window. 'The proper, uptight, Pillar of Arizona society,' he thought. Lonely woman with a son who won't grow up.

"I thought young Dennis would be right back." She turned, surprised. She had forgotten that he had been in the hallway.

"I think he chose to go on to the airport. They probably let his motorcycle through. His, well, my half-brother Bobbie, is due in Phoenix. Denny will pick him up and fly him here."

Landsman did some quick thinking. It was hard to focus as his mind was still foggy from yesterday. "Bob played football for CU... Wasn't he a guard?"

She turned toward him, tightening her body and trying to contain her reaction. "You know Bobby?"

"Oh sure, he headed Greater Development's projects in Arizona about five years ago. I had business dealings with him."

She visibly relaxed. "Oh, of course. Of course!"

Landsman could tell that he had said the right thing. "I haven't seen him since... Well. I deal with Stan most of the time." It was worth a gamble. Maybe she knew Kling.

"Of course my husband handles most of those things. Stan's here in town, have you seen him?"

Landsman almost pinched himself to make sure he wasn't hallucinating. "No, but I plan to. I didn't think Bob liked Sedona anymore. Last time I think he said he'd never return." It was another bold shot. He hit home.

"Oh, you know how he feels about his father. That old man did him a real disservice when he gave most of his fortune away. He's way over ninety now. He lives on, but Bobby won't even try to make up with him. I've tried to get them together. Lord, but I've tried. Doc told him to change his name back if he wanted to inherit anything. Of course, you know Bobby. I can't believe a father and son could be so cruel to each other."

Landsman stayed as cool as he could under the circumstances. The photograph. 'Robert 'Gopher' Connely, Guard.' That hadn't been a typo. He felt his brow beading. His forehead was hot. "Please excuse me, I think I'm still shaky from the... From yesterday. Mrs. Pillar, my blood pressure medicine is at home. Would it seem rude if I walked to the highway and got the police to take me home?" He lied. She went for it.

"Oh, and Dennis wanted so badly to talk with you. I don't know...there will be a better time. He walked up through the burned area to the highway to see about the car. Of course, silly of me! I can drive you! Well, at least to the road if they stop us there. My car is in the garage. The one out on the road is the one we use for shopping, it's a station wagon. Mercedes. Will you let me drive you out as far as we can get in my car?"

Landsman thanked her. "What about these clothes?"

"Oh, yes. Well, you can send them back. Or better still, bring them back. I can arrange a dinner. I'll do that! You and Bobby, Stan and... Just the five of us. Won't that be nice?"

He tried to look excited, nodded and agreed.

"Oh, I'll bet the Kemptke family would like to go too. I'll go find Sarah. Mrs. Pillar, you are a very special woman! Thank you for all," he almost said 'the information,' "you have given us."



## Chapter 7

Prader had found the faked figures. For that he died. A just reward, partner!

CONNORS FIT COMFORTABLY INTO the first class seat. They brought him a scotch and milk. He felt better. His feet hurt and his knees ached. Well, that was to be expected. He had overdone it. Temporarily closing the Denver office had been a shrewd move. Prader was finally out of the way, that ruthless cuss! He even died like the pumped-up, stuffed-shirt, uptight animal that he was. It had been so easy, he was so much smarter, always had been.

The plane was at elevation now. He felt it level and that strange feeling of falling when they cut back the engines after a climb. He flew a lot. Years ago he had commuted weekly between Denver and Phoenix. Hell, he thought, he had spent a large part of his life on these flights, ever since that selfish jerk had sent him to Colorado to live with his aunt. He liked Colorado and had real ties there from high school and college. If it hadn't been for CU, he would never have met Stan Kling. Strange world, things happened, you fought like hell against them, then you learned that it had all happened following a master plan for your life. He wasn't going to fight new things anymore. He knew his center, and if he stayed centered things happened as they should.

He knew that was true. He had forced the river by opening the Phoenix office. He had forced it again when he and Stan made their move for Prophet Canyon. The fake development had fooled Prader at first, but it had only been a matter of time before he found out that it was a sham. Houses and a golf course in Prophet? What a scam! Oh well, he had fooled Prader, but in doing so he had locked the Company into a development mode. Stan was great. He helped devise the way the Phoenix office got rid of employees and that provided a way out. He



suspected that someone told Prader. No. Prader had found the faked figures. For that he died. A just reward, partner!

That nosy Prader. He had insisted that Martel be brought in as a troubleshooter. Poor Martel. He was so like Sam Prader that they could have been father and son. Heartless bastards! Well, it had taken some doing, but using the state to harass Prader, and then giving the state evidence of Martel's plans for moving the cemetery site had been brilliant. When Martel got off the plane, sometime today he guessed, the Denver DA would be waiting. Two down, well make that four. That reminded him. He had to find out about the girl, Cal Nels' secretary. Nels had probably terminated her employment. He laughed quietly at his own joke. He would find out. Nels had to go! He didn't have to kill those Whitetops. That brought the law too close. Cal enjoyed killing. It was necessary. But Cal knew too much and he had plans to take over. He'd talk with Kling about it. Nels should be made to disappear.

He dozed, coming alert as the guy across the aisle rattled a newspaper. He saw the headlines and the photos. 'Sedona In Turmoil.' He couldn't imagine how it had happened, and the article in the paper, when he got a copy from the stewardess, had little useful information. Oh well, young Dennis would be at the airport when he arrived in Phoenix. He'd know all about the accident and fires.

They were on their landing approach. The stewardess cleaned his table and helped him get his seat upright. Women, he thought. I'm big, but she must think I'm --- screw them!

Connors knew that Kling was already in Sedona. If Dennis hadn't forgotten to pick him up he would be able to be in Sedona within the hour. Dennis! Irresponsible, spoiled brat! He would have Dennis fly him over Prophet Canyon. It would be good to see it again. Good to know that soon it would all be his as it was meant to be. He had to be careful. There were too many people in Sedona who

could recognize him. His half sister's house was a good idea. Nobody could connect them. He could hide there. He knew her husband, The great Pillar of Arizona society, would be pleased that the whole deal was finally coming together. Pillar loved anything that jingled of money and power. Well, he'd make a mint on this. The key was still Landsman. Damn! Only Landsman had the pull to get the water and sewer boards turned around. Landsman, that do-gooder, wasn't cooperating. Kling's fault! Kling had misjudged Landsman. He should have known. Landsman was wealthy, had no vices. There had to be a way to twist his goddamned arm. Kling might know how. Someone could get to him!



## Chapter 8

Your conflict is that of all women in this time. You are told to be you, be assertive, be all that you are! Then, in your spiritual life, you are told not to cross the street; to stand there empty and without purpose.

ORANTE TOOK THE NEWS badly. Otoa had tried to soften the blow.

“Peter we were misled. That Greater Development bunch was crazy to think they could develop the canyon. Don’t be too down my friend, Gwinn’s still focused on the cause and somehow money will roll out for us.”

“Like hell Sills! This is the fifth scam of yours that’s failed. It’s my turn now! Look, I think we can get to the money. Gwinn thinks he can get it. What we have to do is get our people into the loop. Understand? We get more of our people on the board. We get our people to manage the money. They took control from us, so we take it back!”

“We can! You’re right. We have the Magi Pioneers and... Gwinn! Gwinn’s already on the board...”

“And he will understand why we need the money, right?”

“Okay, Peter, Orante lives a little while longer. We have a good plan now. I’ll keep it simple and...”

“Damn right you’ll keep it simple. I’m in, every step of the way. I approve each step, right?”

“Without the guardians on your back all the time, you can be involved. But we have to be careful! You’re not to be connected with material things in any way. It would blow our cover, okay?”

“Hold it!” Orante switched gears as he saw Celesta walking by, “...and you will see the light of their energy as it flows. You will rise up on that energy and be transported into the next... Whew, that was close! Celesta seems to appear out of thin air. I think she’s still guarding me even if the others have been pulled back.”

“That’s what I mean Orante. You’ve got to keep it cool. I’m going back to Gwinn. I’ll tell him of your revelation. That’s what it was, wasn’t it?”

Orante stood at the balcony rail, looking out over Sedona. He noted that the smoke was gone; there was no sign of the horror that had occurred there yesterday.

“Master, can we talk?”

“Celesta. Come over! Otoa just left and I was praying for those down there.”

“It’s a bad time... I mean the energy of evil is all about us.”

“No! No, the evil is gone. The deed was done and the blow was struck. Nothing is out there now. Our forces are greater. Theirs can only hit-and-run.”

“The main computer is down. We can’t find Dan to fix it.”

“He’s probably stuck in the mess down there. I hear that few can move. The roads are still clogged.”

“I hope he’s all right. He should have been here by now...the others got here.”

Orante bowed his head as if in greeting. “How can I help you?”

“Master. I’ve had a...well, I cathected! I had a breakthrough. I wanted to know what you thought of my... Whether what I learned is right?”

“Should we go inside?”

“No, not unless you want to. Can we talk out here?”

“You made a breakthrough. What was it?”

“You know I have talked to Otoa for years about my conflict. Everyone tells me that I must give up my Self and lose my facade identity. That I must empty my mind of self-directed thoughts and let the wisdom that is part of my universal being flow freely. You know, all of that...”

“I know of it. And so?”

“I’ve never been able to. I tried, but inside I knew that I didn’t want to give up control of *Me*. I’m not meek and mild, a malleable piece of clay, a dove. I serve you

best when I am me and these things are not suppressed.” She looked at him, turned so that she faced him as he leaned against the rail. She studied his face. He was smiling. Orante never smiled like that. Something was wrong.

“You are like the child that is told not to cross the street. Then there comes a time...”

“What? You mean? I don’t get it!”

“Celesta, your conflict was necessary. As you have recently learned, it is possible to be assertive, successful, strong, powerful, and still be tuned inside to the purity we all seek. Your conflict is that of all women in this time. You are told to be you, be assertive, be all that you are. Then, in your spiritual life, you are told not to cross the street; to stand there empty and without purpose.”

“That’s exactly what I learned... You knew! Then it’s okay?”

“For you it is. Others will find their own emptiness or cross over in their own time. For you, this is your time! I am pleased that you have come this far.”

Celesta exhaled slowly. She relaxed. It was the first time Orante had seen her let a natural flow of energy guide her. She smiled and seemed to be thinking. Almost a minute passed.

“Master, how close are we to the time?”

“Celesta, we are in the time. This is the time! It is happening now. But... Well, Celesta, there are problems... I have recently become aware that others, some of our own people, are working to block our way.” He grimaced and took a deep breath. “I was asked by Her, ‘Why do those less pure control my Temple?’ I did not understand. As a result, She has sent me to probe into the secular affairs of our gathering. Sadly, I have learned that some of those who profit from our gifts may have self-serving motives.” He took another deep breath, then let it out slowly.

“Would you go on a mission for me? Will you scout for me and bring back word of those who may be fattening

at our tables? Celesta, would you investigate those who manage our affairs... Pillar, Nels, others on the board? Are they sapping our financial resources and limiting our options?"

She stood away from the rail, her face registering surprise and concern.

"Master, in all the years I have served you... In all that time, I never knew you were aware of the secular affairs of the Temple. Were you always aware?"

"No. This is a grief I carry now. It drains my energy away from the places where it should be. I became aware because She sensed that there was a block. Rescue us from this! You know the way!"

"Gwinn, are you still in there?"

"Otoa. That didn't take you very long. Was he really upset? He was, wasn't he?"

He let himself in and took the same chair he had used earlier.

"He knew. Don't ask me how, but he knew. He was extremely concerned. He told me that he had misinterpreted the first message. He... Gwinn, this must be confidential, just among the three of us, okay?"

Gwinn was shaking his head, agreeing. "My ears only, right?"

"The part he thinks he misunderstood? As he explained it to me, there is ownership and there is control. Essentially both are the same. But, the part about hiding the sacred place within a development, remember?"

"Of course! That's what you've had me working on!"

"That was misconstrued. The development wasn't meant to happen. It was a way to get ownership of the sacred ground. If we own it and control it, we can protect the sacred site. Orante is certain that the Procyon's evil garbled the first message."

"I knew it! I knew we weren't supposed to try to build houses and a recreation center in the canyon."

“You were right. Here’s the problem. To own the canyon, we need bucks. We probably have enough... At least I think we do. There are people who have taken our resources, our board president, maybe even our accountant. Only, they aren’t really ‘Our’ people, get my drift?”

“I’ve always known about that. They don’t understand; they don’t believe! They take the money and invest it, I’m not sure how, but we always seem to have enough for our needs. I’ve never questioned their honesty, but...”

“But do we have enough to buy the canyon and then protect the site?”

“We did. I’ll get it back... Hey, they aren’t ‘Our’ people are they! Otoa, is there a chance that Pillar and Nels... The others, could they be...?”

“Don’t say it! Think it, but don’t say it aloud! Be careful Gwinn. You’ve known this for a long time, haven’t you?”

Gwinn gave him a sly smile. “Let’s just say I was figuring it out after we talked earlier.”

Orante listened to Otoa’s report. “What can he do?”

“I think he’ll start evaluating the board. He’s looking for the Canis forces; Procyon evil. He already suspects that Pillar and Nels and some of the others are agents. Gwinn is invisible to them. He’ll be back with information about how we can recover the money and take over the board... It may take a few days. You know Gwinn, he’s on a mission.”





## Chapter 9

"I think there is something for everybody to believe. In my business you keep an open mind."

I HAD TIME. THE ladies had gone back to their motel to do laundry; the town was dead. I walked down 179, and went into a crystal store back under the sycamore trees near Oak Creek. Inside I found a big man, smiling and friendly, who was obviously taking advantage of the break in the flow of tourists to do some major reorganizing. He asked me if he could help me find anything. We chatted about the tragedy, the weather, and when things would get back to normal. I got the impression that he was straightforward and I hoped, candid.

"What exactly is a Vortex?"

"You want a simple description of a Vortex? That depends upon the one interpreting them." He started across the shop, stopped to see if I was following, and led me to a bookshelf on the wall. "Here are books and pamphlets that pretty well cover the Vortex subject. Here," and he took a yellow book from the shelf. "Read this and it'll give you the most rational viewpoint." He reached for another. "This one will give you a more... Well, call it a spiritual perspective."

I looked at the shelves. "There must be five or six books..."

"Oh, there are many more than these. I recommend these two because I have found that they give two different viewpoints... But if you're looking for answers don't stop there. Many people say they have been affected by the vortices, and many have written about their experiences."

I wanted to learn without reading. "What do you think about them?"

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "I think there is something for everybody to believe. In my business you keep an open mind."

I paid him and left. The last cars, jammed near the bridge where they had been pushed, were being towed away. A few vehicles were moving across the bridge, but I could tell that the road was still closed. I sat on a stone bench under the giant sycamores and opened the first book. I skimmed through it and picked up the other. The books reflected two very different points-of-view. One was scientific, in a way. The other was, well from my uptight perspective, the author needed his own landing strip. He was that far into the world of 'Let's Pretend.'

I put the books into the bag and began walking back up the hill to my motel. I had time and I would read both books before I formed preliminary decisions. Blame it on my scientific training. It would be so easy to pick the book that seemed to agree with what I already knew, and go with that. But no, I'd do it the right way and be open to new ways of seeing the world.

When I got back to the motel, Misty and Issy were still out somewhere doing laundry. If I had known them better, I would have asked them to do my laundry too. Misty and I weren't at the 'dirty socks and shorts' stage of a relationship, so that never happened. I went to my room, crashed on the bed and read. When I finished, I thought I understood what all the fuss was about.

Misty knocked on my door about 2:00. She had a pink phone message sheet that the guy in the office had given her. She handed it to me after I greeted her and let her come in.

"Hey, it's a message from Landsman's office. Paul Landsman is safe! Great news! He needs to see me, but doesn't know when he will get back here."

"You were really worried, weren't you!"

"I've gotten to know the guy. We were starting to work well together. If he had... Well, I think I'm working for him now. The company that sent me here sold out."

Misty stood, looking around the room. "You work in a funny way. You don't have an office and you always seem to be on vacation."

I stared at her. I was gathering information and working hard all the time. I looked over at her to see if she was teasing me. Misty was serious.

"My work at this stage is gathering information. That means learning the area, meeting key players... You know, it's research." She nodded, turned her head a little to the side, and smiled.

"Is that what those books are for?" She walked over to the bed and picked up one of the Vortex books.

"Exactly. You know Misty, of all the jobs I've been on... Of all the experiences I've had, learning the way things work in this neck of the woods has been the most... Well, most of what I'm learning I never even knew existed a week ago. This place has dynamics beyond anything I even thought existed."

"Like these things?" She held out a book.

"People keep referring to them. A lady I passed on the road had walked from the Village past all that carnage. She told me that the Bell Rock Vortex kept the fires from going that way. When I arrived here, a jerk at the airport who gave me a ride into town stopped and showed me the Airport Mesa Vortex. He wanted to know if I was one of 'them.' Prophet Canyon may have the mother of all vortexes. So, I'm doing my homework."

She was convinced. She told me that she thought a job where you were free to travel, explore new ideas and work without punching a time clock sounded great. I told her about my company, the way my employees had tried to steal my customers and take my business, and generally explained why I worked alone. She told me about Penn State and her hometown. I asked her if she had been married?

"Ter, I'm still married." She sensed my reaction.

"I'm getting a divorce. The marriage was wrong. The man..." She paused, I could tell that she didn't know how to say what she wanted me to believe.

"You'll think I'm telling you this to make you feel sorry for me. Well, the truth is that I married a man who was corrupt and evil; amoral. I married him because his family had a name, social position, money and power. I thought I was able to bypass working and making my own way... That I could change from Toyotas to Cadillacs by saying, 'I do.' For seven years I deceived myself. We never had a marriage, we had an arrangement. I was a front to hide his perversions. I couldn't find a way out. Then he lost it. I mean he mismanaged so badly that the cops and creditors moved in. I was able to get away. I'm hiding from him now --- and the courts. The creditors could come after me for his losses. There's more. I am ashamed and full of self-recrimination. Ter, I screwed up badly. I'm trying to start over and so far..."

"So far, you're doing all right!" I wasn't shocked. You don't meet a good-looking thirties-something woman without a history. Most have a gaggle of kids and debts over their heads. All have more emotional baggage than a Freudian analyst. I asked her if she had kids.

"Kids? No way! The guy I married would have been the father from hell! No, we never even tried."

I wondered what that meant, decided not to pursue it, and started talking about myself again. I told her that I had never been married. I didn't tell her that I'd never had a serious long-term relationship. I thought about Mom. It was wrong to blame my situation on her. If I wanted a life - -- Well, I was starting to.

It was time to change the subject.

"Want to know what I learned about vortexes?"

"I was waiting for you to tell me."

"Well, I've been listening and reading. You know that feeling that you get on a high cliff looking out over the world?"

“Do !! I get this terrible feeling like I’m being sucked down; like I’m going to fall over the edge to my death.”

I couldn’t believe her. “Oh no! You’re saying the exact opposite of what you were supposed to say! Well, back to the drawing board.”

“What do you mean?” She was getting angry...at least her color was rising and the way she was looking at me seared through me. “What was I supposed to say?”

“According to what I’ve read, when you go out on the edge of a cliff or on the top of a tall building, a mountain, wherever, you are supposed to feel expansive energy. Energy that is opening you, drawing you up. And when you go down in a deep canyon or a well, some place tight and low, you are supposed to feel that the energy is flowing down and in. Now you tell me that up is down and... How do you feel when you are in a canyon or a tight, low place?”

“Safe. There’s nowhere to fall. I feel like I can be open.”

“Misty, you just sent me back to square one. Do you have a fear of heights?”

She smiled and shook her head. “No. I love to fly and sometimes I dream that I can fly.”

I told her that at least she was partly normal. We laughed together, as I played the role of the confused professor.

“Ter, you flew here from Phoenix didn’t you?”

I had shared my love of the sky and the beauty I saw from the air with her the night of the fires. “The day I arrived here I didn’t land right away. This red rock area around Sedona is so beautiful. Hey, my plane is at the airport, want to go up?”

My phone was working again. I called the airport to see if it was closed. I knew that a considerable amount of rescue traffic had used the airport. They would have closed it to private flights. A voice told me that it had opened again shortly before noon. I gave Misty the high sign and we went looking for Issy.

We found Issy down below sitting on the bench in front of the coffee shop. The sign was still in the window and the lights were out. Misty sat down beside her friend.

“Issy? Are you waiting here for Dan?”

“He can’t call, the phones are out. I thought he would come here...”

“The phones are working again. Did you have a date?”

“No. But he said he’d call me and we would picnic today.”

“Ter has a plane. We’re going to go flying. Do you want to go?”

Issy couldn’t make up her mind. She wanted to, but... She thought so, but... I told her that if she wanted, I would take a rain check. Her face lit up and I could see that what she really wanted was to be with Dan.

Misty gave her a squeeze. “We’ll be back in a couple of hours. Tell the desk that you are here, so they can tell you if he calls the motel. Okay?”

I wondered about stopping at the Vortex site on the way up the hill, then thought better of it. I had a lot of thinking to do about these energy things and Misty’s opposite reactions to what the books said one should feel, confused me. At the top of the hill I caught the road to the left and drove parallel to the strip in back of the line of hangers. My 172 hanger was in the second row. I told Misty that I needed to get it out, taxi away from the hangers, and call the fuel truck. I had enough fuel, but I hadn’t refueled after my flight with Celesta, and I never started a trip with partial tanks if I could help it.

I called the gas truck and told them where I was. We got the plane out and put the little pull-tractor back in the hanger. I closed the big door and came out through the little door. Misty walked around with me as I checked the control surfaces and the condition of the fuel. The engine started with a ‘pop!’ and I taxied out to the fueling area. The storms had cooled the air a little, but it was still over 90. I figured the barometric pressure and the temperature,

acknowledging that I would need a lot of runway to get airborne.

I talked to the fuel truck driver as he set his step next to the wing and began topping off the right tank.

“Understand that you had some problems with water in the gas.”

“Not from this truck. They drained it to make sure. They arrested Fred. You know him? The guy that ran the desk? Well as I hear it, he said he saw someone fooling with a plane... Hey, it was a 172 exactly like this one.”

“Did they catch the guy?”

“No, Freddie knows, but he told them he didn't. You know Freddie, he'd do anything if you paid him enough.”

He topped the left tank, rechecked the cap, and put his hose away. As he rewound the ground wire, he looked up and whistled through his teeth.

“There's that son-of-a-bitch! He took off this morning before we were officially reopened.”

I looked up where he was pointing his nose. The twin Cessna that had cut me off was out of his dogleg and starting his descent.

“Bad hombre?” I already knew something about that.

“It's that Pillar bastard. He's the one that was messing with the other plane. I'm sure of it! Freddie works for them. He's crazy! He'll kill himself, wait and see.”

I taxied the plane forward on the service strip and turned it so that I could see Pillar as he got out of the plane. I explained to Misty what had happened. She was able to reach my binoculars under the back seat. The twin Cessna came in fast and sloppy. It overshot the first turnout and barely caught the second. The plane bucked each time the pilot hit the brakes.

He taxied to the tie-downs where he had parked it before. We watched as the passenger door opened and somebody inside, a big guy, tried several times to get out. Finally, his round back to us, the big man got his foot on the step and lowered his body. There was something



familiar about him. The pilot went around the big man and got out easily. He opened the luggage compartment. Then I must have let out an ugly expletive. Misty asked, "What? What's the matter?" I had gotten a full frontal view of Gopher Connors...

"That fat guy? He was my boss until yesterday. He's not supposed to be here... Oh, how can I be so dumb! What stupidity! Connors! Of course he is here. Now, where is Kling?"

Misty didn't interrupt my thoughts after I vented. I liked that! She seemed to know when not to talk. I taxied back to the head of the runway, did my rev-ups and checks, and got us into the blue.

## Chapter 10

As he talked, he took a white envelope out of his pocket. "You asked for this info, I believe."

"MARSHAL CAIN. GOOD TO see you. I hadn't expected you here."

"Sorry Fielder. I know you have all these accident victims to do."

"Not so many. Most went to Coconino County, their turf you know. What's up?"

"The girl, Valerie? Did you notice if her wrist was, well, damaged in any way?"

"By damaged? You mean...?"

"Like a bracelet was torn off? Torn off hard enough to break the chain away from both ends of the silver strip?"

"There was something... I'll get my notes." The medical examiner went into a side office and pulled a file from a stack on his worktable. He was thumbing through it as he walked back to Cain.

"Right! There was such a mark. Left wrist. At first we thought she might have been tied up," he was skim-reading as he talked. "A bracelet you say? Could it have had a chain-like band?"

"One of those ID Bracelets with a flat silver piece and a band that's made in the form of a chain."

"Do you have it?"

"Part. The top. It's engraved VAL and on the back it says with love from Cal."

"Where did you find it? I didn't see it in the stuff we bagged."

"Other side of the water, not far from the lone oak tree. About in line with the trail from below. No band. That's an interesting lead. What I found looked like it had been stomped into the earth."

"They had a fight? He ripped it off and... What are you thinking Marshal?"

“Maybe a fight. If so, earlier. I think she was in her tent alone, probably sound asleep, when someone put the assassin bugs in. That had to be later. I think it’s time to find a guy name of Cal.”

“Can you? I mean, are you on the case?”

“Not officially, yet. I’ll need your help. Can you commandeer me?”

“You know Marshal, with this emergency situation we have, I can do that! Get on it! I don’t think we’ll be able to prove foul-play in the deaths of the three hikers, but this one? We may have a chance.” As he talked, he took a white envelope out of his pocket. “You asked for this info, I believe.”

“The status of the Greater Development employees that left?”

“It’s a pleasure working with you Marshal. Keep me informed, okay? Where are you off to now?”

Cain smiled. “Doctor, I can’t get enough of that canyon.”

Fielder was visibly concerned. “Didn’t you have enough fun the night you sat for the dead girl? When are you going in?”

“Probably tomorrow if it stays cool and doesn’t look like heavy rain. I’m not going alone. I don’t want to go back, but...”

“But! You’re convinced that it’s your job, right? Who are you going with and do you have a better medical kit than you did?”

“Guy by the name of Martel.” He chose not to give Fielder any more information than that. “Help me put a kit together, okay?”

With a green metal first aid kit under his arm, Cain made his way out of the morgue and headed for his Cherokee. He moved fast, the information Fielder had researched for him driving him on. The Jeep was hot. He left the door open, started the engine and let the air conditioning blow while he read.

Eleven employees... Minus Kling, ten. Minus Bill Speck, the guy they moved to Barrows in Phoenix, nine. Minus a woman computer CAD specialist who became a member of the Cult, eight. Two field specialists who left the state and took jobs elsewhere, which left six. One early retirement and one, "unknown destination," that left four. Four engineers who went to work for USAugaco, a company he'd never heard of. So, all but one accounted for. The envelope also contained a note:

Doctor, We found no evidence of foul play. The employees all had good reasons for leaving. Those that wanted, found jobs at higher pay. Golf Wednesday?

Ned

Cain sat in the heat, wondering. Why Kling's story about the employees being scared off? Was Martel setting him up? He had a lot to talk to Martel about. First, he had to go to Wal Mart and pick-up some backcountry equipment. Then he had to find the guy who stole Carrigan's wallet and didn't deliver his notes to Fielder; Issy's friend. He'd soon learn if her Dan was his man.



## Chapter 11

Dan looked in his side mirror and saw that the idiot's Buick was sliding sideways along the dirt shoulder, kicking-up a thick cloud of red dust.

CAL NELS CAME OUT of his office looking side-to-side to make sure he wasn't being watched. A blue sedan passed. He ducked behind the building, certain that federal agents had seen him. He got his breathing controlled by sucking air and letting it out slowly. Stupid to have parked in front. He made his way slowly, looking for the sedan, careful to study every potential hiding place along the street. He knew he was smarter than them. He had to be careful. In his car, he watched the rear view mirror. No one followed. He drove into a residential pod and parked for a few minutes where he could see any vehicle that followed. Then he got back on 89A and headed for the meeting place.

The Gallery Mall was a perfect place to meet. They talked quietly through a partial partition, unable to see each other but safe from being seen together or being overheard.

"Thanks for Carrigan, and for helping me with the girl. You'll find another envelope in your car, same as before."

"We covered the Carrigan site. We hired a guy Frank knows... He got his money and left town the day of the fire. He did the job, no worries there."

"You've done a professional job! I'm not through rewarding you for your contributions."

"Your secretary, the Lewis woman? We couldn't get in there and do everything that needed to be done. The police guy? The Marshal? He saw the tent before we could remove the can. He knows we were in there. What about him?"

Nels was visibly shaken. "You covered, right?"

"Yes Sir, best we could. But you told us too late. I mean, the cop was already up there."

“Val drowned, right?”

“No question of that Sir. When the assassin bugs bit her, it was just like you said would happen. She ran to the water as she was going into shock... She drowned. It was perfect!”

“But?”

“Like I told you Mr. Nels, we were too late getting the bug can out of the tent, and we were seen. A guy got our photograph. We clocked the photographer and took the camera. Thought we had put the guy out of his misery, but the cop sent help. He never saw us, the problem is they know we were in there.”

“I haven’t read anything about it in the papers.”

“We’re lucky. The local papers don’t want the community to have bad publicity, so all stories are soft-soaped, if you know what I mean. Besides, the last thing they would do is get involved in investigative or non-biased reporting. They serve as the voice of self-interest, little more.”

“And you think the cops know? I mean, that they might suspect she was done?”

“No way! There isn’t one way they can connect what happened, to us. No one saw us come or go. We don’t leave evidence!” He grinned, working on his fingernails with his thumbnail.

“What now, boss?”

Cal Nels relaxed and stood thinking. They were in the clear. Good! It was time to move on Pillar.

“I have a problem. A guy name of Pillar has taken Temple money and plans to use it to buy out Greater Development’s interests in Prophet Canyon. This guy Pillar is the Orante Temple’s board chair... I never thought he was onto the... If he has his way, I’m out! No money, none of us get paid! It would be convenient if he had a little redirecting, understand? Accidents happen, right?”

“I know who the guy is. We’ll let you know when he changes his mind.”

“I’m counting on it! Call and ask for an audit, we’ll meet here, it’s a safe place.”

Nels waited until the tall man left, joined as he went out the door by his shorter accomplice. He pretended to shop, visited with several locals and then made his way back into the sunlight and heat. He smiled. He couldn’t help it. As an accountant he was trained to be systematic and thorough. Attention to details is what counted. He had covered each base. He was so close... But Pillar knew. How? He didn’t have a clue, but that wouldn’t matter when his men did their job. That damned Greater Development. If they hadn’t coveted the canyon... Things were going so well, and now this! Oh well, a few little bumps along the way --- well worth it!

On his way back to his office, Cal called Prescott.

“Jake? Look, I think it’s time to close the office there now!” He listened as he stopped at the Soldier Pass light. “Yeah, go ahead! Just leave the USA files off here at my office.” He listened again. “You have what you need?” Jake said something. “Great! Have fun in Hawaii. Thanks for doing business.”

As he parked, he didn’t bother looking for tails. He was in the clear, no worries. Well, there was one clung. Pillar. Until he was out, he had a problem. Nothing he and Kling couldn’t deal with. He went through his mental lists again. The cop! What did the marshal know? What had he seen? How could he find out? The medical examiner’s report. Of course! He had been her employer and they would understand why he was concerned. When he got back to the office he dialed a client. ‘Need anything,’ he thought, ‘go right to the source.’

“Hi, let me speak to Doctor Fielder. This is Cal Nels, I’m his accountant. He’ll want to speak with me.”

Dan Carson knew that he had to get out of town. He had a cool \$5K in his money belt, but he had the hots for Issy. He was scared of them. They hadn’t minced words when they told him the conditions of his



employment. \$5K, one day acting natural, and then out! No way the cops could trace him if he went fast and light and didn't leave anything behind. No forwarding address. No papers. "Leave and start a new life," that was the deal. "Remember," the tall man said. "The marshal saw your ugly face!"

Then he met her. She was young and there was no doubt in his mind that if he spent time with her he would score. One time! She had made it clear that she wanted him. He could pretend to leave. He had Ben's apartment key, so he could stay in the Village and lay low. She could meet him. Then he would head for Kansas. No one ever looked in Kansas for anyone, never in Bird City, anyway.

He collected his few possessions from his room in the Temple complex and walked out. No one saw him leave. He drove toward the Village, moving slowly with the line of cars. A motor home ahead was slowing the pace, he jammed his foot to the floor and passed. He hadn't been able to see the fuel truck laboring up the hill ahead of the motor home. He got around both of them, forcing an oncoming car to pull off the road to avoid a head-on. The drivers were honking at him and as he passed. The guy he had run off the road had slammed on his brakes. Dan looked in his side mirror and saw that the idiot's Buick was sliding sideways along the dirt shoulder, kicking-up a thick cloud of red dust. He passed a few more cars and then pulled into line acting as if he had all the time in the world. "A little excitement to liven up their day!" he said loudly in an attempt to justify his actions and quiet his nerves.

As he passed Courthouse Rock, he thought he heard an explosion. By the time he got to Ben's apartment, he saw belching black smoke rising to the sky back they way he had come. He ducked inside and turned on the TV to see what had happened.

Dan was isolated in the Village. The road to Sedona was closed and the phone lines were out. All he could do was dream of Issy's delicate body and wait. It was a long, boring night. He waited most of the next day

for the phone lines to be reconnected. Finally, he got her motel switchboard. She had left a message. Meet her at the little café. He almost left Ben's address, then thought better of it. He left her a message saying that his car had broken down and he was stranded because of the fire. He gave the man Ben's phone number for her to call!

An hour later, he was excited to hear her voice. She would hitch a ride and get there. She was sorry about his car. He told her to be cool and get started. Then he sat watching Oprah on TV, while she found her way. He didn't think the road was open, but she could walk around the accident site. She'd get there.



## Chapter 12

He banked the plane so that its belly seemed to fend-off the great, black clouds forming to the east.

MARTEL FOCUSED UPON FLYING the 172, even though his mind wanted to work on the Connors-Pillar puzzle. He was only slightly aware of Misty's reaction to the beauty around them.

When Misty saw the Sedona area from the air, tears came to her eyes and her heart pumped rapidly. She had spent time studying the geology of the area; reading about its history. Yet the scale of beauty was greater than she could expand her mind to understand. She looked down into tangled canyons with lacy spires and white-capped reefs of mighty red rock. They flew over the tree-speckled black magma fields which covered the highest mesa tops. Fields, she had read, which had once capped the whole area. She was awed by the layers that erosion had exposed below the iron-rich basalt flow.

She imagined the sands which had been deposited under shallow seas to layered heights at least as high as the highest mesas tops. Now, she deciphered the forces of time that cut down through the layers and exposed the hardened sands; stone.

This whole place was sacred. Not in the religious sense of dogmas, lords, kings and saints, but because it was a ripped-open part of the planet; an exposed wound in Earth, its elements gaping; nurturing desert forests and myriads of woody plants. Each tear oozing life-giving juice.

Martel flew without talking. She was glad. She hadn't grasped the full meaning of his angst at seeing the gross man get out of the plane. She sensed his need for space and time. There was no need to talk. He banked the plane so that its belly seemed to fend-off the great, black clouds forming to the east. They swooped down inside a canyon's maw and he pointed to a ruin in the cliff, cradled under the gray-white strip of Fort Apache sandstone. They

flew past great buttes of red, Schnebly Hill Sandstone. She remembered the geological names, and through that contact felt that she had the handles necessary to turn what she was seeing in her mind.

The plane was buffeted by updrafts; fell dozens of feet between layers of air. He seemed to let the little plane find its own way. His hands caressed the stick and fingered the instruments on the dash. He reached overhead between them and turned a little wheel. The plane responded, calmed by his energy, nurtured by something that came from deep inside of him and sparkled out through his hands. She imagined the ecstasy of that touch. It carried her beyond rational thought. She could lose self-control! She forced her head to the side and looked out again, chilled and hot at the same time. They passed over a group of sandstone spires; beings frozen in time as they climbed to the heights of a butte. She saw all time here, a beauty unknown by those fighting the land for survival.

The rubber tore as it came to speed against the asphalt. One tire and the other, only milliseconds apart. The ground got its hold on them and shook the plane to explain that it was captured. The engine quieted. They bounced along. He did some things. It was quiet. She couldn't move. It was a long, sweet time full of the images and sensations, time her mind needed to sort, connect and put away new data. When it ended, she dried her tears and wondered.

The plane was safely in the hanger when the black anvils of fury came in from the east, driving winds that sucked rain from the madness and drove it at the ground until the top soil moved to get away. They closed the hanger and ran for his Jeep, thought better of it, and came back only to get stuck in the deluge as he fumbled the key and fought the door. Inside, the warmth of the plane and the sun-heated metal of the building radiated around them.

The noise was so horrific that even screams wouldn't be heard. She felt her clothes clinging to her... Saw his shirt, wet, transparent. The storm's occlusion was isolating them in a world of their own.

Ter was trying to tell her something. He came close to yell near her ear. She didn't misunderstand, she chose that time. She was shivering from the heat. He stopped. The sound ceased being a barrier between them. She turned into his arms.

The metal hanger was suddenly silent. The metal made popping noises as the sun broke through to it. He held her, but not the way she possessed him. The plane? The wing? The ground? The wing, where they could take flight. Flying again, high above Sedona.

I wasn't aware that Misty was having such a powerful reaction to the beauty around us. As I got the 172 airborne, I had all I could do to keep questions about the Connors-Pillar thing from making me lose focus. After we leveled-off, I had time to think about Connor's reason for being in Sedona. I knew he'd been here before, but what was he doing here now that the deal was off and GD had sold out? I decided that Connors was here to close the deal. That meant that he would be meeting with the buyers. Landsman and I could let him lead us to them. Marshal Cain could... I leveled the plane and headed toward a great reef of red rock.

I looked over at Misty. I had lost contact with her. She was crying. I let myself get mad. Damn, this was the second time I had taken a lady flying over the red rocks...and both had been in tears! I cooled off, flew the plane, and tried to understand.

The clouds were building in the east, blacker than night. The air was rough. I flew the short length of Lost Canyon and pointed out ruins in the rocks. She nodded, eyes still wet. There was nothing to say, so I tinkered with the instruments, flew great circles over the broken country

below, and after an hour, got us back to the airport. The landing was smooth. I taxied toward the hanger, wondering what to say to her; how to apologize. We sat, not speaking for a long time. Then we got out and turned the plane so that it could go back, tail first, into the hanger.

We had returned just in time. The storm broke over us. I shut the hanger and we tried to make a run for the Jeep. Too late, I realized that the open vehicle was not the place to be. The rain was pelting us; it actually hurt.

I finally got the hanger door back open and we were out of the storm. The hanger was warm from the summer sun and heat from the plane. She hadn't spoken to me since before take off. I felt awful. I hadn't a clue as to how to get through to her. I knew I had said or done something that hurt her. I wasn't sure what.

The noise from the rain hitting the metal hanger was so loud that I had to yell to be heard. I went toward her, hoping that if I spoke near her ear we could have a conversation. I wanted to tell her how sorry I was.

I'll never understand how it works...the dynamics of relationships, I mean. One minute she's hurt and silent, and the next... Well, a gentleman doesn't tell. After, I sat on the wing with my back to the cabin. She was curled against me, in a dreamy state. It was always like this. Meet a woman, do something together, spend some time, talk. Then Nature takes over and --- Wham! Then you come out of the induced trance and, give it a few days or weeks, she goes her way, I go mine. Maybe anger is a sexual tonic for some people? Maybe it was the energy from the storm? Whatever, that's about as close to love as a man can get.

We were really tight now, her anger was gone, she wanted to be close. I didn't understand, but I liked it. When we got back to the motel, Issy was not in the room. Misty went down to the little café and came back without her.

"Maybe Dan found her. I hope so, she likes him, but, you know Ter, it isn't Dan, it's her need to find a life of her own. If we learn that he's a creep, we've got to get her

introduced to other people her age. Even if Dan is okay, he's too old for her. She's a great kid. I like her a lot."

I understood. "Misty, what are you going to do?"

"I feel like I should wait here... I'll check in the office and see if she left a message there. You?"

I've got some work that's pressing. Paul Landsman is probably back by now, and I've got news for him. I'll probably be a few hours. Can we have dinner... It may be a later supper, say around 7:00?"

We sat in a back booth of an Inn on 89A. Landsman's story had shaken me. His graphic details and emotional recollections sent shivers through me. It was as if he'd been in Desert Storm; an Iraqi caught on the Bagdad Highway. He told me about the woman and kids he'd led out and his plans to make certain that Sarah got the support she needed to stay in Sedona. I sensed his interest in her. It made me wonder what kind of life he had.

"This you won't believe, Martel!"

"Try me. I have a surprise or two of my own." I thought I had the cat in the bag.

"The house we got to, you know, when we left the rocks and headed back toward Sedona? Well, it was Dennis J. Pillar's house. Remember that I told you about him?"

I nodded.

"Well, three things. First, their son, Dennis Junior, left to go to Phoenix to pick up his uncle..."

I must have reacted too visibly.

"What's wrong?"

"Go on Paul. I'm amazed!"

"Second, I walk down a hallway and see a picture of the CU Football Squad. In the photo, a Robert "Gopher" Connely and a Stanley Kling." He was watching my face. I must have been turning bright red by that time.

"Gopher Conn...e-l-y?"

"Wait, let me finish! I talk to Pillar's wife and she tells me that her half-brother is Bob Connors, aka Bob



Connely. He changed his name, estranged son of... Well, did I do good?"

I felt the wires were connecting behind my eyes; flashes of insights.

"I went flying earlier. I was up at the airport and I saw them land... I saw Connors get out of Pillar's Cessna. I decided that he was here to close the buyout deal and that would lead us to the... Damn, Paul. You not only did good, but... Well, let's think about this. Why is he here? Kling's here too, right? What's Doc Connely's role in all of this?"

"Third thing. Mrs. Pillar said something else that I find interesting. She said they split because the old man gave away most of his wealth...things like the property that is now Orante's Temple. Does that mean the kid is trying to get it back?"

I nodded. If flabbergasted describes it, I was. Was this whole thing a plot by Connors to get back the property his father had given and sold? The Temple site? Prophet Canyon? If so, why go to all the trouble?

"Paul, if so, why does he want it back? Why all the games? What value does Prophet Canyon have that we don't know about?"

Landsman nodded agreement and then shook his head slowly from side-to-side.

"Martel, there's nothing there that I can imagine anybody would go to these extremes for. There must be something else. Do you suppose Stan Kling and Connors thought this up together?"

"He is here in town, right?"

"He's here! Connors, Kling, Connely, and..."

"Pillar. What a group!"

"Ter, what do they want?"

I couldn't answer his question. I told him about Cain and our plan to go in there.

"Jesus, Martel! You're going in with Marshal Cain? It's still too dangerous! Not the canyon, but remember, we think they've killed..."

"I know, so why would they hesitate to kill again, right? We'll be prepared for that. I don't like it, but..." My mind connected some stimulus to some response, "Paul, ever hear about a company called USAguaco?"

I caught him by surprise this time. "Sure, what of it?"

"When Cain had a friend check the list of GD employees I gave him, we found out that four of the employees who left GD went to work there."

"I know of the outfit. Our agency sold them a site for something here. It's a big company that builds stuff for cities. That's about all I know of them, I didn't close the deal. They located here because the owners, I don't know who they are, want to live here. Same old story."

"Can you find out more? I mean, they hired four of GD's top people away."

"You mean the employees weren't scared off like Kling said?"

"No, all but one 'unknown destination' left for legit reasons. The Orante people tried to scare them off, that did happen, but it failed." I let it drop there. I didn't want to get sidetracked telling him what Celesta had told me.

Paul seemed furious. "Kling and Connors! The big lie! Why? And Martel? Why do they want me in?"

I looked up at him. He was standing, his energy forcing him to move around.

"Not to sell sites and promote a development, that's sure. Paul, be very careful! Maybe they really want you out! I mean Out because you know too much. They pull you in and 'chop,' you disappear."

"Ter, can I buy us both a stiff drink?"

"Paul, I don't want alcohol to fog my brain" I looked up at the bartender and asked her to bring us, "Coffee, caffeinated." I didn't feel buzzed, but I wanted Landsman to stop drinking.

"You think that will make a rat's ass difference?" Landsman was feeling the three drinks he had downed, one after the other.

"I think so, buddy. Keep your mind clear! We've got work to do."

He looked at me, saw that I wasn't kidding, and pushed his empty glass to the side of the table. I could see that he was aware that he was fuzzy.

"Ter, I'm going to the john."

I responded before I could think, "Mention my name and get a good seat." Some things are ingrained in me. Junior high humor, yuck!

While I waited, I adjusted my thinking to the new revelations. I felt all kinds of sensations. How could I have missed Connor's-Connely's involvement. How many clues had the old man given me? Three, four? What was the riddle? Something about something 'Given up by one, lost by another?' No. I thought hard. He had said: *"I'll make it a riddle. What's given up by one, coveted by another, lost to both, and the focus of the other?"*

Landsman came back and stood by the table. I was so deep in concentration that I didn't acknowledge him. "Martel, is the booze getting to you?"

I came back from La La Land and smiled. "I was thinking about my conversations with Doc Connely. He gave me clues... He as much as told me that it was his son."

"You couldn't have known that that bastard Connors was of that ilk."

"No, I guess not. Paul, tell me what you know of the old fart."

Paul straightened up and got in touch with his memories.

"I sent you to him because he's been a player in almost every phase of this area's development. He's a trained sociologist, you know, as well as an accomplished opportunist... He'd call himself a businessman." I could see that he was collecting and organizing his thoughts. The booze wasn't interfering.

"He was here in the fifties. He saw the potential of Sedona. He was an underpaid professor looking for

economic security, or so he told me. He bought land, some of it for tax titles. He opened businesses... Well, in reality he got others to open businesses on his land, paying him rent. He built the cheapest buildings he could, some so flimsy you could see light through cracks between the boards. Some are still in use today. He rented them out to anybody who would pay. If they were successful, he raised the rent until he broke them. Then he got some other sucker and did the same thing again. Soon he had a string of properties, all with the crappiest board-and-batten buildings on them that you can imagine. He was raking in the bucks. Dozens of people, I knew a lot of them, lost their life savings through dealings with him.”

“But he gave that all up, right?”

“Not willingly... The parts of his operations that he gave up were the parts the IRS was going after. He was buying and selling marginal land, Prophet Canyon, for example. He’d find a sucker, tell him the land was suited for ranching, and stretch the guy out so far that even if the land turned to gold, he’d lose it. His company would break the buyer, and then take it back. He reported the transactions as losses, showing the amounts owed, the default, but not the gains he made. He had corporate veils, so the IRS had a hard time getting to him. When they did, he pled, ‘unintentional accounting errors.’ To get them off his back, he donated the lands to charity.”

“His playhouse on the ridge? The land in Prophet Canyon?”

“Yeah, and more. But Martel, don’t feel sorry for the guy. He kept the land along the highways and his rental business. Some places he would be called a ‘slum landlord,’ only here, the property values keep rising. He’s a good businessman, or an absolute evil, however you choose to see it. Now, today, he has the same ratty buildings. Oh, some have been fixed-up cosmetically because of fire codes and city ordinances. He plays the same game. He even gets a “key fee” for some of them now.”

I stopped him. "A Key Fee in a little town like Sedona?"

"Sure, if you want to talk to him about renting one of his places, you must lay out big sums of money, sometimes ten grand, sometimes more. Then you sign a lease where he pays nothing of the upkeep. None of the usual landlords' expenses, not even insurance, and you pay the top going rate...plus! In addition, he gets access to your books. When you start making it, up goes the rent. His intent is to drive you out and get another sucker. He's been doing it for years. He's worth millions gleaned legally from other people's life savings. He has money and power that he intends to pull into his grave with him."

I didn't want to believe him. The old man had convinced me that he was... "Paul, the way he describes the 'Only I Count Generations,' he's describing himself then?"

"He'll go on for hours. He hates those who came up during the depression. Has he given you that line about the 'Nowhere kids who got drafted, fought, and then came home believing that they had saved the World?' I always liked that one. Ter, Connely's greed represents one of the most powerful facets of the business mentality. Like it or no, he reflects the values of his times."

"No! Most people don't think that way." I winced as I realized that I believed in that way of thinking; I ran my business on that basis. My thoughts were muddling. He went on.

"Get real Martel. Our country is suffering from the last of the 'First-In-Time, First-In-Right,' interpretation of land and resources. It may have been necessary once... No, it was always wrong! Being first in a place doesn't give you a license to screw everyone who comes later. Sure, those who were here first had opportunities that those who came later didn't have. But it doesn't give them the right to lock others out or to pretend that they are anointed by God. They may have tied up the resources...take water for instance. They formed the water companies that tap public

water - some may think they own the snow and the rain; the aquifers, but they don't! They scream bloody murder when, *We The People*, demand safe water, regulated water, fairly priced water, recycled water, but... Because they were here first and exploited the resources first, they have been given the right to mismanage it, or use it as a weapon to get control of other resources, or to waste it, or to use it in any way to screw dollars out of the rest of us." He paused and I could see that his adrenaline was pumping. Then he continued. I sat back, surprised by his passion.

"Do you know why they're losing that power? Well, Martel let me tell you. It's because of government, our Government that protects us from their mentality. Well, it's beginning to... It should anyway! Our community is developing a government that is, for the first time, representing the people who live here, not just the exploiters like Connely. It helps that guys like Connely are dying off, but their kids... Would you believe it, some of them are worse!" He was sweating and mad. I knew the booze was freeing his tongue. It let me see a part of the man that he never let out.

I had his observations to chew on. I had never questioned...in fact, I had never thought about it. I was raised to believe that, 'Them with the gold, gets.' 'The early bird...' I was having second thoughts that I didn't want to deal with. I redirected, to get back to Connely's involvement.

"And you say no one tried to stop him? Connely was first-in-time so he was able to do whatever he pleased?"

"Stop him! Just the opposite. He attracted like-minded people. He was the teacher! Has he ever ranted to you about how they controlled elections? How they stopped opposition? How they kept a community from forming because they were afraid that those who came later would outvote them? Go back and study the media... The whole story is there, right up to the present. Form a

citizen's group and you were finished here. If you had character, they assassinated it. Don't look so shocked. Economically defined entities work that way. Our country was built that way; damaged that way!"

I understood the way they used power. Up until a day ago I thought that was the way things worked for the best. If I owned the resources wouldn't I do the same things? I thought about it for a mind-surge. I knew what I would do. I'd be a Connely! I sensed that there was another level; a way of acting that was cognizant of others' needs, but I didn't know anyone in the business who wasn't avaricious. Were there mentors who taught differently? What would a rich man lose if he were to...? I didn't have answers. Hell, I could barely form the questions.

"Landsman, how did you survive here? They let you alone didn't they?"

"Sure Martel. My parents were players. No one questioned my motives. I kept my mouth shut and quietly worked behind the scenes for better local government. I got on their boards and helped turn them. I was one of them, and I was a fifth column operative at the same time. I'm proud of that. I hold some very powerful positions. I believe in, *We The People*."

I stared at him, imagining him playing the game. I didn't like having to think about this crap. I wanted to get the conversation back on track.

"You believe Doc Connely is behind this thing in Prophet Canyon, don't you? That's why you're telling me all this? He's old, but... Okay, so let's examine the possibility that he's the one. What do we know?" Landsman had a smile on his face that told me I was getting the message. I started listing things in my mind. I had questions.

"Doc Connely has it all, and he loses his son; his heir. What do you know about that?"

Landsman was shaking his head. "Not much. When I came here in the early seventies, I learned that

years before they shipped the kid off to relatives. Lots of families do that, especially here. The schools still aren't good. I remember that he split from his wife... I can connect the dots now! His wife had a daughter from another marriage. Now, she's Mrs. Pillar. Doc was in his sixties then! Who would have thought that he'd live so many years?"

"So, the Gopher wants the canyon back... You say Connely is very wealthy. Why doesn't Gopher go for that? All he has to do is change his name back, isn't that what Mrs. Pillar told you?"

"Damn, you're right Ter. It would seem that Doc and Gopher have more going than a family feud. How do we know that they're not doing this together? Something in that canyon is worth more than all the wealth the old man has amassed... What is it?" He was leaning forward, intense. He kept going.

"Ter, I've made a list, everything from copper to turquoise... Nothing fits!"

I agreed. I had my list. Mine started with archaeology and ended with vortex... What was a vortex worth? If the Connelys knew, I could find out.

"Cain and I are going in there to find out what's so valuable... Come with us?"

Landsman looked down. "No, as I told you before, I'd be a liability. You think tomorrow? How will you go in?"

"Depends upon the marshal and the weather. Can you put tabs on Kling? He's in this so deep...he's a key... Keep digging! Keep thinking!"

"I plan to. I've got to keep away from Pillar, though. That bastard is trying to influence my votes on both the Water and Sewer Resources boards, and on Planning and Zoning, for more commercial development, more timeshares, if you can believe that!"

"Well, meet with him and lead him on. You might learn something we could use."



Damn what a day! I left Landsman feeling like I was a wrung-out seat cover. The alcohol sat like poison in my liver. My shoulders ached. I was ready for a steaming soak in the motel hot tub and that hard motel bed.

Evidently Misty had been watching for me. As I stopped in my slot, she appeared around the staircase and came to the Jeep.

“Ter, Issy got a message from Dan. He’s in the Village and he told her to hitch there. I’m worried.”

I saw that she was upset, I wasn’t certain why.

“You knew she was waiting for him... What’s changed?”

Misty looked up at the sky and then from side-to-side. “I don’t know. I’m just worried, that’s all. It’s past 9:00. I called the number he left for her. No answer. She should have...”

“Misty, you’re not her mom.”

“I know. You’re right. It’s... Call it intuition. Ter, I wouldn’t bother you, except that I can’t get my Toyota out of the Hillside lot.”

“You plan to drive over there and look for her? What if she’s...they... What if they’re out to a movie or something? Why not wait until at least...”

“No! Ter, I have this feeling... Would you? The road has one lane open, they announced it on the News.”

I couldn’t believe it. Women! “How did you get the address?”

“The motel has a reverse directory. I gave them the number, they gave me the address. Neat, huh?”

“We can drive by I guess. ‘Hi, fancy meeting you here. We were in the neighborhood and...’ Won’t she be angry?”

“I don’t know. I need to go with this, okay!”

I drove through the fire zone and once again she wasn’t talking. I’m thinking about the great relationship we’re forming.

“Look! That’s her walking. She’s walking this way!”

I saw Issy in the headlights of the cars in front of mine, a slim girl in a cowboy shirt and jeans, walking against traffic. I got the flashers on and found a place where I could pull the Jeep onto the shoulder. I got out to study what I needed to do to turn around. Misty ran forward along the shoulder and gave Issy a hug.

“You guys won’t believe what’s going on!” Issy stated angrily as she got into the back of the Jeep. “Dan Potter is in real trouble!”

By the time we got back to the motel, I had picked up enough of her angry explicating to get a handle on what had happened. More important, I had information Cain needed ASAP. I excused myself and called the number he had given me. I woke him from a sound sleep. His voice sounded like I felt.

“God I’m sorry Marshal, I know it’s late. I just got some information you might want to act upon right away.” I didn’t give him a chance to respond. “Issy met with Dan over in the Village. He was at a friend’s place. He bragged about the job he did in the canyon... Told her about taking a wallet and tearing up your notes to Doctor Fielder. He’s the guy you’re after. He’s heading out tonight, on the road now, to Kansas. He’s driving an older Mazda, car license, Arizona ALP 722. Last name is Potter. Dan Potter.”

I could almost feel the energy surge through the man as he wrote down the information. He thanked me, paused, and then, in a calmer voice, asked me if I was ready for Prophet Canyon. We would meet in the morning about 8:00 at Friendly’s, weather permitting. I looked outside. It was raining hard. The sky looked black. It would probably rain all night.



## Chapter 13

No human who has moved beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of this life can easily meld back into the cocoon of limited existence.

JUST BEFORE DUSK, WHEN the low rays of the sun were blocked by the canyon rim, Raven began her slow emergence from the cave of the ancients. She let herself down the smooth face of red sandstone and felt for the ground with her feet. There was enough light filtering in to make her squint. She crouched near the base of the fallen arch and waited. Her eyes adjusted to the light. She moved up and over the great broken arc and crawled out into the late afternoon. She arranged herself on her favorite overlook, and took her hand away from shielding her eyes to let the wonders of the canyon dominate her. She moved, coughed the dryness from her throat, and listened. The wind, a canyon wren, the music of water... These were the sounds she knew well, now. The recent rains had freshened the air and washed the dust off the scales of the junipers and the needles of the pinon pines. Everything shone with freshness. It was cooler. The sear of the summer was now a comfortable balm. She needed supplies and to get back as soon as possible. There was so much work to do. The Ancient Ones shared so much.

Raven moved as quicksilver over the rocks and up her secret trails. She was breathing hard now, the dry pinpricks in her throat irritating and painful. She sipped some water from a secret place and let it trickle down. She needed something soothing; honey. Her throat was desiccated; cave dry.

In five minutes she achieved the view place she had made for herself. From this eagle's rest she could see all directions. She knelt, pulling up a legging; watching her back trail and studying the notch through the pass. Beyond the broad notch, she could see the slickrock and the way to her Blazer; no one. She moved again, coming down and then through the natural arch at the edge of the notch.

Again she stopped to make certain that the trail ahead was open. No one.

The light was still bright, the sun draped by man-made clouds, contrails that had widened and gathered until the whole sky lost its Arizona blue, its purity hidden above the smoky-gray veils of condensed exhaust gasses and pollutants no heaven ever deserved.

Raven knew the ravine path that wound around the back of her secret parking place. She came down slowly, moving at the edge of a manzanita shrub. She studied the ground for footprints; no one. The keys were hidden in the crotch of an old man tree. A web had been carefully wound around them. She pushed them out with a stick and scolded the spider away.

She had a routine. She opened the back of the Blazer and lifted the panel. Below it she had stashed her hat, boots, jeans and a light poncho. She wound her hair into a bun and fit her hat over it, jamming it down. Her hair had grown so long. She changed her identity and hid the real Raven under the boards. Now, the Blazer had to be given life.

She forced her key into the spreading, crack-like receptacle. It seated, turned with her strength, and sent whatever messages were needed to places she imagined as brains and nerves. Her foot beat rhythms on the gas pedal. The grinding became turning, a turning toward life. It coughed at life, choking on too much, too soon.

She patted the dash and gave her friend words of encouragement. It warmed under her care. She moved its lever and changed the flow of its fluids. She let it roll slowly forward until it seemed to get its head. It would race until something inside told it to stop and let it idle; let her decide how fast it should turn.

She wound down the old jeep trail past outcroppings that blocked a direct path and sent her around and down until finally she came out on the lowest apron of the slickrock, her tire marks barely visible, if at all. Raven crept the Blazer across and down until the vehicle

leveled on the old Forest Service road. Now her marks would be lost in those of others; her back-trail invisible to the untrained eye.

No human who has moved beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of this life can easily meld back into the cocoon of limited existence. Raven tried, only barely succeeding due to her need for things she couldn't glean or harvest from the canyon's bounty. Slow-burn candles, dried fruits, nuts, vitamins, writing paper. Absorbent cotton. And the things most prized: Reports from others in her field; papers presented at the archaeologist's conventions, new data about the Ancients. New sketches of Sinauga pithouses and Yavapai wickiups, stone hearths, burial sites, cannibalism, pottery, written reports ranging from Meso-American discoveries to Snaketown's Irrigation Systems. Raven needed contact with her professional world. To lose contact now would make her discoveries obscure. She could add to something that she was a part of...she hoped that she could, with all her heart. She knew that separation from her peers would cut the throat of her knowledge, leaving what she was learning isolated in her head.

They knew her at the health food market. At check out, her friend reached under the counter and retrieved a large plastic grocery bag full of publications. She smiled and answered his questions. "Yes the field work was going well." "No, she hadn't been back to Crow Canyon and seen her friends." "Yes, Summer was not the best time to work." "No, she was not out there alone, she had a crew...they commuted from Flag." "No, there was no place to visit. They were doing survey work. Nothing interesting for visitors to see."

Raven saw through so many things others never question. Town wasn't a village. It wasn't even a place where people stayed very long. Most of the thousands of souls who passed through here were as smoke. The stain they left was money...and sewage. Nothing more. She yearned for the village life the true humans who once lived

here had. She knew, certain as the rain that would fall before dawn, that these synthetic lifeforms could not maintain themselves. Not for a century, certainly not for a thousand years as her mentor's cultures had.

She reached the edge of the craziness they called Civilization, and moved into the dark wild, away from the unreal. She felt so alone in town; so empty. Raven knew the emptiness, the loneliness; the Void.

## Chapter 14

Chris's face was captured by a smile so evil that it made Pillar Jr. envious. The man was pure!

*DENNIS PILLAR JR., SCION of the powerful house of Pillar. Half-nephew of the weak and slovenly son and heir of the house of Connely. Keeper of knowledge that others thought he knew little about. Master at manipulation, and able to access the power and money his father sequestered for himself. Dennis the clever! Dennis the bold! He bides his time, waiting to strike.*

Dennis stopped writing and read what he had down. "Perfect!" He exclaimed to the room. "I am a modern Shakespeare. My identity is sealed in coagulating blood. I am The Prince, Machiavelli only dreamed of. I am the usurper of weaker minds and the heir apparent, but for now, only apparent to me!"

He folded the paper carefully, thumbed his lighter, and melted wax from a sealing stick. He pressed the hot wax with his signet ring, leaving the sign of his new house, Xipe-Totec, the Aztec God of Spring who wore the flayed skins of others. He fit the sealed paper through the slot he had made in the back of his desk. Someday they would need all of his writings to gauge his brilliance.

He was late for the meeting. It was good to be late! The two men hadn't known that he was connected with Val Lewis. He had seen them in the canyon cleaning up Nels' mess after the greedy accountant had killed Val. Killed his squeeze! Killed her! Thought they were clever... He had them now. They worked for him now, since he had confronted them and bought their souls. Nels paid them. He paid them. In the end, beware of alliances made with devils.

"Why did you call this meeting?" He played the spoiled rich kid. A role he was too well suited for.

"It's important. We wouldn't have called you if it wasn't, Junior."



He snarled inwardly. The tall man, Chris, was surly now. Just wait! He thought he was dealing with a kid.

“Okay. What?”

“We want something.”

“Yeah? What’s new?”

“Nels.”

Dennis thought about the request. He smiled as he understood. “I guess you do. He can finger you... You killed others, right?”

The smaller, heavysset man winced. Chris gave him a killer look.

Dennis played them. “I don’t know...” He wanted Nels out, but he knew he should fiddle these two.

“We met with him today. He’s got a new contract with us...” He gave Dennis a smirking, taunting look, waited as long as he could and then spat out, “Your father!”

Dennis winced. He knew they saw the involuntary clutch. “Why Dad?”

“Temple money --- GD, Prophet Canyon. Nels wants it all.”

Dennis paused as if he needed time to think. “One condition!” He had a hard time keeping a smile off his face. “Do Nels! He pays and then I pay you. Got that? And find a way to let my old man know that Nels is gunning for him. Think of a way that leaves me out of it! I’m still not involved, got it!”

Both men seemed pleased. The short man grunted and scuffed his foot. Chris’s face was captured by a smile so evil that it made Pillar Jr. envious. The man was pure!

“It will happen that way, Junior. It will happen soon! One little thing, you match what Nels offered to pay us plus cash, \$25K. Our terms for collection.”

“Not a problem. I need you both. Let me know!” He turned and started to leave, then turned back and stared them down. “Junior is a name you could die for!”

## Chapter 15

Misty stood in front of me, drying, untangling her beautiful hair, when it dawned on me. I loved the woman.

I WAS AWAKE BEFORE 5:00, watching the clouds playing overhead. The rain had stopped about 3:00 a.m., first light was gray. No way we could go into Prophet Canyon today. I got the Weather Cannel on the tube and waited a cycle for them to get to local forecasts. Definitely clearing. Scattered showers diminishing. High temperatures returning. For tomorrow, 111 to 115 in the deserts. Prescott, high 90's. Cottonwood low 100's. Sedona, high 90's. Tomorrow it would have to be! Now, what for today?

I was making my list and checking it twice. I could scare these pikers. I needed to play it well. Connors believed that I had returned to Denver as he had ordered. He probably thought I was sitting at home with my mom, reading a summons from the DA. Good! If he thought I wasn't around he would be careless. Doc Connely? --- Hell, if the two were working this scam together I could play them if I saw the old man and let some things slip. I would do exactly that! Great use of a rainy day. Stan Kling? He was here somewhere, but why? What would he do here that he couldn't do from Phoenix? He was in it with Connors, I knew that, but why? What did he bring to their table? His expertise was... Damn! Of course! Kling was the water specialist! My mind did some fast alpha-sorting and a light flashed when it was through.

Pillar wanted to talk to Landsman because he was on the Water and Sewer Resources board! Was Landsman in on the Prophet Canyon scam, whatever it was? I thought back. The only thing I could come up with that didn't feel right was his refusal to go into Prophet Canyon. Flimsy excuse? No, I had come to believe that Paul was a good citizen. As I decided that he wasn't

involved, a cold shiver ran up my vertebrae. What if he was?

The most likely candidates were the Temple group. Doc Connelly and Connors had told me that the Orante group weren't involved. Proof enough that I had better put them at the top of my list. Could I get hold of Celesta? My list was growing.

I was tense and ready for a hard day at the office, my office, out where the answers lie. I heard her footsteps before I heard the soft knock on the door. I stood, looked at my watch, it was 6:30. She helped push the door open and slid in under my arm. I shut the door and turned to her. Her kiss was hot and as unexpected as anything that had ever happened to me. She held tight, lips mumbling sweet sensations, until my body chemistry became reproductive. I got lightheaded as she led me to the edge of the bed.

"I wanted to do that last night. Call it a 'thank you' for believing in my intuition and finding Iss." She got me in another lip-lock. I couldn't resist.

"And that's for taking me flying and being so great!"

In high school, girls had threatened me so many times about keeping my hands to myself, that I developed a touching complex. Now, I tried to control them; it was no use. They went out as messengers of my brain, sending back answers to questions that made my imagination pale. It is amazing the amount of data that can be transferred in that tactile way. My greatest expectations were nothing in comparison. Even better, there were no hands grabbing mine and forcing them away. In fact, Misty was sending out little exploration missions of her own.

With her hair clinging in tickling wisps to my beard - I hadn't shaved yet - and her softness, which sent me into an altered state of being, things happened. I let myself go into that focused world where instincts take over. Later, when I looked at my watch, forty minutes had passed. I was cooling. Then I came to enough to really see her next to me. My conscious mind lost it again and next thing I

knew on this plane was the hot water. The shower brought us both around. We were in a tropical jungle, a steamy netherworld, a heaven of warmth, slippery skin and pleasure. She laughed, kissed me, and said, "Wonderful, although nothing will ever compare with that first time on the wing!" Funny lady!

While we were in the shower, I heard the phone. I ignored it. Now *its* little red button glowed. I knew it would be Cain. While she helped dry me, I called the desk and got the message. She gave me a hurt look as I dialed.

"Marshal? Martel."

"Tomorrow. Same time. Listen. I'm going to meet with people today and do more groundwork. We didn't get Dan Potter yet. I don't know why. The medical examiner tried to call me earlier. I'll spend some time with him. I did get one interesting piece of information. A company calls itself USAguaco, has purchased land near Tarantula Pass, other side of the county road. Five acres. I checked that list I got from you... The GD employees? Well, four went with this company and guess what?"

"Stan Kling!"

"Oh come on! You're ruining my surprise. How did you know?"

"I'll fill you in. I'm still taking long shots. I'm not holding anything back."

We talked about the weather and our gear. He wanted to know why I wanted to go in from the top. I told him it was just a hunch, a strong one we would probably regret. He laughed. I would wait to tell him of the woman I had seen up there.

Misty stood in front of me, drying, untangling her beautiful hair, when it dawned on me. I loved the woman. Usually, afterward, if you're in Denver, you want to be in Philly, you know what I mean? Not this time. I wanted to graft onto her. Meld bodies and minds; be one entity. I felt like I now had a woman's body as part of my own. I sat there watching and knowing and --- Damn, I had to get back to the job I was being paid by Landsman to do.

“Misty, I need your help.” I got off the edge of the bed and stood.

She came over to me, not caring that the towel fell open. She pressed against me making it hard for me to focus. I wanted to go with her again. I couldn't now, I had work to do. She made a comment about being together on a rainy day. I wanted to. No! I had to get this thing off my mind. We'd be together, even closer, when I wasn't preoccupied with Prophet Canyon. She pressed against me, asking me if I really cared. I looked into her eyes, amazed that she was so open and loving. I wanted to tell her.

“Misty. That's not my pocket knife baby. I'm in love!”

She pushed me back, away, searching my face to see if I was trying to hurt her. I smiled and felt my warmest, loving grin pull my face.

“I'm in love! I've never felt like this before. Forgive my stupid attempt at being funny.”

Misty agreed to go back to the Temple and check things out for me. I explained that with the Prophet Canyon conundrum hanging over me, I was unable to be as free and fair to her as I wanted to be. I told her about the dead girl and the three hikers. As I clarified, I had a flash of insight. It helps to explain something to another. I made a mental note to find out why they had gotten a court order to stop development in the canyon. That triggered my subconscious files. Who put the road up there? Misty stood back as I asked her to let me think a minute. Of course! Cain was one of the first up the new road. He had seen the Cat parked at the bottom. He told me that the Cat had disappeared by the time he came out of the canyon. GD hadn't put the road in. They wouldn't put it up a drainage. Carrigan, the man they found up there. Why was he there? What had he seen? He had gotten the court order? To stop what?

I told Misty that I had a breakthrough. She looked sideways at me, smiled and started locating her clothes. Damn she was beautiful! I grabbed the phone and punched the numbers.

“Cain! Thank God you haven’t left. Listen, can you get the files from the court? The ones about the order issued as the result of the Whitetops’ efforts, you know, the guy Carrigan and the others. What was the compelling argument that won them the court order? Get that, and it may lead us to the Cat operator...to whoever cut that road.”

He didn’t answer right away. Knowing him, he was writing. I held the phone, watching Misty slip into her jeans... I hated clothing!

“Martel, you’re a great detective!” I grinned at the phone and Misty gave me a funny look. “You’re right. I’ll get the info. We’ll talk later.”

“Cain, something else. You told me that two detectives were assigned to the case. Are you working with them?”

“Naive, aren’t you! Look at the case from an overworked smuck’s perspective. The old people fell. No evidence otherwise. Old people die all the time, easy write-off. The girl, Val Lewis? She drowned. Circumstances fuzzy? Medical examiner not willing to write it off as an accident? Hold the file a few days and then solve another mystery. ‘Accidental drowning,’ look how well we do our jobs!” There was a long pause. I could hear Cain take a deep breath.

“Martel, sorry to screw up your vision of law enforcement. They’re in overload central. We’re in the hinterland. It’s you, me or nothing.”

I felt like a juggler. Information was coming in and instead of eliminating possibilities, it resulted in my having more balls in the air. Now this Cat and road thing! Damn, it didn’t fit anywhere. GD wouldn’t do it. The Temple folks wouldn’t. Connely, Connors, Pillar and Kling. I laughed, it sounded like a law firm. Why would they push a road up

there? I was certain that they wouldn't. So, there were other players? Impossible! Who could I contact for information? Who had a Cat and where was it now? I was back on the phone to Cain.

"I'm really hot right now, Marshal. One more question?" He grunted. He had balls in the air too.

"Tell me about the Cat!"

"Funny you should mention it! I was chewing on that after our last conversation... What was it, three minutes ago?" He made a comment about time warp and I laughed.

"Martel, someone must have moved that Cat soon after I went up the canyon. Later, I called for a Cat to finish the road up to the water hole. I was told that there were no county Caterpillars in this end of the county. That's what Dispatch said, 'County Cats.' Okay you smart-ass, I've got this on my plate too. Anything else?"

"Are you sure it was Dispatch? I can go over there and check out how they knew."

"Damn you Martel!" he was laughing. "It wasn't the dispatcher, it was a county commissioner who said that and... He's the bastard who wouldn't send help. I can't think of his name, it's in my notes, wait a minute..." I heard him turning pages. "Fulks, Oren Fulks. Add the county or at least a commissioner to our list! Now can I get to work?"

"Cain, you're a good man to bust a canyon with!"

That's when I started playing with the idea that there were still several forces working on the canyon. Two or more forces that were not connected...but, why?

Misty didn't want to leave. I followed her upstairs and she let herself into the room. I waited for the 'all clear.' Issy had been sound asleep. When I got in, the room had that strange smell all motels have and the wafting pheromones of perfume and woman. I can't explain it, it's something in the air that's definitely not male.

Issy still hadn't taken Dan's actions in stride. She didn't bother to hide her thoughts.

“I should have known that creep was a creep. He’s a bum! He’s a shriveled weenie!”

Misty comforted her as we got to the issues I brought. I explained them to the ladies. Then I asked for their help.

“Okay, I’m glad you understand what I’m up against. I need help. Somehow the Temple folks know what’s of value in the canyon... Not some magic place understand, but something like gold or turquoise or archaeology or... Hey, even water holes. Anything that people want badly... Something so valuable that they would kill for it!” I was sorry the minute I said that. Sorry that I had asked these girls to be involved, and sorry that I had scared them. Issy came back hard.

“Is it dangerous? Will we be in danger? Great! I have to get a job and maybe start Yavapai Community College. Before that, I’d love to have one more adventure.”

Misty was cautious; smart. “Ter, how dangerous is it?”

I told them that I honestly believed it wasn’t dangerous. I told them that no one would expect them to be spies. I didn’t say ‘spies,’ I said ‘observers.’

“I want you to observe, listen, ask questions that don’t make people think you are prying. I want you to use your smarts... Maybe ask someone about the canyon. Maybe find out about their plans... You know, things anybody would ask. Then, come back here and we’ll meet tonight. Let’s plan on dinner. Meet here about 6:00 then dinner, okay?”

The first place I wanted to go to was the County Yards. I called Landsman, filled him in, and asked him where the yards were. He gave me directions and told me to talk to a man name of Johnny Bean. He said, “Lay it straight out with him. I’ll call ahead and ask him to cooperate.”



Bean was sitting in a metal office, cleaning mud from the cleats on his boots. As I came in, he waved a skinny kid out.

"Landsman said you'd come. I thought later."

"Thanks. Paul said to be straight with you."

"He's done me favors. What?"

"A few days ago a Caterpillar was used to cut a road up Prophet Canyon."

He craned his neck to see out the dirty window. "That the one?"

I followed his gaze. A big, modified D-9 sat in the back of the yard. It wasn't visible from the entry.

"Maybe, I didn't see it. Is that the one that was used?"

"Yeah. What of it? It gets used a lot."

"County owns it?" He liked short questions and gave direct answers. I liked that.

"Sure. Cost more than a hundred forty thou. Few locals could afford one."

"Who cut the road?"

"I did. Only three of us trained on that monster. I got the order."

"Who gave it?"

"I got it from AWA, via Fulks. He's City, County and State on this."

"Arizona Water Authority?"

"Sure. They're the ones supervising the Water Consortium on new wells."

"That's why you went up the fall line?"

"The drainage? Yeah. Shortest distance for a pipeline."

"Wasn't there a court order?"

"Sure, later. Fulks wanted it in before the order took place. Like I think it was to start at noon... I had to finish before."

"Who drills the well?"

"Consortium, as far as I know."

"Thanks Johnny. Anything else I need to know?"

“You? I don’t know. Landsman? Tell him to be careful! I think they question his loyalty. I’m not privy to information about what’s going on. I wish I knew! I just hear things... Okay?”

I left the yard. In less than fifteen minutes I had a handle on a whole new part of the story. Public equipment, public official, water well. Water! I remembered how upset Celesta had been as she showed me the evaporation system used by the wastewater people. I recalled her comments about the desert and the fact that the riparian areas were being lost. She said they were sucking more water out of the ground than they should. It was fitting together. Anasazi Bill had mentioned hearing water running; Connely had told about the old preacher, his cane and the springs. They cut a road up the drainage for a pipeline. The well? Would it be just below the water hole? The court order... It had to be against access and a pipeline. The man they found, the Whitetop named Carrigan, he saw the Caterpillar. Did someone murder him for that?

I tried Cain again. He was out. I called the county and told the dispatcher that it was an emergency and that I had to talk to Marshal Cain. She rang his mobile. I heard his voice and started in.

“Pipeline. County Cat. Commissioner Fulks. Water Consortium’s new well near the water hole.”

“So, I just wasted an hour and twenty minutes at the Courthouse? Okay, how did you know?”

“You mean I’m right?”

“I don’t know about the Cat and Commissioner Fulks. The rest? You got it!”

“I’m right about the county’s Cat and the commissioner. So that’s why Carrigan had an accident?”

“Martel, we’ll never prove that, short of a confession.”

“And the girl?”

“Well Martel, you’ve been one step ahead of me all the way... You tell me!”

“Cain, I’m thinking that there’s more than one game being played. Maybe more bad guys are involved for other reasons.”

“Maybe I could go home and get some sleep. You’ve carried it so far, you may not need me. What are you going to do now, compagne.”

“Hey man, it’s my job. Besides, the gods are on my side. Next stop? Landsman, I guess. He’ll know about Fulks and the water well.”

“Martel, you trust this guy? If not completely, cover your rear!”

I told him that I had cold shivers thinking that very thought.

Landsman had a closing and an emergency staff meeting scheduled. He offered to meet me on his way to the Title Company for the closing. I got there just as he arrived in his rental car.

“Hey Paul, another Continental on order?”

“No. Not this time. I read the Powers stuff. I’ve ordered one of the new Caddies. They beat Fords, tires down these days.”

He motioned me over to his rental car. “Come over here Ter, I know this Dodge isn’t bugged.”

His tone and demeanor gave me more cold shivers.

“Johnny Bean called me after you left. You want to know who Fulks is, right?”

I nodded.

“If I were to list the most base business minds, organized by level of greed of course, I would have a hard time figuring who was worst... Connely or Fulks or another real estate guy who’s only been here about five years, so I don’t think he counts. The problem is that Fulks is younger and still plays all hands. He’s a politician now, an elected official. He wants to be governor, and in this state, he fits the mold. I happen to know that he has more money than Dell. Still, he’s desperate for more. I asked him once why

he didn't stop and smell the roses. He looked at me, turned morose, and mumbled-out his story of failed marriages, hateful kids, alienated family. You know, the man has nothing to live for except his ability to screw others."

"He uses county resources?"

"He has the power to use city, county and state resources if he wants to. He cries that, 'Our biggest foe is government!' so he would have us believe. Actually, he controls most governmental agencies, or tries to. Where he's been blocked, mostly federal agencies like Environmental Quality... he simply goes around them and gets minor officials and public employees to cover. His timeshare properties get water and sewer taps when others don't. Citizens pay more for a house sewer tap than large corporations he 'deals' with pay for theirs. We're pumping our aquifers dry! Some in the know are scared as hell about our future. He pulls some strings and those who would expose him... I don't know, but they're gone! I voted against one of his motions last week... He's started moving against me."

"You know it was him...well, probably him, that cut the road up Prophet? It was for a pipeline from a proposed well."

Landsman paled. He looked questioningly at me.

"Johnny Bean drove the Cat, Fulks orders."

"Oh no! That canyon was formed by a fault. Prophet Canyon is a fault line. A well? The water there is shallow and...and it feeds the main Sedona aquifers, the wells in town. Studies were made years ago. The geologists advised against tapping in there. It could cause the fault to shift. They said we'd lose the water. Why would anybody drill up there and then have to pipe it? The water comes out of wells right here in town!"

"You know all that because you're on the board. Wouldn't he know that?"

“Sure, and he would know that the existing water company ‘owns’ that water. If he drilled a well up there... Why, he could dry-up the town wells and...”

“Hold the City’s future, everybody’s future, in his grip.”

I was feeling something nagging at the back of my brain. Synapses connected.

“Paul, how did you cross him? What happened on the board?”

“He wanted us to void our contract with USAguaco. He said they were a threat to Sedona’s future. I said I needed more information. He was livid!”

“And what was your contract with USAguaco?”

“Oh, nothing connected to this. Since I talked with you last, I learned that they focus on wastewater systems. They approached the board about tertiary treatment systems. Supposedly, a combination of natural biological treatment and filtration. All we agreed to do was consider their proposal. They have to prove their system to us... A demonstration project, next year, I think.”

“The land? Is it five acres your people sold near the wastewater return line across the road from the Tarantula Pass end of Prophet Canyon?”

“Oh my God! Kling and Connors... That explains the four employees that left GD and went with USAguaco. Pillar is involved too!”

“Connect the dots! So, a battle of the Titans --- Fulks vs. the Unholy Trio.”

Landsman leaned against the steering wheel, obviously exhausted.

I felt for him. He had been through a lifetime of hell in the past three days. He pushed himself back against the seat.

“Martel, these guys are out to fleece Sedona. I’m sure they envy those who own the water company... Hell, they’ve gotten theirs over the years! Sweet deal! They build wells and a delivery system and use it to sell us our own water, the people’s water. First-in-time, keepers of a

cash cow that produces wealth everlasting, or so they thought. Now these bastards can take them out, dry up their main wells, and get a stranglehold on the whole area. Water! In this desert it is the most valuable resource.”

“Paul, there must be studies. There must be projections about water availability. You chair the board, how much water is there?”

“Not enough. Of course that information is confidential... Guys in the know, and guys like Fulks, have made certain that the results of the studies are not made public. They can control or leverage the Media... The info never gets out. They use the information for their own personal gain. We pay for the studies, they use them to position themselves. Ter, there should have been a partial moratorium on water use five years ago. Now, I believe we’re using water that belongs to others down below... It isn’t even ours to take, but prove it! If you mention it, every power in the area moves to kill the messenger.” He paused, holding the steering wheel with both hands, knuckles white. I sensed his fear.

“Ter. There is probably enough water for homes. It’s the commercial developments and timeshares that are hurting us. It’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever been involved in. We citizens believe that the Rule of Reason will prevail. It can’t! Here’s a community that is taking more water than it should, while at the same time it chooses not to process its wastewater for potable reuse. It spends fortunes on elaborate sprinkler systems to evaporate it! Any child can see what needs to be done, but no, the greed monsters control the agencies *We The People* have created to protect us.”

I guess I was looking at him in a strange way.

“What? Why are you looking at me that way?”

“You just connected more dots. On one end of Prophet Canyon, Fulks and his stooges are getting ready to pump the fault at the head of the aquifer. At the other end of the canyon, USAguaco is setting up a wastewater

disposal project which will pump treated water back into the aquifer.”

“You’re saying their plans don’t work if they don’t control both ends! So, a war with Prophet Canyon as the battleground.”

I leaned against the side of his car. The heat was building and the humidity was almost unbearable. I said something about it drying out fast around here, and Paul assured me that the humidity didn’t last long. I was about to pat myself on the back and say that we had solved the mystery.

“Martel, we only have part of the solution. The Titans don’t have to kill people. Look how Fulks got around their court order. When you have their power, people don’t count, alive or dead. They don’t count and you don’t have to take a risk by killing them when you can easily manipulate them out of the way.”

“The girl, Valerie Lewis? The Whitetops? Why them?”

“That’s what has puzzled me from the start. I always figure water, but... Ter, if the Whitetops were killed, I don’t think the Titans did it. No reason to. The girl? A secretary and a Temple member... It doesn’t make sense.”

“Another game going is what makes sense! There is something else of value in that canyon... What is it?”

“A Vortex!” He said it mockingly. “That’s the only thing we’re told is there that we haven’t checked out. Are you still going in? I want you to!” He paused, and swung his feet out of the car.

“Martel, I asked you to work for me. I know I’m in danger. Fulks is making his move. I think I can fend him off. I know Pillar is after me to get me to vote his way... I think I can handle that. Something else is wrong. I can’t explain it. I fear that a poisonous spider is ready to drop onto me. I sense it! Will you check the canyon out? I know we think we have the situation figured... But...”

“A minute ago I thought I wouldn’t have to go in. Now? I’ll talk to Cain and we’ll decide. I don’t know what

you're feeling, Paul, but what you say makes sense. There are more players. Are you sure you can afford to have me do this?"

"Can I afford not to? It's not money that I care about. I didn't make mine the old fashioned way."

I called Connely and listened to the phone ring. I went by Pick's. They hadn't seen him. I took a chance that he would be at the library. Not there either. I wanted to plant some thoughts in the old man's mind and see where the tendrils led. I decided to keep calling until I connected with him. I went to Friendly's and ordered lunch. The nicest thing about Friendly's was the waitress. I beat the noon crowd. She had already placed the sets and so had time to grab a cup and join me in my booth.

"Is Cain going to come in today?"

Her question surprised me.

"You're asking me? Well, the answer is, probably not. He's taken a few days personal leave to do research in Prescott."

"He didn't call me... He said he would. This is the point where things start to get complicated. I should have learned by now."

"Don't read anything into it that isn't there. The Marshal is okay... He's busy."

"Cops... Ever notice how they serve us but can never be our friends? Look at them!" she pointed with her chin to two Sedona policemen sharing a booth. "Do you think anyone ever asks them to dinner? Do you think local folks are comfortable around them? No, they're ostracized! If Cain and I, well, what would life be like married to a cop?"

I agreed with her, and that made her sadder.

"Look, Susan, you're right to think about things like that. The important thing is to see the man. I can tell you that Cain's unusual... At least he hasn't let his job interfere with our working together. I know he likes you. Ever think that policing is only his job... Like you working here? All



around that are your dreams for living your life, know what I mean?"

She squeezed my hand and gave me a 'good friend's' smile.

"Martel, I hear things. Does this mean anything to you? I listened in when I heard them mention Prophet Canyon."

She proceeded to tell me about a conversation she had overheard between two guys who had been in only once before. A tall, mean looking guy who seemed contemptuous of the world, and a short, heavysset man who radiated sleeze, and didn't tip. Her words.

"The short one said, 'I can't work for Junior. Old man Pillar was bad enough.' The tall guy answered something I couldn't hear. The short guy smiled and said, 'How much money?' That was all I got. Mean anything?"

I assured her that it did, although I couldn't fit it into anything I knew, except that I had a payback I owed to Pillar Junior, the pilot.

"Thanks Susan. Any information about where the two stay?"

"No. They're not tourists, they're not passing through. They've been here for a while, something tells me that."

I ate my lunch without looking up. Somewhere in the crust of the sandwich I was staring at I saw the networks I had formed since coming to town. Things connected for me. It was nothing I did intentionally. Cain probably thought I was some kind of detective. All I did was connect dots. In less than a week I had broken the codes, some of them anyway. I wondered how Landsman would fend-off Fulks. Could he expose him? Did he have allies I knew nothing about? What about Pillar and...? Pillar was the Temple connection, I had almost forgotten. Pillar, Orante, Nels and the dead girl, Nels' secretary. And now, Susan's overheard conversation. Pillar Junior --- What had they said? That 'Old man Pillar was bad

enough...' and, '...how much money?' So the younger Pillar was a player too. A player in what?

I told Susan that I would meet Cain here in the morning. She lit up and gave him a smile, through me. It made me want to be with Misty.



## Chapter 16

Evil meets good. It is our battlefield now, but only for a short time. Then, we will build a circle there, on one special spot where Heaven's energy flows to the Earth.

"GAD, DO YOU THINK they'll run us through the bath and all?" Issy was excited about their mission; ready for excitement and intrigue.

"Slow down girl! We're here on a serious mission. Let them see that we're penitent, you know, we're here for forgiveness for past sins... Something like that. Well, maybe we are here for what we really are looking for, answers."

"You mean, what's the meaning of life!"

"Well, kinda. What's missing in our lives, would be more like it!"

"Not in yours, anymore. I heard you sneak out this morning."

"Do you like him?"

"I love his Jeep. You do, don't you?"

"More than I probably should..."

"He's pretty neat... Go for it! I'm still looking. No more losers, Dan taught me that."

Misty announced herself at the gate. A woman came out to greet them.

"Hi, welcome back. My name is Celesta, how can I help you?"

Misty recognized the woman as the one who had been with Ter on the night she almost ran into him. She kept her cool and asked if they could visit to learn more about Orante and the Temple's mission.

"Of course. Last time you were here, you entered through purification." She turned to Issy. "Would you like to enter as she did, or..." She knew the girl was young; perhaps too young to do a whole purification ritual. Before Issy could answer, she took Issy's hand and squeezed it. "You can stay with your friend. She knows the way."

Issy smiled and squeezed back. "I'd like that. Misty told me about the lovely way you treated her... Maybe I can do that another time?"

"Of course. Now, Misty, would you like to meet with a group of our family who are studying channeling?"

"Sure. You mean like the woman I met the other day that channeled Atlantis? Can we observe or..."

"Observe if you like. If you wish to have a special reading you can. Be at ease."

She led them through the upper hallways and to a stairway at the far end. She cautioned them about the narrow treads on the circular staircase. Her hand was on the sharp edge of the ceiling, to protect their heads, although they were too short to hit it. Down one level, Celesta led them by a series of rooms. The doors were open and one had several computers and work stations.

"Hey, I know one of your computer guys." She was excited that she had made the connection. "Dan. I had a date with him and then..." She paused, angry at what had happened. Celesta read her body language and became cautious.

"Dan left. He didn't even say goodbye. Do you know why? We're lost without him."

Misty didn't have time to think. Issy was nodding...

"Sure, some men hired him to destroy evidence up Prophet Canyon. He did and then he had to leave. He said he was going to Kansas. The police are looking for him, that weenie! He'll never come back!"

Misty sensed the tightness in Celesta. Dan worked here. Now she knew too much. She could connect them to --- Maybe not.

"Oh come on Issy," she caught her friend's eye and stared hard at her, a warning. "Dan may have lied to you. He would have said anything to get you to sleep with him."

Issy refused to take the cue.

"He took the wallet. He rubbed out the marks on the tree. He destroyed the marshal's notes. He wasn't lying." Then she got it, too late.

Celesta faked sadness. She read the transactions between the two and knew that Misty was trying to cover for some reason. Then she saw Issy's reaction as she realized that she had said too much. Strange.

"I didn't know him well. He did computers. I'm sorry he hurt you, Issy. At least you found out that he was a creep before you knew him better. Come ladies!" She swished away motioning for them to follow. They were heading toward the soundproofed room, the quietest room in the Temple.

They entered the room, silently. Across the room a woman was leaning against pillows, stiff, jerking every so often. She was wet with perspiration. Misty could hear her labored breathing, the only sound in the room. Issy leaned toward Celesta.

"What's wrong with her?"

"Sit down! Keep quiet! Wait and learn!" She motioned them toward pillows, next to a group of ten other women.

The woman on the big pillows twisted, sounds started coming from deep within her. The sounds focused and changed from meaningless utterances to words, only the words were in a foreign tongue. Misty had never heard the language. She was certain that it wasn't Greek; maybe Turkish? A tall, skinny woman stood and went over to the prostrate channeller to act as facilitator.

"English... American English! Translate!" She spoke so loudly that the woman shook her head and covered her ears.

*"...that you are two, that is your pain. In the past you were one. You must become one again."* The voice was gruff, the English jarred by a strange accent. The standing woman moved close to the channeller again.

"Who are you talking to?"

*"She is here with you in this room. I know her from our past. Have her stand. She knows who she is."*

The facilitator stepped back, turning toward the others. Misty knew she meant her. She didn't want to

stand, yet she felt compelled to rise. She pulled her knees under her and as she rose, so did all of the other women. They all stood, looking around the room sheepishly. Celesta tried to suppress a smile. Issy was the only observer who remained on her pillow. She was watching the others, puzzled.

*“You are split between male and female, right and wrong, good and evil! You are two parts separated in conception, divided, able to do no good as one. Find your other half, for it is within you... Search inside and...”* The woman jerked several times and slumped down, limp. The tall woman ran to her side; held her sweaty head until the woman’s own soul came back into her body. The standing women milled around, not talking, not looking at each other. Misty looked down at Issy and gave her a weak smile.

“Misty! What happened?”

“Iss. I think she was talking to me.”

“Yeah, you and the whole crew! Why do you think You?”

“Oh, because she helped me tie up some loose ends.”

Celesta came over to them. “Well?”

Misty’s energy was back, she felt great.

“That was really wonderful. I learned a lot... Who was she?”

“She’s a friend here... Sandella. He was an ancient from Persia.”

Issy was confused. “You mean he channeled through her, and he spoke to all the women? Well all but me! And all of them thought he was talking to them personally?”

Misty put her hand out, touching Issy’s arm.

“Iss, it’s not the messenger, it’s the message. She...he told us that we are all twins inside, split between the animal and the spirit. He told us to unite ourselves and be one.”

Celesta was stunned. That's what you heard? You heard him say that? Misty, do you know of our dreams? Do you know why we exist?"

"I... No, not really. I don't know much about Orante or the Temple's reason for existence. That's what I'd really like to know more about."

Celesta smiled. "Misty, I think you already know more than most of us. Come, I'll get you something to drink. Please wait here. I have some business to attend to and then, I think you'll like what I have planned."

"Otoa, Dan was hired by some men to go into Prophet Canyon and destroy evidence at the scene. You know, the place they found the old hiker. Then he ran... Kansas, if you can believe that!" Celesta paused, letting Otoa grasp the full meaning of her information.

"I knew he went in... He told me he volunteered to drive a vehicle. You say, 'hired by two men?' I saw them, here. A tall hombre with mean written all over him. The other guy was short and looked like a...a fireplug."

"I'll need to find them. You saw them here?"

"Yeah, in the lower lot talking to Dan. I was scanning the lot from up here, the TV, turning it around so that I could see how many cars were there."

"I learned that Dan took the dead guy's wallet and wiped out some evidence on a tree. He also destroyed the policeman's notes... Otoa, what in the blazes happened down there... Also? Who were those guys and who do they work for?"

"Some time ago I saw them with Cal Nels! Maybe now we can discover who else is trying for the sacred spot. Find them, Celesta. Nels knows who they are. Stop them!"

"One other thing. I need to see Orante, now!"

"Probably. I'll check. What do you want me to tell him?"

"Tell him that the girl he gave the twins statue to is here... And tell him she's aware of our purpose, without anyone ever telling her."



Orante was pacing when Otoa came in. "You worried about the meeting? He hasn't got any legal claim to this place. His father gave it, lock, land and buildings."

"Yeah, I'm worried. You know I'm no good at this kind of stuff. Why can't Gwinn handle him... If not Gwinn, one of the other board members?"

"After what Gwinn told us, do you trust anyone on the board?"

"Just Gwinn. But Otoa, why the meet? What's he coming here for? I've never met him, have I?"

"Naw, he was off in Colorado... In school, I think. Doc Connely pushed him out. That's when he changed his name to Connors. It was his mother's maiden name."

"And?"

"What?"

"I asked you what he wants!"

"Kling set it up. He told me that Connors had a gift for us; that he needed a simple favor and it would be well worth our while to meet with him. That's all I know."

"Okay, give me a few minutes warning when he drives into the lot, okay?"

"Yeah, don't worry! Besides, while you wait, I have something more pleasant for you to think about. The girl? The one you liked and gave the twins statue to. Well, she's back again and... Celesta says you were right about her. She seems to know our mission without being told."

"And she's here now? Great! Bring her in!"

Celesta led them back to the main floor and down the corridor to a small meditation room whose door was hidden behind the open doors to the meditation section of the Temple. Misty liked the way it was hidden away and private. Celesta told them to wait, then left, seeming preoccupied and anxious.

"Wow! This little room is like a chapel. Feel how thick the carpet is... Pretty neat, huh? Look at the bells and who's that?" She was pointing at a seated Buddha.

"A main man, Siddhartha. You'll learn about him in college."

The hallway doors opened back, they could hear the squeaking hinges, and then the meditation chamber's door opened. Orante, dressed in silk pajamas with his simple white cotton yakuta over them, came in. He wore silk slippers, no socks, and his hair needed trimming. The split ends bothered Misty.

"Oh, you are with your friend!" He seemed surprised. He had hoped to be alone with Misty.

Misty felt his disappointment. She was glad Issy stayed with her.

"This is my second time back. I went through the purification ritual... It was beautiful."

"There is so much here that is beautiful. Celesta tells me that you understand why we are here."

Issy was too surprised to speak. Her eyes were big and she was biting her lip, wondering what she had missed.

"There are lots of things Iss and I don't understand about the Temple... You! What your mission is."

He laughed, a street-fighter sort of laugh that didn't fit the room or his appearance.

"I'm not sure I understand everything either. Remember the night you attended an audience? You knew I didn't have the answers for some of those questions, didn't you?"

Misty smiled. "It must be hard. It seems like everybody wants to give you control of their lives. They wanted you to tell them what to do and you wouldn't. I liked that part, but... It seemed fake somehow."

"Misty! You can't talk to a...a man like Orante like that! She's sorry, Sir, she doesn't mean to be..."

He laughed again, only this time he leaned against the wall and looked at the ceiling.

"Do you think that because I am a spiritual leader that I have ceased to be a human being? Relax, Issy. I am a man and you may talk straight with me. I try hard to do a good job, and I am human, okay?"

Misty liked that a lot. She watched his face and knew that he was sincere.

"Many of the things you said meant a lot to me. Why did you send me the statue of the twins? Chang and Eng, I think their names were."

"I could say that I sensed your concern about twins... Would you believe me?"

"No, I think you read my birthdate..." He tightened his body and shook his head.

"Absolutely not! No cheap parlor tricks here. I sensed something and went with it!"

"Gad, you have a gift then, you read my..."

"No, I'm not telepathic. I've learned to read people's body language... It came to me. Was I on target? I must have been, you are still reacting."

"Right on! A few minutes ago, through the channelling woman, I learned that we are all split into two, anima and animus..."

"It's true, you know. We are joining souls and creating the next level of human existence." She sensed a lie, but there was no other indication that he didn't believe it.

"And the canyon, down there? Is that the place?"

He nodded, not the least surprised at her question.

"You know that there has been all sorts of activity down there... Deaths, new roads cut in... Why?"

He looked at her, nodding and smiling a little crack of a smile. Issy stared at him, caught by his charisma and vital energy.

"Evil meets good. It is our battlefield now, but only for a short time. Then, we will build a circle there, on one special spot where Heaven's energy flows to the Earth. There we will join special souls and create the new age."

Misty felt his energy and the passion he radiated. Issy found a cushion and dropped onto it. Orante moved to the shelves and took down a globe-shaped bell. He rang it. The sound was pure, perfect.

“You are here to find your other soul. Joined, you will be one of the first. We are still in battle against the evil forces rallied against us.” He stood in front of her, reached out and held both of her arms at her side. He backed away, surprise, concern and anger passing through the muscles of his face.

“What’s the matter?” Misty was shaken.

“Do you know that you are pregnant? Just... Not long ago... A boy!”

Orante looked deep into Misty’s eyes. “Perhaps...” He didn’t finish. Otoa came in talking. “Orante, your guests have arrived. You’ve got to come now Master!”

He had nothing more to say. He turned, and Otoa almost pushed him along as he left the room.

Misty fell to her knees on a pillow next to Issy’s cushion. Issy was wide-eyed, looking like she had just seen God.

“He... Was he right? How could he tell? Am I too?”

Misty felt her gut tighten. Was he right? How could he tell?

“No, Iss. He would have told you. Relax, okay?”

Misty wanted air. She led Issy out of the small meditation room, across the great hallway and through a door onto the balcony.

“Look, Misty. It’s Celesta and she’s leading that big guy up here.”

Misty recognized the man as the one she had seen from Ter’s plane. She knew something important was happening. Then she saw Orante come out on the balcony at the end of the building. He watched as Celesta, and then Otoa, helped the hulking man up the walkway. Orante turned, saw them, and smiled. He was at the other end of the building, yet she could feel the heat of his smile. The guy was for real! Why was he meeting with the man that Ter had reviled?

“Iss, that man came here and we need to find out why. Let’s move back, away, and try to keep track of

where they go. Look, those other men coming up. They look powerful. Let's find out who they are, okay?"

On the second level, people were moving along the hallways, going in and coming out of rooms. Misty led as they walked along with a small group of women who seemed to be on a break. When they stopped, Misty moved among them, thinking of ways she could open a conversation.

"Wow! Things are so busy here today. I think the dignitaries are arriving. Are you invited?"

A woman near her looked her over and answered.

"They're not dignitaries. One is our board chairman, one is a board member, and the other is here for a meeting. Nothing special... In fact, we've all been asked to stay clear of them... I don't think Celesta likes them very much."

Misty nodded and looked down. "The chairman, then that must be Mr. Pillar. The other guy, I've never seen him before either. The gross man? I should remember his name... My friend doesn't like him, I know that."

"You're right..." She looked at Misty with suspicion. "How do you know Pillar and Kling? Are you... How are you connected with the Temple?"

"Oh," she smiled and nodded. "I'm a friend of Orante's. I just came from a meeting with him." The woman's eyes grew wide with admiration. She relaxed.

"None of us have heard the big guy's name either. He's some guy that used to come here... Maybe five or six years ago. He's a sleaze... Used to sit by the water hole as we swam, ogling our flesh. None of us liked him... I wonder if he's here to make trouble?"

"Maybe... What can he do?"

"The rumor is that some of the board have been stealing our money... Maybe he's behind that. Gwinn stopped them, I heard him telling Celesta. Thank God for guys like Gwinn. We have to own that sacred spot, you know, regardless of what they do."

Misty placed a serious look on her face. "We have to! We will! It can't be any other way."

The hall was clearing as the break ended. The lady smiled and was the last in, closing the door. They stood in the empty hallway. Issy was completely lost.

"Misty... What are you talking about? How do you know all that stuff?"

Misty gave her a reassuring look. "I'll explain later, thanks for going along... Let me lead for now, okay?"

Misty led Issy along the corridor, looking for a telephone. She could call Ter and give him the information. It was important. They passed a small office. A telephone was recharging on the wall. She led Issy in, and asked her to keep her eyes out for someone coming down the corridor. Then she picked up the phone and dialed the motel.

"No answer Mam. I don't think anybody is in the room."

"Can I leave a message?" He grunted.

After recording a short message she replaced the phone and they left the office. "Well, that's that, I guess," Issy said.

Let's follow them and see what else we can learn. If she had known that another phone was ringing in the security section and Misty's message was being repeated to one of Celesta's best, she would have been prepared for what happened next.



## Chapter 17

The centenarian stood in the doorway blocking it with his bulk. He was out of breath, radiating heat like a furnace.

ORANTE PLAYED THE ROLE of distant, learned observer. Otoa let Connors grunt and puff through his presentation. Finally, at Otoa's insistence, Gopher summarized.

"Okay, damn you guys, you got us! My company, Greater Development, wanted the canyon. Not the land, the water! You know now that we weren't going to develop it, or hurt you religious guys' site in any way. Right?"

Gwinn came in and closed the heavy door. No one acknowledged Connor's question.

"Kling and I need the water for a little project we're doing. A great project for Sedona, by the way! We can get rid of all the wastewater they produce down there and recycle it. It makes this canyon special. I mean the fault and aquifers and all. Right?"

Only Kling and Pillar were nodding.

"So, Pillar, knowing how much the Temple needs good investments, was putting Temple assets aside so that we could buy Prophet Canyon and... You know! Pillar! You tell them! Orante, has Pillar ever done anything to hurt the Temple? We've invested in half of main street for you... He's done a great job!"

Orante gave him a special slum-dumb look. Otoa grinned at Gwinn.

Gwinn took the ball. "So, who is the other player?"

Connors turned sweaty-pink. "What? What do you..." He saw that Gwinn wasn't buying his act.

"Oren Fulks. He thinks he's buying Prophet Canyon from GD. He has three days to come through with the money. He's already cleared the route for the pipeline and had his people locate a well site, but we have a surprise for him. We'll take his money, but Pillar is buying GD out."



Pillar chimed in. "Fulks and Nels formed the company that got the Forest Service trade land at the head of the canyon---leave me out of this!"

"What money did they use?" Otoa asked in a playful voice. He and Gwinn were grinning, unable to contain their glee.

Kling was pale; sweating profusely. "Our money!" he stated indignantly.

"Oh, *our* money! Money stolen from the Temple! The money you guys thought you had in your clutches. First, you used Temple money to buy and obtain options to the canyon, then Fulks was going to pay you for the land and options, right? But what you didn't know was that Fulks was not working with you two, he was working with Nels and someone else. They were also going to pay GD with Temple money. Then they would own the well site at the bottom, the trade land at the top...everything USAguaco bought with our money.

Connors and Kling were staring at Pillar. Pillar turned white! "No way! Absolutely not! Never... Bob, Stan? On God's honor, I never did that! Fulks didn't have access to our.. I mean Temple money for the buyout!"

Gwinn got in. "Sure Denny baby, it was supposed to be you! But as it turned out, it was your nasty little kid! He did it for you, right?" He was almost dancing.

Pillar folded. He was shaking his head and saying "no," over and over. He slumped to the floor with his head between his knees. "No, honest, No! It couldn't have been Dennis... No way! No, you're wrong!"

Kling was staring at Pillar while moving around the room. "I don't care if you did or he did, look how great it's worked out!"

The others took a minute to try to understand where Stan was coming from.

"The Temple bought through GD... Right? Now all we have to do is get it recorded in the Temple's name. Then we work together, right? We have the canyon... Fulks is out, the trade lands are of no use to him.

USAguaco injects and pumps, as a sub for the Temple. You guys do whatever religious stuff you want down there, you won't even know we exist... And think of the profits!"

Gwinn was shaking his head. "Temple's money! The Temple owns it all! Who needs you creeps... Even if it were possible, which it isn't.

Everyone was staring at Gwinn, totally confused. Orante was wide-eyed. He hadn't followed when Gwinn pointed out that the original money Nels and Fulks used came from Temple funds, and that somehow the Temple funds that Pillar had intended to use to buy out GD had ended up in the possession of Pillar junior. He looked over at Gwinn. The little man wasn't happy. He moved close to him and tried to get his attention. "Hold on Master Orante, trust me! I'll explain later."

Otoa was also confused. "What's up Gwinn?"

"The kid! He took the money! He had his dad's account numbers... I think he, Nels and Fulks are working together. The options and the purchased land are legally in Greater Development's name, even though we know that they used Temple money to buy. The problem is that Fulks has a legal contract to buy from GD, and because Pillar junior stole the money his dad stole to buy out GD, they have our Temple money to buy GD out..." He paused to let that sink in.

"So," Gwinn continued, "you may think that because Temple money was used, or to be used, that we could contest GD...or whoever gains ownership, right? Well, think again! The way these bastards stole Temple money didn't leave a money trail. We can't prove that it was Temple money they were using." He paused again to get a breath. "And finally, the money Nels and Pillar stole? Pillar junior has it now, but we can't prove that it is the Temple's money."

Connors looked like a marble bag. "So, what you're saying is... Is that Nels and Fulks and my nephew Dennis can own the land and options Kling and I got on the canyon, for nothing?"

Gwinn gave him an ugly frown. "The problem is Gopher, that you are so stupid! And, in fact, they now are close to owning it the same way you planned to, with Temple money. One thing still in our favor. Fulks doesn't own it until you get the cash and sign the papers."

Kling was leaning against the wall to support his weak knees. "All of our work! All of the time and effort... It's unfair! We won't sign!"

Pillar had climbed back onto his hind legs and was also using the wall for support. "My son wouldn't steal from me! Besides, Nels tried to have me killed! I know that from a very reliable source, the man Nels hired to kill me. And by now, I suspect that he's got his! I mean that guy is taking Nels out! Damn, it must be Fulks behind this!"

"Or your son!" Otoa growled. "Where is he?"

Orante was so confused that he was staring open-eyed and shaking his head. He turned to Gwinn. Gwinn gave him a wave-off. He turned to Otoa and whispered.

"Buddy, so what do we do now?"

Gwinn took charge. "Connors! Kling! Pillar! I don't care how you do it, but you stop Fulks and Dennis junior. If Nels is dead, then you have to stop the other two before..." He was interrupted. The door burst open and Doc Connely was standing there, puffing and angry.

The centenarian stood in the doorway blocking it with his bulk. He was out of breath, radiating heat like a furnace. His sudden appearance was so unsuspected and so unnerving to his son, Pillar, and Kling that they backed away from him, lining up against the back wall. Connely pretended to have a machine gun in his hands and sprayed them with lead. "It's like the St. Valentines Day massacre, isn't it?" He stared them down.

"Peter... Oh, sorry, Orante! I gave you this place and showed you how to protect the canyon. You screwed up, didn't you!"

Orante grimaced, thought about the charge, and took a step toward the old man.

“No! In fact I didn’t! We didn’t! These guys?” he pointed to the three stooges lined against the wall, “they stole our money and planned to use it to exploit the canyon’s fault line and tied-in aquifers. They failed. Unfortunately, they were exploited by others, for water, not for anything else. They’ll fail too!”

Connley was grim. “And what about the... Have you protected it?”

“So far!”

Otoa moved toward Connely, taking Orante’s lead. “Look, we’ve never reneged on our deal with you. In spite of the fact that the whole problem was caused by Connors here, he and Kling. Pillar was in on it... His son, Dennis junior? He stole our money from his father and allied with Nels and Fulks.”

“Fulks! That rotten SOB! He’s in on it? My God! How stupid can you all be! And Nels? He’s the accountant... My God!”

Pillar got himself energized somehow and began to try to get out and away. “Look, I went along with Connors--your son---because he told me that’s what you wanted. I never knew about Dennis. I don’t believe you now! All I wanted was to do what was right for the Temple.”

“And pigs fly!” Gopher screamed. His head was down in his shoulders and then up, bobbing from his turkey neck. “You greedy bastard! You’ve gained ownership of half of the strip with Temple money...in your name, with the Temple as a front. You never did anything for anybody unless you could squeeze a buck out of it. You don’t believe in Orante, and you never did anything for the Temple!” He went limp and leaned back against the wall.

It was Kling’s turn. “Look guys, we’re going to be able to pull this whole thing out and win. It’s a win-win situation if we play it right! All we have to do is join forces here and keep our eye on the prize. You know...we can protect the Temple’s interests and do the whole community a favor. Think how Sedona can grow if water is

assured; if sewage can be recycled... That's good for everybody. Win! Win! Win!"

Pillar wasn't finished. "One other thing! Just what in heaven's name is the Temple's interest in Prophet Canyon? A water hole? A Vortex? Some mineral or something that's worth a fortune? I don't get it!"

Doc Connelly puffed-up again. "And you never will! What the Temple's interests are, is none of your business! Bobbie my son, you screwed this up! We should have worked together. You've made your choice about me and the Connelly name. What I have, and it's considerable, goes to Orante here and the community. I'll be around at least another decade or so to make certain of that! I want you out of town, out of Arizona by the end of the day! If you are out, you'll find a generous check in the mail one day. If not, I'll break you and you'll spend the rest of your life cleaning water holes!" Connors turtled and glared at his father, but Doc ignored him.

"Kling! You are the most amoral bastard I have ever met. I have a job for you, you won't like it, but you'll do it because if you don't I have enough evidence about your dealings to put you away forever! Got that? Good! You will help me get that bastard Nels, control both Pillars, and then you will help me get Fulks! You and I will do it...and if I even suspect that... Well," and he walked forward and hooked his arm into Kling's, "I know we will work together on this... There's nowhere else you can turn!"

Pillar was as white as the wall, sweaty and shaking. Connelly, Orante and Otoa were focused upon him, now. The centenarian continued.

"And now we come to you! Mr. Society. Mr. 'civilized' Leader of Republican Arizona. You should die! Die painfully, right here and now! But, you married well. That will save you! Don't relax, because you will soon become the most generous man in Arizona! You will give money and resources to the Sedona community that create schools, develop a year-round recreation center

with the finest competition swimming pools, and guarantee that the library never has another financial worry. You will build neighborhood parks and provide scholarships. The Pillar name shall be honored, but your son will get absolutely nothing! Understand how things will go? Good! Now, you three miscreants, get the hell out of here! I'll call you when I need you! Go!"

When they cleared out, an acrid stench still filled the room. Orante opened the door and went across and pried a window out on its rod. Clean, hot air flowed through the space. Connely walked to the window and looked out on Prophet Canyon. Orante and Otoa stood at his side.

"I need to get down there soon, my friends." Orante nodded. Otoa was mentally making arrangements. It was very difficult to get the obese old man into the canyon. The last time, they had almost let him fall.

"Hey, we can drive in there now, most of the way, anyway. Otoa, the road is passable, isn't it?"

"I'll get Celesta on it! Is that okay, Doc?"

"You called?" Celesta came into the room, grinning.

"Celesta. Were you outside listening? Orante was concerned.

She looked startled at the accusation. "No... No, I would never do that! I really just came here...the door was open...I heard the part about 'getting me on it,' what ever 'it' is?"

Otoa smiled at her. "'It' is getting Doc Connely down into the canyon again. I think we can drive most of the way this time.

"I think so... I'll check it out. When?"

Orante smiled at her. "ASAP, Celesta. Latest, tomorrow morning."

She nodded, took out a pad and wrote something. Then she remembered why she had come. "I have a problem. Two women... Well really a woman and a girl, are here spying on us. They called Martel and gave him a report about Connors, Pillar and Kling."

"Misty and Issy by any chance?" Everyone turned toward Doc. How did he know?

"Good people. Don't worry! Celesta, you were working Martel... What do you think?"

"He's screwed-up, no doubt about that... He's not a threat. GD fired him. I don't know who he's working for now... Well, I may. I think he's helping Landsman now."

"That's even better! Paul's a man I respect, even though he thinks I'm evil incarnate. Let's talk to the girls," he turned toward Orante. "Do you know them?"

"Met with them an hour or so ago. Misty, is a kindred soul. Strange. I mean... Well, it's private, confidential. Nothing I can ethically say. Who's her man, anyway?"

"It's Martel. My source at the motel said that they are getting it on." Celesta had no interest in Martel. Still, she felt a twinge of jealousy.

Orante was thinking; his face became expressionless; he was in other space. Otoa walked quickly to his side, locked arms with him, slowly lowering him to the floor. A long minute passed as they all stared down at the Master. He came back.

"Thanks, good buddy! Orante was smiling. "Tomorrow morning, I'm looking forward to it! We drive in as far as we can. Invite Misty along...the young one too. Tomorrow will be very special!"

## Chapter 18

Pain and near starvation were driving her now, not instinct or functioning senses.

SHE MOVED LIKE FLOWING water, although her joints were stiff and the pain in her head was severe. The great slabs of tumbled rock that blocked easy access to the upper canyon provided the cover she needed. As she had used these paths, she had learned the easiest way to reach the hidden water and the open copse where rabbits, squirrels, deer and javelina could be found. She had maintained herself in this place although her ribs were exposed as if they formed an exoskeleton. Her wound had taken her left eye, making it difficult to navigate or to find food. Pain and near starvation were driving her now, not instinct or functioning senses. She needed an easy kill, hot blood; sustenance.

The antler had come back as she clamped down, driving her incisors into the spine of the deer. Her forward thrust had driven the sharp point of the antler deep into her cheek, up and into the socket of her eye. As they fell together, the antler twisted and its other prong broke through her gum just above her left incisor. The subsequent infection had caused the saber shaped tooth to fall out.

Half blind, hindered by the loss of the incisor; in anguish from the pain of an infection that wouldn't go away, she had changed from a sleek and powerful mountain lion into a crazed and desperate beast. She went on because, even damaged, she was able to find enough food to survive. She had learned to bite and hold with her one incisor and her front claws; to kill by ripping the guts out of her prey with her powerful hind feet. Those rear claws, sharp as razors, were her deadly weapons now.

The sun had taken away the moisture from the rains, dried the small pools and brought the land back to its desert form. The humidity which had been intense in



the morning, was now dropping and the air was clean and pure. It was hot, cooling as afternoon crept in slanted shadows across the canyon bottom. She moved as a skewed shadow, looking for some advantage.

She found a place on a great, flat-topped chunk of red rock not far from the small clearing and close to a game trail. To her right, she could see the black tip of her whipping tail. She crouched sideways across the rock, not able to face forward and see. In this position, by turning her head, she could survey the movements of living things in her domain.

With the shadows, life forms appeared. Small creatures too fast for her to catch; creatures a coyote would seek. She watched. She could take a coyote, if it got close enough.

From above, still far off, she heard clunks of rolling rocks and the strange sounds of footfalls, scraping soles, guttural voices. She crouched lower against the stone, listening. The awful sounds came closer. Hungry and mad, she slid like poured butter from her hold and made her way back into the secret passageways beneath the tumbled rocks. Not far inside this maze, she found a place where she could observe the area below.

Three men came, lugging a tripod and transit, tying blue plastic tape to tree limbs, putting dots on a topographical map, and driving all native life into hiding. Secreted in her lookout, the lion watched their progress down through the tumbled mazes of the upper canyon. When they disappeared from sight, she moved to another vantage point, vigilant and afraid.

At the small clearing the men stopped, set the tripod, and discussed their surveillance and concerns. After recording their GPS observations, they drove a stake deep into the center of the clearing. The wooden marker had numbers written in black on its sides, and trailing blue tape streaming from its top. One man looked at the sky and then his watch. The others followed him back up the trail they had just marked. After more than half an hour,

just as the sun's last rays were blocked from the canyon, they were gone.

Their smell wasn't gone! The stench of alien chemistry contaminated the clearing. Remaining, were the places they had marked as they relieved themselves, animals staking territory; creatures with the noxious power to drive all natural fauna away.

At dark, she crept out of her temporary lair and made way down canyon, widely skirting the clearing and the odors she feared. She made her way through rock falls and across flats too rocky to provide a habitat for the creatures she depended upon. Beneath her, a sound she was familiar with, rushing water. Sometimes the roar from beneath the ground was too loud and she moved away until she could hear other sounds again. She lunged at a cottontail, missed it. She caught a small sparrow and ate it, feathers and all. If anything, it only made her hungrier.

She found and followed a game trail recently used by javelina. The pungent, overpowering smell of the animals clung to her fur and clogged the passages of her nose. The scent was so fresh and strong that it blotted out all other scents. Her tail whipped in anticipation. She visualized her attack and focused, moving with her belly scraping the ground, her back claws digging in, ready to send her forward.

The javelina were moving fast. The sound of water flowing beneath the rocks blotted out all other sounds. Her digestive juices were flowing. The kill was just ahead. She was focused only on that. If the scent of the javelina and the noise of the water cascading through underground channels hadn't blocked out other scents and sounds she would have known that she was being led toward the edge of a great sinkhole, formed hours before by the torrents of new waters flowing toward the fault from underground streams.

She could not have imagined that only a few hours earlier three men had forced their way through the underbrush and tumbled rocks looking for a remote spot to

do an evil deed. One man had his hands tied behind him. The other two, a tall man and a short fireplug of a man, dragged the third between them.

No lion or javelina could have known that the weight of the men would make that seemingly insignificant difference in the geological balance of the roof of rock and soil which arched over the eroded-away emptiness of the cavern below. Without warning, the roof had collapsed. Of the three men, only the one with his hands bound survived. The other two were separated. One, the tall man, was washed away, screaming, into the bowels of the Earth. The other fell across a sharp-edged boulder, his back broken and his head bashed. In moments he too was washed away. The survivor, broken and bleeding, alive, was totally aware that there was no way out. Like all sinkholes, the sides were vertical. He lay on his side, more than ten feet from freedom. It grew dark, and Cal Nels saw the vacuity of his life for the first time.

The javelina came out of the brush at the edge of the sinkhole and moved around it, smelling death, smelling blood, excited by the food below. They knew these smells. They had eaten this meat before. They edged the hole, not convinced that there was no way down.

The lion came forward, seeing in the dark, but not well. She watched the javelina; selected a smaller one. It was easy prey. She came forward like liquid death and pounced. In the air she may have realized what she had done. It was too late. The pig-like animal hit the sharp rocks, bounced, and was washed away into the black depth. She landed on her feet, unharmed, crouched, and tried to get her bearings. Cal Nels, broken and bleeding, hands still tied behind his back, looked into the eye of the cat and screamed.

She crouched, senses screaming alarm. She could see the thing across from her in the pit. Its smell was one she had feared and run from; avoided with all of her skills since the first time her mother had taken her from the lair. The acrid stench and her conditioning made her hug the

ground. It overpowered her starvation. The creature didn't move. If it had, she would have attacked and defended herself. Over the roar of flowing water she could hear its whimpers and irregular breathing. It was a terrible thing.

She backed away, inch-by-inch until her rump touched the wall of the sinkhole. The thing didn't follow. Another pungent smell, one she also knew well, the smell of the blood of the animal she had moved to kill, came through to her. The javelina was gone, washed into the channel under the earth. She didn't know that. Her hunger drove her. She turned her head as she moved away, never losing sight of the creature she feared. It lay watching her, but made no move. She lifted her belly off the ground and began to edge sideways along the wall. The sound of water running was deafening. She was alert and strung tight, ready for the man or the javelina. Rocks slid into the water to her left.

She feared that if she took her eye off the creature, it would move at her. She fought the urge to turn and look in the direction of the sound. She inched sideways again, this time moving more than three feet. Beneath her nose she smelled the javelina's blood. She settled slowly into a half-crouch, still cocked, but able to move easier. Eye on the dangerous creature across the pit, she stepped nearer the edge where the javelina had been swept away. Suddenly, so fast that the energy which kicked her muscles into a leap, drove the loose rocks and earth beneath her down, completely unbalancing her and keeping her from getting back onto stable soil. In seconds, she was underwater, twisting, snarling bubbles, sucking in great lungs full of water; she was gone.

Cal Nels was frozen in place. His wrists ached from the nylon rope, his hands were numb behind him. He was scraped and bruised from the fall into the pit. The sky above was black, pierced by stars so bright he should have seen the wonder. Instead he cowered.

The rush of water was lessening. The runoff from a thousand little aquifers over who knows how many

thousand acres was diminishing. Still, the collapsed roof which had once covered the cavern, now a sinkhole, was slowly being eaten away by the water. His little patch of stable earth was shrinking, rock-by-rock, dirt slide by dirt slide. He had seen the end of his human enemies, the javelina, and the mountain lion. At any time, he knew that he too would be swept into the bowels of the Earth.

## Chapter 19

Kling was playing him and he...he almost cried. He had just been conned out of fifty thousand bucks!

STAN KLING HAD FELT the sting of the old man's threats. Well, he had been threatened before! He had told them, 'Keep our eyes on the prize,' but oh no, they couldn't see the 'win' in any situation. Damn them! Well, he knew how to pull this out of their hands. He played it smooth until he got back into town. At his motel he placed a call, set up a meet, and then took a long, hot shower. In an hour his fortunes would change.

They met in a parking lot on Oak Creek at the base of the West Fork Trailhead, a place so filled with tourists that locals avoided it like long lines. He was too cheap to pay the entry fee, so he sat in his car, waiting. The dark green Mercedes pulled in and parked next to his new Ford SUV. They rolled down adjoining windows so that Kling could fill his new ally in on the day's happenings. Then, the Mercedes driver got out, came around and dropped a manila envelope bulging with cash into his car. Electric windows went up. The stage was set.

Oren Fulks leaned back in the plush upholstery. Thanks to Kling, he now had everything he wanted. He knew all of the players, their positions and their game. He knew who was out, and who was in, or thought they were in. He laughed. He had blocked the marshal, questioned the credibility of the medical examiner, and positioned himself to get what he deserved. All he had to do now was let his attorneys file papers, move his pawns into position, and with USAguaco and Kling, rake in the money at both ends. That's what he had gone into public service for. How could anyone oppose him? It was all for the public good.

As the driver negotiated their way back down canyon into Sedona, he thought about the amazing intelligence Kling had shared with him. It was too good. Something seemed out of line, some part he had missed?

Something that could go wrong? What was it? He ran up and down his position like an accountant checking figures. Kling had said that the Temple only wanted to protect... What? What did they have there? What was so valuable that the Temple guys could overlook the millions to be made from water? Amazing! Kling said he didn't know. Bullshit! He had to know! So it had to be something big. Minerals? The lost goldmine rumored to be somewhere around here? Something big! Something important! So important that water paled in comparison. Kling did know! Of course, why else would he have come with his bullshit story of infighting---saying that the old bastard Connely was taking over. He laughed out loud. Connely was at least a hundred years old. Senile! A windbag nothing now! Powerless; as good as dead.

Kling was Orante's and Pillar's front man. Kling was playing him and he...he almost cried. He had just been conned out of fifty thousand bucks! Kling! What? They thought he just fell out of a hay wagon? He'd given Kling \$50K for nothing... Kling set him up! "Damn him!" he screamed.

All he needed was a plan. He could end-up with --- He sat back, smiling. "Think of that \$50K as your last scam, Kling!" he growled, imagining Kling across from him in the car. He wouldn't have time to deposit his money today, too late. He wouldn't try to deposit \$50K at a drive-up window. No, he would wait and put it in a safe deposit box. If he could get Kling out of the motel and on some task... Kling would hide the money in the motel room. He'd get it back while Kling was away on a fool's mission. Sure, good plan! Other GD papers and information might be there too. Without the money and papers, Kling would be lost.

He picked up the phone. No, too soon. Kling wouldn't be back at his motel yet...even if he could get a signal out of the canyon. He put the phone back and waited, gloating. Wealth greater than water! God was good!

Kling was surprised. Fulks never did business first-hand. That proved he trusted him. He was warmed by that. The commissioner was a true partner, not like that sniveling Connors. He held the phone tightly to his ear.

"Yes, I understand. Of course. Tonight? I'll do it! Then I'll sleep up there in my car and see who appears in the morning. And Oren, thank you! What a great idea!"

He didn't have boots. His Nikes would do just as well. He unpacked some jeans, a better shirt and of course, sun screen and a hat. He put his stuff together, stopped by the hardware store and picked up six 24" rebar rods, aluminum surveyors' caps that he could stamp with Fulks' information, a metal die stamp kit, a compass and a canteen. By dusk he was on his way, munching Snickers bars and gloating. He hummed as he drove, certain that his fortunes were made and that his adherence to his principles had paid off. Besides, he was smarter than Fulks. He'd end up with everything. Just wait.

No one was around. He passed through the subdivision and found the fresh road cut. There were tire tracks, they looked fresh, he couldn't tell. There were no footprints. Someone was up there, so he would have to be careful that no one saw him place the survey stakes. His Ford SUV was new. He went slowly, avoiding brush piles and cuts made by the heavy rains. He followed the track up, winding and bumping, moving closer to his target. It would be dark in about half an hour. He clicked on his headlamps, then turned them off. He could still see better without them.

In a short time he came to a place where a giant tree had been knocked down across the trail. He could see how its massive trunk had been sliced by chainsaws to provide access. Two-foot log sections were standing along the trail, seats in a picnic ground. There was water flowing from where the giant sycamore's roots had been torn out of the earth. 'Water,' he thought, 'I'm the only one who really understands the power of water!'



The gushing flow had made a deep cut across the trail. It was impassable. He looked to his right. Easy, he could get around, all he had to do was go over a few branches that had once been the tops of the tree and drive over a few bushes. They might scrape the paint. What the hell, what were SUV's for!

He backed up until he found the easiest way to bypass the ditch. There were other tracks here. He should have been paying more attention. Whoever had gone ahead of him had done the same thing he was planning to do. He crept forward carefully, stopped when the tires spun against the roundness of a branch, and put the Ford into four-wheel drive. This was fun! He hadn't tried four-wheel before. The earlier vehicle's tracks were hard to follow. He lost them. He pressed down on the accelerator and the vehicle leapt forward. He drove over several branches without a problem, saw thicker branches ahead and gave the SUV the power it needed to crawl over them.

When the great sycamore had fallen, its crown bashed against the ground splintering the larger branches, breaking some ends into sharp, spear-like points. As Kling forced his vehicle forward, focused upon his path, looking for the tracks he had been following, darkness hid the arching spear directly ahead. He gunned the powerful vehicle. Tires squealing, it rose up on, and suddenly lurched over an obstacle. Before he could react --- even while the vehicle was free and driving on --- the arched branch was driven through the windshield and impaled him and the headrest. For a few seconds the vehicle forced itself forward. His foot was on the accelerator pedal, no brain telling it to push. The SUV came to rest there, in Drive, idling as if it were waiting for the sycamore to release it. After dark, as evening's cool breezes came to play, the branches shuddered then settled; the *Spirit of the Sycamore* was gone.

## Chapter 20

He must have been doing ninety or a hundred, he had plenty of speed to get into the air, but the control flap's pins held. His control surfaces were locked.

I COULDN'T GET IN touch with Doc Connely. Misty was up at the Temple, Landsman was doing his business stuff. I tried to call Cain, and got a funny message. The Dispatcher told me that she couldn't contact him because he was not available. I chewed on that, but could make nothing of it. I wanted company; someone to talk things over with. I thought of the young architect, Dean Arbor. I tried the number that had worked before, one digit up from the listed number.

"Dean? This is Ter Martel. Listen, do you have any time... I mean, can we get together, maybe go flying?"

"Hey Ter. I was hoping to hear from you. Things have been crazy here... Suddenly everyone is interested in comprehensive planning and in alleviating the traffic situation. The pressure is on! Sure, it would do me good to get away for a while. Pick me up?"

"How soon? I can be there in fifteen."

"Great, I've been hearing some wild things... I'll be out front."

I tried to bring Dean up to speed as we drove toward the airport. When I told Dean that the whole development thing had been a blind, he laughed.

"For a time I thought I was missing something... What did GD know that the rest of us missed? So, what's there that everybody wants?"

I told him and he wasn't surprised.

"Ter, it seems that these days everything hereabouts comes back to water. Water to use and water to waste. So, Prophet Canyon is to be our recycling center? No, nothing would clean out the sewage by the time it went through the canyon."

I told him he was right, and that someone had formed a company called USAguaco. "They got five acres between Tarantula Pass and the wastewater return line. Landsman suspects that they can do tertiary treatment and then put the water back in the ground."

"And Fulks pumps it out before it goes down the aquifer Sedona depends on... That dries up the lower wells. He gets the government to come down hard on the existing water company, they sell out or are taken over. Fulks comes to the rescue and... I get it... Damn!"

"Yeah, only there are other players, and that's driving me mad right now. I've been fired by GD --- Gopher Connors and Stan Kling. Landsman has hired me to find out what is going on. I've got feelers everywhere... I needed someone to talk to...to help me figure this thing out."

We topped airport hill and I turned left along the access road. I planned to park near the hanger and get into the air as quickly as possible. The day had turned gorgeous. All I could think of was the beauty up there. Before we got to the hangers, we were stopped by a guy in an FAA jacket at a barrier across the road.

"May I ask what your business is up here? And may I see some identification!"

I told him. Dean and I both showed him our ID's.

"You are Terrance Martel...you filed the complaint about watered fuel?"

I nodded.

"Have you been notified that we have determined what happened?"

"No Sir. Can you tell us?"

"No Sir, but if you will go back and around to the main office, I'm sure that they will fill you in."

We parked and walked over to the office. I saw the Cessna that Pillar owned sitting at the far edge of the tarmac. Someone had put stops in the control surfaces. I could see the trailing orange ribbons. The plane was grounded... That gave me a thrill.

We introduced ourselves. The guy I had talked to on the telephone filled us in. Pillar Junior had paid the clerk who ran the office to water the fuel in my rental 172. They didn't know why, and I wasn't in the mood to tell them, not yet, anyway. They had notified the local police and the search was on for Pillar. The problem was, that someone had probably tipped him off. They hadn't been able to contact his father either... His mother wasn't sure where either of them was, but she swore that they weren't together... "So you-a can-a almost a-bet that they-a are," Warner said convincingly.

"They-a, a-tried to-ah kill you? Why? You-a must-a know?"

I told him I was working on it and that he would be the first to know when I did. "I'm here in Arizona to represent a developer... Pillar didn't want me to find out anything I guess."

"Well-a. Don't leave-a Sedona until-a we get Pillar and-a you can-a give-a a deposition."

He gave me a note to let us by the guard and get to the hanger. Dean was getting a real kick out of it all.

We didn't use the little tractor to pull the 172 out of the barn. The two of us easily manhandled the beauty out into the sunlight. I was starting my check-out when we heard a ruckus from back near the office. We heard horns honking and someone on a PA giving orders. As we rounded the hangers and looked toward the main building, I saw a puff of white smoke come from the left engine of the Cessna twin, then a puff from the right engine. Before the RPM's were up, the pilot had the plane moving and was making for the runway. Even from our distance, I could see the orange fluorescent control flap ribbons blowing in the props' wakes.

Pillar was making a run for it! The FAA guys were scurrying around, wondering what to do. How does a two hundred-pound man stop an airplane? Pillar had the plane throttled full, and came our way, fast. Before he reached our end of the runway, he threw the plane around with

brakes and engines and began his take off. He must have been doing ninety or a hundred, he had plenty of speed to get into the air, but the control flap's pins held. His control surfaces were locked. The plane continued down the runway, was airborne when the mesa dropped away, and then dropped out of sight. We heard the explosion as it made a new hole in Carroll Canyon.

We ran toward the office, it seemed like the right thing to do at the time. An FAA guy was down, he had wrestled with young Pillar and been hit hard, but not before he latched onto a large suitcase. Another guy was trying to get the case closed. It was difficult, as the stacks of bills inside were going every direction.

Wagner came up as we got there. After checking the status of his man, he looked at the suitcase and turned to me.

"Any-a idea where-a this-a money came from?"

I nodded and told him.

"You-a mean-a you think he-a stole it-a from a-ah Temple?--- A Religious Order?"

I assured him that he probably did.

Dean and I were both shaken by the crash and its implications. Without discussing it, we rolled the 172 back into the hanger and battened it down. I had haunting visions of Pillar's last moments. Every pilot harbors fears of a mechanical failure so serious that he can do nothing but watch the ground come in through the windscreen. I pushed the thoughts from my mind and focused upon Sedona. I pulled off the road at the overlook atop Airport Mesa and kicked the emergency brake on hard. We sat, looking down on beauty. The crash had left Dean in a mild state of shock. I saw him shake his head to refocus his thoughts. He spoke for the first time since we left the FAA agent.

"Ter, I'm concerned that you aren't seeing the true Sedona... The one I know and love. I mean, you've talked to Connelly and others who are so caught up in their little parts of history that they can't see what's really happening

here. I want you to look at the whole picture, not malfunctioning or aberrant parts. We can all focus on the past and process and reprocess the meaning of actions that are defacto. I know that approach goes nowhere... It results in nothing positive. It burns people out. Or, we can work together to form a vision. A blueprint, if you will, of the ideal community we can build... Are building! Everywhere I look," and he pointed to the city below, "I see where we have made great progress in building a community. Sure, it hurts when vested interests control governmental processes or do ugly things. In fact, it's happening less and less. Every year new people are coming to our community and bringing insights and skills with them that can help us form our vision. They aren't caught up in past ills... They want to focus upon quality of life issues. They are the majority now."

Things he said clicked and fell into place. The things I had been focusing on, primarily because of Doc Connely, were negative issues. Yet, I had sensed that things were not the way he painted them. I think it was the day I went into the library and learned that it was built by the people of Sedona without relying on tax dollars, when the right message was planted in my mind.

"I hear you, Dean. Hell, look at it! I was told that in the '60s this place was a wide spot on a country road; the City of Sedona wasn't incorporated until the late '80s; the Village is still rural, unincorporated. I wonder how many communities have come so far in such a short time?" I paused as another thought hit me. "But Dean, this community has just experienced a terrible blow... The fires, the people killed and homes burned! How can any community recover from horrors like that?"

"People respond to crisis even when they won't respond to any other call to citizenship. Horrible as that cataclysm was, it will bring the community together. I wish people got involved and helped for other reasons... A lot do, you know. I've heard at least five people say, 'Never

Again!' People I never saw or heard from before." He adjusted the seat so that he had more leg room.

"Ter, the people I work with and for have a passion about this place that is unequaled by anything I have ever seen, anywhere. We are building something fine! We are infected by the spirit that created the American Dream: the opportunity to create something decent and lasting. Can you imagine living at a more exciting time in history?"

I started the Jeep, and backed away from the edge.

"Buddy, I've been here less than a week. Strange as it may seem, this place and people like you have changed the way I think. Don't laugh!

The guy who came here to save the GD Project was 180 degrees different from the man sitting beside you now." I paused as a thought came bounding out of some chamber in my mind. "Dean. Maybe there is a special energy here... Maybe this is a magic place... I mean... Something has charged me with new energy. Something has put me in touch with a part of me I have suppressed since I was a kid."

## Chapter 21

Cain, Martel and Fielder traded information like kids with baseball cards.

CAIN RECEIVED TWO PHONE messages as he left the Courthouse. The first was a long message from a fellow officer stationed at the Barrows Hospital in Phoenix. Bill Speck was conscious and although he didn't know the tall man who shot him, he claimed that he saw a man named Cal Nels waiting in the car the man had driven up in. He knew Cal Nels because he had once dated his secretary, Valerie Lewis. Cain's mind started sorting.

His research had given him new insights into the Whitetops' concerns and the legal issues regarding access roads, pipelines and well heads in Prophet Canyon. Before contacting Martel and confirming his findings, and getting Martel to figure-in the involvement of Cal Nels, who must be the CAL on the bracelet he had found ground into the dirt near the water hole, he decided to go back in and document his research by photocopying as many of the records as possible. It took time, and it was necessary police work.

The other phone message was an order to report in immediately. The order made him nervous. Something big had come up... Or? He had taken personal leave and was on his own time. Something was wrong! He put the second message in his pocket and spent the next hour documenting his findings. He would call Martel after he found out why they wanted him to report.

As he entered the building, the guard directed him to the DA's office. His body tightened. He sensed that he was under attack and tried to prepare for it. He entered the outer office in the DA's section. The secretary gave him a wry look and handed him a sealed envelope. "You may want to read this. You'll have to sign for it. The DA's busy, he won't be available today."



Cain took the letter and turned quickly away from the desk without signing the form the woman was trying to hand him. He sat on the edge of the seat of one of the vinyl chairs and tore the envelope open. As he read, his eyes teared and sadness gripped him. He was hereby notified that *“...due to serious charges against him, including insubordination, threats to go around established lines of communication, allowing the use of a county vehicle and property by one or more unauthorized person(s), deviation from his assigned duties, and other charges not yet filed, he had been placed upon administrative leave until hearings could take place.”*

The letter went on to inform him that he was to cease any and all activities as an employee of the county until further notice, and that he was not to use county vehicles or equipment.” They had thought of everything.

“Mr. Cain, you are to sign this letter acknowledging that you have received the notification!”

He stood, took a deep breath and straightened his back. Without responding or looking her way, he turned and left the office. He could hear her calling after him until the hiss of the closing door shushed her.

Outside, he put the keys over the visor, got his personal gear out, and locked the Jeep’s doors. He knew they would come after him to sign the paper acknowledging that he had received notification. Without his signature... Well, he wouldn’t give them that edge. He moved quickly across the street and down toward the center of town. The strange thing, the thing that was bothering him the most, was that he felt relieved. He wasn’t in touch with his feelings enough to know why. He found a pay phone and called Fielder.

“I’m sorry Marshal Cain, but Doctor Fielder is no longer here.”

“But I just talked to him two hours ago.”

“I know Sir, we’re all upset. We’re happy for him, tho’. Doctor was given early retirement... They made him an offer he couldn’t refuse. He had to leave right away,

tho'. We won't even be able to give him a retirement party. He certainly was upset, I understand it tho'. I guess it came as a surprise tho'."

"Do you have his home phone number?" Cain was recoiling from the hit.

"Oh no Sir! We're not allowed to give that out, but I would to you, an officer...except you know he has an unlisted number."

"If he calls in... Tell him I've also been clipped. Tell him we'll get together."

It took Cain half an hour to get a taxi. He had the lady drop him off a block from his apartment. Good thing. A county car was parked across the street. He went around back, and got to his apartment without being seen. In fifteen minutes he had his personal records, some clothing and miscellaneous items in a suitcase. He stuffed his camping gear in his backpack and two plastic grocery bags. His truck was parked in the back lot. He left the apartment, got out of the building and was on the road toward Sedona, a fugitive of sorts, fleeing the injustice of power.

Susan had thought about taking the rest of the day off. She hadn't heard from Cain, and although Martel had been convincing about Cain's intent, she had been down too many of these crooked roads not to be wary. She called for a replacement, then sat, sorry that she had. Why go home? At least here, she wasn't as lonely. Her replacement came in, she helped the woman get orientated, got her paycheck, and went out the door. Someone in an older Ford truck honked. She looked over, trying to see through the tinted glass. The window went down and she saw Cain motioning her over.

"Hi Marshal, is this 'cloak and dagger' stuff?"

He laughed, so relieved to see her that he had tears in his eyes.

"I lost my cloak *and* dagger! They just took them away from me. I'm almost a civilian again!"

“You’re kidding! Aren’t you?” She knew that he was serious; noted his damp eyes. “Oh, am I glad you’re here! You need a friend, and guess what? So do I!”

They left his truck in the busiest area at the far end of the lot and took her car. She drove to her apartment without thinking. He told her that due to his investigation of things in Prophet Canyon, an investigation that implicated a powerful politician, he had been brought up on charges and placed on administrative leave. She got angry, thought about it, and wondered why he wasn’t.

“Oh, I’m angry. I plan to clear myself... The strange thing is I’m not angry enough. It’s like... well, maybe it’s time I left law enforcement... I mean, there is so much that I want... like a normal life, for instance.”

“What would you do? I mean, isn’t it hard to start over?”

“You know, on my way to Arizona, I stopped off in southwestern Colorado to see a friend. I fell in love with the area. He wanted me to join him in a business he was building and do investigative work on the side. I had this job, it paid better... I had already committed myself.”

“You’d go there?”

“In a flash...” He felt more than saw her angst, “but maybe not alone...”

“It would take some serious getting to know one another...”

“I’d like that a lot.”

She fed him and coddled him as he organized his papers. He tried to call Martel. He didn’t want to leave a message.

“Will you want to stay here?” Susan realized how dumb the question was as she asked it.

“I... Susan, I can’t ask that. I can’t!”

“I can! Ask that, I mean. I have a tiny guest room... We can take time... I’d like to have you here, as a friend right now. Okay?”

He called Martel's motel again. No answer. He left a message that he hoped no one would trace to him.

"Tell him Susan and Arnie called, just got in town. He knows where we're meeting for dinner."

"Susan, call Friendly's and tell them that a guy name of Martel will come in or call. Ask them to give him this number."

Susan jumped when the telephone rang. Cain had fallen asleep, his papers and notes spread around the big old chair he fit so well.

"Hi! The waitress here at Friendly's gave me this number... My name is Fielder and, well forgive me if this is out of line. I'm trying to find Cain."

Susan didn't answer. She put her hand over the mouthpiece and whispered to her groggy companion.

"It's a guy name of Fielder."

He came awake and reached for the phone.

"Doctor?"

"I can't believe I found you. I remember you said you were calling from this place... It was the only lead I had. I got your message... You got the axe too?"

"I'm on administrative suspension, pending investigation. Look, can you come here?"

He gave Fielder the address and told him to be careful. "Oh, and Fielder, let me talk to the waitress again."

He handed the phone back to Susan, "Tell the waitress to expect Martel... Tell her to give Martel this number, and thank her."

Fielder didn't take much time getting to Susan's apartment. As Susan greeted him, the phone rang again. Cain answered.

"Arnie?"

"I prefer Cain... Good to hear your voice, Martel." He gave Martel the address and told him to be careful, "You never know who's watching!"

Susan fell into the role she knew best in life, hostess and comfort maker. While the men talked, she

nurtured them and shared her meager fare. If it is possible to glow with happiness, Susan lit up the room.

Cain, Martel and Fielder traded information like kids with baseball cards. They put isolated pieces of information together, discussed the ramifications and finally, after almost an hour, concluded that someone had to go into the canyon. They weren't sure why, they sensed that something they would discover there was important enough for someone to kill for.

"Okay," Martel summarized, "we know that water is the issue. Fulks at one end tapping it out. USAguaco at the other, pumping it in. That's important, but you say Fulks has the power to pull that off without fear of anyone. He wouldn't have to kill... Especially not Whitetops; not a girl. So, after water we have what? Turquoise? Gold? A major silver find? Copper?"

Cain was sitting back in the big chair, staring at the ceiling; thinking.

"I think it has to be something like that... You know, the Temple folks... They've had access to Prophet Canyon for decades, accountable to no one. Suddenly, others want the canyon; access to its water. That's when Val Lewis and Carrigan died... Or were they killed? Fielder, are we close?"

"Of course. I had linked Val Lewis's death to anaphylactic shock, caused by the injection of fluid by the assassin bugs. I had your notes, Cain, about the can with the lid punched to let air in. I had enough mashed bugs to... Well, I had a case for murder. She ran to the water to get away from the Assassins... She went into shock and drowned as a result. After Carrigan's autopsy I concluded that he died from a fall from at least fifteen feet above the ground. It would be a little less than that if someone picked him up and threw him down, as I suspect happened. I stated in my record that it was impossible to get the kind of injuries he had, the injuries that killed him, by rolling down a fifteen percent grade covered with thick brush. Again, I

concluded that there was sufficient evidence to indicate murder.”

Susan poured more coffee into his cup. “And so they had to get rid of you... But how?”

“Fulks! He threatened to cut the department’s budget if they didn’t cut staff immediately. I’m sixty-six. He implied that my work was reflecting my age and ‘impaired mental condition’ and urged them to, ‘Treat him right’ by giving me early retirement and a large bonus. He told them to do it now, or else he wouldn’t go along with the bonus.”

“Power! There’s one like him in every system.” Cain was shaking his head.

Martel thought a moment. “The Temple folks know what’s down there. I suspect, from what an old guy who calls himself Anasazi Bill, and from Doc Connely, and others have told me that it has to do with water. Lots of water, maybe more than anyone suspects... Maybe enough to sell water to Scottsdale and Phoenix. Imagine what it would be worth? You know, Stan Kling’s specialty is water... That’s got to be it!”

Cain agreed. “Right Martel, and Fulks is going for it. Do you think he’s working alone?”

“He can’t be... He’s either connected with the Temple group or... Or with Connors, and Kling... Jeeze, and Pillar and Nels and... Dennis Pillar died this afternoon as I told you. He had enough money in a suitcase to... It was Temple money, I’m sure of that... Well, it had to be!”

Susan interrupted. “Those two men I told you about, their conversation... Dennis Junior and money... Does that connect?”

“Like fat and food... Orante and the Temple guys are major players in this... What?”

The phone rang again. Susan looked around at the men and shrugged. She answered, seemed confused and then... Oh sure, you’ve been in with Ter Martel!” She handed the phone to Martel, smiling.

“This is Martel.”

“Ter. I’d almost given up trying to find you. I left messages at the motel, but nothing... I thought we should try Friendly’s... We sat there for over an hour waiting and then the waitress... She gave us Susan’s number. You’ll never believe what happened to us today... I mean, what we learned. Orante and Doc Connors and... Well, a bunch of Temple folks are taking us into Prophet Canyon tomorrow morning! Are you still going in from the top? We’re going to drive in up the new road cut because Doc Connelly is too old to go by the trail.” She paused, wondering how to say what was really driving her. “Ter, I...I mean. We have something very important to talk about too.”

Martel gave Misty directions to Susan’s house, handed the phone back to Susan, telling her as he did that he had taken the liberty of inviting two more guests to the party.

“I asked the girls to go to the Temple today and check things out... They’ll be here soon to fill us in. I won’t try to explain until they get here. Doc are you up to going into Prophet Canyon?”

Fielder shook his head and answered without deliberation.

“No. There was a time, but no! I will be much more valuable to this case if I go to Phoenix tomorrow and give a deposition. My profession has seen this type of power and cover-up before. I’ve contacted my superiors on the state level. They want to depose me as soon as possible. I can get Fulks, believe it!” He smiled a satisfied little comfort to himself. “And Marshal, when I do my part, you’ll never have to have that hearing. His railroad will be out of steam!”

## Chapter 22

In the sand near the water, two distinct types of sign. To the left, a perfect depression made by a human foot. Near it, the deep pads and pug marks of a lion.

DAWN CAUGHT US AS we were bouncing along the old Forest Service road, navigating by first light and sentinel silhouettes. Streaks of pink radiated into the eastern sky. The temperature cooled to its low. High above, birds were moving...tilde in a lightening sky. The Jeep caught every bump and drove its complaints into our kidneys. I slowed as Cain searched for the topography of slickrock that led toward the notch which was Tarantula Pass. The sun's rays were almost horizontal as they swept across the open places. In that light, ruts showed up as curling lines across the cut-up planes of open gravel which interspersed the bare sandstone. Cain grabbed the dash hand strap, leaned out into the cold air. "Hold it!"

I got the Jeep stopped and sat looking around Cain at the shadowy track working its way up, over and seemingly beyond, toward a notch far up in the ragged ridge line.

"What do you think?" I wanted Cain to confirm my thoughts.

"We should see stakes or survey markers on the other side of the road where USAguaco bought their five acres."

We drove forward, looking both directions. "Stop!" Cain was out of the Jeep, making his way up toward the pass. "Look Martel! Someone tied survey tape to this bush."

I looked up, past where Cain was pointing. "I see more. Think that's enough to bank on? These markers go toward the pass."

"Yeah. Drive!"

I tried to retrace the tire ruts we could see shadowed from below. I drove up, following the easiest



route. In a few minutes we could see that we were in the right place. Tarantula Pass was the notch above us. "That Blazer I told you about should be parked up above... It's in pinon and juniper, so it must be close to the edge over there." I pointed to the edge of the slickrock where bushes and trees stood, increasing their numbers, waiting to cross.

I cut the Jeep back and forth in wide sweeps to help it climb easily. As we neared the trees, Cain pointed to the Blazer. Its beige color and layers of red dirt made it difficult to spot. I drove into a sheltered place where the Jeep could be partially hidden and cut the engine. We sat, feeling the warmth of the sunlight as particles hit us.

Cain was uneasy. "What the hell, I might as well tell you. I talked to a ghost of a woman, dressed in white, the night I spent near the water hole. She called herself Raven. I've never mentioned it to anyone... I'm not sure I wasn't hallucinating."

"I saw a woman dressed in white standing next to a boulder watching our plane as we flew over. I never mentioned her either... That's why I wanted to come in this way. She was up in the rocks, just over the pass."

We laughed at each other, feeling good about our shared secrets and confessions.

"I would suppose that's her Blazer. We can look at the registration... Maybe her name is 'Raven.'"

We walked over to the mud-caked truck. "Door's locked."

Cain laughed. "It's a Chevy man! Got a hanger or stiff wire?"

"Hanger."

"Open says me!"

"No registration, nothing! Whoever owns this Blazer doesn't want us to know who they are. What's this?"

Cain pulled a wrinkled photocopy of a news article from under the seat.

"About a mitigation project... Old! The road between Cottonwood and Sedona. Says they found

thirteen sites in the right-of-way. Paleo and Sinagua, Yavapai, Apache... I don't know, does it mean anything?"

"Maybe our Blazer owner is interested in Indians?"

"Maybe archeology? I wouldn't give it much credence; everybody loves that stuff."

We were anxious to get going. The faint foot trail led up and toward the south side of Tarantula Pass. I led, Cain was close on my heels. He was breathing hard because he carried the pack and our supplies. He stopped, dropped the pack and readjusted the coil of climbing rope. I checked the ground. The ways of observing sign I learned in the service helped me locate several moccasin tracks.

"Damn rope keeps flopping. It bothers me!"

"I can carry some stuff..." He shook his head. "At least let me carry the pack when you get tired, okay?"

We were both breathing hard when we reached a small arch at the edge of the notch. I had assumed that we would see into the canyon. I imagined that from the pass we would see the whole cut laid out before us. My aerial vantage point hadn't provided me with a ground perspective. All we could see was a field of tumbled sandstone blocks. Cain pointed out that as the fault moved, the slabs had come tumbling down. Above, on the steep cliffs, I could see the scars left where they had separated. We stared across a field of boulders and sharp-edged sandstone blocks, some the size of busses.

Blue surveyors' flagging marked a way over and through the fall. If I were a mountain goat, I wouldn't have hesitated.

"Cain, the surveyors tape? Should we follow it?"

"Look Ter, if they were marking a route for a pipeline... Well, wouldn't they have picked the straightest route, not the easiest one?"

I agreed with him. They wouldn't blast all this rock out of the way. "They plan to go over the pile. They didn't pick the easiest route."

We made our way across the jumbled field, boulder to boulder, sometimes having to climb down between great slabs. I kept the blue tape in sight, but it was often easier to make way by going along the right side.

As the canyon widened, the going got easier. I climbed to a place that looked flat; a good lookout. There were prints in the soft soil, more moccasin prints. I remembered what Cain had said about Raven; she wore leather moccasins.

“Hey buddy, over here!”

Cain agreed with me. “She’s been here. Look at the view! This is a perfect lookout.”

There wasn’t any way to read a trail from the lookout. It was all rock. There was nothing that would hold a track for another three hundred yards. We kept climbing down, sliding and gripping, hugging and puffing. Below, I could see a blue flag waving in the center of a level clearing.

“Martel. Look here!”

I came across and down to Cain’s level as fast as I could. He was looking into a crevice between two gigantic slabs of red sandstone.

“It’s water running. I heard it and from here you can see it.”

We crawled down into the crevice, scraping our arms and feeling for some solid connection with our feet. I dropped the last foot or so, and heard Cain land beside me. It was cooler, dark and humid in the hole. I inched forward, giving my glasses time to un-photogray.

“Looks like a pool ahead.”

“Beautiful... And, see those!”

We both stopped at the entrance to an open cavern where a pool of silver water glimmered in the half-light. In the sands near the water, two distinct types of sign. To the left, a perfect depression made by a human foot. Near it, the deep pads and pug marks of a lion.

I looked up through the cleft in the rocks. Lion? I wanted out of there. I knew better than to ever let a cat get above me.

"Looks like the human tracks are a few days old, the soil's dried out," Cain said. He crouched examining the prints, probing at their edges with a short twig. "The Cat's marks are fresher. Today or last night, I'd guess. Our friend Raven's been here, some time before the cougar from the looks of the tracks."

"She must have a place around here... We'd never find it in this maze. Let's get on with it!"

The sun was hot, reminding us of how nice the shaded caverns and crevices were. We felt better keeping to the high ground. From the size of the pads, that lion was big. It took another five minutes for us to work our way down to the clearing. I pulled the stake and tried to make sense of the letters and numbers written along it. Cain came over and said something about GPS readings. I nodded, that made sense. The satellites were always overhead. Today, all a surveyor needed to do was read his position and record it. I imagined what Fremont would have given for a GPS system. Our times and techniques bore no similarities to the past. We were technological beings.

From the clearing we had to bash our way through dense brush and around trees with branches hugging the ground. We followed animal paths, forced to crawling on too many occasions. Every few yards we had to climb over or make our way through rockfalls. As we passed the places where rivulets had brought down slides of earth and rock, some deep enough to be called side canyons, we heard water running below us.

"Hey buddy, let's stop and rest."

I was sweating and itching; he didn't have to twist my arm.

Cain smiled as he let a dribble of water trickle down his chin onto his chest. "Martel, it's exactly like I imagined

it would be. A desert canyon overgrown with brush and trees, clogged with fallen rock. Nothing here suggests anything of value.”

I had to agree. I let my gaze float up to the canyon’s rim, marveling at the beauty of the cliffs and the eroded-out chimneys and monoliths. In some places the erosion had formed temples. In other places, stone beings marched from the escarpments. It was getting hotter.

“Cain, let’s keep going. It’s narrow here, the heat reflects off the walls.”

I was down in a crouch, almost on all fours, when I saw that we were following the lion’s tracks. I smelled a sour stench. “Cain,” he was about ten feet behind me on the same trail, “Lion track and... I smell something sour.”

I went on, wondering if the lion was watching. He came to the track.

“Same big lion! Track’s fresh. That smell? Javelina. I’ll never forget it. Keep your eyes open... I don’t think it’s a good idea to be crawling here... Can you stand up?”

I tried, but the path through the brush was only a few feet high. To get through, I had to crouch even lower and then I could only make way on all fours. Something in the reptilian part of my brain stem kicked into gear. I went forward, flicking my tongue and digging my nails into the earth. I heard Cain in back of me, his breathing sounded like a monitor lizard in heat.

A clearing saved me. I came to my feet and my cortex took over again. I turned and watched Cain come to his feet, shake his head and grimace.

“Martel, if you ever lead me through something like that again, I’ll bust your ass!”

I wasn’t about to. I’ve had strange experiences. It’s just that I’ve never reverted to that stage before.

We found a flat rock and took a breather. The sun was shining straight down into the canyon; shade was at a premium. Cain got out his sunscreen and was plastering himself and the back of my neck with the stuff when we

heard the strange sounds. He cupped his hand near his ear and listened. I did the same.

“Sobbing? Does it sound like... Sobbing?”

I nodded. “The lion? I’ve heard that they can make a sound like a baby crying.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that too... Think the cat’s over there?” He pointed in the general direction of the sounds.

“Should have brought more than a pistol!”

“See if you can find a sharp stick or club... It may be waiting for us.”

I looked around the clearing and saw a bush with a dead limb sticking out of it. I went over and broke it off at the ground. It was crooked, dried out; brittle. I dropped it and went looking for another. The sobbing had stopped. Then we heard a cry for help.

“That lion knows English? It’s a person!”

We inched forward through the brush and interwoven tree limbs.

Cain was about twenty feet to my right, no longer willing to let me lead. We came to the edge of the sinkhole only aware that the tangled brush ended. I looked down and couldn’t believe my eyes.

“Hey guy, are you okay?” I shouted, realizing as I did that I wouldn’t get an answer.

Cain was the trained professional. He assessed the situation, slipped out of his pack and had the rope tied to a stout tree in seconds. I watched as he gently tossed the rope so that its end fell across the man’s body. The man folded like a jackknife and screamed.

“Must think it’s a snake or something. Hey fellow! Hey you down there! Take the rope!” He paused and I could see that he saw what I saw. “Martel, the guy’s hands are tied behind him!”

Cain was down the rope and at the guy’s side in a blink. I saw the flash of his knife as he cut the ropes away and helped the man bring his arms forward. The guy was completely out of his head, babbling, drooling, screaming little dry screams and choking on gobs of blood-specked

mucus. Cain tried to get him to his feet, while the man fought to stay in a fetal position. Cain pulled the man's wallet and opened it carefully.

"Hey Martel. This is Cal Nels. Someone's done him bad!"

Cain and I together were a great team. I found two poles and Cain tied Nels between them. He came up and I went down to help lift and pull Nels out of the hole. I had to be careful, the ground around Nels was caving in, falling about a foot to what looked like a washed-out stream bed below. I heard water running, a trickle. From the looks of the place a lot of water had flowed through here after the storm. I had never seen a sinkhole, so it took Cain to explain that I was standing on what was left of a roof. He thought it had recently caved-in, and speculated on how Nels ended up down there. His wrists were raw. Whoever tied his hands hadn't cared that the ropes were too tight.

We made our way, pulling and carrying the makeshift pole stretcher around the sinkhole to a place where we could lay him out and have room to examine him. He was conscious; not in this world. Cain did a preliminary check.

"No broken bones. Scrapes, no bleeding. Ribs seem okay. May lose his hands... He was tied up a long time. We've got to get him help. Martel, see if you can find a trail out of here... He had to get up here somehow." He was dribbling water into Nels mouth, trying to get him to swallow. Then he was up and working his way around the sinkhole.

"Before we leave here I want to check... Hey, look over here!"

I stood, felt dizzy in the heat, regained my head and eased my way around some catclaw to where Cain was bending over studying the ground. "What is it?"

"Tracks." Cain stood erect and began to follow the sign back, away from the edge of the sinkhole. "Look, three sets... Two deep sets of tracks on each side and the tracks in the middle... Step, step, then kinda dragged

along. Three people... Two doing the dragging... Looks like men's shoes. I can't tell about the middle ones."

I was standing as close to the edge as I dared, studying the place where the three tracks ended... "Cain, all three were together when the ground collapsed. Where are the other two? Nels had his hands tied... He must have been the one they were dragging between them. How could the others get out?"

Cain worked his way around the sinkhole, carefully studying the ground and the edges of the hole. "No one got out Martel..."





## Chapter 23

“Stay back Sir! The tree limb went right through the driver’s face.”

MISTY MARVELED AT ISSY’S innocence. The girl was bright and perceptive, yet she was so focused on herself that she missed the bigger picture. Iss filtered everything that happened through her own needs. Her filters didn’t let others’ feelings through. When Dorothy was Iss’s age, she had been that way. Misty made the connection and gasped. Dorothy screwed up because she was only aware of herself; her needs. She was unable to see the bigger picture because she was a child. The part of Iss and the part of Dorothy that would become empathic had not developed. She wrestled with the concept. Insight brought pain.

Empathy developed... When? Her hand went to her lower abdomen, she knew! She was only now starting a process which would lead her beyond herself to empathy. Her concept of the way things worked was locked within Self. Misty had to get outside of her Self to understand what life could be. Nobody, no Guru or Master could lead her. She had to break out herself. Someday Iss would too.

She realized that any relationship she entered into while she was processing within the limited confines of her own mind would be doomed. Well, no! It could be different! She could make it different, knowing that she needed to get out of her focused myopia. She could develop the relationship with Ter; she couldn’t lose him. She couldn’t, especially now! She lay back, letting her thoughts work out. Were men like that too? Was Martel? Gad! If so, what chance did they have to build a relationship, a family?

Last night had been so wonderful. Susan’s place was filled with energy; camaraderie, warmth. She had liked Susan the first time they met at Friendly’s. She was an example of a person who functioned outside of herself. Susan was a model. A person who focused upon the needs of others. Susan was tuned in to others. Did she get

what she needed that way? It hadn't looked like it. Susan seemed lonely, but last night she was glowing with an energy that emanated from deep within. That great warmth had succored Cain and made the others relax and feel part of something they could do together.

'That's what it is,' Misty thought. 'Susan has moved outside of her Self and is in tune with greater things. I'm not able to do that yet.' The feeling of inadequacy welled up inside her. 'I will be!'

It was time to get up and wake Iss. The invitation from Orante had come as a surprise. Instead of being in trouble for spying, they had become welcome guests. Why? What did he see in her? Why invite them to go into Prophet Canyon? And Connely. That old man had so much energy. What did he mean when he said that it was time for him to go back there? Why go to all the effort to get him into the canyon? What was in there?

Issy moved about the motel room gathering her clothes from the chair and floor where she had tossed them. She decided not to shower, splashed water over her face, pulled back her hair, dabbed cover over her pimples, and stared at her reflection in the mirror as if looking at an enemy. She used her nail to flick a tiny sleeper from the corner of her eye, stuck her tongue out and studied the white film. She pried her mouth open with her toothbrush, put the soapy tasting paste in her mouth, gagged, scratched the stuff off her teeth with the bristles, spit and took a drink of water. The thought of going into the canyon with Orante excited her. She came out of the bathroom alert and looking for her gofasters. "Misty, what if we find that we need boots?"

"Don't worry Iss. We'll be walking, not climbing or tramping through brush. Our tennies will be fine."

Celesta drove up in the Temple's Suburban and waved. Misty carried her day pack. Issy had a pint bottle of water in each hand.

“Get in ladies! Doc Connely is meeting us at Pick’s. Orante, Otoa and Gwinn are coming too. They’ll meet us there.”

Misty stopped and turned, looking back at the parking lot. “Jeep’s gone already. They got a really early start. They were supposed to drop Susan off here. Is it okay? I invited her along. She wants to meet Cain when they join us.” She paused, studying Celesta’s face to see if she reacted to the addition of Susan.

Issy was worried about meeting up with the men. “Do you think they’ll find us? I’d feel safer if I knew that they were with us.”

Celesta was scowling. “I didn’t know they were planning to join us.”

Issy answered without thinking. “Ter and the Marshal. They left real early this morning.”

Misty saw Celesta’s features tighten. She responded before Issy could say anything else. “Don’t worry Celesta. Ter and Cain have been planning a trip into the canyon. They are hiking in from the top. It’s not official or anything. They want to see it.”

“I knew that!” Celesta said, seeming to relax. Inside she was concerned. What if these men wanted to hurt Orante? What? No, she knew Martel wasn’t up to anything like that. “So, they plan to meet up with us up in the canyon someplace?”

Issy thought the question was directed at her. “I hope so. Then we wouldn’t worry about them.”

Susan came around the corner of the motel. “HI, I wasn’t late. I was visiting with the guy at the desk. He eats at Friendly’s. Is it okay? Is there room? Can I join you?”

Celesta knew who Susan was, shrugged, and opened the Suburban’s doors for them.

Susan was jammed tightly against the door in the middle seat of the Suburban. Misty sat next to her, then Issy. In the front seat, the hulk of Doc Connely was stuffed between Celesta, who drove, and Orante, who rode

shotgun. Gwinn and Otoa were trapped in the far back. The powerful Chevrolet made the road cut seem easy. Its long wheelbase let it pass easily over the drainage swales and the few rocks and branches remaining in the cut.

“I see two vehicles went in this way ahead of us.” Celesta had studied the tread patterns and knew that it wasn’t one vehicle in and out.

“Look at the light, it’s hitting the white Coconino formation; makes the rock look like clouds.” Orante was so happy to be out of the Temple and free that everything he saw was amazing and wonderful.

Otoa mumbled something from the back about not being able to see anything but headliner. Gwinn reached between his legs and grabbed the seat, holding on as the Suburban kicked up its rear.

“Never thought there would be a road up here,” Connely was staring through the front windshield as if he were driving and had to see.

Celesta had the best view of what lay ahead. “Looks like we’ve got company.”

Connely narrated for those in back. “Water cut the road. There’s a dark blue vehicle off to the side... Looks like someone parked it... Holy Mother, it ran into a tree!”

Celesta was out and moving toward the SUV. “Its motor’s running. Someone is in... Oh yuck!” She moved toward the driver’s side window and stopped.

Orante was out, moving toward her.

“Stay back Sir! The tree limb went right through the driver’s face.” She moved closer, went around to the other side and then came back to Orante’s side. “Don’t look in Sir. No way to tell who that is in there. Poor guy.”

“The motor’s running...”

“I can’t get in to turn it off. It’ll probably run out of gas soon. This happened hours ago, the blood is dried black. Maybe last night... Yesterday probably.”

Connely had been listening. “And you can’t tell who it is? Look in the glove box!”

Celesta looked back at Connely and gave him a 'screw you' look. "Okay. Then we need to go back and report this."

She filled her lungs with clean air, opened the door, punched the glove box button and grabbed all the papers inside. In seconds the door was shut and she was moving away, grimacing. She hadn't smelled anything, it was the thought that turned her stomach.

Orante took the papers from her. "Owner's manual. No registration. Here, looks like a Bill of Sale." He opened the folded documents, read for a second and looked back toward the dead driver. "I would never have guessed... Stanley Cater Kling! If that is him?"

Connely was blocking the door until Otoa and Gwinn forced him to one side and got out of the Suburban. Gwinn went to the passenger's side of the SUV and looked through the window.

"Could be Kling, same size maybe. Dressed different. Why would Kling be up here?"

Celesta had opened the back hatch of the SUV and was eyeing the cut lengths of re-bar, aluminum survey caps, and the stamp kit. "Whoever it was, he was going to put these survey stakes in... Why would Kling do that?"

The SUV's engine chugged, caught, chugged again and died.

"Out of gas," Otoa announced. "Now we have to go back and report this, right?" He was looking at Celesta, hoping she would say no.

Connely reacted with anger. "Damn, but I've got to get up there! Celesta, you said there were two cars ahead of us. Where's the other one? Don't you think we should check it out before we go back?"

Celesta turned to Orante. "Sir, there's probably no urgency to report this accident. If we find the others, maybe we can send them back."

Orante nodded.

Otoa walked back toward the Suburban. "Okay Connely, we go on. You ladies," he leaned in and addressed Issy, Misty and Susan. "Any objections?"

Orante navigated while Celesta shifted the Sub into four-wheel drive. "Follow the tracks of that other vehicle... Over there!" He pointed to the tracks that led around the tree limbs. "That must have been a beautiful sycamore. A giant. Who would be heartless enough to down a tree like that? I hope they have bad luck forever!"

Celesta kept looking back in the mirror at the blue SUV. She felt guilty leaving it there; not reporting it. "Hey, we're at the water hole.

There's the other vehicle. Doesn't look like anyone's around. Everybody out! Last stop!"

While Orante helped Connely lower his bulk from the sub, Celesta walked over and perused the Isuzu Rodeo. It was locked, no sign of any foul play. She searched the ground and found three sets of footprints leading up canyon - one set indicating that one of the three dragged his feet. She didn't know what to make of that until she followed the prints up and around the water hole. There, she read the traces like a pro. Two men had another between them, almost dragging him. She turned back to Connely.

"Doc, it's tough going from here. Can you make it?"

Connely was looking about, seemingly confused. "I... I can. You know I must, but where's the trail from here?"

Celesta motioned for the others to gather around her. "Look. We stay together. I'll lead. We go along the trail that leads to the Temple. Then, if I can still find it, we move the brush pile and find the hidden trail. I haven't come this way in a long time, so... Don't worry, we'll find it! Help each other! Doc, no games. Tell us if you need help!"

The sun was up now, its heat blasting them. They moved away from the water hole along the well-worn path. After fifteen minutes, as the trail started to wind up toward

the base of vertical red cliffs, Celesta called a halt. "I must have missed the trail. Wait here!"

She turned and went back the way they had come. In less than a minute she called them back. When they saw her again, she was clearing brush away and making way into what seemed to be a dense thicket. Soon they were working their way along a narrow trail which led up canyon.

"Okay, we lucked out! Hold branches for the person in back. Don't let them whip back... It's getting hot, drink water!"

Connely knew the way now. He seemed energized as he followed Celesta. Issy was confused and angry. No one had mentioned that they would have to hike in this heat. Sweat bees were biting. Sweat and blisters were not her thing.

Misty and Susan followed Gwinn. The short man's legs were bowed, but strong. He made his way without comment. Otoa made small talk, enough for them all.

Celesta stopped where the trail turned to the left and crossed the bottom of the canyon. "Hey guys, the going gets rough as we cut across the drainages. Keep together. Help each other! Stop me if you feel dizzy or... Stop me, okay?"

Twenty minutes later Celesta stopped them. "Sit here and rest. Drink water and make certain that you are okay. Doc, that especially goes for you. You know why!"

Orante sat off to one side, contemplating tiny pebbles and ants. He fingered a leaf and smiled. The times he had been here before, he had felt nothing. They had gathered in the clearing and others had marveled at the energy which lifted them. Gwinn and Celesta had some type of energizing experience. Bull! It was a nice place, a beautiful place. Connely believed that he had received the gift of long life here, from a vortex of energy of all things. Nonsense! People were what they believed,



and that's all. His plan was working. This was now to become the place of continuation.

"Misty, aren't you afraid?" Issy came close behind her friend.

"I don't think so. What's to be afraid about?" Issy was too close, stepping on her heels and it hurt.

"Look Iss. Relax and go with the flow. I'm not sure why we're here, but it's a great adventure, right? I think we'll stop soon. Relax!"

Issy noted that the oblong clearing was the exposed top of a giant sandstone block. In the center, a piece of the sandstone formed a rounded bump that looked from the side like an elf wearing a monk's hood. From the bump, a deep crack went all the way to the edge of the block. Celesta told them to sit in a circle around the bump and to, "Be careful! That crack is more than twenty feet deep. Stay away from the edges, sandstone is rotten and you'll slip."

Misty wanted to feel something. She and Susan sat together, relaxing and trying not to let the others distract them. Orante sat in line with the crack, his back uphill. His eyes weren't closed. He was watching Doc Connely. Connely had lowered himself to the rock and was trying to sit still. He needed a back support and Celesta came over and put her pack behind him. "Keep drinking water!" she urged. The rest of them sat, staring at the sandstone altar or with eyes closed, trying to sense something.

## Chapter 24

I stared, blinked, and rubbed my eyes. As quickly as they had appeared, the people disappeared.

I COULDN'T HOLD THE thick ends of the poles. My hands ached. I told Cain to stop.

"Sorry Cain, the butts of the poles are too fat. I can't get my hands around them."

We lowered Nels to the ground and Cain came back to see what my problem was.

"I think I can whittle these down. If not, maybe we can rig rope handles."

His knife was too small to do more than scrape the bark off the poles. He cut a groove around each butt and I rigged a loop of rope, tied to each. My plan was to put the loop around my neck and carry some of the load that way. Cain nodded as he saw my plan, then went forward to do the same thing at his end. Nels was awake, following us with his eyes. He seemed crazed. There was no indication that he knew what was happening.

By some miracle Cain found a trail wide enough and tall enough to let us pass erect. It was steep in places, our feet slid on loose rocks and soil. In other places it turned and wound so tightly that we had to twist and turn the litter to get it through. The heat became unbearable. We were weakening fast. Nels was dehydrated needing our water. We gave him most of ours. Cain's foot caught a root and he fell, barely freeing his hands in time to break his fall. The litter jammed into him. If I hadn't lunged back, it might have broken his spine. It took long minutes to get him untangled. I could see that he was in pain.

"Some trip you planned, Ter. It would have been difficult with just the two of us."

I heard water running. Anasazi Bill had told me about the Prophet. I found a stick and pushed it through the tumbled rocks, down into soft soil. As I pulled it out, water followed. That probably saved our lives.

In half an hour we were ready to try again. We made perhaps fifty yards when the trail turned sharply to the right, now going uphill toward the vertical cliffs and the reflected heat.

“Ter, let’s put him down. I’ll go ahead and scout... This may be the end of the trail.”

I couldn’t let him do that. “Cain, you’re hurt. Besides, you’re up on first aid. Nels needs you. I’ll go.”

I was up and on my way. He didn’t protest, that worried me. I followed the trail up until it leveled-out, turned down canyon again, and narrowed as it entered a crack through a massive sandstone reef. I inched my way along, sideways for about fifteen feet. The crack widened. I could see sunlight ahead of me. I heard water running, loud as if I were walking along the banks of a mountain stream.

I heard voices, then reasoned that what I heard was the water babbling. My eyes adjusted to the sunlight. I stood at the end of the crack gazing out upon an oblong clearing. From the center, the clearing was sliced by an eroded channel which ran from a beehive like sandstone formation. The air was... I thought the heat was getting to me. I couldn’t see through the clearing. I saw the lower part of the canyon on each side, but when I looked straight ahead, I saw nothing! Except for the raised sandstone altar and the cut which ran from it, I couldn’t see past the center. I looked, nothing was there. Nothing!

I sat on my haunches and let my head clear. Heatstroke played tricks with vision. I got my water bottle free and took a long drink. When I felt in control, I looked toward the altar-like thing in the middle of the clearing. I still couldn’t see past it. Then I saw people appear, lots of people sitting around the raised sandstone center. Colors. Foreign-looking men and women. I thought of Kathmandu and the throngs around the Pagoda shrines. Not the same. The people gathered here were mixed in every way.

I stared, blinked, and rubbed my eyes. As quickly as they had appeared, the people disappeared. No one

was there. Now, I couldn't see anything in the center of the clearing. It was as if an opaque screen existed in front of me. I felt stupid. Heatstroke! Cain had salt tablets. I drank the rest of my water as I made my way back up the trail.

"Damn Martel, I thought you were lost. You were gone a long time."

"I was?" I had gone up, seen the whatever, and come right back.

"Almost an hour... Our friend here," he motioned to Nels, on the litter, "died about fifteen minutes ago. Came to first. Said something about the 'Eye of the Cat.'"

At first I couldn't believe him. Nels looked like he was asleep... He was dead! All of our work! --- Poor bastard.

"Cain, can we leave him here for a while? I want to show you something... Something weird! The way in is too narrow to get the litter through. We'll have to come back and take him out another way."

Cain wanted to stand the poles up against a tree... "Javelina won't get to him so easy." It was hot. "We can't get him out. He needs bagged in this heat. We got to get folks in here who are properly equipped."

I was relieved. "We need to mark the spot... How?"

We discussed several ways; none were feasible.

"We try to mark our trail from here out. Stack rocks, leave pieces of this blue flagging tape I pulled from a stake in the clearing."

I led him up the trail, taking my time so that we could rest. It was cooler in the cleft. I stopped before he could see the end. We drank water and sat, cooling.

"Ready? Come forward slowly. Tell me what you see."

Our eyes adjusted to the sunlight. I watched his face for signs that what I had seen was really there. His face lost all expression. I followed his gaze out across the clearing.

The opaque screen was there, on the far side of the clearing. So were throngs of people, maybe fifty, too many to count. I searched the crowd. Doc Connely was seated about five feet away from the stone altar. To his left, Misty! Issy next to her on the right, Susan on the left. People were seated in circles behind them. I saw Celesta, laying on her back, seeming to stare into the air. In back of them were circles of strange people in brightly colored robes and flowing whites. Strange hairdos, weird clothing. I heard Cain mumble, "That's Raven!"

"Cain, you see it?"

"Where did they come from? How in the blazes did they get up here? Are those people in the middle all from the Temple?"

"You see them? Can you see through the... I mean beyond the clearing?"

"No. It's like invisible glass or something... It's nebulous... Hell, I don't know what it is!"

We sat down, staring at the amazing sight, looking away to test our senses, then staring again. Long minutes passed, I don't know how long. In time, I felt an urgency to go across and join them. I got up and started forward. I heard water rushing; felt dizzy energy sweep past me. Cain grunted and I exhaled in surprise. The throngs disappeared. The opaqueness was gone. I could see the canyon again across the clearing. Cain put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed hard. "We're real!" I said.

Misty must have seen us then. She rose and helped Susan up. They came toward us, slowly at first, and then as fast as they could climb. Both were radiant. Their eyes shone with a magical light. Misty welcomed Cain as she hugged me. Her energy flowed into me and I saw a shining vision -- a child.

"Ter, you look awful! What happened to you up there? We were here waiting for something, and, well all I know is that I feel wonderful. I hoped you'd find us. Did you see Orante? He's holding Otoa, they're both crying!"

I heard Susan tell Cain that now she knew the meaning of "Being."



## Epilogue

MISTY WAS RADIATING A special kind of heat... I held her hand as we walked slowly back down the trail that led out of Prophet Canyon. I put my arm around the small of her back when we stopped to rest. I had to touch her, she had a magnetic attraction that kept me in contact. I noted that Cain and Susan were joined the same way. Connely was talking a mile-a-minute to anyone nearby; mostly to himself. He was energized and, sitting or standing, his back was straight. He radiated youthful energy. Orante had asked to be left alone for awhile. We left him sitting on the edge of the great rock altar. Otao explained that Orante had made a major breakthrough. Then Otoa, Celesta and Gwinn walked ahead of us. There was a lot of money unaccounted for and they knew it was their responsibility to find it. I could hear them making plans as they walked. Issy noted Misty's need to be alone with me. She reluctantly stayed to herself, alone, but not bothered by that as much as the visions she had and the new opportunities that were opening before her.

Misty squeezed my hand and leaned over to me. "I really don't want to leave here... Do you?"

I shook my head. I liked the place we were resting and I had so many questions buzzing around in my mind, but I was ready to go back.

"Ter, you and Arnie were up on the ledge. Did you see us? Did you see..."

I didn't wait for her to finish. "I saw. We both saw a...a lot. I came up there first and I thought I was having heat stroke. Then I went back and got Cain. Cal Nels had died while I was gone. We left his body back there." My mind jumped to planning how to get Nel's body out. Then I decided that it wasn't my problem. I refocused. "I saw all of you...and seated in rings around you I saw..." I paused, afraid to admit what I had seen. "We even saw a woman



that Cain met at the waterhole and I had seen from the plane... She calls herself Raven. Cain can tell you more about her.”

“Ter, you saw Raven? I’ll bet she’s the archaeologist the woman in Flag told Issy and me about. And beings from...well, maybe from Tibet and perhaps from somewhere else? Did you see them?”

“You saw them too? There were some that seemed more energy than body... They were bright colors and kinda floated there, right?”

“Starbeings... Celesta said they were Spirits released from Ethos.” She paused and reached around me, giving me a tight hug. “Whatever they were... Whoever! They made me feel easy inside. Know what I mean? And Orante was so happy. He said ‘It is The Continuation!’ whatever that means.”

We passed the Isuzu Rodeo where it had been parked by the men who had taken Cal Nel’s up the canyon, according to Celesta. She told us about the three sets of tracks she had found, the middle set looking like the person had been dragged along. Cain gave me a sad look and I nodded back. The vehicle confirmed that the two hadn’t gotten out of the sinkhole---at least back to ground level. I could only imagine what happened to them. In my mind’s eye I could see their bodies tumbling along beneath us in an underground stream.

We all packed into the Suburban and waited for Orante to catch up. He squeezed in without saying a word and we were off. I turned to see his face. He looked...stunned. His features reflected a mixture of amazement and shock. We gave Kling’s SUV a wide berth. Misty remembered that my Jeep was at the other end of the canyon and in a whisper, offered to drive me around later to pick it up. No one else talked. Each of us was processing in private. Doc Connely relaxed heavily against Otoa and fell asleep.

Days passed. Misty and I found a cute little house we could rent for a small fortune. We had been playing house and enjoying life. My mom was coming down in a week to join us... "But only for a week's stay," I told her. Then, I got a call from Doc Connely requesting a meet.

Cain and Susan had just come back from a few days stay in Dolores, Colorado on Lake McPhee. Cain had interviewed for a job with the Ute Tribe. Misty and I hadn't had a chance to talk with them about our shared experience in the canyon. We planned to get together to burn some hamburgers and collect our thoughts. I called Susan's apartment and told Cain about Connely's request. Cain spoke loudly into the phone. "Damn right I want to meet with him! There are a lot of things I don't understand and I'll bet he has the answers."

I called Celesta's number and left a message for her to join us. Celesta would keep Connely honest. I called Landsman. I wanted him there. He agreed to come.

We met at Pick's, in Doc's booth. Doc was peeved because he was squeezed in against the wall. Issy and Misty were on his side of the table.

Cain, Celesta and I sat across from them. Paul pulled a chair up to the end of the table. We didn't order because the top was so jammed with hands and arms that there was no place to put a dish.

Celesta started in on Doc before he could take control of the meeting. "Doc, Orante is really angry! He feels that you knew what was going on and didn't trust him enough to tip him off. You knew about Nels and the money he was helping Nels and Pillar and --- everybody it seems -- steal. You knew, didn't you!"

The accusation hit home. Connely wrinkled his nose and squinted. Cain jumped in. "You stood by while people were killed!"

Connely's eyes opened wide and he tried to speak. I cut him off. "You played me too. You withheld information that could have made a difference. You still hold cards that we haven't seen."

Issy freed her arm from her side and accidentally poked Connely in the ribs. He jumped, gave Issy a 'punished puppy' look, and kinda deflated. His shields fell away and he lowered his head.

"No... It's not what you think! I'm not responsible for anyone getting killed or hurt. Sure, I suspected Nels. Hell, who wouldn't? He held the Temple's purse strings. He knew where all the Temple's money was, and he used it to get others to play his game. Nels wanted everything. He played Pillar and Kling and my errant son, and even Fulks. He knew who was greedy and how to play them. Nels hired the goons --- Celesta here will confirm all of this --- Nels was having an affair with his secretary, Valerie Lewis... He went crazy when he found that she was also dating that hippy draftman guy that worked for GD. He had him shot. When Val turned on him and stole his files, he had her watched. He learned that she was also screwing around with young Pillar. I think Nels killed her, even though the official cause of death was 'accidental drowning.'"

Cain forced his words in. "I found a bracelet near the water hole. It was engraved to 'VAL' and on the back it said, 'With Love, Cal.'" Fielder confirmed that it had been ripped off her wrist. Nels wasn't alone. He evidently left after their fight, gathered assassin bugs, slipped back and put them into her tent. When they sucked her blood, she ran to the water to get away from them. Too late! She went into shock and drowned. It was murder!" He paused, using his hands in front of Doc's face to let Doc know that he wasn't through. "And when I got up there, they were watching me. The kid who was taking pictures for me saw them... They almost killed him. He's recovered now, but he came close to being victim number..." He paused, counting. That gave Connely his chance to get back in.

"Count them! Three Whitetops. Val Lewis. Stan Kling, Cal Nels..."

He paused and I added. "Two guys went into that sinkhole with Nels. They're gone! And don't forget Dennis

Pillar Junior. In a way, he committed suicide, all because of..." I paused and thought, 'add Prader too. He also died because of this.'

Landsman had been very quiet. Now he leaned forward and slammed his fist on the table. "Oren Fulks was involved! Right? Fulks was in this all the way, even if I can't prove it."

Issy was holding nine fingers up and listening closely.

Celesta was staring at Landsman. He noted her intense focus and gave her a weak smile. She looked down and said quietly, "Doc, you tell Mr. Landsman or I will."

Connely grimaced. "Paul, as I'm sure you know by now, Fulks went to the media and gave them a story about how he infiltrated GD's organization and exposed a plot to take over Sedona's water. He's made himself a hero with the locals. He cast all sorts of dispersions your way... Said that the Water and Sanitation boards had weak leadership. Paul, reality is that you are going to take a drubbing for all of Fulks misdeeds." He looked over at Landsman and saw that Paul understood. "After all of these years of working for good government... You're going to pay! Remember Paul, no good deed goes unpunished."

Misty didn't get it. "What are you talking about? Isn't that guy Fulks one of the bad guys?"

Connely gave one of his horse laughs. "Misty, he's a politician. Lots of folks are beholding to him. They look the other way and avoid asking '*inappropriate*' questions. They fear that they will lose if Fulks is investigated, so they cover for him. Guys like Fulks always get off. He'll be re-elected by a landslide. Each election washes away past sins."

"But Mr. Landsman, that's not fair," Misty argued, deeply concerned.

Paul reached across and put his hand on hers. "I always knew it was coming... And I knew when I took on Fulks that he would win. I'm sad, but not *that* sad. I met a

great lady. She's an artist and I always wanted to promote art. I'm looking at a new life; a new family. In many ways, this is working out for the best."

I watched Paul's face and saw a new energy there. I really liked the guy and was relieved that he had plans.

As usual, Issy got to the point... Or I should say points. She jabbed Connelly in the ribs again as she put her elbows on the table.

"Two things. What happened to all that money Nels and others stole from the Temple? And, what happened up in the canyon? Did we really get zapped by a vortex thingy?"

Celesta gave Issy a warm smile. She coveted Issy's innocent young womanhood and appreciated her openness. "Gwinn and I made a list. Guess what? Gwinn put his name, Otoa's and Orante's at the top. They had a plan to skim money to do something for Christmas... I'm not certain what, but they worked with Nels to set it up. In fact, everybody went to Nels with their scheme to use Temple funds. Nels was the common denominator for each scam. He knew who was doing what... Well, whatever was happening, Nels knew. And the perpetrators thought that Nels was working for them." She paused and thought a moment. "And another thing. There is property all over the area and the Temple actually owns it. It may take years, but we will find all the stashes. And think about it. Gwinn says we own USAguaco now and the water in the canyon. Orante will see that Sedona has a future."

We all sat there trying on the new information.

Cain was hung-up on the ethics issue. "You mean people were stealing money from the Temple and no one did anything about it? How could that happen?"

Connelly came in strong, moving his arm over Issy's as he took control of the conversation. "Like Fulks! Because everybody who counts---in this case the whole Temple Board of Directors---were beholdng to Nels, no one wanted an investigation that might expose the activities of the accountant. That's how it works."

Celesta nodded agreement. Cain sat back, his idealism and sense of right and wrong badly damaged. Issy was trying to get her arm out from under Connely's. "Hey, okay, people are selfish. But why doesn't the Spirit---God---do something to stop it? Isn't that what we learned up the canyon? Isn't there a power that is greater than all of us?"

We all sat, lost for an answer. Celesta thought she should say something, but didn't know how to start. She sat back and looked at me. I shrugged and looked around. Issy got her arm on top of Connely's and turned and gave him a conquering look. The old man was warmed by the contact.

Connely grunted, took off his large black-rimmed glasses, tweaked his great veined nose, and scowled at Issy. He forced his arm away, back to protect his ribs. "Little people often ask the biggest questions. The answer is..." He paused and looked away from Issy. "Nobody sane expects a God or any of Man's creations to give a hoot about such matters. These trivial games we play mean nothing in the long run, so don't create a God for yourself that will stop wars and catch falling sparrows. You learn *that*, and you're almost there. What's up there in Prophet Canyon is a source of power. It's a place where Earth's energies converge... Probably accidental. It's not good or bad, it's just power. Whatever, you go there and it gets into you... through you and in you it's an energy that flows through living things. For me... Well, let's just say it recharges me. For Orante? It means his personal salvation and The Continuation. For others? Well, whatever you feel when you are centered.... That's what you get from it."

Misty was moved; excited. "Sedona *is* a very special place, a magic place then!"

Cain sat up straight and reacted. "No, not magic! I sensed the energy in Prophet Canyon the night I was up there alone. I sat on the trunk of that great bulldozed

tree... Understanding flowed through me... The power has always been with us. It is *The Spirit of the Sycamore.*”

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## About the Author

Descry was born in Colorado and grew up exploring wild places in search of pre-historic peoples and the wonders of nature. In his twenties, he was captured by the magnitude and magic of the Colorado Plateau and melded his life into that region.

Descry's work emerged out of one of the most exciting and mysterious regions on the Planet, the American Desert Southwest. His works are filled with vivid descriptions of real places and events. His writings explore possibilities that are so plausible that the reader has a difficult time separating truth from fiction.

Descry and his family live, depending on the season and their whims, in Sedona or Prescott, Arizona, and Cortez, Colorado. They also spend quality time near the Sea of Cortez. He is actively involved in family, education, archaeology, environmental issues and business. In his writings, he shares his insights and love of the land and its peoples in a way that charges one with awe.

***The Spirit of the Sycamore***, is a tantalizing and complex mystery that explores discord and harmony in Sedona, Arizona, which is one of the Planet's important spiritual energy centers, and one of the Earth's most beautiful places.

This mystery follows the successful release of the historical-mystery, ***Spirits in the Ruins***, which challenges the reader's detective abilities with a century old murder. Descry provides insights into the illegal trade in Anasazi grave goods, and a previously untold history of the Ute Mountain Ute Indian people.

***The Spirit of the Estuary***, Descry's third in this series, will be published soon. It is a historical-mystery told through the experiences of a murdered Seri Indian woman. It is set in the northern Sea of Cortez (Gulf of California) region of Mexico.