

“Who am I? What am I doing here?”  
Admiral James Stockdale  
Vice-presidential debate, 1992

## CHAPTER ONE

“...low-life, low-rent, low-tech sorry-ass excuse for a delivery service. Get that envelope back! Get it back now!”

While Marvin sputtered, I held the telephone at arm’s length and tried my ironic smile on the freezer-burned receptionist guarding the gate at Cerebrix, Inc. She’d been seriously annoyed when I handed over Marvin’s envelope without offering an official form for her to sign; she’d started to steam when he called and bullied her into handing the phone to me. Now, with a rash of in-coming calls flashing on her console and Marvin’s demand for undelivery, we were seconds from spontaneous combustion.

“Bring it back you bad-mannered, bone-headed, brain-dead, bicycle-peddling Deadhead.”

From past experience, I figured he’d rant another twenty seconds before running out of adjectives, hyphens, or both. Always eager to improve my vocabulary, I put the phone back to my ear. Alliteration was Marvin’s bag. And even though I was the target, I dug his style. I smiled at the reception harpy again and got the kind of look women reserve for the mold that grows on three-month-old cottage cheese. “Wrap it up,” she mouthed, drawing a finger across her throat.

I shrugged. Not my fault this branch of the communications industry was withering. The blame belonged to the Cerebrix execs who had scrimped on the small stuff. They’d failed to put a courtesy phone in their marble and gilt lobby, so Marvin’s diatribe kept customers holding and made the woman

behind the name plate reading “Antoinette Spaulding” as tense as a Pekinese at a pit bull show. She’d probably mellow out if she just grooved on the blinking lights, but I decided not to tell her. The vibes didn’t feel right. She’d call building security and have me slam dunked to the soggy Portland pavement nine floors below. No more smiles for her. Obviously, she wasn’t charmed by my graying ponytail, my beard, my “Jerry Garcia Lives” T-shirt, or by the water dripping from my duct-taped poncho.

“...disorganized, depraved, do-nothing dildo. I need it back. Now! I’d fire your ass if you were on my payroll, Pal.”

I chuckled at that one. I don’t do payrolls. Cash or barter only. It kept life simple. My pockets were almost always empty, but at least I didn’t scarf down antacid tablets like peanuts. Freedom’s just another word for not giving a shit about money. Janis and Bobby McGee understood that. So did I.

“...trying to get hold of you for an hour, butt-head. Why can’t you carry a beeper, or a cell phone?”

“Only pretentious yuppies have cell-phones, Marvin.”

He snorted, shifted to pleading. “I need your help, Pal. Get the envelope,” he pleaded. “Bring it back. I need it. Bad.”

I glanced at the small padded manila envelope resting atop a pile of papers on the “in” tray beside the lovely Antoinette. “Too late.”

“Get it back!” His shriek struck my eardrum like a swarm of ballistic bees and I tore the phone away. “Now! Now! Get it back you jerk-off.”

Antoinette scowled at me like I had eight legs and just crawled out of the drain in her shower.

“So, you want me to ask this nice lady if I can have your envelope back?”

The nice lady shook her head and clamped one hand over the envelope. Her nails were half an inch long, painted a dark red. No ovals for her; she’d filed those nails to points. Sharp ones.

“One o’clock, Pal. I don’t care how you do it, but I need that package in my hands by one o’clock.” His indignant tone melted. “It’s twelve-forty. It’s twenty blocks. Think you can pull it off?”

“Have I got time to clothes-pin some playing cards to the spokes of my bike? The clack-clack noise makes me go faster.”

“Fucking hopeless hippie hairball.” The dial tone put

an exclamation point on his final insult. Returning the handset, I forgot my promise and tried my ironic smile again. The aging Arctic anaconda eyed me suspiciously.

“There’s been a mistake.”

“I gathered that.” She opened a bottom drawer, pulled out a jumbo-sized can of disinfectant and laid a fine mist over the telephone console. One light continued to blink, but she ignored it, intent on her crusade against renegade bacteria.

“I need to take the envelope back.”

“Impossible. You delivered it. I accepted it.” She applied disinfectant like spray paint to the handset, pausing only to present a bouquet of message forms and a fawning smile to a muscular three-piece-suited power-luncher who passed me without a glance. “That envelope is now the property of Cerebrix.”

“Bummer. You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

“No way I could persuade you to change your mind?”

I zipped up my poncho in what I hoped was a casual I-don’t-give-a-shit manner.

“Certainly not.” She clicked the cap back on the can, slammed it into the desk drawer and began polishing the handset with a tissue. “You have no paperwork to support your claim.”

“Okay, I understand. No problem. See ya later, Antoinette.” I faked a half turn toward the door, then reached across the desk and snatched the package. Diving to avoid death by stick-on nails, I bolted for the stairwell.

Funny thing. With all the fitness hype, and all the time office workers spend going nowhere fast on souped-up treadmills, I hardly ever see them taking the stairs. So I had a clear shot, nine floors to the street, then fifteen minutes, easy, to Marvin’s office.

My shins were screaming when I reached the lobby, and it was all I could do to lift my right foot high enough to kick the padlock and chain that tethered my street bike to a wrought-iron fence surrounding a few mangy rhododendrons. I’m in pretty good shape for a guy who lived out most of the Seventies on doobies, granola and free love, but nine floors of down set several hibernating muscles twitching.

The lock sprung open and I tore off the chain, jamming it into my knapsack with Marvin’s damn envelope. I wheeled away against the light and across traffic, then along the sidewalk, down a flight of stone steps and into an alley.

I've heard New Yorkers swear their bicycle messengers are kamikazes. But in Portland, they'd be road toast. I'd put the most aggressive of them up against even a pre-teen girl or a retired college professor. And I'd give the New Yorker a ten-minute head start. There are only two rules out here. First rule: While on our bicycles we are invincible, invisible and omnipotent. Second rule: All other rules exist only for chumps in fossil-fuel-burning, pollution-spewing, stereo-blasting automobiles. Since we're environmentally sensitive and politically correct, we get the right-of-way.

Today, unfortunately, no one seemed to agree, especially the no-neck calmly backing his tractor-trailer into the mouth of the alley. The rig nearly scraped the walls on both sides, and I could tell from a glance at the mottled face in the side-view mirror that I'd lose an argument with him.

I reversed course, skidded down a walkway between buildings and mentally added a minute to my ETA. I cut around the big bronze deer at Third and Main, wondered if maybe it was an elk, decided it didn't matter and hung a right against traffic. Then a left and a right onto the sidewalk and... "Shit."

The nun could have been the office iceberg's twin. The blistering glare was certainly the same. My squealing hand brakes stopped the front wheel inches from the hem of her Navy-blue raincoat.

She gathered a scattered flock of children behind her, then advanced on me, black umbrella snapping in the gusting wind. "These are young children you nearly ran down—young children who know enough to follow the rules, to cross in a crosswalk, with the light. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Forgive me Sister, for I have sinned." Reflexively my hands uncurled from the grips and I extended them, knuckles ready to be rapped. I wondered where she kept her ruler when she was on the road. Then I yanked my hands back. Yeah, I went to private school, but it wasn't Catholic. I didn't have enough guilt-baggage for this. I turned the wheel, but before I could get my feet on the pedals, she furled the umbrella and thrust it between the spokes.

"Sister, I'm in a bit of a rush here and—"

"I didn't hear an apology. And neither did they," she nodded toward the slicker-clad kids, holding hands in twos and smirking at me, then wiggled the umbrella, threatening to bend the spokes.

I cleared my throat. "I'm sorry."

“You don’t sound sorry.” Wiggle. Wiggle.

“I’m very sorry. Honest.” The kids giggled, delighted to see an adult on the hot seat usually reserved for one of them.

“And?”

“And what? I’m getting wet here and I’ve got an important delivery to make.” I visualized the veins on Marvin’s neck standing out like a mountain range on a topographical map. Hell, he might even resort to using a real delivery service in the future, even do it on the books. Then I’d be out some mad money, a weekly dinner and the legal services Marvin swore I’d need when the IRS finally caught up with me. Triple bummer.

“Don’t get short with me young man. You seem to feel you’re above the law.” She gave the umbrella a vicious thrust and glared like I’d invented original sin. “I see two officers over there on the steps of the courthouse. Unless you explain to these children what you did and why it was wrong, I’ll call them over and tell them I’ve made a citizen’s arrest.”

She punctuated that threat with a parry that made the spokes twang. I clenched my fists, seconds from discarding twenty years of pacifism in a nun-punching fury. A quick glance at the burly cops changed my mind.

“Yes, ma’am,” I muttered, teeth clamped tight around a class-ten blasphemy. “I broke three laws,” I told the children. “I rode on the sidewalk, I rode against the traffic, and I turned into the crosswalk when you had the ‘walk’ symbol. I’m very sorry and from now on I promise to obey all the laws, and I hope you will, too.” That last part qualified as a flat-out lie, and I knew the kids knew it, but it convinced her to take the umbrella out of the spokes, earned me a nod of dismissal and got me going again. Going slowly. On the street. With the traffic. At least until I turned another corner, stood up on the pedals and cut in front of a bus.

I don’t wear a watch. I don’t even own one. But I knew I wouldn’t make Marvin’s deadline. In fact, I’d bet a non-stop string of hippie-bashing obscenities had already peeled a coat of varnish off his desk. A story about being terrorized by a militant nun would never fly. What was the damn hurry today? What was in the envelope that he had to have it back so fast?

I escaped the downtown core and pumped hard toward the Pearl District. Marvin made a point of telling his clients he specialized in fat settlements instead of lengthy trials, so he didn’t see the need for an office near the courthouse. But like I

said, Marvin and I go way back, and I knew that was only half true. The rooms in the remodeled warehouse suited him. The building huddled between a plumbing supply company and a biker hangout called, aptly enough, The Wrong Side of the Tracks Bar and Grill. The place specialized in thick sandwiches, thin beer and bean soup that could cause gastric distress on contact. He ate there five days a week.

Marvin owned one tailor-made suit. He kept it in an old wardrobe in the corner of his office and when he put it on for a court appearance, he reminded me of my third-grade teacher, squirming and swiveling her head around every ten minutes to see if her seams were straight. Like me, Marvin was more comfortable in jeans and shirts without buttons. That went down fine with his clients, a mix of eco-freaks, folks who believed they really could fight city hall, and little old ladies who left everything in trust for their cats.

I bumped over a double set of railroad tracks, cut through the bottle-strewn weeds alongside the tavern and skidded to a stop in the muddy parking lot behind the warehouse. Leaping off, I chained my bike to the bumper of Marvin's old Chrysler, vaulted onto its hood, grasped the flaking bottom rung of the fire escape and swung myself up toward Marvin's third-floor window. I'd used this as an exit before, never an entrance, but I knew it would save me a few seconds, and might spare me a verbal ass-kicking from Marvin's secretary, Deedee.

Finally I reached the grated landing at Marvin's window, my hands rust-stained, my heart thudding in my ears. Through partially drawn curtains I saw a few tufts of Marvin's thinning red hair over the back of a dinged-up leather swivel chair.

I tapped on the window with my forefinger, leaving a rusty smudge. Marvin didn't swivel to look at me. The elbow resting on the chair arm didn't twitch.

I tapped again. "Marvin." "It's me. Paladin. I've got the envelope."

Marvin sat as if posing for a picture—still life with attorney.

"C'mon, Marvin. I'm sorry I screwed up. Open the window, it's wet out here. Open the window or I'll break it."

Marvin didn't flinch. He'd elevated pouting to a fine art.

"Shit. Have it your way then." I snarled. I placed both hands against the thick whorled glass, shoving in and up. It moved a centimeter and I shoved again. Swollen wood

squawked, then slid a few inches. I got both hands under it and raised it enough to duck inside.

“Okay, Marvin, here’s your chance.” I fumbled the envelope out of the knapsack and tossed it over his head and onto the desk. It landed with a damp plop, but Marvin still didn’t move. “Take your damn envelope, call me dickweed a few times, and let me get on with my life.”

I kicked the chair. It swung slowly around.

Marvin stared at me through eyes that would never blink again. His mouth hung open in a gasp for the air his windpipe couldn’t deliver.

I felt sorry for every dead lawyer joke I’d ever told.