

A SHADOWY FIGURE blasted through the unlocked apartment door. The man paused only a moment before striding purposefully toward the nearest bedroom. The door was slightly ajar. Ricardo Coronado, Jr. banged his fist twice on the wall and slapped the door open. Freddie and his girlfriend, Camilla, had been in a deep sleep nestled in bed. The loud noises were an unwelcome and unexpected intrusion.

"Wake Up! We've got work to do," he said.

Freddie opened one eye, attempting to focus. Coronado's unsettling presence filled the room with a menacing shadow. The intruder glanced about the apartment suspiciously. Two other figures appeared in his peripheral vision; one was stirring from where he lay on the carpet while the other brushed his teeth in the bathroom. Coronado turned away from the bedroom door, capturing the nearest person in his piercing gaze. Fast Freddie Giddings grasped that opportunity to escape his mentor's hypnotic force.

Rapidly rolling over as he hid under the satin sheet, Freddie's muffled voice moaned. "Oh man...I'm too damn tired to do anything, Rico." He braced beneath the thin layer of protection, expecting trouble. Surprisingly, there was none. Yet.

Coronado dismissed Freddie and Camilla from his attention, as he re-entered the living area. He walked with arrogant confidence toward Freddie's friend from Oklahoma, who just arrived in Dallas the day before. The young man was now fully awake and sitting up. He recognized the man before him as the benefactor of Freddie's activities—most recently partying the previous night. Coronado firmly tapped Perry Carroll on the shoulder.

"Get up. I want you to come with me." The five-ten, rather stocky man straightened abruptly and called toward the bathroom. "You ready, Meyer?"

Alan Meyer, not having participated in the previous night's debauchery, woke before daybreak, showered and was about ready to go. He had instructions to accompany Coronado to an appointment with a lawyer regarding a scheme Freddie was into—importing gold and other high-end commodities—before regular office hours. Alan recognized the attorney wanted them out of the office before his secretary arrived, but the allure of getting rich quick got him up at dawn. He had dabbled in dealing marijuana in his hometown of Dairyville, Texas, graduated to selling methamphetamine before moving to Dallas to pursue larger opportunities. He came out of the bathroom with a toothbrush in his mouth.

"What's up, Rico? You're early."

"Damn it! No arguments! There's something we gotta do first—before the lawyer. A little money collection action, that's all. Hurry up. Get ready to go. The Unit is required to respond." Moving to the front doorway, Rico adjusted his black baseball cap and leaned against the framework effectively blocking any exit. He always referred to the men who worked for him as the "Unit." The members of the Unit often changed, but to Coronado, he was Capo of the Unit. Alan considered asking where they were going, but changed his mind after looking into Coronado's frightening black eyes. Jamming the toothbrush back into his mouth, Alan ducked into the bathroom. The hair dryer whirled for a minute, as the young man styled his thick, brown hair and regarded his own reflection in the mirror. He jumped when another image appeared. Coronado took possession of the bathroom threshold and their eyes met in the mirror.

Unable to break away from the stare, the instant the Coronado reflection crooked his finger Alan knew something wasn't quite right. Excitement turned to dread and fear, as he switched the hair dryer off and grabbed his wallet. At first he hesitated, feeling a shiver run up and down his

spine. Coronado continued to glower menacingly. Alan didn't understand what was happening, but dared not do anything to irritate the Capo.

The two men stood facing each other for a second, each knowing who was in command. Coronado calmly moved away from the doorway, turning his attention back to Perry. This action released Alan from the hypnotic gaze, yet the tether of control caused him to follow. Perry was staring strangely at Coronado, seemingly mesmerized until the commanding presence shifted toward the open door. Complying out of fear or obligation, or possibly both, Perry quickly pulled on jeans and shoes.

Coronado stalked across the living room. Stopping, he glared back at the two men standing statue still in the living room. Coronado's entire body exuded an underlying malevolence. He was very much in control. A motion with one hand ordered the Unit to follow and proved the Capo confident the men wouldn't dare disobey. Perry made the first move, gently pushing Alan toward the retreating Coronado. Alan had a distinct feeling he was making mistake—a wrong move—his mind was sharp and he was keenly aware of a foreboding which stopped him in mid-step. But he glanced at Coronado's strong back and followed the powerful man through the doorway. Perry's mind was in a haze of alcohol, drugs and lack of sleep. He was right behind Alan. The door slammed shut after the third man stepped across the threshold.