

Chapter 1

"The books! Where are they?!!" the Executioner barked out at Rinyard the Carpenter, The razor-sharp blade swung across his neck, a fraction of an inch closer with each beat. A few more ticks of the Executioner's time clock and he would be bled out like a sacrificial lamb, like the rest of his brethren whose remains lay in a blood-filled vat below the interrogation platform.

"Give us the books and we will spare one of your children." He continued. "Any one you choose."

Rinyard remained firm, his quivering lips saying nothing.

Then, the pendulous movement of the sword escalated, ticking harder, and faster, going down a quarter of an inch with each swing. And still, with the scrapes on the skin that became cuts and gashes, the defiant silence from the Carpenter. And the defiant silence on the faces of the three youths chained to the wall in front of his face. And on the faces of the prisoners below, Pacifist-Scholars who, until this day, could use their brains to effectively fight against spears and clubs, emerging victorious in every conflict, which, so far, were bloodless. Each would forfeit their life before their dignity, or so they hoped.

The mercenary Executioner had angry eyes. The blond Aryan Pacifist-Priest wore slanted blue ones obeyed none of the rules, in life or even on the verge of death. And in Ancient Eurasia, there were supposed to be rules. Commander Grathos, just promoted to Head Interrogator, knew them, very, very well. You conquered a city, your king got the throne, your subordinates got drunk, and you got to interrogate the prisoners regarding any secrets of value to yourself, or your employers. Then, when the conscripts were drunk, you stole whatever women or gold suited you before 'order' was established again. A fair exchange, for a Junior Officer in an Army for hire the civilized world feared more than death itself.

Its leader was Tyrannis. You never saw his face, unless you were his employer, victim or both. No vase bore his likeness, no coin his face, no statute erected in his honor. He chose to leave behind his record in blood, and pain. The fabled Mercenary of Mercenaries sold himself to the highest bidder, and his armies were the best. Though he never sat on the throne of any kingdom, he was ruler of the world. Indeed, no ordinary bandit.

But Rinyard was no ordinary carpenter, and Jenada was no ordinary outpost of the once-strong Babylonian Empire. The Jenadans knew it. Tyrannis knew it. Grathos had no idea why he would get half the gold in Jenada if he found even a tenth of the books hidden within its caves, caverns and temples. But he knew that if he failed to find even one of them, it would be his own head dangling from the tip of Tyrannis' sword.

Defiance turned Grathos' frustration into desperation. "Tell me where the books are and I will spare the lives of ALL your children," he whispered to Rinyard, pleading between the grimaces he gave to the other prisoners and the illusions of assurance he displayed to the soldiers, thus far, still under his Command. "All of your children," he repeated.

"Or whichever ones are left," from a voice behind the shadows. Nothing was out of Tyrannis' hearing range. It was one of the senses that he had developed particularly well, so well that some thought him to be a god.

He stepped out from behind the shadows. Rinyard saw his shiny armour, embroidered with demonic snakes. Then his black lips outlined by pale skin that could be green, grey or blue, depending on which color would evoke more fear in the viewer.

"The books," Tyrannis repeated to Rinyard. His tone was inviting. Like that of a merchant suggesting a beneficial deal which would profit buyer and seller alike, but which would rob the world, perhaps.

The pendulous blade stopped, the sword held above Rinyard's eyes. Grathos was moved aside.

A victory, Rinyard thought, as did his chained brethren below. His Comrades in the pit simultaneously broke out in song, sending a resounding wave of harmony and confidence up to the interrogation platform. Strong enough voices to lift Rinyard and his sons, chained to the wall in front of him, up into the sky, and out of a world where men such as Tyrannis were even allowed to exist. Courage had transformed despair into hope, defeat into victory.

Then, reality. Tyrannis nodded. It was time for Grathos to show what he was made of, and he did. The ex-Spartan, and banished Athenian edged his way over to one of the boys, stroking him on the head, in the manner an elderly Warrior would teach a younger one the bonds between men in love, and war. It

could be his own son, the Greek Mercenary pondered. Indeed, with Grathos' record of disseminating his semen in every City from Gaul to Gallilee, the boy could have been his.

"It will be quick, and fast," Grathos said to the lad with a tone that said 'Comrade', and which was received with trust, and compassion. He lifted up the boy's hair, stroked the soft blonde locks with his hard, stubby fingers, then edged his dagger across the lad's throat in a swift, smooth action. But---not swift of smooth enough for Tyransis' liking. A sword cut off Grathos' head, wielded by his second in Command, Themiku, a Persian with less years under his belt, more greed, and perhaps a political score to settle for the crusty-Greek's involvement in a War with his homeland's Masters and Kings.

A cheer from the crowd at the chaos inflicted upon the chain of command, and the shock in the faces of Tryansis' army, having witnessed the death of the grubby Greek Seargent who led them like a merciless General. And the new SubCommander Themiku seemed so refined, and intelligent. Even the Jenadans below seemed pleased at the change in Command. Perhaps a change in plans, the gold and silver coatings on the books and sacred scrolls to be melted down in exchange for leaving the material inside them unrevealed, and unread by the marauders.

The boy in Grathos' hands seemed most pleased. No grubby hands on his head, no ugly man trying to violate his boyhood, no need to die before his---

"---For Tyransis, and for us!" Themiku proclaimed to the Army as his left hand grabbed hold of the boy's foot long blonde mane, his right peeling the scalp off in one very foul swipe with his dagger. Then, before the lad could see what had happened, his ability to do was removed. Themiku dug the blade into the boy's right socket, then his left, popping both eyes out in a deadly rhythm that silenced everyone. Scalp and eyes rolled into the blood-filled pit below to the beat of the seven year old's screams of pain. It echoed into every bone of anyone within range who had a tinge of conscience or an ounce of perspective left. The prisoners' faces went pale, the lesser experienced soldiers becoming green in the gills.

Tyransis smiled, then nodded, his eyes still hidden. He knew just how long to wait for the order to chop off the boy's head. Just how long to allow shock and terror to reach peak levels for the executed, and the soon-to-be executed if he didn't get the information requested by his employers.

The boy's head got chopped off, cleanly and in deadly rhythm, at just the right angle in Themiku's hands. It fell upon the others with deadly accuracy. "On top of the caligrapher, the wheelmaker and the herdsman. Like a pyramid!" he mused.

Little did Themiku note, or care, that with each head that fell to the pit, so did the Jenadan medallion, a distinctive 5 star pattern and triangular core never duplicated or imitated by anyone else. It was an ugly design, by Greek or even Persian standards. Carved from wood. Of little significance to anyone who valued power, strength or security.

As Themiku 'tested' out his new powers, and problems, of command, the rest of the interrogation took place between Tyransis the Conquerer and Rinyard, the Carpenter in soft-spoken voices with the most final of agendas.

"Why us?" Rinyard asked, and pleaded.

"Your blond hair and big blue eyes offend my employers," Tyransis related. "But if you give me the books, I will spare the rest of your children. And the others.. I feel like being generous today, and you feel like being....stupid."

"Why do you want the books?"

"THEY want the books, Carpenter."

"The Romans? The Egyptians? The Assyrians? The Hebrews? The Chinese? The Persians? What ruler wants the books?"

"They all do, you ignorant pounder of nails. They're too dangerous."

"They're too truthful."

Silence from Tyransis as his soldiers glanced his way.

"I want the books," Tyransis demanded, quietly, and with finality.

"You want our dignity," Rinyard smiled back at the Conquerer or conquerers.

"I want the books," Tyransis affirmed, his worried eyes downward.

"And I want to see your face. We ALL do." Rinyard was more clever, and wise than Tyransis, after all. Still, the third class carpenter had to fight by a harsher set of rules than his Conquerer. Rinyard could spot the inner beauty behind the ugliest of eyes. Tyransis could see fear behind the boldest of bluffs. And Rinyard's youngest son had a mountain of fear over the blank stare overcoming his peach-fuzzed face.

Tyransis knelt down in front of the lad and unbolted his chains from the wall. "What is your name son?"

“Klimin.”

“Klimin. A brave name. You are a brave boy, not afraid to die. Not afraid to face the demons of the Netherworld. I know them personally. I can send you there with my personal recommendation. They’ll take care of you. They always take care of brave boys like you.”

Tyransis released the shackles from the chains, freeing the boy’s ankles. A quick run into a small crevice within the cavern carved inside the mountain would have bought freedom. But Klimin was too terrified to think about freedom. He grabbed hold of his older brother, bolted to the stone wall next to him.

“Family,” Tyransis proclaimed. “It’s all about family. Your father will take care of you, Klimin. He will do the right thing. The moral thing. He knows that the lives of children, HIS children, are worth more than the lives of his fellow ‘citizens’. More than a civilization. More than ideas. More than ink marks on papyrus or etchings on a stone slab.”

Tyransis grabbed hold of Klimin’s foot-long blond mane, his knife slowly moving in to lift it off the skull.

A defiant, though uncertain, start from Rinyard. Countered by Tyransis moving the blade in toward the boy’s eyes.

“The books!!!” Tyransis requested again to the still-silent Carpenter. “You value the books more than your own children?” Still, silence from Rinyard, a drone in the hierarchy of Jenadan society who could barely read the literary riches stored on the shelves and boxes he built. But, a drone with the Soul of a King. A Philosopher-King as well in a very different kind of kingdom.

Jenada considered itself a kingdom of the Spirit. Its terrain was harsh, dry and desolate. Its people were gentle. Its National Anthem one of simple lyrics, a prayer-like drone and a driving rhythm that could drive even disbelieving Pagans into terror on the battlefield. It worked to scare off weak men driven by evil spirits before. It could sustain Jenadan spirits—and perspective—at this time—when they would perhaps win their most important victory, on a metaphysical battlefield their enemy did not even know existed.

Umbilo, Rinyard’s eldest son, channeled the droning lyrics through his determined, yet quivering, lips. Drones became song, then celebration. Younger brother Krimlin joined in. Then the other prisoners. Rinyard’s contribution was a smile, and a well deserved laugh delivered at Tyransis. Though the humble Carpenter couldn’t see the Master Conquerer’s face, he could smell his desperation. It was the books that he wanted, after all. Not the gold in the Temple Cavern walls, used for physical and medical purposes unknown everywhere else. Not the silver in the underground streams, accessible for the taking for those who knew where the main aquatic veins were. Not even the dignity of the Jenadans, the silent envy of every Alexander the Great wannabe within 3 thousand miles in every direction.

Tyransis retreated into the shadows. His men didn’t. Rinyard the Carpenter had said he would give his right arm to bring down any one of the tyrants infecting the world, and he did. The Conquerer’s blade sliced off that appendage at the shoulder, a manure-soaked cloth immediately tied onto it by a lower rank soldier to cheat the commoner Carpenter from a fast death due to blood loss. The opportunity to humiliate the infamous Tyransis cost the fame-avoiding Carpenter his left arm with the second swing of the sword. Portions of the legs and testicles were taken from him slowly, in succession, blood and flesh dripping onto the prisoners below the interrogation platform, the former holder of said body parts still very much alive. Perhaps more Alive than he had ever been in his entire life.

Still, the singing from the pit continued, the chorus of courage driving terror into every man holding a sword. The last martyr in the last war, a lowly Carpenter, a drone in the ant hill. Appropriate for a kingdom where everyone was a king, but no one wore a crown.

Though he could never hug his son’s again, Rinyard embraced the lads with his eyes, the shaking bodies of the soldiers near them giving him confidence, and strength, until---

“Enough!” Tyransis asserted, taking the axe from the assistant executioner, lopping off the head of Umbillo and Krimlin, in front of their father. To ensure that Rinyard had seen how his defiance had cost his two remaining sons, Rinyard’s head was pushed downward, forcing him to see the heads of his eldest and youngest sons falling upon that of his middle child.

A blood curdling scream from Rinyard. Horrifying silence from the prisoners below. And, an explanation, courteously delivered by Tyransis to the entire congregation. “I want to preserve the fear, the regret, and the guilt in his eyes.” With that, the Master Mercenary lopped off Rinyard’s head, the eyes fixed into the most desperate and painful of human emotions, holding it up for all to see. “You all will experience this pain, and go to your Creator like this if I am not told what I want to know. And what you

need to tell me. If any ONE of you tells me where ONE of the Sacred Books are, I will spare ONE HUNDRED of you masachistic idiots!"

Themia the Scribe was the next to be asked the questions, and pay the consequences for her answers. Maybe she knew that Tyransis' offer would not be honored. Or maybe she thought it would be. But she also knew what it meant to be a Jenadan. And that perhaps the world needed another martyr for Truth, for reasons not known to those who wrote about or studied It.

No one knew how the soldiers found the caverns known only to the most trusted caravan chiefs. No one knew how Tyransis found the way into the mountain passes negotiable only by those who knew them by feel and sight. And no one recorded what the last Jenadan said to the last question asked by Tryansis, but it was certainly 'no'. "No" to putting survival in front of Service to Humanity. "No" to allowing the Hidden Library carved into the mountains to be burned, sacked or stolen. "No" to revealing the Secrets of the East and West entrusted to Aryan, blue-eyed 'freaks' who didn't fit into any earthly kingdom. And "No" to any more chances Tyransis would get to conquer anyone else.

Nature answered the abuse of men against man, and woman and child, with Her own response. Attempts of Tryansis to burn his way through the Mountain caverns caused the valley to rumble with an Earthquake from which only the most nameless of Tryansis' Army escaped. As the Earth reclaimed the mountain, and the people within it, all that was left was a legend, and a scattered group of renegade ex-mercenaries who had little left to do except to run home and hope that their Sins would be forgiven by whatever gods were still listening. Sustained by the conviction that no good act goes unpunished, and no vicious one ever goes unavenged.

## Chapter 2

More business was always done on the streets of Old Kerstanabad than in the shops, despite the mall developers and retail chains that wanted to abolish non-accountability of the barter economy. Taxing the sidewalk merchants was hard, but still possible.

The wares were watched from a very discrete political distance. True, the Michael Jackson tapes and tee-shirts might undermine the manhood of emerging Islamic adolescents. But it was far more acceptable than Prince, and safer than the Satanic undertones of Blue Oyster, Black Sabbath or the Sex Pistols. Then there were the more traditional items, sure movers during the tourist seasons, with, of course a 900 percent mark up. Some were made in Tokyo, Hong Kong and Long Island City. Others had more indigenous roots. It was, as always, up to the buyer to look after his own interests.

Mike Craven had spent most of his professional life on the road. By thirty-three, he had acquired more frequent flyer points than anyone else at the New York Times and twice as many journalistic awards. But this trip to Arabia on the eve of his big Four-O wasn't to cover the war in Turkistan, or the arms deals which were setting the stage of another brushfire where the 'real' mover-and-shaker countries could test out their wapins and political diplomacy against each other. This trip was about exploring internal frontiers with Crystal, on-and-off-and-on girlfriend for a decade, now newly-wed wife for as long as New York pavement kept the New Jersey crabgrass hostage under West Side Highway concrete.

It was Crystal's idea to tour the part of the city where the real expatriate tourists shopped. It was Mike's to spot a sheepskin vest, a Masonic-like five-pointed medallion embroidered on its left side, just over the heart.

"Three hundred American dollars," Ibriham Housian said proudly, smiling a mouthful of half-rotted, and half whitened, teeth through his overgrown waxed mustache. "Real thing. No imitation. Authenic. Original."

"Made in Taiwan," Mike noticed on the stump from a partially-torn off tag in the collar.

"Imported leather with real Afgan wool! Wild sheep. Only wide men deserve to wear it. Men with wild spirits! Here, you try it on."

Mike knew that he labelled himself 'sucker' the moment he let Ibriham put the vest on him. But there was the smell of the wild ram, the feel of sunbaked leather, and the embroidered design with the constellation of interwoven symbols on it. He found himself instantly attached to it. Was it Masonic? Something from an ancient Zoroastrian sect? A symbol used by Alexander the Great? An ensignia used by First Century Christian Essenes before the fish or the cross gained popularity because of ease of design and understanding? A Taoist emblem used by Buddhists who found themselves in Arabia just as the Prophet Mohamed's Army found themselves at their Temple doorstep? Or maybe all of the above, he pondered.

"It's a little too big around those Yuppie shoulders," Crystal interjected in a snide Arkansas drawl. "But it fits. Specially around the eyes," she noted with accuracy, and sincerity.

Like all Upscale Manhattan men, Mike was fascinated with Off-Scale Southern women, particularly if they came from trailer park roots with a Brooklyn attitude. Crystal fit all the requirements. A sleek body that made New York supermodels look like bar room has-beens. Long blonde hair down to her ass, a bust that fit her hips perfectly, atop a sleek 22 inch waist on two legs straight out of a Texas Cheerleader mail order catalogue. And above the neck---brains!

Crystal was midway through a degree in biology when she met Mike ten years and twenty Chief Editors ago. She was on her way to a nursing degree in Arkansas or, if she dared, the citizen papers that would allow her to be a Doctor. She took the MCATs and even did a semester at New Jersey Medical School. But life on the road with a budding journalist was more exciting than spending four years inside university walls, for the privilege of spending four more years as a resident somewhere already overpopulated with residents who sought the preist-like 'MD' appendum to their common surnames. And the end product was a healer who was usually more Soul dead than his, or her, patients. Healing the human SOUL was her objective, or dancing to its most Natural tune.

Though he prided himself as a loner, Mike was never more independent than when he was with Crystal, ten years younger in age, a hundred years wiser in her vitality. Her skills as a photographer were unparalleled. Her contribution to his writing was between every line, and within every letter. And without her, he would have never wandered into this street, this merchant, and this purchase.

"This vest was made for you!" Ibriham proclaimed to Mike as he observed the blond-haired, blue-eyed Yankee admiring himself in the mirror 'conveniently' on hand next to the overpriced wares. "Generations before you were born!" he threw in for extra measure.

"Yeah. An authentic original," Mike noted, taking heed of the embroidered insignia. It seemed a beautiful design, grander sewn into it, probably by a seamstress somewhere whose life was anything but beautiful or grand. "A modern lie that keeps alive some ancient truth, or un-realistic wish." Mike found his eyes transported a million miles away, his perspective someplace....very different.

"Excuse?" Ibriham asked, not expecting such an elegant variation from the script he saw coming once the guilt-ridden American spotted his stand.

"Real world translation," Crystal interjected. "He likes it, we'll take it. But for a HUNDRED dollars."

Ibriham looked at Crystal directly, but with the courtesy demanded by his current station in the transaction. "The price is supposed to be FIVE hundred dollars, Miss."

"Ms...and his new Mrs."

"I dropped it down to three hundred because I like you and your husband."

"Well, if you RESPECTED us, you'd drop the price to ONE hundred dollars, 'Sir'."

"I let you have this magnificent garment for one hundred and I take food from the mouths of my own children. Four of them. Here, I show you their pictures." He reached into his wallet, showing the 'pity me' photos reserved for special clients, particularly those with Liberal Political leanings and not-so-lean wallets.

Mike's eyes remained fixed on the insignia. Crystal's rolled at the sight of the Ibriham's snapshots. "Hey. Even if those ARE your kids, maybe you could give them something off YOUR supper plate, there, Bubba." The former Miss Hot Springs, Arkansas pointed to the Arab merchant's enlarged belly, checkmating him on his most powerful sales technique. But before he could shift to the next bag of tricks up his sleeve---

"I can pay three hundred," Mike interjected, reaching for his wallet.

"The price is ONE hundred, Michael!" Crystal held firm.

"Back in Manhattan, I'd pay eight hundred for it, easy," he countered.

"This poor excuse for a swap meet ain't Manhattan, or even Jersey, and the RIGHT price is ONE hundred, Michael."

Two 'Michaels' in a row, Mike noted. Crystal must be really pissed off, he thought. Or she must be planning something very...special, he postulated. He let her take the vest off him, following her lead into...somewhere Vital. She always took him to such places, and states, and the results were always worth the journey. But---

Crystal threw the vest back at Ibriham and turned away, sauntering away with an arrogant very American stride. Never mind that her Arkansas drawl had blasted out into the square like a megaphone.

Never mind that she insulted Ibriham's manhood and culture in a country where either offense could get you killed. And never mind that Mike really wanted the vest.

"What are you doing?" Mike whispered to his new wife, eyeing the aroused policemen who were taking notice of his wallet, and her very feminine frontal anatomy.

"I'm havin' some fun," she softly explained. "So is he," she noted, pointing Mike's attention back to a smiling Ibriham. "And so should you," she reminded her ever-on-the-job, obsessively-responsible workaholic hubby.

Mike got an idea. Crystal read his mind, and Soul, nodding in approval to it being verbally expressed. He stopped dead in his tracks, negotiating the most effective course between want, need and practicality. "Two hundred!" he bolted out to Ibriham.

"One hundred!" Crystal interjected.

"And fifty?" Ibriham countered, holding the dark-brown vest up for Mike to put his pale-white arms through, knowing it was a temptation the otherwise-disciplined American could not refuse. Or so he hoped.

Mike looked at Crystal's face, she looked into his Soul. Everyone in the Square gazed in suspenseful silence at the American tourists and the toughest Arabian negotiator this side of Cairo who had violated every bylaw in town with respect to both dress and deportment.

Mike gave a thumb's up to Ibriham. The merchant strolled over, putting the vest on his mark. Crystal gave her recently-betrothed a kiss on the lips no one within hearing range could ignore.

From the Square, cheers. From the Japanese tourists, snapping of cameras. From the Police, smiles as they balanced the benefits and problems of being with a woman so "Americanly" attractive, yet so insolently independent.

From a dark corner of the Square, a Stranger, unknown to everyone. He had seen it all, and knew that from the moment Michael Craven had put on the overpriced sheepskin vest, he had taken the first step on a journey from which there was no return.

### Chapter 3

The dance was a little bit Reggae, a little bit Hindi and a little bit Rockabilly. Hard, fast and fiery. A street festival dedicated to life, God and people, all at the same time.

"Sufi rock," Mike called festival in the streets, from the sidelines. "No one understands what the Sufi's are supposed to be about. Maybe because they're not supposed to be about anything," he commented to Crystal.

"Huh?" her reply, her jaw on the ground, watching the gyrations of a dancer who defied the laws of physics with his arms, legs and rubber-like back. Her toes tapped along with the flutes and tamberines, her heart beating along with the silent, yet everbuilding drumbeat.

"The Sufis. A mystical Sect, officially speaking," Mike related as he ducked the ever-growing mass of participant pulling the spectators into the dance. Though he was wearing an authentic, perhaps imitation, Eurasian vest, his anxious eyes, Nikon camera and rigid back said 'tourist' loud enough to be heard by a deaf mute. "The Sufis can get away with most anything in this country. Including dancing nearly naked, without veils or the rigidity Moslems are supposed to have in this part of the world....and in this part of the world...Crystal...Crystal?...Crystal!!!"

A hand sprung out of the crowd, pulling Mike into the human tornado. "This honeymoon is supposed to be about being spontaneous," Crystal explained as her feet danced with a smile fueled by both mischief and rebellion.

"But—" Mike's feet remained frozen stilts, petrified wood in the midst of an awakening rain forest of celebration.

"I know," Crystal interjected. "Pulitzer Prize winners don't sing, and upwardly-mobile White men can't dance."

"But--"

"Come on, Hon."

Before Crystal could say 'Nutmacker' or 'Hodown', Mike found his feet dancing, his eyes widened, and his heart---open. At the wedding he refused to dance, with Crystal, and even with his own grandmother. It wasn't because there wasn't any love in his heart. "I don't have any music in my feet, and when they get started, they bring death to the notes and the rhythm," he rehearsed, and accurate, answer.

From a Mystical Arabian perspective, it was no surprise that Sufi Rock put the beat into Mike's bootheels. It was also no surprise that an extra dancer appeared, from a place not on any National

Geographic map. His head was covered with a black Turban, a scarf over his mouth. His eyes were deep, reflecting a constellation of emotions ranging from anger to helplessness, despair to happiness, love to indifference. They weren't human eyes, but then again, this was not a very human visitor---or perhaps one too human to live in the world of ordinary people.

He glided in and out of the crowd towards Mike. His mission---drop a book entitled "Lost Civilizations" into the pocket of the vest that bore the multicultural emblem, now worn by one of the most civilized men in the World. The dated cover was faded, making the 130 page book look more like 1952 Pulp Fiction rather than something that would provide a clue to Mike's destiny, and the fates of everyone he had ever touched, or will from this critical moment onward.

It was a dangerous mission for the Masked Dancer. If he was spotted, or his face was looked into, by anyone who would take part in the drama to unfold, his purpose would be ended, as would be his life. Important to not be seen, but to have an effect, the Ghost Dancer thought as he weaved his way through the crowd, unnoticed. The Sufi's were absorbed into the bliss of the occasion. Mike and Crystal became absorbed into the joy of each other. And as for the Messenger, his absorption back into the Infinite Essence was to happen very, very soon, or so he hoped.

Sufi dances involve lots of circling, the cloaked Visitor utilizing that to the fullest. The festive motion of feet, hands and heart compelled the participants to face the four directions, North, South, East and West, many times, from different perspectives. North was the direction that most Western Europeans and North Americans worshipped most, one way of another. Mythological gods and Spirits were always "Up" there in the "North" country. The East was about where you came from. The West, where you might be going. The South, about comfort. "North" the Messenger concluded in the language of his own about the most unexpected recipient of the package that he had been looking after for so, so long. "That is the place where he is most distracted, and drawn. His strength and weakness."

Consistent with the rule of threes, the dance took one circle around the Square for Man, one for Humanity, and the final one for God. On the third, the Messenger delivered his cargo, the "Lost Civilization" book sliding into the pocket of Mike's new vest unnoticed, a perfect fit for the garment and the wearer. "I can go Home now," the Ghost Dancer sighed with relief, knowing that his Brethren from the Beyond Realm would take the next 'shift' of the multistaged Mission. "Praise be to God I can---"

A flash of light blinded the Ghost Dancer, his eyes painfully hurting behind closed lids. When he opened them, he saw One Eye staring back at him.

"Smile!" he heard in Arkanasas-eze from a moving object jumping with joy, pounding the pavement with primal passion.

He ducked, shriveling up like a thief caught in the act by a Constable's spotlight. Maybe Crystal's eye DID see him. Maybe the camera was aimed at his face, taking a picture of his Soul, something, which if photographed, would be stolen.

He saw his arms dissolve into formless fog, then his legs, then his torso. "Praise be to..." The Ghost Dancer never did get to name the Diety, but he was on his Way to It. As for Michael Craven, the blessing, or the curse, had been bestowed. The rest would soon be history.

#### Chapter 4

Pictures of smiling children captured at the bazaar and the Dance by Crystal's camera cluttered the hotel room, interspersed between sweat-drenched clothing torn off in the heat of passion. After the dance outside, she and Mike reconsumated their recent marriage with a very private one behind closed doors in the Ambassador Hotel. It was one of those once-five-star places that had lost one of its stars every time the Country dropped down another notch in political status. Still, Mr. and MS. Craven turned the honeymoon Suite with the peeling paint into a Passion Palace. It never felt fresher, or newer, or more Alive. But it was still done according to Custom, adopted from habit and necessity for keeping private life private on the road for one of the most blackmailable journalists on the Associated Press roster.

This time, it was the radio playing music rather than the TV providing a sound cover of football or soccer crowds. At least 'music' was what the commentator called it on the most popular program on Achmed's All-Country Hour. Bad American Country music translated into inaccurate Arabic lyrics and worse instrumentals. Perfect copies for mass consumption and Cultural Domination by Big Bubba in Nashville.

Mike's mind found itself lingering on the future, a place far, far away that was beginning to form in his troubled mind. Crystals was on the present, her crotch wet with fresh semen and lovingly-emitted

vaginal juices, her body drenched in joyfully acquired sweat, her heart pounding with a feeling both familiar and new.

“How was it for you?” she asked in a soft voice raspy with lingering passion.

“Great, I think,” Mike answered from the fog between his ears. The answer was honest, direct and real. He was always brutally honest during conversations-after, unlike most of the rest of his waking hours.

“I don’t wanna know what yer thinking,” Crystal whispered, cuddling up to his chest. “I wanna know what yer feelin’.”

“It was great...really.” Mike hugged Crystal, but there was something dangerously distant about his touch this time. Maybe it was the fact that they had been on vacation past Mike’s three-day workaholic limit. Maybe it had something to do with the food, Mike’s Americanized body never being able to keep up with the versatility of his very International Mind. Or maybe it had something to do with the trash Archeological paperback he had been glancing through while she was in the bathroom, and every time she turned his back on him to get one thing or another. It sat on the night table, opened, sweat marks on the cover that got deeper and darker with every unanswered “Is anything wrong, Babe?”

Men vowed first loyalty to their Work was something that Crystal got used to. It was smart courting strategy in Arkansas. It was essential survival skills after she arrived in the Big Crab Apple. But there was something very different about this ‘story’. Everytime Mike dived into a project in his head, there was always a part of him that let Crystal have a side view of the show emerging. But this time, there was a plan bigger than big, larger than obsessive. Something she could not understand, perhaps because her Beloved didn’t seem to understand it himself.

“Michael...eh, Mike. What’s wrong?” she asked, inviting whatever answer he was bold enough to give her, her body giving him enough comfort for trust, enough distance for honest introspection.

“It’s like the world is falling apart,” he confessed, growing ever more distant the more he tried to make the words connect to her. “That everything I value is about to be turned upside down. Inside out. I don’t know. It’s just...just...”

“...somethin’ Political?”

“No,” he affirmed.

“Professional?”

“Not anymore.”

“Personal?”

“Yeah. I think so. Or I feel so, I...”

“Does it have to do with you, me, or,” she choked on the word. “Us?”

“Them,” Mike surmized, affirmation accompanying determination as to the conclusion reached when he looked towards the nighttable, and the window beyond it, a full moon lighting up the desolate desert mountains beyond the fertile valley that made the city, and life within it, possible. “Them...” he concluded, getting up, walking towards the night-table, clenching his fist, bringing it down upon the item on top of it, uttering with furocity and fire, “The Achy Brakey in Arabic!”

“Huh?” Crystal let flow out of her confounded lips as Mike flicked the dial of the radio up.

“The gosh darn, golly ain’t that great Achy Brakey!” he asserted in a mock Arkansas twang as the American pop tune blasted out of the radio in a language neither Billy Ray Cyrus nor even his record promoters could understand. “Ferget H-bombs, toxic bugs and bazookas. This is how we Americans ARE conquering the world, and ourselves! Good ol’ easy listenin’ musac that makes ya bob yer head, tap yer feet and smile with pure delight as yer brain cells die of boredom and simplicity, in harmony, ‘cause we all got a...”

Crystal always took it personal when Big City Mike goofed on her Small Town Country culture, but he could always make her laugh, even through the anger. Never had she heard a New Yorker sing the Achy Brakey in Texan Arabic. Never did it sound so entertaining. Never did she suspect that “Lost Civilizations” was waiting for yet another intense read once she fell to sleep. And never could she imagine where it would lead Mike, and her. Not even the Ghost Dancer had access to that information.

## Chapter 5

The average American’s knowledge of World Geography is bad, even on the best days. New Jersey’s next to New York, Connecticut is next door on the other side, and Rhode Island is buried somewhere on I-95, or maybe the mini-State that miss if you don’t look for it is under that 4 lane highway overpass on the way to Boston. Distance is a perspective measured by time, and mode of transportation. A five minute car ride, or a five hour flight. Never mind how far the crow flies or the Pilgrim walks.

Mike's knowledge of the Eurasian Mountains was better than most, but not good enough to make a trek on his own. The maps were printed in Princeton or Philadelphia. The mountains were here. An inch in a published Atlas could equal ten, or a hundred or a thousand miles, to say nothing about distances in altitude and weather that always disobeyed the rules, providing the most extremes of hot, cold, wet and dry.

The political weather was even more variable. Political boundaries changed every time another egotistical Sultan decided to become King, or illiterate Bandit aspired become a President. However the mix settled out, drifters and seekers were always dis-invited parties, particularly if they were trying to find Truth within themselves or around them. With the decline of the Soviet Empire, a new kind of chaos was emerging, far more deadly than the Holy Wars in India after the British gave up playing nursemaid to warring Hindu and Islamic militants in India. The soon-to-be-renamed 'Persian' subcontinent was an 'interesting' place to be where if caution wasn't your friend, it was your constant companion.

Yet, it was a honeymoon designed for adventure, and above all things, Mike was adventurer, at least in the ways of the World. Money could buy the best guides possible, and after the last deal he cut with CBS News for exclusive rights to his stories, and presence in front of camera, he had no shortage of money. His talents could buy what he needed. His reputation was ample currency for what he wanted. But as for his reservoir of common sense, it was running dry faster than even he was realizing, and the timetable had been escalated. The destination---fixed in his head, or so he thought.

"Are you sure you want to go here?" Achmed, NOT the one on the radio, asked Mike again while pointing to a hand-drawn map the Journalist had scribbled out of the uncharted desert mountains, a series of 'X's with question marks next to them.

"Positive," Mike's reply as he shoveled down another handful of buckwheat cake. He knew he was allergic to it, but he ate a generous portion anyway. Achmed ordered it and to refuse the specialty of the House at his host's brother's Café would be a hanging offense if the local judge was in a bad mood, a sure-fire way to lose Achmed's trust and cooperation.

Mike's throat itched, a prelude to what he thought might be another emergency run into the hospital for bronchiolar constriction, but he was breathing, fine. Maybe it was confidence, maybe it was conquest of his old 'stay at home' persona, or maybe his adrenals were pumping out epinephrine which he once flipantly called 'hormonal fear factor.' Either way, the beat required the next note for the business to continue. "They say you are the best mountain guide in your Country," Mike said to Achmed, his eyes turned downward.

"Allah has given me many gifts. I do the best job I can," the reply, proudly given.

"They say you are a true professional. The most professional in your Country"

"Anyone who does their best is always a professional."

"And that you are, in your Country, the most...discrete." Mike turned his eyes up, looking straight into Achmed's weather-beaten face, staring into his soul, even through the thick beard the Master Guide had grown to keep it well hidden.

Achmed sat back, stroked his hairy chin with his index finger, and after careful consideration, gave his answer. "If I am so discrete, how did you find me, Mister Craven?"

"Because I'm the best journalist in MY country," Mike countered, a confident smirk on his freshly-shaven face.

Achmed contemplated the matter again, a four finger stroke of the whiskers this time, feeling the scars on the chin underneath them. He had lived through eight wars since his childhood, come of which never made page 22 in the Cairo Herald. He stood only five-feet six in the valley, but was a towering six-foot ten on any mountain trail. His small-framed body was built for endurance, not speed or brute strength. He knew the ways of the Mountains by nature, the ways of men by necessity, but desired to know the Way of God most of all.

For Mike, every dime he himself honestly gave life yielded back a dollar of reward. For Achmed, every dollar of blood given for others yielded barely a penny of satisfaction. Yet, somehow, that penny was enough for Achmed to continue on the Life Path he had chosen for himself so many long journeys ago. He had learned much, most particularly the wisdom to know what he didn't know. And what he didn't know about the rich Yankee with crazy eyes and an addictive obsession to make this 'Mystery Trek' felt very dangerous.

"What are you looking for in the mountains?" Achmed asked as he sipped his Turkish coffee, hiding behind the cup.

"Stories. Photographs. Amateur video footage. I'm on vacation!" Mike's eyes looked like those of a 19 year old Hippie back in 1969, declaring everything free, open, and his own.

“Do you know what they do to people who smuggle drugs in this country, Mister Craven?” Achmed asked.

“I’m into something a lot more important than drug dealing, Achmed.” Craven lifted the Lost Civilizations book from the sheepskin vest pocket, gently handing it over to the Veteran Mountaineer and Adventurer with a reverence reserved for Holy Books and Holy Men.

Achmed chuckled under his beard as he thumbed through the pages and the notes Mike had made in the margins, and the missing page that would have indicated the address and legitimacy of the publisher. “‘Lost Civilizations’. A comic book.”

“Your family’s survival!” Mike shot back in a low voice and fierce tone. He pulled out plain envelopes, each loaded with American money, each with a different name on them. The names and locations, indeed hit Achmed where he lived.

“My brother, sister....sons,” he somberly noted.

“In prisons and refugee camps with buyable guards.” Mike smirked the kind of ‘gotcha’ grin reserved for only the most valuable of prey. “And I know that you have...other expenses, other friends you value more than even family.”

Achmed braced himself and said a silent prayer to his Creator, then allowed his eyes to stare straight into Mike’s. “What makes you think you can succeed where I have failed, Mister Craven?”

“Because you have to trust me, and that stare you’re throwing at me is because you need the money from this...recreational expedition as much as I need to find what’s at the other end of it.”

“Pardon my disrespect, Mister Craven, but...”

“---I’m crazy. Maybe yes, maybe no. But I’ve done my research.” Mike interjected. “You have men you can trust, I have money you need. You have horses, I have equipment that needs to be taken along. You have a Russian surplus military watch, I have a Rolex. And they both say ten after one.”

“Which is to say?” Achmed inquired.

“We start at ten after seven, tomorrow morning, on the Eastern outskirts of town, as indicated on the map.” Mike got up, taking back the envelopes, noting that the men outside the Café were hitmen for someone other than his host.

“And my assurance that you will be there?”

Mike dropped the prized blue booklet on the table, the one no traveller from the land of the Free and the Brave should ever be without, anywhere.

“Your Passport,” Achmed noted. “This is worth ten thousand dollars on the Black Market, and the way things have been here lately, maybe twenty or thirty.”

“My wife’s passport stays with her.”

“Your wife?” Achmed inquired. “I’ll need more...”

“Money, for ‘provisions’, Achmed?”

“Yes, for provisions, Mister Craven.”

“And privacy. Whatever comforts you can offer her on this adventure.”

“This route you’ve chosen has few comforts to provide. But, we will do our best.”

“She’s to be treated with respect, dignity and kindness.”

“My men are disciplined warriors, Mister Craven. Your wife will receive the same respect, dignity and kindness that you give her yourself.”

Mike sighed, in shame and terror.

“Or I will treat her better than you can,” Achmed ordered.

Mike threw an angry dart straight between the Arabian Mountaineer’s eyes.

“According to your ‘cultural boundaries’, Mister Craven”.

Mike smiled, bowed slightly and gave Achmed a “Go in Peace” according to Islamic Custom. It was accepted, but as a truce. A War with something or someone was inevitable once the ‘recreational expedition’ set out on the two week excursion.

## Chapter 6

The expedition set out the next day, on schedule, at 7:10 from the end of the distant most road in the most desolate sector of the Country. True to his Word, and reputation, Achmed provided the best Arabian Mountain horses American money could buy. Achmed’s connections with some legitimate and some certainly illegitimate sources at the National Television Network resulted in the best ENG video equipment available, built in Japan. The still photography cameras and the infrared attachments had Russian writing on them, but thanks to his Afganistan mechanic contacts, they worked as well as anything

made in the Good Old US of A. Portable stoves were the best that could be 'lost' at the airport baggage terminal. Tents were a patchwork of fine craftsmanship, dating back to Achmed's grandfather's Wars against the Ottoman Turks and the Brits. Two pack horses carried the food, a mixture of dehydrated fast food American, military surplus K-rations and sun-dried delicacies from Achmed's brother's Café, the sibbling who was indentured to the Russian Mafia. Buying said brother out of his mob-ruled enslavement would cost more than springing the rest of his family from 'legitimate' prison.

Every element was in place to insure the most comfortable of non-motorized three week holiday, along with the best protection Smith and Wesson, and more current manufacturers of rifles and pistols, could provide.

The wielders of those weapons of 'insurance against predators', as Crystal was told, were Achmed's prime posse. Kabrin had the body of a muscle-bound Greek god, the loyalty of a dog, and the heart of a child. Like his father, grandfather and great-grandfather, he was brought up with horses and the Koran, and little else. But that was all a Mountain Warrior like Kabrin needed. That, and someone Noble like Achmed to serve under.

Yosaf came to Achmed by way of the street. He was born into a Gypsy family which valued cleverness above all human 'abilities'. He was the best thief Upper Class Serbian Gypsy blood could produce, until he tried to steal from the most vicious Low Class Lebanese Gypsy Family the Black Market provided. Yosaf found refuge in the mountains of Eastern Turkey, then in Achmed's guerilla army curing one of the unofficial Afghan-Soviet Wars in the mid 70s. That winter, Achmed did more battle with Nature than with medn, and the once-urban Yosaf quickly learned the value of helping others. By Spring, he valued caring over cleverness, and how quickly karmic payback really works.

Patel lost his family in the Indo-Pakastani skirmished over Kashmir in 1979, his faith in God after the official Police Actions of '80, and confidence in himself by '81. He lay on a windswept battlefield, wounded, lacking medical assistance and the will to live, having shot himself across the scalp with the last bullet in his pistol, begging the buzzards to eat his flesh, the only live body amongst the stacks of dead ones left by his Indian Hindu Comrades on their way to 'important' combat elsewhere. When Moslem Achmed rode his Arabian horse through the carnage, he didn't saw an infidel enemy soldier, but an underaged Hindu recruit who had botched a suicide attempt. Achmed's medical skills saved Patel's life, and there was no turning back. Patel was a marked man in the Indian Army, the witness to a ring of Military Corruption that got him nearly killed in battle, and which would get him executed should he ever go 'home' again. Patel saved Achmed's men from an ambush by his former 'Comrades', earning him trust, then friendship of the Renegade Veteran who chose the sides he fought for on the basis of best-percieved Virtue, rather than religion or politics.

As for Crystal, a strange thing had taken place. The Fort Smith, Arkansas gal bred to mate with cowboys and bond with horses seemed to be having trouble with the four legged motorcycles. She was tossed off "Lightening", and "Thunderbold" showed her that Indigenious Arabians think way different than American Quarterhorses, twisting and turning every time she asked for a straight line. Ears going back on "Ibin" when she threw her body into the saddle forced Achmed to offer her "Gentle Healer", a creature she was finally able to convert from a prancy lope into a balanced trot after the third uphill trail.

She rode up to Mike, feeling odd, and inferior. "Damn, I'm all thumbs. Like I ain't here, even though I wanna be. Like my legs decided ta attach themselves to someone else's body, maybe..." she glanced over at Mike, firmly situated in the saddle of "Lightening", the steed obeying his every request before he had to convert it to a comman.

He smiled at her. "Like your legs are on me?" he offered.

"Hey, I just remembered, Mike. You can't ride."

"Guess I shouldn't tell 'Lightening' that," Mike mused, finding himself at home in the saddle, and the terrain, growing drier and harder with every hill, hollar and pass. And his skin, had...

"Ya don't look as White as ya used to," Crystal commented.

"Maybe it's what I'm wearing?" Mike looked at his vest, the pale arms within it seeming darker than normal. It had only been two hours out, but had he been transformed by the sun already? Or maybe something else?

"This country. Sure is...big," Crystal noted once she could treat herself to a look at the scenery on the horizon rather than the snarkiness of the horses who tried to toss her on the ground.

It having been pointed out by the eyes of his heart, Mike felt the presnece of something Bigger than himself ahead of him, a feeling he had never had before. A feeling that he feared, and welcomed.

"But there's just one thing," Crystal noted. "Where we goin?"

"There," Mike said, pointing to nothing, looking at the map behind his eyes.

"Where's there?" she challenged.

"Somewhere that's not here," he mused.

"So we're goin out into the desert with no cell phone, and no map, to go to somewhere we ain't at now?"

"That sounds like a good plan," Mike mused.

"I'm the woman here, I ask directions, and those Guides you hired, who don't say nothin' to me in Arabic, or English..."

Mike handed her the map with the X's in it, the question marks next to them now crossed out or erased. She looked at it, trying to get a sense of her bearings, turning it round and round, finally enjoying the sustenance offered by uncertainty, and adventure. "Just one question. Which way's North?"

Mike's connection to the Four Directions was never more keen, and direct. He pointed to a mountain, the shale on its steep slope making it look like a shrine designed by Mother Nature herself to say "Magnificent" in colors not defined by English, or maybe even Arabic. And in them... "Faces," she commented. "With the sun coming over them, I can see faces of at least three animals, and a crabby old man," she mused with a sweet smile.

"Ten animals and three children, one of whom has an Old Soul," Mike commented, deady serious, fire in his eyes.

Crystal looked at the mountain again, thinking that maybe the shifting of the sun would give her a better and more accurate view of the magnificent rock face. She wished she hadn't.

"Shit!" she cried out, pulling her horse to a halt, the animal rearing up for a buck guaranteed to make soft head hit hard ground.

"No," Mike said, taking hold of the rein, casually gazing up at the source of her concern.

"Kingdom of Turkestan: Entry without Visa Strictly Forbidden" she read. The sign was in four languages, the message the same. No welcomed visitors, no matter how benign, compassionate or metaphysical their reasons. Those who wanted to argue would face two machine guns and two squads of Border Guards who were undoubtedly chosen to shoot first and ask questions of the corpses later.

Achmed looked up then rechecked his ammunition supply. He stopped, pretending to tighten his saddle girth, hoping that his employer, his wife, or his possible executioner behind the Border Fences thought that he was merely checking his supply of goat jerky or dried figs. This part of the Border was not supposed to be fenced, or patrolled, he silently thought. The fighting was in the Eastern Portions of the country, so the reports said.

Mike rode up to Achmed and handed him an envelope, very discretely. In it--more money. More than Achmed had ever seen. Enough to buy his family out of ten countries and a hundred prisons, he calculated. With enough change to allow his Mob-affiliated brother to buy a franchise into any Mafia he wanted.

"Mister Craven. How did you get this much money?" he asked.

"Powerful friends in low places. The kind who can reward you VERY well after I do what I have to do out here." Clearly Mike had a more solidified agenda now, but he wouldn't share it with anyone now.

Achmed had many of the pieces already, but not the ones he needed to solve the puzzle. Just enough to keep him guessing, with the illusion that he was on the right path to a solution. It was the way Mike wanted it, and needed it, so that the Mission could continue.

But in half a mile there would be the matter of the Turkstan Border Police, guarding the only known passes into the vast wasteland that was known to the World as their country.

"Those Goons on top of the Mountain haven't spotted us yet. You know a way around them," Mike noted.

"Why do you think I do, Mister Craven?"

"Because I hired you to protect her, and my equipment."

Achmed looked back at Crystal, struggling to keep her horse in control, and quiet. Kabrin rode to her aid, calming the horse, and, with his caring eyes, the rider. Still, she would not listen to his non-verbal requests to be quiet, and compliant. "She will be trouble for us. I can have one of my men bring her back."

"And risk being seen riding OUT of this canyon?" Mike noted. "We rode into this gorge, and I'm sure we can find a way through it, without being spotted, and around those fences. That should be a piece of cake for a professional like you."

Mike was right. Allah, or Whoever Else was in charge of the expedition now, had put them in the middle of a 'can't go back now' situation. Backwards would lead to being spotted, robbed and probably

raped by the troop build up on the West Cliff. Forward through the dried riverbanks, under the brush and rocks that provided shade and sanctuary, would be the only safe route out. A stroke of cursed luck that Achmed spotted an old drug smugglers trail he thought destroyed two Wars ago to the Southeast.

Mike smiled, his finger pointing a course in front of him as if someone was providing him a passage and a plan. "I know what I'm doing," he proclaimed. "I think," he confessed, the invisible messenger disappearing without warning.

"I think you had better talk with your wife, Mister Craven," Achmed said.

"While we take that Southeast Trail Allah has been kind enough to offer us. And which we must accept."

Achmen joined his men, relating the plan to them, showing them the money to justify the journey out of courtesy, and as he anticipated, Command necessity. Mike led the way, Achmed and his entourage riding behind, guns drawn, trigger fingers ready to let loose if and as required.

Crystal galloped up to Mike, her feet finally finding the points of communication in "Gentle Healer". "What are we doing here?" Crystal demanded, and pleaded.

"Being spontaneous, Crystal, my love. Your feet led us to the bazaar, the Sufi dance, and these horsies are leading us into the Magnificent Eurasian desert." His smile was big, playful and very secretive.

"Michael! These animals, and YOU, are taking us to Turkestan. They kill foreigners in Turkestan, Particularly White ones."

"So I'll get a sun tan and you wear a veil. YOU said this honeymoon was supposed to be about spontaneity, right?"

"PLANNED spontaneity," she bolted out through a hard whisper, spotting the Lost Civilizations book in Mike's saddlebag. She pretended to adjust her girth, edging her way over to it, then in a bold and very necessary action, snatched it.

For the first time since leaving town, Mike's full attention was turned to her. "Hey, give me that..."

Crystal moved "Gentle Healer" into a trot, keeping him away as she read from the first torn pagemark, its print blurred out by the sweat of a very nervous fingerprint. "'The Lost Civilization of Babylon'..."

"Give me the book, Crystal!" Mike growled out under an 'all is well smile' to Achmed and his very heavily armed Comrades.

"No, this is good," she continued, trying to diffuse Mike's rage with benignly intended ridicule. "Listen to this, "Gentle Healer". 'According to government sources, an ancient civilization emerged from Babylon. One with undiscovered roots'...And maybe an explanatory zip code?"

"Give me the goddamn book Crystal!" his final grunt of assertion as Crystal's horsemanship ability finally overshadowed those of her Manhattan hubby, his horse hopping to the left when he wanted to go right, and vice versa.

"This ancient civilization that rivaled Atlantis, or may have been Atlantis, vanished without a trace. Destroyed by famine, sulfur gases or a plague that may have been the same virus that caused the Black Death in Europe almost two thousand years later."

Mike reached out in mid 'bump' and grabbed the book. He was angry with Crystal. Really angry, with a feeling of betrayal under it all.

"It wasn't famine," he said.

"I know what's wrong, now," Crystal countered noting Mike's blonde hair blowing in the sunbaked desert breeze. "The hat. You need a hat, Indiana Mike."

The joke wasn't appreciated. But, for a moment, Mike had an open mind about the whole thing. "It wasn't the Black Plague virus, either. It couldn't have been the plague virus."

"Got that right," Crystal affirmed, warmth in her voice and intention.

"You believe me then?"

"No...Mike. I believe in biology." She took her moment, preparing the rest of the commentary in its own time and rhythm. "It was a BACTERIA that caused the Black Death in Europe. Bacillus Anthracus. A BACTERIA, not a virus like that books says."

"I knew the epidemic story in this book was a lie," Mike asserted.

"That whole BOOK is a lie, MICHAEL! There is no lost civilization of Babylon, or Atlantis. Maybe there'll be a lost civilization of New Jersey one day, assumin' New Jersey becomes civilized, of course."

The joke was lost, but not wasted.

"Mike, this thing was, is, dead." Crystal was never more honest, sincere, and loving.

"Yeah, it is," Mike replied, resignation in his voice, along with sorrow he had never expressed before for any person, or people.

"But it looking for this dead civilization keeps you Alive..." Crystal extended her hand to her betrothed. He took it, gratefully. It meant more to him than acceptance of his proposals of dating, live-in or marriage. After all the quips were said, and all the eyerolls had been done, Mike's genius as a journalist was his madness, and that madness needed vindication from someone sane like Crystal.

"I owe you," he said, appended by a kiss on her cheek.

"At least it beats Golden Showers, chains and dog collars," she mused. "And if I EVER find out that you've been sharing my underwear..."

"...Only with my boyfriends," Mike replied in a mocking lisp, his humor restored, his perspective re-balanced.

But that balance would not last long. Kabrin galloped up to Mike. "We go this way. To the left!" he blasted out in Arabic, to Mike. The gentle giant had urgency written all over his face. Mike followed, then Crystal.

As Crystal moved along the fork in the ever-steepening path, she saw the reason for Kabrin's concern. It was a very ancient kind of border post ---a human head impaled on a stake. Underneath it, in Arabic, English and Russian---"Welcome to Turkestan".

"Not to worry, Mrs Craven," Kabrin said quietly, and discretely to the Arkansas hot rod as she barfed out what was left of her breakfast. "It is a warning for the Turkestan Rebels. Not for Tourists."

The words were chosen carefully, given with no further explanation, and out of range of his Arabic Boss and American Employer.

## Chapter 7

The aire thinned out quickly, as did the vegetation. All except on top of the hills that passed as mountains everywhere else. It was Crystal who saw a mountain goat nursing her young there. She had to stop and take a picture of...life.

Three days into the trek that felt like three weeks had found Mike growing more alone, and introspective. He had taken to riding either behind or ahead of the rest of the 'recreational expedition'. For him, the sight of a goat nursing its young made him feel more alone than ever. He envied Crystal for her ability to be nurtured by that sight of primal love and sustenance.

"Hey, Hw ya'all doin'?" she said as she approached the mother and child with her Nikon. "I just want to say a howdy. Smile for the camera. And fer me."

Mike rode up behind her, quietly. "Crystal" he whispered. "We really have to move on and..."

"Mike. You know me and babies."

"Crystal. Tempus Fugit." He pointed to his Rolex, still ticking though it has definitely taken a licking with the heat during the day, the cold at night, and all manner of precipitation in between. "Tempus fugit," he repeated in a warm, but uncompromising tone.

"Maybe we SHOULD have some kids, Mike," she smiled as the mother allowed her closer access for the close up, for very real, under the wind-twisted tree she had claimed as her own. "I really wouldn't mind bein' a Mom. Or a Ma. You'd make a great Dad, Pa. Or Father. Or, whatever. Ya know?"

Mike's mind pondered the thought for a second, but his eye remained focused on the watch, and the sun sinking inot the Western sky.

"Crystal, Tempus fugit. Latin for 'time flies'"

"Caprine Uralis. Latin for goat." The heart of the baby opened up the the human intruder, mother Caprine Uralis allowing the approach to tactile range. "But I think I'll call her Rayana. And her son looks like a Charlie. No, a Chuck. Chuck Caprine Uralis."

Mike maintained his watch, from a distance. Terrified to get any closer. His sense of urgency paralyzed by Crystal's warmth, and the animals' trust of it. Envious that they could access it.

"Ya know, Mike. The physiology books say that a baby can't see worth shit. Not enough nerve circuits in the retina and the midbrain. But those big eyes can see a whole world..."

Mike squinted as she continued in Arkansas medicalese. He had gone without food, sleep and a hat for days, and the air was thinner than usual here. Delusional states bring a man to his roots, or away from them. Mike saw a lot more in the gaos wyes than a Caprine Uralis cornea amd slit pupils.

Rayana bleated, the expression of 'connection' repeated by her son, Chuck. Mike's ears heard intense silence, nothing but silence. Then the bleating again---human this time. From a HUMAN mother and child. The Caprines seemed more like Homo Sapien, then more human than anything in the 'real' world, yet they were still formless, untouchable, from someplace distant, yet familiar. They seemed well fed, even happy. Maybe Mary and Jesus, the eyes blue, the hair brown, maybe blond. Certainly the image of Mother and Son that was so basic to the Human Condition, and Humane Possibilities. Mike smiled, satisfied in a way he never thought possible. Whatever illusion this was seemed real enough, or at least he wanted it to be.

Then, the sky above turned deep red in the American journalist's mind. Thunder bolted out. Then, the bodies of human friends became emaciated sacs of bones held together by wrinkled flesh. Yet still, the mother fed the child. Even as the bones penetrated through the skin. Then, from a branch above them, a blood-drenched hand reached down, military iron brackets around the wrists. Mother grabbed her child by the neck. Mike pulled a pistol from under his shirt.

"No!!!!" he screamed as the emptied the chamber into the bloody demonic hand in front of his bloodshot eyes.

Crystal ducked for cover. Achmed and Kabrin galloped over. The ghost ran down the hill into a cave, disappearing into the landscape. Mike walked over to the tree and pulled an object off the blood-soaked muck, the goats having run for cover down to their hiding places in the hollow below.

"Snakes!" he noted, the bullet-filled slithering slain creature in his hand. "Snakes!!" he angrily repeated as he cut up the rattler into pieces with his knife throwing a portion of the 'kill' into the valley below. "For the buzzards."

A handful of snake meat went into his vest pocket. "For us."

A fistful went up into the air, tossed up as far as he could throw the offering. "For the gods! You sadistic motherfuckers. We honor you, and offer our lives to you, you sadistic, merciful, all giving motherfucking assholes!!!"

Mike offered Crystal a hand up off the ground. She refused it. Achmed offered his, much to Mike's displeasure. Crystal knew that Achmed was hiding something from her, and if she was going to be lied to, it was going to be from a liar she could trust. One that was, at least in name, family,

Mike helped Crystal onto her horse. The demons left his head, pain penetrating into his chest.

"Mike!" she pleaded with ultimate alarm. "With your heart condition, that I thought was okay, we can't..."

"It's okay," Mike related, remembering that he wisely forgot to tell Crystal and everyone else in the expedition that his angina pectoris was indeed back, the thin air in the high country not helping any. "I have some nitro in my pack. And we're burning daylight."

He slapped Crystal's horse on the rump and mounted his own, hunched over in pain, gasping for breath.

"I'm okay!" he screamed out to Achmed. "We still have another ten miles to make today. A contract is a contract."

Kabrin pulled out his gun, letting its barrel hone in on Mike's back. Achmed abruptly pulled it down, complimented with a disapproving, yet sympathetic stare.

"I will say it was an accident," Kabrin offered, trying to offer some kind of assurance to those around him who were still in control of their emotions, and perceptions. "Or a border patrol sniper. He is cursed. He will kill us all."

"And if you shoot him, the border patrols will get a SECOND chance to hear us, Kabrin. Or maybe it will cause an avalanche," Crystal said.

"He'll kill ALL of us," Kabrin insisted. "You, me, the horses, and her. He's cursed. He has to be stopped."

"And he will be, my friend. When I say so, in my way." Achmed never gave a promise without fulfilling it, one way or another. It was not a matter of WHAT he would do with the mad White hunter, but WHEN. And that 'when' would be very soon.

## Chapter 8

Kabrin stood 6 foot two when he looked up to the mountain sky, a lot taller when he was scared and trying to protect others in severe danger. He had good eyes, as well as a solid heart. Some said that because of his kind, Virgin heart, he could smell evil as it approached. It was a natural to put him in charge

of sentry duty when camp was set up at the end of the day. He could smell a Border Patrol a mile away, But there was one intruder, from behind, he didn't expect.

"I cooked it myself," Crystal said as she waved a plate of food in front of Kabrin. He turned around, instinctively pointing his weapon at her then the cliffs on his right and left, prepared to fire. It took a second to adjust, but logic dictated that all was okay. Evil Spirits don't offer you reconstituted food on Army-issue plates. But interesting ones do.

"I really did make it myself," Crystal continued as Kabrin took his readiness stance again, his eyes now on the cliffs above, lowering his gun but not his apprehension of something up there. "Well, the sauce came in this powdered mix. And I did use instant noodles. And you guys did start the fire, but..."

"No, thank you, Mrs. Craven," he said in very clear, yet mispronounced, English.

"You worked hard. Ain't ate all day. But if yer not hungry..." Kabrin's silence and devotion to his duty of protecting Crystal made her feel embarrassed, then hurt. She turned away, walking back to her place, and station.

"I am forbidden to eat," Kabrin related just as she was about to leave hearing range. "Not before the sun goes down."

"You don't eat, you die." She walked back, slowly, keeping the distance that the Brave Mountain Warrior seemed to need in order to deal with his terror of personal intimacy. "And if yer blood sugar drops down, ya start burnin' off fats and proteins. Build up them ketones and ammonia. They get high enough and the brain can't think straight. I read a whole of biology when I wanted to be a nurse, maybe even a doctor. And I DO know that my instant homecooked meals tasted better than anyone else's instant prefab home cookin' in Western Arkansas. I got three brothers and a father with king size Bubba bellies to prove it."

Kabrin could feel temptation coming on, or was it common sense, delivered by someone who really DID care about his welfare, in ways that even Achmed couldn't, or wouldn't. He glanced over at the food, then took a whiff. "One good smell is as good as ten bites," he tried to tell his churning stomach. Then there was the warm smile of the cook, waitress and hostess who came to his always inaccessible 'table'.

"Come on," she continued. "Ya can fight the Boogie Man or whoever else is out there better on a full stomach. Wouldn't wanna jeopardize the lives of everyone else here cause yer brain get soaked in ammonia and yer mind gets all acidic with ketone bodies, right?"

"This is true," Kabrin rationalized, noting that the descending sun had disappeared behind a tall mountain, and a cloud around it. "Allah would understand. It is almost sunset, yes?"

"I guess. In the mountains the sun sets earlier than it does down in the..."

Just as Kabrin was about to take a well deserved bite of homecooked instant reconstituted gruel, Achmed approached, stern disapproval in his penetrating eyes. A few words in Arabic were spoken, none of which could be understood by Crystal. She found herself holding the plate of food and alone once again with Kabrin, the emotional distance between them widened considerably as he continued his watch.

"I am sorry, Mrs. Craven. It is Ramadan. We do not eat from sunrise to sunset. For forty days and nights. We---I---do it to show devotion to Allah."

"I'm sorry," she offered. "I didn't know that you were, like, fasting for God."

"You weren't supposed to know."

"And what else am I not supposed to know?" Crystal's tone turned demanding, uncompromising. But Kabrin had pledged obedience to Achmed long before giving a vow of open dialog to this loving blonde-haired woman who didn't seem to be afraid of any man.

Crystal would not accept any more "protection" until she knew what she was being protected from. Achmed hadn't spoken to her since the trip started, but maybe that was because she never asked him a direct question. Kabrin was always the interpreter, or Mike was. Time to get it straight from the Arabian horse's mouth, she thought.

Achmed's tent was smaller than the one used by his men, and it was always 'separate' from the rest of the evening dwellings. 'Separate' was the way Achmed survived in his position of authority. Reveal too much and the men, or women, under you will see your weaknesses, and it will cost everyone everything.

She followed him back to his 'chamber'. "What am I not supposed to know?" she asked in five language, with not shortage of detailed pantomime and sand drawings. Achmed's response to all them was the same---a cab driver's smile and a "sorry, no English."

Born under the Cancer sign, Crystal was predestined to get what she wanted by manoeuvring around thick walls rather than crashing through them. It was time to take stragety and fate into her own hands.

Mike was hiding out in his 'chambers', a pup tent he adopted so that Crystal could have more 'sleeping space and creature comforts' in the portable enclosure that was supposed to house both of them. The tent flap, as usual, was closed.

The basis for survival in crammed trailer park homes was manners, and honoring a closed door, drawn curtain or closed tentflap was one of the prime commandments, particularly if there was a troubled man behind it. But Mike's private cave was getting deeper, longer and darker by the hour. And the chest pains seemed to be getting worse, those moment of cardiac pain being the only break in the long periods of ever growing madness that disconnected heart, brain and Soul.

Violating common sense, manners and her 'ask before helping out' instincts, she whipped the tentflap open. Before her lay a sleeping bag, a stone-dead lump inside it. "Michael!!! It's been three days and you haven't said more than three words that didn't have some reference to urine, feces, reproductive fluids or...."

Crystal's pulling the sleeping bag open revealed something far mjore dead than Mike in a cataonic stare and metaphysical tantrum. Bones and shappered skulls lay before her, terror emanating out of the empty sockets. Accessories included ancient knifeves and daggers, some in well preserved condition, others stuck inside skulls of what used to be small children.

Before she could let out a scream, Crystal was grabbed from behind, sweat impregnated fingers holding her eyelids open, forcing her to gaze at the ancient legacy of death in front of her. The voice was the most horrifying of all.

"Before you scream, listen," Mike said in a whispering voice part his own and part a madman Crystal never knew. She was not sure whether to pity that alter ego or to do whatever it took to destroy it. Mike continued.

"These are all around these hills. PILES of the, Just INCHES under the dust. They're at least two-thousand fucking years old, do you understand that?"

Crystal nodded 'yes', with a very limited amount of leeway Mike gave to her head and tembling bodyu. He re-established hisgrasp, this time twice as hard, his voice hald as loud, his tone ten times more intense.

Mike continued. "If WE get caught smuggling oiut archeological batrifacts, we get deported. Following an all expense paid weekend at the Turkestan Hilton in their special S and M theme dungeon. If Achmed and the Arabas get caught helping us, they get their hands cut off and both testicles. Do you understand that?"

Crystal nodded "yes" again. Mike regained his grip, so hard that it nearly broke HER bones. "And this is the biggest archeological find of the fucking twentieth century. And NO one wants it made public. The biggest story I'll ever write. The biggest you'll ever photograph. And the most important one ANY trailer park yahoo or East Side Yuppie asshole will EVER read about. Do you understand that?!!!"

Crystal nodded her head again. A 'no' this time. It was an honest answer, courageously given and desperatley needed. Mike released his grip.

"Then take a look at these," he continued, calmer, showing her drawings in the book he 'accidently' acquired at the bazaar, and some other parchment-like pages from someplace more 'rustic' that were anything but 'calming'. They were done by his own usually non-artistic hand, revealing an Ancient Asiatic Nordic people with large, peircing blue eyes, long blond hair and large foreheads designed to house, and protect, a very special kind of cerebral grey matter. Their bodies were mutilated in all manners imaginable to minds allowed to indulge in evil fantasies. Arms, legs and breasts were hacked off. Rats and vultured picked at their eviscerated intestines. Branding burns penetrated down into bone. Canabalistic executioners helped themselves to snacks of the flesh taken from victims while they were still alive. Yet, still on the faces of those victims, defiant, and hopeful, eyes.

Mike lifted up one of the skulls, part of a blond mane still attached to it, a large arrow head and shapt rammed into the fissured between the bones. He took off his belt, wrapping it around the skulls, inviting her to confirm his 'findings'. "Look. The cranial size. Thirty percent bigger than normal for two thousand years ago. Thirty FIVE percent bigger than the average size of the brain box today!"

Crystal was trained as a scientist. Seeing was believing, measuring was proof. But revealing something very scary beyond any scientific description. "I got a real tape measure in my pack, somewhere, in MY tent. Our tent. I'll just get it and..."

“Goddamn it!” Mike grunted out as she was in mid exit, pulling her inside again. “Look at them!!! The drawings!!! Look at them when they were Alive.”

Evidence hidden to Crystal meant evidence not real. The same held true for Mike, even in one of his extraverted, non-linear ‘intuitive’ moods.

She looked at the drawings in the pads that littered the tent floor. “Did you draw these from the ‘Lost Civilization’ book?” she asked, noting that she had not seen any evidence of the book in days, and it was missing from the tent.

“From THIS book!” Mike affirmed, pointing to his temporal bone and the brain inside it. Maybe a sane box developing special abilities, or maybe a biological computer re-programed for self-destruction, or maybe both. “Those nights I didn’t sleep. And when I screamed out names of people you don’t know, and I don’t either. All those ex’s you think I was still involved with. All those...ex...ex...” He faded into incomprehensible babble, then to English that was all too clear. “THESE people in these drawings I found in the book in town, under the sand out here in places only I could see, and between my ears in my nightmares are my ex’s! Him. Her. Them!” Each skull and drawing seemed to be a very personal friend, mourned again, with the deepest of pain, and a love beyond anything that could be experienced in New York, or Arkansas.

From Crystal, confusion, and understanding. It was the best she could give Mike. That, and pity. He was lost in a world of fastacy and horror that had no basis in reality. He needed help, very badly. But with her Beloved’s ever-growing insanity came clairvoyance with regard to people and geography. He knew where all the water holes were when the horses needed to drink. Where the shelter was from the elements. And where the roaming bands of armies seemed to be hanging out, begging for a practice skirmish with a group of ‘tourists’ with expensive watches, jewelery and video equipment. Was the madness real, and was it required for some Higher Purpose? The scientific evidence pointed to that conclusion, but there was still the matter of the heart, and heartbreak.

Mike continued his rant. “Just look at their faces!” he pleaded. “Look at them! Listen to their pain. Can’t you hear it?”

The wind outside the tent howled. Mike closed his ears, the deafening noise, or perception of such, driving terror into his already tormented soul. He lost control of his mind, then his breath, then consciousness. He fell to the ground, struggling for breath, his heart racing a thousand beats a minute.

“The nitroglycerin pills...” Crystal studded. “Where’s the goddamn nitro”. She fumbled though his pockets hoping that he would say something, ANYthing that she could use to help him. Thankfully, he had enough foresight, or rationality, to bring a few of the lifesaving pills with him, and thankfully, a handful of them were in his front trouser pocket.

Mike nodded ‘no’, to the pills being inserted under his mouth.

“No you don’t. You don’t die on my shift!” Crystal insisted, ramming the pill under his tongue, shutting his mouth over it. He leaned back, held his chest, held his breath, then---let out a sigh of relief. The demon was gone, or so it seemed. Crystal thanked God, finding herself crossing herself in the Catholic manner secretly taught to her by her ‘Papist’ Mother in Baptist Arkansas.

“You should have let me die, bitch,” Mike said in appreciation. Still, he held onto her hand like a lifeline. His other lay inches away from the handle of his knife, clenching its fist around it, edging it toward his own throat, or maybe Crystal’s.

The tent flap opened. Behind it, Achmed and Kabrin, armed and ready to do whatever was necessary. “Are you alright, Mister Craven, Mrs. Craven?” Kabrin asked.

“Fuck off!” Mike yelled back. “This is my tent. And I’m YOU’RE boss. And I’m very tired!” Mike managed to cover the artifacts and the drawings before his employees, and protectors could get a glimpse of them. The swift and abrupt gesture took the last of his strength. He grasped hold of his chest.

“Something wrong?” Kabrin asked.

“Angina.” Crystal answered, inserting the second of the small number of pills under his tongue, this time meeting no resistance from Mike, getting no lip from the alter ego that had possessed him just minutes ago. “He’s got a big heart. A big thick heart that doesn’t work as good as it should. But we got it under control. Thanks.”

Mike nodded ‘yes’ to Crystal’s request, but it was her wishes that Achmed obeyed now. Only one thing would supercede that Mission now---the welfare of his men, and family. And that welfare depended on Mike’s survival. He knew the terrain, where the cash for the job was, and something else that seemed very, very important for all concerned.

With the Arabs back in their tent, or watching for roaming soldiers around them, Crystal allowed herself to breathe a sigh of relief. Mike fell asleep, for the first time in days. He looked restful, for the moment. She looked at the faces drawn by Mike, with a hand that could normally not put a straight line on a piece of paper with a ruler. They seemed real, somehow. Daring to look on the other side of the sketches she saw something more ominous, written in Mike's handwriting. "The first shall be last. ..So the pain is remembered...So it will never happen again."

Was it a lament, a Last Will and testament, or a promise that had to be fulfilled at any cost? Either option would cost their lives, their love, or something a lot more valuable.

## Chapter 9

"The desert sun bakes the brains of sane people. It makes those who are made even crazier," Kabrin informed Crystal as she swayed back and forth in the saddle, her mind drifting to and from with every stride the exhausted horse took. The two week "Recreational Expedition" went into the middle of the third week with no end in sight, and no way home except 'Forward', a direction determined by the whims of Mother Nature and the ever-changing commands of Master Michael Craven.

From Crystal, nothing but the blank stare on her windblown, bone-dry windblown face, looking forward somehow, determined to ride "this thang" through, whatever that thang was.

"You should wear a hat, with a proper visor to protect your eyes," the Gentle Warrior continued. "You don't want to become mad. Possessed by demons inside your head."

Mike's brain had indeed gone mad, but with that came the strength of ten men—or demons. Hatless, without sleep or food, he seemed invisible, moving the expedition forward harder and harder, in circles which he claimed were 'the shortest distance between two points'. There was always just enough water, just enough wild rabbit, just enough shelter, just enough footing for the horses on the ever-narrowing 'trails', and just enough safe distance from the military patrols to go wherever Mike wanted to go next, towards a final destination he shared with nobody, especially his beloved Crystal.

It was a different shifting of responsibilities than expected for Kabrin. He found himself more concerned with this obstinate, Infidel White woman's welfare than her husband's sanity. "You can't drift," he reminded her, again, as he caught her fall, nearly off the saddle and into a ravine a thousand feet deep. "Keep your hands on the horse's mane, and your mind on something simple. Something real. Something you can sing."

"That's the dumbest thang I ever heard," she slurred out the side of her sun-dried lips. "I'll just close my eyes and..."

Kabrin edged his horse over for another save. This time, Crystal AND her sure-footed mountain horse would have plunged into the abyss below.

"Sing Mrs. Craven!" he shouted at her, not caring who heard what he was saying and the subtext of the real meaning, and feeling, behind it. "Something simple and real. From your ancestral roots!"

"I can't sing," she blurred out, awakened by a glance of the dark hole between the mountains into which she almost plunged. Grateful that the strong arms holding her had her best interest at heart. Terrified that they would not be there the next time she needed them.

"Sing!!!" Kabrin commanded in a loud whisper, with the utmost sense of urgency.

There was only one logical choice, and one song appropriate for the occasion, picked by Crystal's mind as the last-ditch attempt at survival on this 'suicide' mission for her husband, and maybe herself. "Double your pleasure, double your fun, with double good, double good, Double Mint Gum..."

The TV jingle did indeed have more uses than keeping super-G-rated actors in work and leacheraous advertizing execs I Porches. Kabrin joined in, then invited Josaf and Patel to do the same. And, thank Allah, Jesus, Buddha or all of the above, it worked. The chorus of men who had watched barely ten hours of television in their collective lives singing the TV commercial so familiar to Crystal brought her level of arousal, and assurance, up a hundred fold. Enough to keep going. Enough...till the next crisis brought upon by their fearless leader, Achmed, and their ever-distanced employer, "Mister Craven".

As for motive, this issue was evolving for both Josaf and Patel. Since the last 'confidential' expedition with Achmed, their life paths changed considerably. Josef had just married and his loyalties were now with his son rather than his Comrades. This would be his last trip with Achmed, no matter what the money at the other side of it, but with the rewards promised by Mister Craven, he could sire ten sons and put them all through school in London, or maybe even New York.

Patel was homesick for Puna, its Native East Indian food, its gentle hills and its smiling people. Changing political climates had provided a window of opportunity to go home without politically-

motivated repercussions from bandits with badges and those without them. Hopefully, it would still be home when he got there.

For all his faults, Mike did have intact faculties about the desert. It was he who could smell where water was long before any of his Arab Guides. He had no trouble finding grasslands not shown on the map, either. Then again, there was something in it for Mike, Achmed pondered as he rode alongside his employer at point intuiting a trail to the destinations still beyond another mountain, hill or hollar. Very convenient that when the jackals came into camp they made off with several rounds of ammunition and all of his own maps, the veteran Mountaineer noted.

Mike also had eyes behind his head that were far more open than any of his guides. He could see Turkstan troops long before any normal human eye could spot them, and those troops were the best equipped light cavalry Achmed ever crossed wits and wills with. They were armed with the best rifles American CIA operatives could provide in exchange for a sacful of heroin, and the best scopes Russian supply Sergeants would 'lose' in exchange for a bottle of vodka. The new soldiers in this new Army for a new country basing its existence on old vendettas could shoot the balls off anyone unauthorized to be in their country from a half-mile out. Even the Afgans were scared of the Warriors of the 'New Prophet's Jihad'. The New Prophet with the name that could never be pronounced appropriately using the American alphabet took his 'new orders' from the Koran, those orders always involving cruelty to those who opposed him, wealth and very temporary assylum to those who obeyed his 'Vision'. If not for Achmed's knowledge of the Prophet's real, very secret and unprovable past, Kabrin, Patel and even Josaf would have joined them. As those who rejected the 'invitation' in unison, they were marked men. As those who could elect to turn on their Comrades individually for profit, they could be 'redeemed heroes'.

Ahead lay a box canyon whose forboding slopes said "no entry" on Nature's terms, in language that anyone could understand. Steep shale to the right, salt-flats with quicksand to the left, cliffs on all sides that supported nothing---no grass, no trees, not even the rugged lichens and mosses that could find a niche where nothing else could.

"I knew it! I fucking knew it!" Mike yelled out as he tried to push his horse forward, only to have the steed rear up and refuse to take another precarious step.

Achmed trotted up to Mike, pulling the horse's feet back to the ground so Mike wouldn't wind up with his back thrown onto it.

"You are confused, Mister Craven?" Achmed asked. "Maybe we could use the money you paid us to pay off the New Prophet's butchers and we ALL could..."

"Go FORWARD!" Mike asserted, his eyes moving across the terrain, looking for something, or someone who he had been following ever since that fateful day at the Sufi dance. "We go FORWARD!"

"How, Mister Craven?" Achmed asked, gently, reasonably, and kindly. "And we are out of supplies, again. We are running out of water, food, ammunition and..."

"Reason?" Mike interjected.

"No...Hope. We are running out of hope."

"When there is Purpose, there is always hope, and always...a way," Mike insisted, his eyes roaming across the forbidding terrain, opposite to the direction of his wavering index finger in the manner of a man moved by two minds, and Souls.

"The only way we will survive is to go home, Mister Craven."

"Come back victorious behind your shield, or dead over it!" Mike proclaimed, yet again, the ancient Spartan credo having carried him through every crisis in his life so far. "We go home after we reach...The Destination."

"Where your wife can have the best funeral the Turkestan Military can provide. After they rape her dead, or dying body."

Mike's eyes turned downward, moving his head in a circular motion, bowing to something in front of him in like a baby being rocked by an invisible mother, or perhaps puppeteer. "Yes," he admitted to his Guide, and himself. "Crystal can't die."

"Indeed not," Achmed gratefully noted.

"Because she has to reach the Destination, alive."

"How!" Achmed protested, violating all protocol and restraint.

"By taking the Path there...carefully."

"The Path where!!?"

Mike froze, his slithering, fear-filled 'desert dance' having ended. He moved his lips upward, his

face brightened by something in the NorthEast. Then, he laughed. As if on cue, a burst of wind came out of that dense pile of impassible rock, blowing the dried brush from its floor, revealing---

"A trail?" Achmed noted, amazed and astounded, wondering whether to thank Allah or curse the Devil.

"Yes, indeed!" Mike sighed. "We go...forward!"

The trail ahead seemed passable at first, sheltered from above by a natural cliff, negotiable as long as you moved forward. Indeed, as the last horse made it over every slope, the rocks behind it seemed to accumulate, the wind taking care of the rest. Grey skies lay ahead, hail and sleet behind.

Mike rode tall in the saddle, pointing every step of the way the direction. And the command, constantly repeated as each of the Guides decided to smell out a better way up, out, or back. "Your men ride straight ahead. Eye straight ahead. On the horizon. Riding carefully, and lightly."

"Why?" Achmed asked, another ten miles in, or maybe a hundred out. With the ever present fog and ever-increasing altitude it was so hard to tell.

"They need air," Mike said, looking at the ground.

"Who?"

"And they need privacy!" the once-calm, once-diplomatic journalist blasted out at Kabrin, noting that the Second in Command had his eyes aimed downward, allowing them to see whatever was there through his very metaphysical 'ghost detection' vision. Vision which, thus far, had seen nothing.

"Is there anything wrong?" Crystal blurted out, awakened by her husband's bark.

"No," Mike assured her, showing Kabrin the most recent gun 'missing' from the Warrior's pack horse, and angry Yankee eyes prepared to use it. "We're just going forward, our eyes on the horizon, riding light and carefully." He repeated the 'request' in Arabic.

Kabrin nodded, prodding his horse forward, in the direction of whatever demon dancer was guiding Mike's steps, or so it seemed.

Kabrin joined the rest of the expedition on its leader's terms. The direction was Mike's, but the route, would be according to the horse. "May the wisdom of Allah be in your feet, my friend," he said to the steed softly, in Farsi, hoping that no one around him knew the dialect chosen. It was sound wisdom on ground that seemed solid on top, but soft on the bottom, or maybe... "hollow," he intuited as he heard a 'thump' on the side of the narrow trail Mike had chosen for now single-file expedition. "Hollow like a...let us see."

Kabrin grabbed his rear support saddle girth and pulled on it, turning the horse that had previously obeyed every request in his head before it became a command with his feet into a bucking bronco.

"Get that horse quiet!" Mike shouted out in a harsh whisper.

"I am trying, Mister Craven." Kabrin said in his best apologetic English, allowing that horse to explore a few more patches with the skilled acrobatics that had saved him from being blasted to Hell in so many mine fields.

Patel and Josaf pulled their own horses in, fearing that whatever rattler had spooked Kabrin's steed would be after theirs. Crystal feared for her personal Arab's life, praying to Jesus that Allah would spare him from a dump down the creavaces on either side of him. Achmed watched, knowing that it was his place to not take part in this battle of wits and wills.

"Get that horse quiet or I will!" Mike raised his rifle up, aiming at the horse's head, his aim dead on, his trigger finger ready to let hell fire go into the animal that had become Achmed's close friend and Comrade, particularly when Kabrin was on assigned sentry duty or 'Crystal watch'.

"I'm trying, Mister Craven." Still, the fiveten hand Arabian gelding who carried himself like a stud bucked wildly, each kick and prance off the Craven trail orchestrated by Kabrin, and listened to with the ear in his belly. "He is---"

"About to be buzzard meat unless you get him---"

Mike aimed, prepared to fire and...

"Ahhh!" Kabrin screamed as his horse fell to the ground, and into it. He followed, falling into the hole, out of view of his friends, Comrades and potential adversaries. All that remained of where rider and horse were was a cloud of dust, emanated from the Earth below.

Achmed was the first to the site of the fall, and fallen, the dust still hiding the view of the event. Then Crystal, then Patel, then Josaf.

From the cloudy pit below, a prayer in Arabic, for mercy, said with desperation, and fear from the unseen Comrade. From above it, a Hail Mary from Crystal. From ex-Hindu, sometimes-Moslem Patel, a

mized prayer for deliverance from demons common to Underworlds of all Faiths. From Josaf, a counting of what Yankee money would be split three ways rather than four from Josaf, finding himself being selfish, or maybe practical, as a 'family' man with a new family. Something the ex-Gypsy thought was out of his blood years ago.

Mike walked over slowly, the dust clearing in rythm with his footsteps. His determined eyes looking down into the pit. His gun barrel pointed straight at Kabrin's fear-filled eyes.

"I told you, Sand Nigger! Ride light, and quiet! They deserve their privacy!" he bolted out in very American English.

In any language, the 'company' Kabrin had in the pit ten feet under the horse-broken ground was Ancient, and frightening. Everywhere her turned, was another skull, looking at him, throwing guilt his way, for sins he didn't even know he had committed. The horse leaped out of the pit, its thrown rider crawling up the sides, finding more death and destruction with every step, falling deeper into the mass grave with every attempt to get out of it.

"Get the hell out of there!" Michael yelled out, firing into the dirt under Kabrin's feet, missing the skulls.

"I can't!" he screamed in his Native tongue, too terrified to translate anything into English.

"This way!" Mike said, shooting into the sides of the pit spots not visible to any human eye.

True to form, the bullet marks hit the steps created from stone, slabs designed for strength rather than style, and enough strength to get even a Warrior the size of Kabrin onto 'safe' ground above, comforted by Crystal, assured by Achmed, helped by Patel and Josaf.

"An interesting picture," Mike commented snidly from the side regarding the collection of rugged individualists clinging onto each other for dear life. "But we have a Bigger Picture to deal with," his next command, given to himself as much as to them. A command he feared, for his own life as much as those around him.

Mike petted Kabrin's steed, assuring the beast that he would be in good hands from now on. With that, he mounted the animal himself, motioning for Kabrin to take his own horse. "We go Forward," he related to his four, and two, legged companions, with kindness, and apology. "Come back victorious behind your sheild or dead over it."

The rest of the blabberings from Mike's mouth were in some language no one could understand. Neither Crystal, nor Achmed, nor even the world-travelled once-theif Josaf could make sense of it. But one look at the skulls down below in the pit revealed that some kind of box had been opened, and there was no turning back now, for ANYone.

## Chapter 10

Brush along the dried reiverbank protected the expedition from being seen from above, but not a the end of the trail. Watrer lay ahead for the horses, and Turkestan bullets for their riders. Better to catch the border guards on the cliffs, but surprize, Achmed thought. Two can defeat ten if those two chose the time and place for the encounter. Which two to send was the problem. It solved itself very quickly.

Kabrin rode up, his semi-automatic rifle loaded, his revolvers on the ready.

"There are eight, twelve at the most," he noted, seeing very real people this time. "A dozen Turkestan cowards against this gun. I will be bak for evening meal. AFTER it gets dark.:

"There are twelve, you say Kabrin?" Achmed inquired, squinting his aging eyes, each year bringing worse far vision, even with technical aids.

"Fourteen, fiveteen at the most." Kabrin counted the figures in the field glass oculars.

"Is one of them wearing a red scarf? A blue and white turban?"

"Yes, but..."

"Major Tulinoff. We'll give him this." Achmed pulled out an extra stash of money from his pocket, remembering the half-Russian, half-Chechnian renegade who worked both sides against the middle so well in his former half-homeland.

"Only cowards and women apease Turkenstan dogs with bribes," Kabrin reminded his Mentor, and Master.

Achmed knew that his 63 years of experience would turn into six decades of old age at some time in his career. But to happen now? And in the eyes of those who had been so supportive of his ever-lasting vibrance and vitality. But for the moment, Achmed was in command, with its rights, and privildges. "Patel

and Josaf will deliver the tribute,” he related to Kabrin. “It will come out of my share of the money only.” Achmed took the money out of an empty shell in his gunbelt. Rolled up tight, and dry, and secure.

“Patel and Josaf will keep this money for themselves.” Kabrin had heard the intentions of his Comrades in confidence, but he owed Achmed one breach of that confidence. And only one.

“If Patel and Josaf can ride faster than the Border Patrols, and draw them away from us for a while, then they deserve to be paid extra combat pay.”

“They’ll turn us in, or draw them to us,” Kabrin countered.

“If they run for the border, they will draw attention to themselves, and be shot by the Turkestan Militia. If they turn against us, my still loyal friend, they will be our enemies and be shot by us. Either way, justice will be served, one way or another.”

As usual, Achmed came out the master barterer/ Though he desired a “what’s in it for all of us” world, he knew that extra-ordinary men were out for themselves, and that good men could devolve into ordernay men when pushed beyond their limits.

Patel and Josaf prepared for the ride to meet with Major Tulinoff, or whoever else was out there. On the way, they would encounter the mercenary bandit’s enemies, or Regular Turkistan troops. Be they traitors or true Comrades, it would save Mike’s Mission, and Crystal’s life. Both, for reasons he could not understand, were top on Achmed’s list, and Kabrin.

Achmed gave “Go with God” farewells to Patel and Josaf in Religious terms which were appropriate, leaving himself and Kabrin behind to continue ‘forward’. Easier to fight Ghost armies while the Earthly ones are chasing someone else. It seemed the only way ‘home’, Allah willing, for everyone concerned.

Meanwhile, Mike and Crystal dealt with internal matters between themselves. It was not made any easier by Mike losing his breath again as he poressed onward, exploring which way to get around the next set of mountains. He had lost his bearings, and any sense of ANY of the four directions. He was determined to get them back, no matter how many times he had to ride his horse over the same clearing in a relentlessly monotonous figure-eight pattern.

“You feelin’ okay?” she asked with all the concern left in her tested, but not yet broken heart.

“I’m okay!” he blasted out. “Why don’t you find something USEful to do with your time instead of doing the worried littlewife thing about me like a dumb-ass trailer park...” The rest of the words got caught in his throat, trapped by emerging 156% total exhaustion of the body, mind and spirit.

“You can’t keep going on like this!” she shot back, following him around as he kept one stride ahead of her. “You can’t die on me! Goddamn you!!! Mike. Micheal!!!”

By the third “Michael”, Mike brought his horse to a halt. He looked at the animal’s neck, noting that it was drenched with sweat. He felt his own throat, from the inside, feeling that is had gone hoarse, and dry. And what to do about the woman who he loved, and had to bring to this place of living death.

“So, what are you going to about it?” Crystal demanded an answer, a plan at the very least. Even a bad one. It beat none at all.

“I’m on vacation, Crystal. I’m allowed to do what I want,” his final offer.

“Well, Michael, I’m on vacation, too,” Crystal countered. Intuited the best direction home from the overcast sky, sensing where the sun would be and turned her horse around heading for the direction that felt to be West. Who know, maybe, she would ride clear across Arabia and Europe back to Arkansas.

“Goodbye, Michael,” she said by way of explanation, and final intention.

This time, Mike didn’t stop her. No pleas to her conscience. No trying to intimidate her into going Forward to adventure rather than Backward to home. No nodding to Achmed or Kabrin to ‘encourage’ her to see the reason in staying with the expedition rather than to expediate her exit from his life. Her exit started with a doubtful walk, emerged into a firm trot, then evolved into a steady lope.

“Better that she leave,” he said to himself, and the horse. “And I DID try to stop her!” he explained to the mountains ahead of him. “I did everything I was supposed to do!” The explanations turned into apologies, then pleas, then rants then screams of frustration, then...pain, in his chest. With a final yell of agony, he fell from his horse, hitting the ground, jumping towards a rock that hit his throat rather than the intended location on his forehead.

Mike prepared himself to meet his Maker, or Manufacturer, she appeared in front of him, begging for death. His reward came in the form of Kabrin, looking down at him.

Kabrin’s Religious training was left many spiritual riddles in his head. One of them was, ‘if a devil was dying in front of you, would you save its Soul so that Allah could reclaim it?’ Here was living evidence of such. Mike yelled all manners of obsenities and insults in tongues he didn’t recognize, through

voices that he recognised as ghostly. Yet these ghosts seemed to want help. And the route to that help was in Mike's hand, pointing to his pocket, the few nitro tablets left at the bottom, his paralyzed right arm unable to get them.

"You want...what?" Kabrin asked.

"The pppiiilllls" Mike pleaded, then screamed. But when he looked down into the valley. "And..."

Kabrin looked in that direction. Crystal was on her way out of sight, and mind. Achmed picked it up, riding in to intercept her. Kabrin gave Mike the pills, on top of his tongue.

"Swallow, Mister Craven," the Warrior instructed.

"No! No!" Mike screamed, as himself, spitting them out.

Kabrin grabbed two more nitro pills, ramming them down his throat. Forcing him to swallow.

"No!" Mike screamed. "No!" he repeated, spitting them out again.

Kabrin got another pill, forcing him to swallow by pushing his neck out, closing his mouth with the force normally reserved for silencing a Turkestan torturer once you got him into YOUR campground. But the strength of one dedicated man is nothing relative to ten demons, or angels. Mike spit out the pills, the tablets of life-promoting chemical falling down a deep cravace, becoming specs of dust lost to the darkness, and the upcoming earthquake surging out of mountain's core.

Kabrin shook with terror. Mike grabbed one of the last nitro tablets. "It goes under the tongue, Sand Nigger! Dumb ass fucking rag head..."

As Mike got stronger, the mountain got weaker, trembling, its strong and sturdy rocks dropping like leaves from an aging tree in the last days of Autumn to a cold winter wind. The ground opened up, revealing cracks in the Earth below it, the 'below' too deep to fathom, or imagine. The horses jumped the safely. Their riders were less fortunate.

Kabrin felt his feet losing connection to earth, then to ground. Under him emerged a pit of what felt like quicksand, sucking him in.

Mike extended his arm in. "Give me your hand!" he offered, risking his own life in the gesture.

"I am not afraid to die." Kabrin was firm. Better to die according to Allah's will rather than be saved by a man possessed by something he didn't understand, and if he didn't understand it, it was demonic. "Allah will take me!"

"But I need you first. So does Crystal. Take my hand you motherfucking, goddamn"

Five obsenities later, Kabrin saw more reasons to live than to die. Though he didn't know why, he found himself extending his arm out to Mike's. Yet, the pull of the Earth, and perhaps the pits below it, was strong. Like a thousand devils wanted him in hell before he got a chance to even get a glimpse of Heaven.

"Allah is Great! Allah is merciful! Allah is the only true God." Kabrin proclaimed as his final statement, rehearsed in so many battles, and meditations. "Allah is..."

"...not here now. But I am," Mike asserted, pulling Kabrin up out of the shaking Earth with the strength of a hundred Angels.

Kabrin breathed a sigh of relief and gave a prayer of thanks as he lay on the rocks next to Mike, drenched in blood, and thankfully, not his own urine or feces. "Allah is merciful!" he exclaimed.

"And we're in deep shit, my short-peckered friend," Mike gently informed his new Comrade, pointing down below.

"With Crystal, and Achmed?"

"Allah Willing," Mike offered as---himself, and a person beyond himself who was worth knowing. Once, of course, he knew himself what he was becoming.

## Chapter 11

From the smoke of the earthquake one of the pack horse emerged, its long White main and neck against black soot. It froze, suspended in animation in front of Kabrin. So did the thick fog coming down from the newly-remodelled mountains around it.

"May Allah have mercy on our souls," Kabrin said, anticipating the worse.

"He already has," Mike commented, a confident smile enveloping his newly fired-up eyes. The reason was on top of the horse. By some miracle, or curse, it was the equine-carried cargo Mike valued most, still very intact.

"The VTR, cameras, lights. And microphones. All intact!" he noted to a now terrified Kabrin. "You, my friend, have been promoted from Production Assistant to First Assistant Director. We can't be more than a few hour's walk from the Caves. And we are burning daylight, my short-peckered friend."

Seeing that the horse was too lame to make the trip, Mike loaded the lion's share equipment on his back, tossing the rest to Kabrin.

"You're crazy. Mad!" Kabrin screamed, but the louder he screamed, the more frantic his plea, the wider Mike's smile, and the longer his stride in a direction felt by his feet, and eyes. Two miles in, or maybe twenty, Mike heard something in the air, lifted his hand up and felt the desert talk to him. He motioned to Kabrin to record it, instructing his unwilling, but very indentured Comrade to listen with the headphone.

Mike talked, and sang to it, in tones and languages Kabrin had never heard.

"I hear nothing, Mister Craven," the claim.

"That's because you're not listening," the reply. "That audio machine says there's something out there talking to us."

Kabrin looked at the red arrow, fluctuating in the middle of the meter. "Wind, Mister Craven?"

"Yes, we should listen to the wind, too," he cordially acknowledged sniffing his way 'forward'. "From the Northeast. A very strong smell of death from that mountain over there. The approach to the Caverns on the Western slope, about five hundred feet up. Above a clump of knarled pines and a rock that looks like a Lion from the Southern valley."

Nothing in Mike's head was visible to Kabrin's eyes, though the description of what was beyond the next mountain was clear, concise and sounded as concrete as intuitive feel Kabrin got of ambush patrols hiding in trees around the corner. Kabrin's radar has saved his Comrades from being massacres in many wars, and skirmishes. But this metaphysical War between ghosts and man was not his. He lifted up his gun, pointed it at Mike's head, and waited for the answer.

"I know," Mike related very humanly. "How can a Yuppie asshole who spent his Nepalese holiday in the Katmandu Hilton know anything about these mountains? Well, rest assured, my short-peckered friend, I have no idea why I know more about this fucked up country of yours than you do."

Mike couldn't go on, but he wouldn't turn back either. Kabrin cocked the hammer of his revolver, confiscating the pistol Mike had hidden under his belt. No resistance was offered, but an answer was given. The surrendering Yankee grabbed Kabrin's canteen and threw it down the hill, a five-second slide down, a day's climb coming up.

"Plenty of water at the foot of the caverns," Mike offered by way of explanation with a voice parched dry beyond thirst. He picked up the equipment, proceeding onward. "Then there are the underground springs. They survived avalanches a lot harder than this one," he said assuringly, scurrying up a narrow path barely wide enough for a billgoat.

"Your wife, Crystal, Mister Craven," Kabrin reminded his 'leader' as he followed, struggling four times as hard with a quarter of the load on his back. "You don't care if she's alive or dead?"

"Oh, she's alive," Mike noted. "So is Achmed. They'll catch up to us, if they have the balls to. If they can handle what's on the other side of the circle."

The riddle was only three days old. "The other side of the circle" was not the boldest of Cravenese phrases, but it seemed to make logical sense, somehow, the higher the trail got. Something that frightened Kabrin even more.

His construct of the Universe challenged, Kabrin went back to basics. Religion, a safe substitute for Spirituality. He was safe while his Comrades were gone, probably dead by now. A Warrior can survive death, but never the guilt of being the only soldier left alive. A cursory inventory of what he did or didn't do minimized the guilt. Then he looked at Mike to assess his inventory of that quality, or affliction. Either he had no guilt at all, or a mountain of it. And for what? Mister Craven had been Kabrin's worst enemy, and best friend. Sometimes both at once. Or was he really someone else masquerading as Michael Craven. Someone who knew what people were thinking about him, and someone who would not let lingering questions be formulated, or asked. To aid in the questioning, Kabrin edged his free hand down to the handle of his revolver, when---

"Come on, Kabrin," Mike interjected as Kabrin almost saw into his Soul. "We shoot our enemies with cameras now, not guns. Get with the program." Mike's tone reeked of cultural condescension, and comradeship---as if two spirits were indeed using his body at the same time. Answers about their destination were, as usual, on a need-to-know basis.

Kabrin had always trusted Achmed's reasons for keeping inner secrets about a Mission secret, and Mission was always spelt with a big 'M'. The Mission mattered, not the men, though the men were supposed to agree to the Mission's terms prior to embarking upon it. And if the man in charge of the Mission is making the Mission fail, then the second in command has no choice.

Kabrin halted, pulled out his revolver and shot at Mike's feet. After the fifth bullet, Mister Craven finally turned around---smiling,.

"What are you smiling at?" Kabrin yelled out.

"That you finally had the balls to use that. I'm proud of you."

"Proud enough to tell me if this Mission is about gold!!!"

"No." Mike's answer was direct, honest and respectfully delivered.

"Diamonds?"

"Maybe a girl's best friend, but not mine. Or Crystal's," Mike replied with saddened laughter.

"Fame, Mister Craven?"

"Highly overrated, and I already have all the fame an egotistical asshole can handle."

"Suicide, Mister Craven? For something you did, or didn't do, perhaps."

Mike smiled, looking backward in the head toward the Soul, hoping it was still there. "Close," his answer. He turned around, absorbing the desert mountains which turned abruptly from his worst enemy into his closest friend. "It's about retribution, my short peckered friend. Retribution."

## Chapter 12

"Rhetolish's Lament", Achmed related to Crystal. The slash on his head from the falling rocks gushed out a liter of blood, but an ocean of perspective, as he lay back on the rocks on the "Worldly" side of the avalanche. While Crystal assessed his injured, Achmed assessed the viability of moving forward to meet up with Mike and Kabrin, knowing that it was not an option of choice anymore. The ammunition was gone, as was the food, water and any map of the terrain. A map would have been useless, anyway, since Nature changed it. Yet there was a reason for it all, he finally concluded.

"The first shall be last and the last shall be first," he continued to Crystal, in English. A language he was forbidden to speak with in her by contract with his employer, perhaps dead, perhaps dying, but, for the moment, not present.

"Sounds, Biblical," Crystal noted.

"Perhaps even more important than Bibilical. Spiritual. An ancient children's story about being reborn to settle old debts, and say goodbye to departed friends from past lives while you live this one."

"Re-incarnation?"

"Courts in India prosecuted a man for killing his wife ten years earlier, and the key witness was a six year old girl who was the victim. And regarding rebirth after death there is the research in your world, Mrs. Craven."

"And the wierdos and con men who try to make a livin' off of things they SAY they hear from dead folks." She put the final stitch into the gash on Achmed's forehead, tying it tight, checking for bleeders and any ocular signs of brain injury behind it. "And it's MS Craven, or just Crystal. And, yeah, I know I look familiar ta you, like ya'll have known me before. All of us hot lookin' babes do. I never believed in cheap pick up lines, or re-incarnation."

"You believe what you have to to believe to to survive, and make sense of the world." Achmed's tone was sombre, and truthful. He was well aware that there as so much lying in the worls that most people didn't know when they ere lying or telling the truth. Especially in the military when you go to war based on a political lie, keep your men obedient based on lies you invent yourself, and keep the civilians in your charge co-operative with lies that you and your men invent by necissity.

"I listen ta claims 'bout bein' reincarnated," Crystal conceded. "But I mostly ignor them. Have to."

"Did you have to ignor this?" Achmed challenged, whipping out Mike's drawings from Crystal's pack.

"Those are private!" She grabbed them back, reiniserting them into the hidden compartment, now made open by rips and tares made by the avanache, interestingly in a pattern reminiscent of the emblem on Mike's vest, a garment he still kept on, and visibly present, no matter how hot, cold, dry or wet.

"Yes," Achmed concluded. "They are VERY private." He helped himself to a look at each of them. Crystal finally gave in to looking at the scetches made by her beloved madman together.

"The Jenadan medallion," Achmed pointed out, remembering the childhood tales told to him, but never put on paper. "I remember it. My Uncle telling me the stories. He was a kind man, who I knew for a short time who said that I would be rewarded in my old age for listening to his stories in my young age. Sometimes you are rewarded in old age by remembering your childhood stories."

Crystal looked at the faces, people and ornaments in the drawings, opening her heart this time as well as her mind. She was shocked, then ashamed, at what was so, so evident. How could she have missed it? The Jenadan medallion in all of them, around the necks of the victims of some kind of massacre. And superimposed on the larger design of each sketch made.

Yet, no picture of the five-sided multi-cultural emblem with the triangular core was in the "Lost Civilizations" book. Or maybe it was in the pages Mike had torn out prior to her peeking into it. And there was so much to see in it once you gazed at it beyond merely getting a peek.

Crystal's baby blues gazed upon the Ancient Seal.

"What do YOU see in the Jenadan medallion, Ms. Craven?" Achmed inquired having just been touched by something different about it himself. "The legend says that everyone sees something different in it, but that everyone feels the same thing once they are taken by its spell."

"The Star of David, or the Alexandrian 5 point. The Cross. The Yin Yang symbol that's always on the labels of those over priced health food you can get at the regular grocery store for half the cost," she noted with her head. "Maybe somethin' Celtic, Hindu or Native American. Navajo or Hopi most likely," she intuited with her mind. "Or maybe something...Ancient and Modern all at the same time?" the question, formulated by her heart.

"Perhaps," Achmed noted, and hoped. "Your husband always said that you were more connected to it than he was."

"He never told me that. Ya know why?"

"In young, you ask 'why', as an adult, you ask 'how', and as an old man you ask 'where'." He prophesied. "Where are my glasses, where are the keys to my house, where is the toilet," the Old Veteran of so many Wars, and Peaces, mused.

"So, where is Mike and Achmed?"

Achmed perused the horizon with his binoculars, then his eyes. "To the Northeast, I think."

"Why?"

"I see two sets of tracks, a trail of horse manure."

"No shit?" Crystal chuckled.

"Your laugh fits your eyes, Ms. Craven."

"It beats cryin', and tryin' to figure out where all this is goin'. Do you know?"

"No," Achmed's reply. "But we have to move ahead."

"Where's that?"

"To the Northeast."

Achmed never revealed doubt to those under him. A Commander must be sure of his course, even if he doesn't know it. Still, as they packed up to find a trail that would connect them to what was left of the Recreational Expedition, Crystal knew that Achmed as much in the dark as she was. And that the destination would be dark, desolate and demon-infested.

## Chapter 13

The vultures above showed the way, the Earthquake cracked ground the path. Mike's third eye was wide open. The Caverns of the Ancient Jenada would never be exposed to the modern world and the impartiality of the video camera's verification in any other way.

It was as he envisioned it, vivid images of the dead on cave walls in living color. "My old friends, family and Comrads," Mike related to Kabrin upon laying his modern eyes on the ancient wall-paintings. "I think I still know their name, but always remembered their faces...."

As Mike pouted out names in ancient tongues, Kabrin had problems of his own. One of them was a bat, swirling around him in a figure eight pattern, making his job as lighting man even more difficult. Mike scanned the cave walls with the camera, his hands steady as a rock despite the multitude of emotions brewing behind his eyes. They were the kind of emotions that kept away people, and bats.

"They can smell fear on me," Kabrin said under his breath as the bat swung in, closer and closer with each landing pattern around his head.

"Then don't sweat, and don't be scared," Mike spat out. "And whatever you do, hold the light steady! But not close enough so that you..."

Murphy's law held true, even in caverns that had not been seen by human eyes for over two thousand years. A 100kv light was no match for a flammable wall painting, no matter how technologically-advanced the artist. The ancient mural caught fire in a flash, emitting multicolored smoke representing hues from every part of the color wheel.

Mike grabbed Kabrin by the collar. "Do you know what you just did? You killed Tyukili the Metalsmith, Husband. Father, Friend. You burned out the last record of his existence. You don't understand ANYthing about this place. And you never will, God help you!"

The bats hovered around Mike, like demons around the Devil, Kabrin thought. Or maybe they were angels around a martyred Saint, he reflected a moment later.

Still, Kabrin did his best to hold the light steady as Mike went deeper into the caves for more footage. And still, the bats protected Mike. First by flying around him, then by hanging upside down, as if guarding each passageway behind him from any unauthorized entry. Guards who seemed to have been on duty since before the birth of Jesus, or Mohammed.

One tunnel wall looked particularly frightening. Part rock, part bat, Kabrin thought as he hand quivered and urine trickled down his trousers. His feet froze. And explanation was necessary. Kabrin thought of telling Mike that the only beasts he feared were bats, and it was true. The phobia was a natural result of having been locked up in a room with crowd at an impressionable age by a sadistic older brother. But Mike already knew that, Kabrin concluded. He seemed to know everything else. He made the adjustments, dulled his senses, and invented an extra reserve of courage. Still, he was hounded by the blind winged rats who seemed to see everything.

"These bats are possessed," Kabrin said. "They still smell my fear. They are the devil's curse!"

"Then I'll use magic words against them," Mike pontificated. "Satan rules!" He blew on the bat circling around Kabrin's head. It fell to the ground, dying an ugly death en route. Mike smiled. "Manhattan Mouthwash. You happy now?"

"What kind of man are you?" Kabrin braced himself for whatever answer Heaven or Hell would provide.

"The kind who knows how to get rid of bats?" Mike replied. "The creator and destroyer of life," he ranted on, taken away into another place and time in his mind, and heart. He turned the corner to another cavern which was blackened with soot. "The creator and destroyer of life," he repeated as he blew against the knarled stone wall.

Twenty winged rodents emerged from it, awakened for a moment from lifeless slumber so they could experience, in one horrifying breath, the agony of death. Mike smiled the kind of grin supported by a strength derived from Worlds beyond that of human forms.

"Black magic!" Kabrin gasped, a courageous heart under his fearful studder.

"No," rebutted. "Hypothermia. Hot air a rude awakening for bats in hibernation. I could have let them be, but you insisted on being scared, and sweating. They're all gone now, and it's safe for you to follow me the rest of the way, unless there's something in your religion back in the Mosque that forbids you to bravely go where no man has gone before."

At Mike's insistence, and dare, they proceeded. They moved on into the next tunnel. Its entrance was narrow, protected by spikes and sharp blades of various alloys jutting out of the rock, angled so that the uniformed intruder would lose a finger, a testicle or his nerve if he rushed forward at the wrong pace. And that pace was set by Mike, a slow, humble walk, light footed, head bowed slightly. It seemed to Kabrin that indeed, the irreverent Journalist DID have something he revered other than irreverency, and Howard Stern.

The light dimmed, the rocks seeming to absorb every kilovolt of the 100k light that could, in the world outside, illuminate anything. Mike struck a match, igniting torches along the way, their grass and kindling chips still intact. To Kabrin's shock, and assurance, they provided more light than the artificial lamp which allowed them entry thus far. Then, another tunnel, leading to a dead end, or maybe not so dead end.

There it lay, a plain wooden chest, laquered. Space lay between the top and the body, nothing between it, apparently. Mike rushed to it, his hand grasping it with gratitude and unbridled enthusiasm. Yet, it wouldn't give. He tried with all his might to pull it open, and even with Kabrin's assistance, and that of an improvised crowbar, resulted in nothing but sweat and exhaustion. To have come all this way to be locked out by wood held together by some ancient vacuum which seemed impenetrable! To have experience so much pain, and frustration. Then, for Mike, to release the most unexpected gesture---laughter, gently expressed by the ever-intense Manhattanite.

Kabrin could hardly believe his eyes. He opened his mouth, hoping that the right words would somehow come out of them. But before he could---

From Mike's aethiestic/agnostic lips, a prayer in an ancient tongue, perhaps Arameic, perhaps Farsi, but certainly gestures Kabrin recognized as Christian, Moslem and Buddist, combined into something that had its own rules to it.

Kabrin watched, keeping his silence, holding back his judgements on good, evil and everything in between as Mike finished the prayer with a bow, his eyes closed, his fingers finding spots to touch, gently. The box opened, revealing something far more valuable to gold, silver or diamonds.

"The books," Mike noted with quiet and intense appreciation, again and again. Though he knew his hands were grubby and grimmy from the desert trek, and perhaps blood-stained due to the possible demise of Josaf and Patel, the chest allowed him entry. His hands came to lay on leather bound manuscripts, making him feel clean again, perhaps for the first time since his birth.

An explanation was appropriate, and given.

"This, my short peckered friend, is the collective Universal Bible," Mike related to his now-Comrade. "The Words, big 'w', from the Spiritual Masters themselves, in the appropriate languages. Gree, Hebrew, Arameic, Sanscript, Hindi, Manderin, Nepalese and, Father O'Brien, my old priest back in Brooklyn would be pleased to know...Gaelic. The clues to It all. The glue that helped keep together the Babylonian Empire, the Sumerian State, and who knows what other kingdoms centuries before the Romans or the Christians came along."

He looked to the sides, of the three-walled 'chamber', smiling even wider.

"And those portaits on the wall, and in my mined, were the people who brought it together. How they REALLY looked. Buddha, Krishna, Plato, Hippocrates, Moses, Confucious, Lao-Tze and the only REAL portrait of Jesus, done by someone who must have known Him, very personally. With eyes of fire, warmth, wisdom and what isn't in any of the Gospels...laughter."

Kabrin's heart seemed satisfied, his curiosity activated, and the question of all questions he had asked in his Religious training formulated. Mike anticipated it.

"As for the Prophet Mohamed...maybe the artists were killed before they got a chance to put it on the wall."

Kabrin's disappointment at not being the only living Moslem to see the Prophet's face. It was, after all, forbidden to know what Mohammed looked like, for reasons Allah revealed to His followers slowly. But one question was askable.

"Is there something of the Prophet's writings in that box?" Kabrin inquired. "Something beyond the...the...Koran." That phrase 'beyond the Koran' was something Kabrin never envisioned as even possible. But perhaps for the Truest of Believers, the most Sacred Writings would be accessible. The Jews had the Kabala, the Christians had the writings of the Essenes. The Hindu's and Buddhists always seemed to have a book beyond the standard lesson for students who wanted, and had to, excel beyond their teachers.

"When would they have been written?" Mike asked.

"In your calender, the seventh Century, Mister Craven."

Mike sighed, knowing the story all too well. "Well, that seems to have been, by my gut, and my eyes and whatever I remember from Pre-Medvil history, five centures or so too late. The killings here happened have at least five hundred years before the Prophet Mohammad was even born. Sorry, Mister Habib."

Kabrin had never been called "Mister" by anyone in years, even Achmed, and no one, even Achmed, knew the identity of his real surname. He looked at Mike, reading the books, absorbing every word at lightening speed and volcanic intensity. Then realising that---"They are books, and Ancient people had scrolls, and pappyrus."

"Not these folks," Mike added, his finger feeling each word in languages he seemed to miraculously understand.

"Do those books say anything about your Prophet, Jesus?" Kabrin asked, from a respectful distance.

"It would lose everything in translation, probably," his comment.

"He was a dangerous man for His time," Kabrin related.

"All of the Prophets were. But if the Prophets ruled instead of the Kings and Ceasers. What a revolution! Freedom. Independence. Compassion. Those powerful combinations, like Christian Principles with Buddist discipline, and Islamic dedication."

"Thank you, from the Prophet, and myself," Kabrin acknowledged.

"And every man a king. No one slave, no one master. No man an island..."

"Except one," a voice rang out behind Mike. It was only a matter of time till Crystal and Achmed found the caverns. Mike had underestimated them both, a mistake for which he was now very, very grateful.

The Arkansas blond bombshell, still beautiful under the dust and the grime, and the Arabian mountain goat, still affirmatively limping on his own two injured feet, stayed outside the Sacred Book chamber, held at the invisible door by a wall of bats.

"Come in, Crystal," Mike said, his back turned to her, his heart open, and vulnerable. "My friends won't do you any harm."

Crystal hesitated. Was it Mike her husband, or Mike the madman? Or was the madman a kinder husband than the one she knew three weeks ago, now seeming to be three decades in the distant past.

"Come in, Crystal," he repeated, turning around. His face was human, and warm, his eyes...on fire. "These winged gatekeepers will let you pass if they don't smell fear on you. And as my friend Mister Habib and will demonstrate."

Mike bowed, inviting Kabrin to walk across to the outside of the three-sided chamber formed by naked mountain rock made Sacred with the paint put upon them. There was nothing Sacred about the bats, though. They seemed like Messengers from hell, their 'eyes' focused on Kabrin's most vulnerable places inside. Terrified, he turned around, asking without words, if he could stay inside the chamber, protected and nurtured by the books. The Wisdom within, or perhaps beyond, the Koran.

"No," Mike said, with deep regret. "You are a man of Spirit, and your Spirit is needed in the world." Mike gave him a sheet of pages. "Arabic, it looks like. Maybe it's your place to do some good with it out there. Maybe the Prophet DID stop in here on his way to...ya know, somewhere else."

Kabrin smiled, feeling touched, and strengthened. No more was he afraid of bats, or anything else. He was needed outside the chamber, for reasons that seemed very real, different and in keeping with all of his past beliefs. Such a novel offering was rare, indeed.

Kabrin walked through the wall of bats, armed with confidence, a smile, and a greeting of welcome by his old mentor, now best friend, Achmed.

"It is good to see you again, my friend," the old Mountaineer said, tears in his eyes. "Praise Allah!"

"Yes, indeed, praise to the One True God," Kabrin added, noting that Achmed had become a true believer of the Prophet, and that he himself was becoming a believer in...Truth, whatever that was.

Crystal's eyes spun around the room. The paintings on the wall scared her, particularly the ones of the people who were smiling, and laughing. The flying rodents circling around her in a wall that kept her hostage in a 4 foot wide circle didn't help. "What the hell is this place. Hell?"

Mike smiled, but only to himself. He snapped his fingers, then said something another one of those strange tongues---a new one this time that had diphthongs she did not recognize. The bats flew away, fixing themselves to the wall, their heads down under their wings.

"What are they doing, Mike?" she asked.

"Bowing to you. Letting you in. As am...I, I guess." He gently motioned with his hand for her to enter the chamber. She followed, one step a time, till she felt 'the line'. Once inside, she fell into Mike's arms.

The bats sprang back into duty, forming a wall in front of the chamber. Directly in front of Achmed and Kabrin.

"Sorry guys," Mike confessed to them. "Keeping you out, and us in was their idea, not mine."

There was no bullshit in the bullshitter's eyes. Some things were even out of Michael Craven's control. Those were, indeed, the scariest. But what to do? Kabrin and Achmed couldn't just stand by and watch. "God helps those who help themselves" was a credo they both knew very well. But how to help themselves and each other as the bats came back, the torches flickered in rhythm with each other to a song the characters on the wall seemed to be singing. Student and teacher asked each other the question words not spoken.

"You two guys get out of here, now," Mike related. "The money is in my saddlebag. The number for the Swiss Bank account with your tip is back at your Brother's Café."

How to get back home would be hard, but not impossible. A mild tremor caused another chamber to open, leading to light outside, SUNlight. Still, Achmed hesitated.

“What about you, Mrs. Craven?” Achmed’s request was from the bottom of his heart, reaching into Mike’s conscience. He lowered his head, leaving the rest to her. Whatever she wanted, would have to come from her, not his eyes telling her what to do, think, or feel.

“I’mmm...I’mmm...” Crystal struggled to get out.

“Doing what you WANT to do,” Mike asserted, knowing that this was his nightmare, or Nurvana, no one else’s. “You are doing what you WANT to do.”

“Which is...?”

Achmed and Kabrin froze, braced for her answer, as did the mountain, and the bats.

“Staying with my...Comrade,” her answer, hugging Mike. Tears of appreciation came down his cheek.

Achmed and Kabrin walked away, leaving behind the location of extra provisions and spare horses, and their route of exit. They would wait outside the mountain for another day, they pledged. Promise to send an expedition back for Mike and Crystal if they got lost finding their way out, they promised.

Just as they were out of hearing range, Mike revealed the most heartfelt of messages to Crystal, “Thank you for staying,” but in a frightening language.

“Ancient Greek?” she noted, terrified, recognising the tongue from her detour into Anthropology during her Undergraduate Days at Little Rock College. “How did you ever learn to talk in Ancient Greek?”

“Doesn’t everyone speak Greek?” Mike replied in Arameic, Hindi, Mandarin, Latin, Farsi and finally, English. The fact that he could speak them all with so much ease, and authority, seemed natural, normal and...required for the next step.

Crystal was in no mood to be amused, impressed or have her head played witty. Her apprehension escalated to fear as the corridor out of the caverns got darker, then clown over with dust. But the light inside the caves was strong, the sun peaking in through holes on all sides, provided nearly perfect three-point lighting, not a shadow in sight to hide behind.

Eyes stared at Crystal from all directions, the portraits of dead Jeanadans brighter than ever, identical to the ones Mike had drawn on those dark, lonely and scary nights on the trail.

“Why be scared, Crystal?” Mike asserted. “We’re amongst friends. Very old friend. Who know? Maybe you’ll finally get to meet one of my ‘ex’s. See why I was holding a torch for them all these years.”

The pun and punchline were understood, but not appreciated. Indeed, Crystal felt herself to be one of those lower, weaker beings who feared what she couldn’t understand.

“You don’t get any of this, do you, Crystal?” Mike noted, accurately, and regretfully.

“I want to, damn it If you let me help you...” She moved in towards Mike, extending her warm hand to melt his cold ice, and connect to his Inner Fire. He withdrew from her embrace, terrified of a link so strongly tied to the land of the living.

The always-cool and marketably-hot on-top Journalist found his feet RUNNING, into an all too-well-lit corridor where the wall paintings were even more vivid---and cruel. There was a special kind of pain in them. The agony of surrender. The faces reeked of death, fear and the most horrible kind of end. Whoever the artist was drew it in full detail, bodies mutilated with knives, chains and hot irons. Blood, puss and infestations of insects in the open wounds. And in each painting a bloody left hand from an unseen attacker inflicting the wounds to the flesh. And the demon’s right hand behind the head of the victims, pulling something out of the eyes that seemed like dignity, and hope. His last painting was unfinished above the neck, the body relatively untouched. Perhaps he escaped, or perhaps he didn’t. But inside that face, Mike’s mind to see a very familiar person---himself.

He found himself paralyzed with fear. Still, he refused Crystal’s hand, balling up in a fetal position, closing his eyes in the hope that the nightmare in his head would end.

“Why can’t you let me help you, Mike?!” she pleaded.

“Because I don’t deserve it!!!”

“Why? Why!! I can help you, heal you, IF you let me.”

“You don’t understand. You never will.” His conclusion was unexpected, even to himself, and final.

“Then MAKE me understand,” the counter offer, intended to not be refused. She pulled him up off the cold rock floor, forcing him to look into her eyes. “Why don’t you deserve my help?”

“Because I’m one of the ones who survived.”

“Survived what?” Crystal asked.

Mike hesitated, his attention drawn, on schedule, to another corridor, dark, narrow, and winding. His lips quivered with unspoken words of the most horrifying kind.

"You survived what!?" Crystal demanded. Whatever you know, feel or have to do, I know I can handle it. It think."

Perhaps Mike found courage to face the demons straight on, or he was more terrified of Crystal's love. Or maybe it was her offer of such that allowed him to move forward, away from her, and into the winding, dark cavern. With each step forward, the stench of death, a rotting kind of odor that also felt sterile. Listening to the Earth with his feet, he stopped and looked down. He wished he hadn't. Most importantly, he regretted that Crystal chose to follow him there.

#### Chapter 14

Mike's hand reached down into a dark pit, two storied high and how tellind how wide at its base. Most of the bones were broken or deformed, the stench of two-thousand-year-old blood somehow still fresh. The bats stayed away from this place. So did the mice, rats or any other fur bearing creature.

"It was a large graveyard, Crystal," Mike said by way of explanation, and apology. Built by us for Tyransis the Great at the beginning of his 'visit' here. We thought it would be to store grain, wood chips or..."

"OR what?" Crystal asked, wanting to extend her hand to Mike, painfully knowing that it would not be accepted.

"It turned into the largest graveyard we'd ever seen, or ever imagined," he continued.

Crystal looked down. She had to ask the most obvious, crude and necessary question. "How many?"

"A number that's..."

"None of my business." She had to pull away, horrified by the one and the so, so many. "I'm sorry, Mike, I..."

"It's alright, Crystal. The world needs people who are horrified by deaths of hundreds, thousands of millions they don't know instead of only being moved by the deaths of the few who they do know as friends, Comrades or family." He was speaking as himself, the self who Crystal had loved ever since she met him, the self he never revealed to the world, to her, or even himself.

"Then again," he continued, "The death of one can have special meaning, too." He pulled up one of the skulls, the left temporal bone crushed in with a hammer, a small piece of blonde hair dangling from the back of what used to be a child's head. Embedded in between the bones was a broken edge of a rusty dagger, its blade sharp, its shaft strong enough to penetrate anything made by Nature except for petrified rock.

"Big eye sockets," Mike noted, and related, speaking to an old friend from his place of discovery in the modern world. "For big eyes that one saw the world with wonderment," he lamented. "Tyransis was kindest to the children. Before they were beaten, blinded, scalped. He always liked the children with the long hair best." The memories poured into Mike's sweat-soaked head faster than his teary eyes could see them coming. "I always did have a love-hate relationship with short hair and shaved head. What first attracted me to you, Crystal, was your long hair. You never did cut it. Thank you."

"You're welcomed," Crystal replied looking for a route into Mike's heart, and pain, his reflexes cutting her off at the pass everytime she intuited another tunnel under his walls.

But something bigger than Crystal's love was happening. Mike's mind faded off again. His eyes glossed over, a pityful plea for connectivity in them.

In matters of the heart, Crystal had the courage of a lioness, and the brains of a lobotomized turkey. Mike needed hugs, she stoignough. Strokes, caring, and, yes, even sympathy. She let them all swell up from her gut, into her heart, into her loving arms, extending them, when---

Mike ran his fingers through Crystal's hair, his arms tightly around her 18 inch waist. His touch felt vulnerable and erotic. Gentle, kind. But in his other hand, a clenched fist holding the dagger he somehow managed to pull out of the departed child's skull.

"I used to have weird fantasies," he continued in a voice coming from two Souls. "The kind shrinks lock you up for talking about, and priests don't understand. About what it would feel like to cut off off of this beautiful hair of yours, that I love so much."

Mike tested the blade's sharpness on a few strands of Crystal's three-foot long mane, smiling sadistically as the fallen golden strands fell to the cold, dark ground.

Her lips quivered three dimensions beyond fear, thirty times more vulnerable than terrified. She gazed into Mike's face, the right side someone she knew, the left showing the likeness of someone she never could, or would.

"Or maybe." Mike postulated as the war between right and left, or wrong, sides continued, the demon inside moving the dagger within an inch of her scalp as the angel, or man, inside wondered what to do about the events to come. "Maybe I should cut it off below the roots."

Mike grabbed Crystal's grabbed hold of Crystal's silken topknot even harder, the blade edging in to the skin on her forehead, his mind now possessed with pur evil, moving in...slowly. "These things are better done...slowly." He pushed her head downward, demanding that she look to the ground.

Crystal was afraid to look up, but there was no other choice, so her heart said. Maybe she could penetrate something into Mike's Soul by looking into his eyes. But when she did, the demon smiled even louder and more sadistically. That devil seemed to be Satan himself, one 'dare' away from slashing off her hair below the roots, as promised. But there was one weakness common to man and devil, known only to woman.

Crystal kicked up her legs, landing a dig into Mike's groin. But the demon was faster, moving aside, trapping her foot, tossing her on the ground, making her eat the dirt. Moving in for the scalping of a lifetime, or deathtime. Still she looked for Mike inside the creature who had his knee on her back, his grubby and soon-to-be-bloody hand on her neck.

"You will not look at me like that!" the demon growled through Mike's voice. Or maybe it was Mike through the demon's voice. "Those eyes offend me, and I WILL cut them if you--"

"Self sabotage, Mike," Crystal interjected.

Mike's knife froze in position. The demon seemed checkmated, or at least checked—for the moment.

"Self sabotoge, Mike," she went on with the small window of opportunity left. "It's got you, Break the cycle. Break the Goddamn cycle, for Christ's sake. For the love of God."

"Love for the love of--"

"---ME, then."

The hand on her neck let loose, a bit. Then the dig of his hard knee on her soft back released, just enough. Cautiously, she turned her head, staring into the face of the man she loved and the demon she feared. While each wrestled with the other, she threw her two-cents into the poker game that was a winner take-all hand for all concerned.

"Jenada," Crystal said, connecting intellect to heart to mouth, and hopefully to Mike.

The darkness left his face, then his heart, then his eyes. But his cheeks remained pale, white and gauntly ghostlike. "We tried to save the world from itself," he related, focusing his stare on the walls, his attention on her. "Me and all the other Jenadans." He got up, wandering the corridor like a lost child looking for his schoolmates, and schoolmasters, finding them not there, yet ever present. "Save the world from Tryanisis the Executioner, and his bosses. All the bosses who loved ignorance, and cruelty. But no good act goes unpunished."

Mike kissed Crystal on the forehead. "I love you more than my own life," he confessed, and discovered.

Crystal hugged him, for dear life. She felt his heart beating, pounding for her, pumping in the quest for Life, then---

"Ahhh!" Mike groaned, the angina back, another heart attack in progress.

Crystal dug down into Mike's pockets. No pills left! His reserves gone, or discarded. She reached into her own pockets, finding, thankfully, a vial of nitroglycerin she had brought on the road with her, just in case. She pulled it out, assessing how many mini-lifeboats were in the jiggle. Nine pills left. Thankfully.

She opened the vial, put the pills into her hand, prepared to put them under Mike's tongue when a bat swooped down, biting at her hand, pills spilling down into the creavaces in the floor. She clenched her fist. Thankfully, two left. Hopefully pills and not pebbles. But those two pills were now the targets of prey for twenty bats, actively on the prowl, taking no prisoners.

"Nature doesn't give you a problem without a solution," Crystal remembered from her Biology Professor in the instant of urgency. "And God helps those who help themselves" her heart echoed in from Scripture lessons. With that, she spotted an Ancient Jenadan staff lying on the ground, not unlike the one she envisioned held by Moses at the parting of the Red Sea.

The first wave of bats swooped in, attacking her left wrist so the life-promoting pills in that hand would be lost to the cavern pit. She grabbed hold of the staff, waving it in front of the winged creatures, calling upon the Spirit of Jesus and, if available, the help of her departed Cherokee Shamen Grandfather.

"Go back to your Creator. In the name of---"

Before she could voice the Name, and names, the bats departed, disappearing into the walls. In her hand she discovered something odd. Three tablets of nitro, not two. Something had gone very right, or very wrong. The next move in this game that was no game was set.

Mike was in no position to argue, either. He didn't resist Crystal inserting a pill under his tongue. Taking the spare acupuncture needle from her pocket, activating the appropriate point, the cure was still not working. His heart thumped an irregular death urge, his chest painful, his eyes becoming more distant. "Live, you fucking bastard!" she screamed out, defying the laws of God, man and biology. One more nitro pill helped, but not enough. His breathing became shallow, then absent. CPR was needed. Her breath into his body, becoming faint, pale and, perhaps, dying in a state of grace. At least he was dying as Mike, not someone else. She read something in his eyes, though.

"You don't deserve to die," she yelled at him. "You arrogant, self absorbed egostic. You don't deserve to die!!!" she insisted, again and again. "None of you did," she found herself admitting, and believing.

Why and how Mike recovered his breath, and his vitality, was nothing short of a miracle, at least in Crystal's eyes. As he breathed regularly, leaned against the wall of the cave and uttered words in what had to be the language of Ancient Jenada, she crossed herself.

"Thank you, Jesus," she said again and again. "And anyone else out or up there who helped," she added for good measure.

Then, something very real, and human from Mike's cold, clammy and quivering lips. "The first shall be last, and the last first. Retribution must be accomplished. The broken circle must be closed."

The credos and maxims were straight from Achmed's childhood stories told to him by his Uncle, tales Mike could never have known, and which Achmed never told him. But as for how those promises of justice would be delivered---Crystal felt both assured, and terrified. So did Mike. And perhaps, so did every Creature living and dead in the Caverns that had been activated from the two-thousand year old slumber.

## CHAPTER 15

The only word that could describe him was 'big'. Big shoulders, big muscles and a big sword. The colors screamed out their hues, pale white skin on his body that lured in the eye, bright metallic armor that made you squint, deep red blood-stains that would not let you forget the horrors of war and the misery of slavery.

But the mural painting of Tryanisis done by the Ancient artist who got away, or maybe didn't, still lacked one thing---the face. It was a black hole, over shadowed by the flash and power of everything around it.

"None of us ever saw his face, not the living or, so I am told, the dead. Not even the whores and slaves he called his 'wives', so I remember," Mike related to Crystal in an even tone, his mind resolved, his heart re-dedicated to an old score, and obligation. "Tyrannisis was the most vicious mercenary the world had ever known, or created. One day, fearful and selfish people in high placed decided he should be especially vicious to us. But we protected the books. We protected the books."

It was a two dimensional likeness of the ancient mercenary tyrant, but in Mike's mind it had already aquired three dimensions, maybe more. Still, Crystal used whatever courage she had to reach whatever humanity her husband, now Comrade, had left in him.

"Tryanisis is dead, Mike," she reminded him, gently laying her hand on his shivering shoulder.

"Tyrannisis NEVER died!"

"And you came here to deal with Tryanisis?"

Crystal's words had more truth to them than she ever imagined, but then again, that was not so unusual for someone who channeled truth like she could.

Mike was strong enough, but there was something missing. An ingredient that made him a candidate for both Sainthood and condemnation as the biggest pain in the ass East of the Hudson---his defiance. Why did it vanish now? What was there in the painting that made the Spirit of rebellion and

rugged individualism leave his body, allowing his mind to wander into dangerous places no man or woman should ever even know about?

He rose, his shaking legs barely able to hold his shriveling body.

"Mike?" Crystal asked, moving in with a hand of support, which was taken, and turned around into a twist of her arm.

Mike found himself with Crystal in hand, pushing her face in full view of Tryanisis' unrelenting stare from the black hole under his helmet visor. He pulled a dagger from his belt, facing the Executioner, taking on a new tone, and tempo. "Tyranisis, Master of Worlds seen and Unseen!" he declared as a Roman Centurian with a dangerous mixture of boldness, pride and compassion. "You are a righteous and honorable man! You pledged that if the head of each house kills one member of the family, you will spare the rest. And the books. I now sacrifice the one for the many! The one I love most, for the many that must be saved!"

Crystal was to be the sacrifice. But there were answers far more final, and profound that the Arkansas trailer park beauty queen saw between the ugliness and crudeness of the moments that seemed like millenia. Finally, some real answers, her mind realized as fear still permeated through body. Had Mike really sold out his Jenadan bretherin two millenia ago? Had he identified with the aggressor to save himself and his family? And why were the books so important? Why did they cost the lives of his fellow Jenadans two thousand years ago? And why would it cost him HER life now?

Tyranisis stood firm in the arrangement. He demanded sacrifice and he would have it. Mike had no choice but to oblige. He edged the dagger on to Crystal's neck, fully realizing that he would be slashing her throat as soon as the first cut on the skin spilled the initial drops of blood.

Then, as in the story of Abraham central to all religions, perhaps even Tyranisis'. Cries of horror and agony poured out of the walls, especially the ones bearing the likenesses of the victims of the Holocaust two millenia ago. They pounded into Mike's mind like nails. The harder he tried to hold his hands over his ears, the louder the cries for help—and retribution. "I have to sacrifice the one for the many!" he kept screaming, hoping he would not have to follow through with the sacrifice of the one he valued most of all. "I have to sacrifice the one, this woman I love, for the many who are my Comrades!" Such was the bargain in the present, bringing back the deal remembered from the past. "Yes, I led the soldiers to the caves, allowed them to find you, and kill you, my Jenadan Brothers and Sisters." A tear of regret, shame and guilt came to his eyes. "I didn't know who and what they really were! I was told that we would all be spared if I cooperated with them. Tyranisis gave his word!"

Crystal could hear the voices from the wall as well, now. She had paid the dues and was entitled to verification. Many departed spirits wanted to her to know that this final retribution to those betrayed, and tricked into betraying, was for real.

As the voices got louder, Mike's chest pain got deeper, and more deadly. A sure fire heart attack that would put out his pilot light for good this time. She looked in her pocket for the nitro, but they were gone. Crumbled into dust by perhaps one of her falls, perhaps by the humidity, or perhaps by factors more metaphysical than 'real'. Then, as if saved from one fate and plunged into another, Mike felt strength going through his chest, confidence through his veins, and a dagger clenched in his right hand, again, prepared to follow through with the sacrifice, for the Right reason this time.

"I have to sacrifice the one for the many," he uttered again and again as a mantra to Crystal, the voices, and himself. Tryanisis would go away forever if he followed through with the arrangement.

Crystal closed her eyes, finding her mind and Soul prepared to meet her Maker in something that, in some strange, perhaps wonderous way, made sense. She always said that she was prepared to lay down her life for Mike, and by inference, she now was ready, and willing, to sacrifice herself for what he valued even more than his own life. "A deal, for...the books," she acknowledged.

"And so much more," Mike added. With that he lifted his arm up, letting it swing the dagger downward, into its designated target. It fell fast, hard and as planned.

"What the?" Crystal gasped as she noted a sheet of skin Mike had sliced out of his thigh, a belt-like slab of flesh he held proudly in his hand. "I gotta stop the bleeding!" she screamed, tearing her shirt off, wrapping it around the exposed muscle.

But Mike felt no pain. Not from his sliced leg, not from his infarcted heart, not from his tortured mind. He turned to Tyranisis, offering his own flesh as the sacrifice. "Here! It is from me. This is my offering and I am the sacrifice!" His declaration was final, defiant, and calm.

Tryanisis emerged from the wall in full animation and form, visible and feelable to both Crystal and Mike. As he edged his way toward them, he seemed to get bigger, denser and deadlier. All of his

features became more pronounced. His armor shined brightly in the light of the Jenadan lanterns, turned up by something in the small holes in the walls that fed them natural gas. Or perhaps the fuel for the re-lit torches that burned bright and proud was some man made chemical that allowed the Ancient scholars and writers in the underground caverns to work day and night for so many wonderous years. The details were familiar, yet blurred in Mike's very pre-occupied mind.

Tyrannis' shoulders bulged big, brawny and bombastically. His face was a dark hole, drawing you in when you looked into it. Even the bats hid from the darkness when he entered it, and eminated it.

Crystal feared for Mike's life, and her own. Mike feared that he would give in to fear itself, or reason. He offered the slab of his flesh to the animated tyrannt. And the means of delivery--assertive. Mike threw the slab of his own flesh into the black hole that he felt to be the Tyrant's mouth.

The 'meal' disappeared into the black face, but was not digested according to the way Tyrannis was used to. The Conquerer who ate the organs of his victims like candy upchucked 'Craven tar-tar rump roast' like it was a hariball of wool wrapped around a ball of sticky cow manure.

The sight of seeing the great Tyrannis barf up what he asked for pleased the spirits on the walls, but they dared not laugh, at least not loudly. And certainly not as loudly as Mike. For the first time in years, or perhaps his whole lifetime, the laughter came from his gut, his Spirit, and his courage.

"Mmmike," Crystal uttered, not understanding the beats nor the melody of this musical finale being written in the process of its final performance. "What is this?"

"Round one. Round two is coming up." He reached down to the dirt, at least a foot deep in soot, pulling out what looked to Crystal like a snake, then a rope, then a staff. Perhaps similar to what Moses had on Mount Sinai. Perhaps, she pondered, the staff that DID part the Red Sea.

The barfed partial human sacrifice offered, and rejected, Tyrannis prepared for the duel. Mike prepared Crystal for her part in it as the aroused beast with the shadow face approached her.

"Crystal. Tempus Fugit. You gotta do what you gotta do," Mike related.

"Which is what, goddam it!" she screamed, praying to God that she would finally get the final answer.

"The books, where we just came from. They're yours now." Mike kept Tyrannis at bay by slicing up bits of his arm, tossing them into his face, his David-like staff holding off the Goliath with a swinging action worthy of any Kung-Fu Martial Master in Ancient China, Japan or Korea.

"Where, how?" she shrieked, paralyzed by fear. Her answers were given by another earthquake, opening up a back door to the cavern bearing the chest of Sacred, and sacredly-irreverant books. And another two boxes next to it. The tunnel was just wide enough for a narrow-like-rail Arkansas bombshell, barely passable for a Manhattanite with a big ego, and prohibitive for a big and very tall Goliath deciding that he would WIN the battle with the David this time.

"Go!" Mike shouted. "Get them. Rinyard the Carpenter didn't bust his ass building that tunnel and the chest holding those manuscripts for nothing."

"But where?" Crystal pleaded. In rythym to the symphony being written, and performed, the mountain formed another tunnel opening to a bright light--the sun, outside, from the left side of the chamber.

"Tempus fugit--time flies!" Mike reminded Crystal as he wielded the staff, holding Tryannis at bay, but only marginally. Though Mike's staff whizzed by the tyrant with lightening speed, the lightening rod was made of wood gone soft over the millenia. Choppable by Tyrannis sword once he started to swing it in for the final kill. "Two more strokes and this deul is a done deal, babe," Mike noted confidently. "I'll be right behind ya."

"Mike! I..."

"Have to get out of here, now! Get the books. Then you can send someone to get me."

"Which is ME, NOW!"

Crystal defied Mike's orders, and whoever else was running this 'show'. She grabbed hold of a cavern lantern, feeling its handle to be firm, its tip hot. Certainly it would be of use in the wrestling match, and certainly she wouldn't let Mike kill the most horrible Mercenary in the Ancient world all by himself, so he could grab the glory later.

With a Confederate Rebel yelp remembered from her Great-Grandfather who lost his leg in the War of Northern Aggression, she lost her inhibitions, fear and doubts. The bats lost no time in checkmating that gesture, forming a wall between her and Mike, allowing her one way in, or out.

"It's unanimous, Crystal," he noted as the corner of his eye saw the light from the chamber with the books throbbed, the light from the Sun, and the lanterns around the Sacred Chests pulsating with light

in tune with her throbbing heart. "You get the books, I get the bad guy. You pick up the check when we rendezvous at Doubledays."

There was nothing left to say, or do. "I love you, Mike," her gesture of farewell, and greeting.

"Yeah, I know, I always did, and will," his reply as the wooden staff got whittled down to the length of an Arkansas toothpick, perhaps just enough edge on the sliced rod to be able to use it as a Bowie knife, to be delivered into the Goliath's chest.

Crystal lost no more time running to the chamber, collecting the books, making her getaway. Seeing that the prize was gone, Tyrannis lost no time in declaring his final sentence upon the upstart who dared to stand up to him. "Die, Michael Craven," Tyrannis roared from his mouth. "Die, Ironica."

It's "Ironical", Mike mused regarding the Ancient Jenadan name that sounded so familiar to his now open ears, and heart. And in the most boldest of gestures in the midst of danger and tragedy---humor.

Tyrannis's reply was unexpected. He laughed, joining in with the joke, then reminding Mike that he was maybe the butt of the very black humor. "It's 'ironical'" he repeated in a monstrous echo. "Yes, indeed, Ironical."

Tyrannis moved closer and closer to Mike, one slow step at a time, moving his sword aside, then to his waist, then dropping it on the ground in front of the Globetrotting Gladiator.

Everyone watched, and waited. The bats, the Jenadan Elders on the wall, and the Spirits of those who painted the likenesses of those great Masters and Mistresses. Spirits mummered loud enough for Mike's human ears to hear them. Both Realms would have to merge now, Living and Dead, Spirit and Form, Human and...Whatever.

Mike picked up Tyrannis' sword, feeling its handle hot from a distance, ice cold to the touch. Something in him was unable to hold onto it.

"Kill it if you have the balls to face me, and kill me," Tyrannis offered, and dared. The language was English, Greek, Hindi and Janadan, all at once. "Do it, if you..."

"Yes," Mike said, picking up the sword. "Yes, I will put you out of our misery."

"YOUR misery," the claim, and promise.

Tyrannis's laugh stopped. So did the rooting and geering from the metaphysical Greek, and Jenadan chorus. Mike raised the sword, prepared for final retribution. "So what you did here will never happen again. Die, Tyrannis. Die."

"Yes, I think we will," the pledge, and promise from the blackened hole below the Goliath's helmet visor, above his spiked chest shield, and between the massively muscled arms stained with blood of every one of his millions of victims. "I think we will both be satisfied, very soon..."

With that, Mike braced himself, wielding the tyrant's sword with both hands and finally saw into the hole. A nose emerged, then lips, then cheeks, then, most frighteningly, the eyes. They were familiar and terrifying. It was face Mike Craven had seen every day of his earthly life. A face that was he saw in every detail every day of his life, every time he looked into a mirror.

"No!" Mike screamed, noting his face as Tyrannis'. Then his body as the Tyrant's. Wounded by every blow the Mike Craven, the 'human' who thought he was a Jenadan, delivered to him. This time, feeling the pain of the blows, the aching of the bruises, the shame of being discovered, and the worst agony of them all. Guilt!

"Now you can feel what you did!" the voices of the Jenadan spirits and ghosts echoed into 'Mike's' head. "Now you feel the pain of remorse, the agony of guilt, and the experience of..."

"No!" Mike screamed, turning around to the paintings on the wall. The eyes of those he thought were departed Comrades were now seen by him to be victims, now turned into victors. Finally able to make their Executioner feel the pain he had inflicted upon them.

"Die, Tyrannis. Die!" they all commanded, gently, as Mike tried to avert the eyes of the stares, the condemnation, and the pity an Enlightened former victim has on a former victor who is about to die.

"No!" Mike screamed from the body of the person who he had been two millenian ago. Everywhere he looked, mirrors on the walls shot back his reflection, in the clearest of daylight. His face, as Tyrannis, had been so handsome, so strong, and so hidden. "I didn't know!" he screamed, every ounce of pain he inflicted in the past as Tyrannis coming back at him in pounds, and tons. And according to Natural Law.

The bats moved in for the final kill, swirling around his feet, biting their way up to his shaking knees, wet ground, pounding chest then terrified eyes, saving the best treat for last.

For Mike, the world went black. For Tyrannisis, it went finished, or perhaps over to some other life form from which karmic payback could be negotiated. For the Janadans, it went 'final', the mountain giving way to another quake that collapsed the caverns upon themselves, the dust filling in the holes so tight that only an enlightened worm could find his way back to the Sacred Caves. But, perhaps such a worm would, or could, some day. But not for a long, long time.

In the meantime, there was still unfinished business to be done.

## CHAPTER 15

Crystal could never sit still, as a child of three or thirty. She also considered patience a vice, not a virtue. But no matter how hard her toe tapped, or how many times her neck turned, or how intensely her hands fidgeted around the rosary beads in her pocket, it was being watched by someone outside the room, she felt. In the arena she was playing now, stillness was required. As was 'stiff' wardrobe, skirts rather than trousers, and certainly trousers rather than jeans, and underneath whatever---nylons, preferably with deep, sombre hues.

Everywhere around her in the office was furniture of aged oak, chosen by old money families, paid for with new deals that never made it to the Wall Street Journal, or The Post. But when you sat in the main office of the main editor of the main, mainstream MacMurphy Publishing Company, there were rules. First, don't get overly enthusiastic. Rich people are most offended by that, she remembered Mike telling her. The second point, she couldn't remember. Perhaps it was because she couldn't forget how Mike had started his quest to wherever he was now. Or how he sacrificed his own life for hers, and the books entrusted to her. Or how Kabrin and Achmed carried out their final Mission, delivering her safely across the Turkstan border and onto a plane bound for Ankara as they absorbed the bullets from the xenophobic Militia meant for her. Or how she was now the ambassador for a Civilization that defined civilization, or at least tried to. The Jenadan Texts were about so much. Science as well as Spirituality, with technical clues to connect those two Callings. One of them included a way to speak to the 'dead', in a very Alive way in service of the living. But what to say, and to whom?

As for "Mister B. Oliver MacMurphy, Jr.," that was another story. He sauntered in with the Xeroxed copies of the texts Crystal had prepared for him, translated into the best English possible with the best translators hireable with her life insurance policy pay-off. He sat down, glancing over them for a final perusal, keeping his judgement silent.

"Ya'al like 'em or not?" Crystal asked with an Arkansas drawl and Brooklyn hutspace.

"They are...quite interesting," the reply in American business English, more condescendingly English than American. "We just don't know what to do with them, Ms. Thomas."

"Craven," Crystal interjected. "Mrs. Micheal Craven. And..."

"THE Michael Craven?" 'Oli' MacMurphy the Second inquired, stinking of Stanford Connecticut in his William F Buckley, Jr. mannerisms.

"Yeah. He wanted to be sure that..."

"---How is the old boy?"

"Old, and hardly a boy no more. Dead, sort of." Crystal dropped her head, pulling back her hair, remembering that Mike liked it, keeping it long as a banner in his honor.

"Interesting," MacMurphy continued. "He's hiding then?"

"Hope so," her reply. "Or maybe he got out through another hole in the mountain. Became a priest, a hermit. Or," she chuckled. "The goddamnest country singer East of New Delhi."

"And he gave you these manuscripts?"

"Yeah."

"Which you made from originals?"

"Yeah."

"Which are where?"

Crystal pondered the issue. She was just the messenger for the Word, and Words, not the Executor of the Will of those who wrote them. Yet, she had to ask the question. "What can you do with them?"

"Once we establish the line of ownership, and royalty payments, and research our demographic and profit margin given the current literary marketplace, and after editing it appropriately to mass market taste---"

“They’ll be list priced fer 30 bucks each. Even though they was meant fer folks workin’ penny to penny, day by day, moment ta moment.”

“I don’t quite get your meaning?” MacMurphy’s inquiry. He leaned back on his very comfortable desk lounge, watching Crystal brace against the hard-backed armchair intentionally 3 inches lower in the seat than his.

“But I think I get my own meaning, now, and lots of others.” With that declaration of awareness and independence, she got up, shook MacMurphy’s cold, clammy, limp hand with a firm grip, picked up the manuscripts, and left. She pondered on the wisdom of it all, and the practicality.

The walk down the hall was lonely, and scary. Where to go next? What to do with the most profound books the world seen since...since a long, long time ago? And the ‘who’ to deal with in a ‘who’s who’ world?

Crystal felt the strangest tune going through her head. “My Girl”. That primal melody with a rhythm that fit the human heart beat. Systolic boom, diastolic bam, and a silent bang of the third heart sound the drummer never inserted, leaving it to the listener alone to fill in the gaps.

The sky outside was urban-grey, the weather city-cold. How appropriate the words, “I got sunshine, on a cloudy day. And when it’s cold outside, I got the month of May.” She sang them, felt them and let them carry her to the A train to Port Authority Bus terminal, picking up, en route, the priceless box of books from a dollar-fifty locker. Then, a book on how to publish your books, insultingly overpriced, at Doubleday.

As for the ‘where’ through which the ‘how’ would be made possible, it was whispered behind her. “Fort Smith, Arkansas,” the voice echoed. She turned around, the man in the red tie, white shirt and blue suit continuing. “A real estate dealers dream, if he dares to dream big,” he continued in Yuppie-esce tones that read ‘on the way to conquer another small town and merge it with Cosmopolitan America, whether the town or America likes it or not.’

The song by Sinatra said that if you can make it in NY you can make it anywhere. But the tune inside Crystal said ‘Home, on the Range,’ or what was left of it. What better place to start a new printing company for a new consciousness than a backwater town about to get Aspenized.

The ‘when’ became very, very clear. “Now!”

It was said in Ancient Times that the fate of the world was on the back of a camel carrying preciously-original scrolls across a desert littered with illiterate bandits. It would be said that in Modern Times, the hopes for a brighter, kinder and more Alive world shook on the overhead compartment of a Greyhound bus. By a widowed Country Girl who had become more woman than she ever bargained for. Holding a torch for a husband who was saint, sinner and perhaps everything else in between.

Such was confirmation of the baggage handler in Cleveland who smiled as the feisty, beautiful blonde ‘bitch’ refused to let him throw her box in the luggage compartment. His dance would be silent, but not for long.