

Daughter Dearest
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Rough draft

Chapter 1

The room was dark, but only if you looked at the lights. There were 18 of them, by design. Each stood up on their own, reflecting hues of yellow, white and pink under them. Soft colors that felt gentle, innocent and pure. Very non-offensive and kind. The only thing brighter than the light each of them gave out was the Silence, which Ashley could see as well as feel, and hear of course. The evolving symphony she heard within the Silence was not what the ears heard, at least what was probably heard by all the ‘normal’ ears around her, the melody emanating from their ‘normal’ mouths in ‘normal’ tones that were, surprisingly, not that off key. Some even added harmony to the melody, the high pitched female voices mostly. But there was one singer who Ashley heard, and felt, more than all the others, not because of how loud she was but because of the intensity she put into the notes, and the sincerity of her music.

“Happy Birthday to you,” Elena kept singing as the birthday candles burnt down to the cake frosting, their wax flowing onto the smooth, white surface, laying a sinister-looking spider-like web around the flowers that became a happy jellyfish as its hard tentacles became softer and more free flowing. Ashley’s music mind started converting the Beethoven String quartet which had been going through her chronically-over-active multi-modality brain into something a little bit down-home Bluegrass, a tad traditional Turkish, and a lot that defied definitions of marketable categories and established genres. The left side of her head imagined the violin doing the solo, the right side filling in the harmonies in thirds and fifths with a viola and base, a mandolin and banjo converting both into a fugue that defined and defied the intrinsic rhythm of the piece as it kept changing, becoming something bigger than itself somehow. But the time clock was ticking on the composition being written within her head, as well for the orchestra which were the people around her, most particularly Elena.

Ashley somehow saw her mother as younger, perhaps on her eighteenth birthday. Piecing together the old pictures on the wall of Elena twenty years earlier, with the even brighter images Ashley had in her head, the new initiate into the ‘adulthood club’ of humanoids imagined what 18 felt like for her mother. How Elena had looked with hair that was naturally auburn rather than dyed brown, flowing down her back in reckless abandonment rather than trimmed neatly just shy of the shoulders. What kind of music had flowed out of her mother’s fingers when she let them become one with the piano keys, her relationship with the keyboard now being far more strained, rigid and ‘correct’ rather than spontaneous. The joy young Elena must have felt, or said she felt anyway, when being the center of attention and vitality of the orchestra. And the Passion Mom once felt for the man who took her away from all the strains of having to earn a living as a struggling Classical pianist in a world that paid big bucks for Rock guitarists, providing her with a home that she owned rather than a tenement she struggled to pay the rent on each month. With enough food in the pantry to keep her body fed, as long as she cooked it, and put on as many pounds each year as the Prince Charming who blimped out into Humpty Dumpty.

No matter how hard Elena dieted, she could never fit into the size 6 ‘Elvira’ dress that she had worn on her concert tours twenty years earlier. The tastefully-tantalizing gown remained two sizes too large for Ashley no matter how much of Mom’s cooking she wolfed down. Yet, Elena

insisted that Ashley wear the slink, subtly-glowing black garment for her birthday. Or maybe the request came from the man next to her, Steve. Ashley's biological Dad, according to what Mom said anyway, who bore no resemblance to her or any of her older sisters or yet again absent brother.

Dad sang happy birthday with Mom with his strong arm around her fragile shoulders, and all the invited guests said they were the perfect couple. But Ashley knew differently, as did Mom, Dad and the rest of the children they spawned who chose to leave home as soon as they could after 18 candles burning candles on a wax-covered cake was placed in front of them. Ashley didn't know if she loved her mother, or pitied her. But both emotions fit into her life agenda all too well. She would stay at home for as long as life would let her, and remain Mom's best friend. Daddy's little girl as well, as long as things between them didn't get too 'personal' again. The resolution of those 'personal' issues was as they should have been, by moral and legal law. As long as Elena didn't remarry, her needs, and some of her wants, would still be paid by Steve. Yet Steve was a good father when he wasn't drinking. Still, Mom didn't trust him. In her few realistic moments, the ever-idealistic Ashley knew that he was a walking time bomb as well.

Finally, the chorus singers completed their 'Birthday Oratorio'. "Make a wish." Auntie Racheal, a slender, very aged, five-foot-nothing hippie with long, thinning white hair behind the third row of guests. Ashley took the opportunity to look at those who had schlepped from far places and cancelled other appointment from closer locations to be with her on this occasion. Nine in ten of their faces had deep wrinkles in them, some acquired by hard living, some by long years of wrong living. Some were defeated, some tired, some just...old. Yes, 'old', a state of Soul which Ashley felt that she was born into, as she yet again felt to be 18, 8 and 80 all at the same time.

"Make a wish," bubba-bellied dutch Uncle 'Blacky' commanded in a bear-like, Texan drawl, in a gruff, baritone voice that matched his over-muscular body sharply-sloped forehead. "And make it a big one. Good Lord knows ya only turn 18 once."

Ashley's inner ear could hear Auntie Racheal say 'Good LORDESS knows, unless you count all of your other lifetimes when you survived till you hit 20' with her rolling eyes. But this event wasn't about Auntie Rachel and Uncle Blacky's ongoing socio-religious political feuds, nor the loving and lust-infested way they looked at each other when having heated philosophical arguments. No, it was about family, and preserving it.

Ashley let her eyes rest firmly into Mom's forced smile, making it become big and full again. She looked at Steve, making him feel like 'Dad' again, like it was in the good old days. Those good old days that would return if she wished hard enough, took a deep enough breath, and blew out all of the candles.

Ashley's size B minus breasts and Twiggly-like body around them were built to compose operas and play musical accompaniment rather than to sing them. She ran out of wind by candle 10. Joining in to blow out the rest of them was Mom, Auntie Rachael and a Big Sky wind from the oversized pipes of Uncle Blacky. Steve remained as a smiling observer, a good provider, a solid husband and a loyal American who was to be 'deployed' to the Middle East next week in the service of his country. Clad in his dress uniform, the shiny medals on his chest covering his untrustworthy heart, he clapped the group into exuberant applause.

Ashley looked at her mother, conveying with no words what her 'once in a lifetime' eighteen birthday wish was. 'I don't think so,' Elena said back to her with a sorrowful glance, as she noted Steve helping himself to a hefty glance of a perhaps 18 year old guest whose anatomy resembled

her own at that tender, optimistic and untested age. ‘At least Dad would fall off the wagon in someone else’s house’, Mom seemed to say to Ashley. “I love you,” Elena said with her mouth as she gave Ashley the first ‘birthday hug’, a gesture conferred with more intensity than felt comfortable. But, as Ashley’s real fathers, Ludwig von Beethoven and Frank Zappa, said again and again with each note they wrote that continued to inspire Ashley, “Life is not supposed to be comfortable. It gets in the way of Bliss, Passion and, like, being Alive, big A, ya know.”

Yes, Ashley knew. As did Mom. And even Steve. It was the way things were, which would change very rapidly, very soon.

Chapter 2

Elena looked at herself in her bedroom mirror in the cold light of day just after a steamy August sunrise and yet another night of uneasy, but welcomed, dreaming and saw something...different. A long life with nothing in store except more of the same, and worse, to be doing it alone. Yet she was still young...in her heart, which was bitter. Her brown hair seemed blonder to her somehow. Her green eyes more blue, and the lashes longer than her natural ones. Yes, she could grow ‘down’ or ‘back’ to something that she produced.

“Yes, Ashley,” she said to the picture next to the mirror, which she preferred to look at more than herself on most mornings as the years slipped away. “We could be sisters. We SHOULD be sisters. We WILL be sisters! You and me are more like each other than any of my other children and, besides it will be...fun.”

Elena made the pledge to God, who maybe was listening. To Steve, who was absent in more ways than one, though his body still lingered in the next room, while gathering his stuff. And to herself. Yes, it would be a new life for both herself and Ashley, starting with the next concert date.

Elena’s routine as an early riser in a family of late sleepers was to go to the kitchen, read yesterday’s newspaper, and over a cup of privately-enjoyed coffee and accompanying muffin to make her ‘to do’ list for the day. Most of the items dealt with tangible things, and around food. \Food procurement, food preparation, cleaning areas where food was prepared and eaten. And dealing with the ‘collateral damage’ of such, that size 14 body which greeted her every morning no matter how hard she tried to keep reflective surfaces out of the kitchen. This morning, the muffin in her hand seemed bigger than normal, its odor more rancid than sweet. Its touch like broken glass rather than smoothly-delicious on her fingers. “Yes, you want me” the blueberry-honey muffin said to her. “I will make a bet with you. I bet that you can’t resist eating me for...let’s see. Ten minutes?”

Elena vowed that Maria the Muffin would not win today. It would be a fight to the finish. Winner take all this time. So, Elena left the kitchen and went into the living room. Another adversary awaited her there. The Steinway piano which she received from Steve on her tenth anniversary, picked by him because it was a good looking piece of furniture. The stool in front of it still remained as polished as the day it was brought into the house, despite the various items that Elena’s piano students had tried to stain it with. She had taken in a few students to keep in practice, none of whom really succeeded. Perhaps part of a sinister plan which Elena was more involved with than she could imagine. Indeed, imagination was all Elena had these days. Above the Steinway, in her mind’s eye, was yet another poster from Carnegie Hall for a soon to happen sold out concert.

“Beethoven and Bluegrass,” the title on it. As scored, probably another PDQ Bach remake. Put a little banjo in with the Moonlight Sonata and get the “Moonshine Contata”. But it would be not only Earth shattering by Universe defining. Yes, Elena would play with her daughter. Ashley on the violin, the fiddle during the country parts. And Elena on the piano. A perfect duet except that Ashley didn’t know about the recasting of the roles, and that the piano was still Maria’s enemy.

She glanced at the Steinway in the living room, and heard it laugh at her through the dense silence which was now her life. Its reflection of the lights outside the window and of Elena when she went passed it painted a cartoon of a has been that never was. The worse kind of musician...one who played the notes but never the music. This time she snarled at the polished wood. Growled at the off white keys which absorbed all of the light so completely, and on its their own terms. Let her stare be absorbed into the black keys which seemed more to be holes in the board rather than elevations. “What shall I prove to you today?” she boasted as she pulled out the recital book which with the yellow pages that had once been white. “Pathotique” she informed her adversary, “Not pathetic,” she continued as she screamed her heart out at the 88s. “Not anymore.” With that, Maria pounded out the piece which had been her trademark as a kid, her un-climable Everest as an adult, mostly because her feet never left the mountain, nor felt its summit.

The first notes rang true, and even melodic. All done correctly, according to memory and current perception. The next two pages felt...odd. She had memorized what was on them and felt the need to go beyond it. To teach a lesson to Beethoven, or show him that she had gone beyond him. And could be competitive with her real standard, and mentor, and friend, Ashley. Somehow Ashley was able to adopt the piano piece to a the violin, which was physically able to only play two notes at a time. Yet, Ashley could make the audience feel like she was playing 4, or more, with a voice that was both sacred and irreverent. Funny as well. How Elena envied Ashley’s ability to play ‘funny’ and old Ludwig’s ability to write it. So, Elena decided to make her own jokes. She forced herself into them, then emerged...satisfied, for now...Maybe. Of course the audience in front of her agreed, giving her a standing ovation. On not only two, but four legs.

Scout seemed to like Elena’s performance. He could have remained in the den and watched other canines on Animal Planet’s Favorite Dog Days Videos, but he decided to come listen to, hear and perhaps connect to her. “Whose dog are you?” she smiled at him.

“Whoever feeds me,” the logical part of her brain translated cruelly from canine to human-speech. “You, the most brilliant genius about to be reborn within your daughter’s world,” the most sensitive, vulnerable and reborn part of her Soul continued. It was enough, for now.

Elena could hear the clock on the wall ticking louder than any metronome she inflicted on herself or her piano students. Its minute hand read 8:16, eight minutes from her last encounter with Maria Muffin. “No!” she blasted out at herself. “I’m not going to give in this time!” She sat at the piano, trying to see if her fingers had any more music, or even notes left in them. But they froze, as did her imagination. The poster on the wall disappeared, fading into the off white paint on the well-insulated wall. Elena’s mouth watered, then became dry, her stomach gurgling with the most supreme dissatisfaction.

The sun moved up in the sky, illuminating Maria Muffin. “Yes, you can play better if you’re happy. Like Mozart. He was happy. You want to be happy. We want to be happy. Come be happy with me.”

Maria Muffin's voice was as demonic as ever. Slowly it broke down Elena's will, then her perceptions. The first mirror on the way in to the kitchen showed her to be a size 12, the next a 10, the reflection of her face in the microwave saying "accept your limitations, you will be much happier that way."

Maria Muffin won this round, again. But not all of it. Scout got more than just crumbs from the muffin. He got a whole quarter of it. Then, the sun decided to have its say on it. Elena saw herself eating the breakfast 'nutrient' in a mirror that told the truth. Within it, a size 14 woman older than her age with both feet in the grave, or worse, the rocking chair. Somehow Elena would have to beat Maria Muffin, and her fellow demonesses. As a start to it, she put her finger down her throat, tickled the back of her tongue, and let loose with a bolus of half-digested muffin that seemed disgusting to the eye. Even Scout wouldn't eat it. But rather than save it, Elena did something more appropriate. Feeling partially purged of her sins, she retrieved a cellophane baggie from the top draw of the counter, blew it open, and put Maria Muffin's sister, who was waiting in the wings for another match, into it. She taped it on the wall next to a picture of her daughter Ashley in the prime of her now 18th year, herself in her dwindled glory of 39 years, and a photo of someone more feared, hated and connected to than even Maria Muffin. "Mom," she said white-haired woman whose 'muscular' physique made her look more like a man below the neck. "I will not become you," she vowed. "If growing up like you means growing up, I'm doing something else."

"What" and "Who" that something else was, this was a TBA item, to now be put on every days' 'to do lists'. But she knew such a list would require a different kind of paper, pen and even language to write the 'must do' memos in.

Chapter 3

Harry Pappon watched the event from his seat in the auditorium, unfettered by the opinions of anyone else around him. Except of course Irving Horowitz, who was his boss, servant and collaborator, depending on what the opinions of the crowd were. Meanwhile, the performers on stage played on, more to themselves than anyone else watching, a fact that interested Irving and shocked Harry.

"Ya hear them clappin', Harr?" Irving commented, his stubbly white 'beard' reeking of cigar smoke, the bald spot under his combed over hair shining brightly. "I hear them clappin', Harr," he continued looking at the seats around them. "I see them payin' fifty bucks a ticket next time, and tellin' their friends that their goddamn idiots if they don't fork up eight a piece, don't ya think so, Harr?"

Harry hated being called Harr, but knew that telling Irving such would fall on ears that were as deaf to being requested to do ANYthing as they were to real music. But Irving knew people, and knew how to fill a room with those who would pay big bucks. And his imaginations always came true. No reason why they wouldn't this time as well, Harry thought as he looked at the auditorium seats around him, all empty. As empty as his pockets, until Irving came along. How Irving got his money when he opened up shop as a music promoter was a mystery that no one dared ask him about, no one who lived to tell the tale anyway. How he made it grow, that was easy.

“It’s about instinct, Harr,” the 60 going on 16 year old Yiddish entrapanour informed the 25 going on a hundred Harry. “Ya gotta feel the money comin’ at ya and it comes. Believe that is will happen and it will happen.”

“And if believing doesn’t make it happen, Irv?” Harry asked, feeling ten dollar an hour sweat pouring out of his flesh, meeting the five hundred dollar suit he wore in an attempt to hide it.

“That’s easy, Harr,” Irving replied with a Santa smile that matched his beer drinking slob belly. “Ya sue the guy who made ya believe in the brilliant idea that turned into shit, and make his life shit. Pay forward the blame to some other schmuck while you pay forward whatever money falls out of the cookie jars to yourself,” he continued leaning forward. His smile turned into a frown, then a growl, delivered softly. “And if you want any more advise from me or backing for one of your shows, you won’t call me Irv. Otherwise you’ll be bussing tables at your brother’s restaurant and licking the toilets with your tongue at your father’s pizza joint. Got that, Harr? Katalavenis?”

“Ne,” Harry conceded, in Greek. “I mean malista,” he continued, realizing that Irving most probably did know the difference between saying ‘yes’ to a man in charge of you or a man who you were in charge of.

“And that name of yours, Pappon. Why the fuck did you change it?” Irving pressed. “I know it ain’t ‘cause Pappandreu is the Prime Minister of Greece whose taking the fall for Greece’s economy being in the crapper.”

‘Harr’ kept his mouth shut, but knew that Irving would open his up. Maybe he suggest that the Pappandreu dinners and pizzerias were as corrupt as any Greek Cabinet in the old country. Or that the real reasons for hiring those blonde waitresses was because of what they served up in the kitchen to the owners of the restaurant after closing time. Or that Harry’s ‘money problems’ regarding getting a restaurant of his own were far more complicated than his brother or father let on.

The performers on stage made Harry sweat even more. Maybe it was something about their music, or their presence, or the fact that they were playing for him while never seeing his face, at least not clearly. Or maybe that ‘medical issue’ Harry had which he never shared with Irving, but the old fart Jew undoubtedly knew about.

“I’m addicted to making money, you’re addicted to medicating yourself,” Irving said, anticipating Harry’s unasked question. “And you’re also addicted to things beautiful, and, my friend, that music up there is beautiful,” Irving said.

Putting all of the formulas about what made a new composition a top hit and a new performer an instant star seemed to fit the mother daughter duo on stage. The daughter was dressed in rags but shined like a Barbie. The mother was a cow, though she tried to dress herself up like a prime fillie and under the sheets could be any creature in the jungle. But both had possibilities. The kind that Harry would not share with Irving, or anyone else.

“Elena and Ashley, or Ashley and Elena?” Irving asked regarding the names to put on the playbill.

“The Dimitropoluses,” Harry suggested, thinking about the ethnic possibilities and marketability opportunities that perfectly matched the cow’s maiden name.

“Dimitropoli,” Irving ‘suggested’. “It sounds more musical. Easier to say.”

“And easier to get funding for, you old, horny goat,” Harry thought as he saw Irving eye the daughter in the mother/daughter team as they played more classical ‘weird’ that didn’t fit into any box.

Harry felt the ticking of his \$300 watch go louder and louder, drowning out the violin and piano duet, the violin carrying most of the music and giving it whatever life it had, and according to Irving’s head nod, there was something in the music worth marketing. Still, Harry had to ask two questions of ‘Uncle Irving’.

“Why are we listening to this beauty and beast team?” he asked regarding the ‘Judds gone Classical’ mother and daughter team who were auditioning for a producer who only did pop.

“Because the cow paid us good money to take her and her daughter under special consideration,” Irving explained, pointing the ‘cow’s’ married name.

“Giavonni...Steve Giavanni?” Harry gasped.

“The gonif who steals from the crooks, the suits and almost me,” Irving said with pride. “And if his now ex-wife stole from him, all the better to dig the knife further into his balls by making his no talent wife a star, and let her daughter think that the world gives a shit about her music. Which doesn’t suck, but sure as shit isn’t a top seller.”

“What about the crowd?” Harry asked. “If they hate what they hear---”

“---They’ll listen with their eyes, Harr,” Irving replied, helping himself to a healthy dose of the beauty’s anatomy as he motioned for the lighting technician to lower the spotlight from her veiled face to her very suggested chest and the ample breasts attached to them. “We concentrate on what the beer drinking slobs who think they’re champagne sipping schaalars see, not what they hear. Capiche?”

Harry again wondered why Irving auditioned his music groups like this. The veils over the face he understood. It made the listener judge the music rather than be biased by the mouths from which it came. Such made sense. As did, finally, the logic of sticking it to Steve Giavanni by making his no-talent divorced wife and estranged daughter a star. Eventually, the crowd would see through the real intentions of the endeavor, eventually. But in the meantime, Harry would get a big ‘tip’ from Irving for pushing ‘The Dimitropoli’ to potential stardom while Irving pushed Steve Giavonni down the totem pole, and all on ‘the cow’s’ divorce money. A perfect plan, as long as you didn’t have to look into the face of the cow, or her prize filly.

CHAPTER 4

“I didn’t think that we were, like, so good, ya know?” Ashley observed herself relating to her Mom when the contract was delivered to the door, by special courier. “The note here says our faces made the music shine, but we had our backs to the theatre director, and the lights were on the instruments, not us.’

“Or parts of us that a man is more interested in than the face,” Elena replied in a maternal tone that was reassuring, and assertive. That mode of speaking which Ashley heard when her mother gave her those ‘talks’ about female matters that men were not supposed to know about, particularly Steve, who she painfully called ‘Dad’ when social protocol or domestic tranquility required it.

Steve was officially out of the house now, everything that he had bought or enjoyed laying out in the yard with discounted prices for the garage sale, something very rarely done in the kind of neighborhood Ashley grew up in. What remained afterwards, Mom said would go to the Good Will store. After it had been exorcised from Steve’s evil spirits, of course. None of the objects displayed in the front yard for the curious, eye-rolling neighbors were of interest or relevance to Ashley, except one. Her eye caught hold of it as a potential customer picked it up, checked his wallet for small bills, and forked it out to her mother.

“Wait!” Ashley insisted. “That leather fringed coat is a classic! No one makes them anymore, and I always liked the way it fit.”

“Around your bulimic body?” Elena said regarding the size 44 dark brown Daniel Boone special.

“No, around yours,” Ashley insisted. “I remember when Dad put it around you that night after you came to see me play Chopin in the park. My fingers were cold, and the only way I could keep them warm was to play faster. But seeing you I that coat made me feel, ya know,” she smiled.

“Yes, I do,” Elena replied with a downward glance, a heartfelt tear in her eyes.

“It still fits you,” Ashley said. “Without the man that it came with.”

“And without the body that he was responsible for,” Elena grunted. “And that you were partly responsible for when I gained all that weight after you were born. But I forgive you for that. You didn’t know what you were doing. You were just, being born.”

“We’re both being born, again,” Ashley said, noticing Elena looking in a mirror. Then throwing the coat that fit her rotund body all too well into the arms of the garage sale customer, insisting that the price was now reduced to nothing. Then insisting that the over-dressed, bargain-seeking buyer take with her all of the kitchen appliances in the yard, particularly the muffin pans. Then looking into the mirror and asserting to herself, “we’re going to be changing all of this mass into--hmmm.”

“Energy?” Ashley offered, having an Einstein moment.

Elena didn’t understand the humanity nor wisdom behind the mass converted to energy comment. Like so much Ashley intuited and discovered, it went over Elena’s head, the ghosts of so much of the past lingering around it. Ashley asked the ghosts to leave again, but they remained, hiding their identity as usual. Defying her to convert them to angels, if she dared. Ashley silently accepted the challenge with the same tenacity with which Mom took on the ‘no more size 14 anything’ pledge which she meant this time.

CHAPTER 5

“I know it was not my idea, but we need the money,” Elena blasted out at Ashley as she remained in the bathroom. “I don’t like these new outfits anymore than you do but it that’s what the crowd is paying for, then that’s what we have to give them.”

Ashley remained on the other side of the door. Why she did, Elena didn’t know. After all, she had less to hide, and less was very much more. Elena looked again at the Western Cowgirl outfits sent by Pappon Productions which wrapped her waist, strangling it. There was more fringe than clothing on it, and she wondered if it was a horrible joke, played by Steve perhaps to remind her of that magical night when she wore his large leather fringed coat over her then small and shapely body. Of course that carrier of her tired mind and burnt out soul was bigger now, but it was on the way down. Her stomach grumbled, wanting to be filled by Maria Muffin, or perhaps even another diet cuisine lasagna. The expensive kind that had less calories for more dollars to pay at the till. But Elena resisted the urge, yet again, drinking another glass of water from the tap in the kitchen while she waited for Ashley to emerge from the bathroom in her cowgirl outfit as the one assigned to her seemed to somehow fit. Elena had, out of anger, desperation or sheer effort, dropped two dress sizes in as many weeks, with still two more to go. Such was both overdue, wanted and necessary.

Elena looked at the contract from the producers who kept their faces in the shadows and smelled it. The paper seemed real. The ink reeked of official. To be fair, the check for the first installment of services to be rendered did clear. And thankfully that it did. Steve’s lawyer decided to freeze most of Elena and Ashley’s assets, claiming most of them as his own. As for the ring he gave her, worth at least \$60k, its value was nothing now, as he claimed it as his own. The Cops were good enough to not arrest her for trying to hock it, for now anyway.

The clock on the wall ticked louder and louder, echoing memories of the metronome that Elena remembered from the days she learned how to play the piano, then the times she forced knowledge of such upon students who wished they were doing something else. How SHE wished she had been doing something else...for the last 20 years. Now, with economic concerns being more of a crisis, the challenge and opportunity to move upward merged into the same entity. And that entity was still behind the door of the bathroom, the instrument to make everything happen outside.

Elena picked up Ashley’s violin and plucked it, a solemn death dirge emanating from its strings off key just enough to make it harrowing. “Come on, Ashley. Come out here, now, or Mister Violin becomes firewood.” Such a threat worked before when Ashley was un-cooperative, and much younger.

This time Ashley answered with something Elena in ways that she never had. “Fuck off! And tell this promoter to fuck off!” she grunted.

It was an accomplishment of sorts, to Elena. It was the first time that Ashley had used the F word. All of her other children said the F word, and the C word, and the MF word to excess. Ashley’s problems were...different. She was the kind of daughter that you had to FORCE to stay out late rather than demand to come home by curfew. But Ashley’s silent conversion after she finally mouthing off had worse timing than Elena’s most tone deaf music student.

“We need the money, and you need the exposure, Ashley,” Elena reminded her daughter with affections mixed with the kind of desperation that she was becoming unable to handle.

“Exposure is right,” Ashley replied. “Look at this!”

Ashley finally opened the door, presenting to Elena the view of a classical music performer that Beethoven, Mozart or even Frank Zappa never experienced, but sometimes wrote about.

“I look like a fucking whore,” Ashley said, her arms and legs pulled inward, trying to hide her body behind the Wild Wild West outfit which featured clothing that was more see-through than covering. “I can’t play the violin like this!” she said.

“Even if the top music writer for the New York Times will be watching you, and listening to the music?” Elena said. “I personally called him, you know. And you know how many times you tried to get him to come to one of your concerts,” she continued. “And one of mine,” she continued, with downward turned eyes.

“We did get picked to play at the Coliseum over a hundred other groups,” Ashley conceded. “Because of our music.”

“Yes, we did,” Elena replied, knowing there were over a hundred lies within that statement. She hugged Ashley, hoping that the good intentions would speak through her body, clouding out all of the deceptions, most importantly the one that she had bought the producer’s favor with money, and perhaps other things that Irving Horowitz wanted but never stated in words. Elena knew she was a pawn, but one that would win in the chess game between the ‘men’, and take the spoils that were left after it was over for the women.

Ashley’s anger at the ‘Bach in Barbie Bikini’ outfit turned into pity for her mother, or maybe compassion. Elena would take either one. Memories of all of those performances the forty going on four hundred, or fourteen, gave in the past where she played well and no one came, and those where she played poorly and everyone came, materialized in Elena’s mind. A mind which saw now her last opportunity to make something of herself as a musician, a woman and perhaps a mother, if her daughter would be compliant with the plan incubating in Elena’s head. A plan which was still in the works, going to places darker than any shadow that would be on stage, or the back alleys behind the auditorium. Still, it was the only way back to the Light.

Chapter 6

Harry delayed the performance as long as possible, Elena having put it off with one excuse after another. Her first was that there were copyright problems with the songs to be performed. Her second was that she had a touch of the flu. Her third was that her daughter was ‘touched’ by a malady of the head, initiated by a fuck-head snakehead dope dealer who was running a cult that made her sick in the head.

But it was the body under the head which worried Harry as he saw the filly violin player come on stage, looking like she had been at the feed bin a bit too long by the way she seemed to be carrying, or perhaps padding, the sexy outfit he had provided for her. And there was a glazed over look in her eyes. “She just had the munchies,” he thought as the light shone on her, the face of the now unveiled ‘Arabian Greeks’ still suggesting enough beauty to make the event eventful. But, balancing the act out was the mother, who seemed to have lost weight, and whose hair was a bit longer than he imagined, from a distance anyway. A lot longer when she sat at the piano and let it fly atop her shoulder, then down her back. It was blonder than he remembered it, and it seemed that mother and daughter were more like sisters. Equally appealing or repelling to the eye, but it was about the music this evening. At least that’s what the bill was supposed to be about.

As for the music, it was musac from Mom at the piano. Standard crap that could have come from any copy-tune machine. Mozart, sort of, mixed in with a beat that the crowd could dance to, if it wanted to. Standard crap that moved Harry as much or as little as anything else he heard with notes in it. He was indeed dead to the music, as it was the music of the applause and the crowd that moved him. As a promoter and producer, that was his canvas. A dirty job but someone had to do it.

As for the crowd, it wasn't exactly a rave, and the head bobbing was occasional, and controlled. Some foot tapping. A few swaying of heads. Many faces slumbering, like all high brow concerts. Not a sold out crowd, or one sold into thinking or feeling with one brain, but they weren't leaving the room either. And with what they paid at the door, it wasn't a loss. But there was winner in it all. An angelic figure finally emerged on the stage through Ashley's body and voice by the fourth musical selection. It gave the mediocrity to the standard melody meaning, with sounds that couldn't be put into a computer or calculator, coming up with a number that wasn't bottom line, or any line.

"She's good, Harr" Irving commented to his apprentice. "And not only because her father says so," he continued, bringing Harry's attention to Steve.

Harry looked at the special balcony box up top, with the client who was wooed in by the deal he had made with the hot looking \$3,000 a night hookers who insisted that he come. Steve Giavanni rolled his eyes condescendingly every time his ex wife Elena played the 88s. But he opened them wide whenever his daughter Ashley made the violin sing with the kinds of melodies that were traditional and hip, young and old. He even laughed at some of the musical jokes that she cajoled the strings into saying. But his smile was turned into a grimace when Elena threw 'she's MY daughter not hers' stare his way, and flashed a healthy view of her thinned down legs to the men, and some women, in the first few rows.

"Yes, that piano player is making Steve quite jealous because of her beauty, which of course is mostly the way we lit her," Irving said. "Sometimes you can turn a pigeon into a canary with the right kind of lighting, Harr."

"And cage, Irv," Harry said, daring to address him as such. But the apprentice had earned the right to insult his mentor. After all, the profits for the night would show a big gain, at least to observers like Steve up in the balcony. And making his ex-wife a star the next day with the paid off critic from the Times would make Giavanni barf out his breakfast. The reviews that would be bought the next few days in the Village Voice and The Post would turn his stomach into knots. Yes, this was all part of the plan to put the always in control Steve Giavanni, war hero and military industrial mogul into thinking irrationally so that his financial transaction the Army didn't know about would take on a new direction. One which would land him into a mine field which he could not escape this time.

But as Harry heard, and felt it, something about Ashley was special as the concert continued, on HER terms, with unscheduled adjustments in her wardrobe which she made that were less scantily-sexy but far more suggestively-alluring. It was as if the music she was playing was composed and played for him and him only. The same claim that any performer delivered, be it naked in a bedroom or fully clothed on a religious revival stage made, and delivered. No, whoever this 18 year old wonder was, he was determined to have her. And to see her face in the bright light of a red lamp in a very private room. For the first time, Harry was moved by the

medicine that he had inflicted on the crowd. And he was determined to have the whole bottle for himself, no matter what any other patients, or doctors, said about it.

Chapter 7

For reasons she never really understood, applause always made her feel uncomfortable. At the last curtain call Ashley bowed with shoulders shrugged up, apologetically keeping her legs together, her arms protectively at her side. As if the roar of the crowd was aimed at her. The faces in the group of people who had become a stampeding herd seemed small, unrecognizable, but large somehow. And threatening. Maybe some of it had to do with the mixed feelings behind the smile of the man in the \$1,200 suit in the balcony, with love slaves next to him worth ten times that for an evening's entertainment. Ashley's hand shook as she let her stare be fixed into his.

"Your father's jealous," Elena explained as she took her daughter's hand, the gentle but firm grip saying that all is okay, somehow. "He never believed we could be winners, but we are."

Even Ashley knew that though Elena was eating up the applause, it was Ashley who made most of it possible. After all, the compositions were all hers, and as for the music, the violin carried the spice while the piano provided structure. Then again, Ashley needed structure. She feared a world without it, and most especially a universe with that most feared entity in her life--freedom. Even when doing 'freeform' music, she was always obedient to the Core of it. The Spirit of the notes which required certain non-linear structures and application of intellect to turn them into music. Her musical compositions all were in service of that Spirit, big S.

But, for the first time, Ashley heard the world's reaction to her having channeled that primordial and primal Energy onto paper. The crowd seemed to like it. Especially the most enthusiastic ones, sitting strategically behind, in front of, and to the side of Tom Olsen, music editor for the New York Times who hated more music than he ever admitted to liking.

Thoughts of Brian Epstein went through Ashley's head, as she recalled how the screamers at the Beatle's concerts were paid fifty bucks a head for losing their heads over the Fab Four. Perhaps Harry, or his very elderly Jewish-looking 'accountant' were behind these enthusiastic neo-classical music fans yelling 'Brava' with more volume and enthusiasm than any of the groupies paid off by good old Brian E.

Ashley looked over to Harry, and his still unnamed Uncle, and asked him with her eyes, 'your idea'?

"Enjoy it," Harry seemed to say back to her. "You and your mother deserve it," he seemed to continue.

Ashley looked from the corner of her eye at her mother, and saw that she needed the applause. More than food. More than water. More than even a good roll in the hay with a man who she could love and trust. And, according to Ashley's moral accounting, her mother deserved to be in the spotlight, and even to share the byline for having composed the music. The misprint in the playbill was one of those publicity accidents that seemed to work out. There was certainly enough glory to go around. And enough justice, as Elena commanded the crowd to give their applause to Ashley, and demanded that she accept it. Ashley felt...good about her self, in ways that she never imagined possible. So good that she didn't care that Steve left his balcony seat,

pushing away the hands of the escorts who insisted that he stay, with a sour look on his face, having never clapped once. Not for his daughter, nor his ex-wife.

“We’re the winners now,” Elena whispered to Ashley. “Your father is going down,” she continued in the mob-like tone that Steve used so often just before a professional or personal enemy met unexpected misfortune. “I know what he did to you, and wanted to do, Ashley,” she continued by way of explanation, and justification.

“And I know what he didn’t do for you,” Ashley felt like saying back to her mother. A woman who once had such life, vitality and a shot at the big time. Whose dream lover turned into a nightmare who was always too busy to come to her concerts. Then too occupied at work to come home to share a bed with her. Then too popular to pass up any opportunity to ridicule Elena’s aspirations to do ANYthing creative. Though Steve never laid a hand on Ashley’s mother, his stare, his snide remarks and his subtle eyerolls cut into her deeper than any knife. Now, the knife seemed to be in his belly, particularly when he stared down Irving and gave him the finger while leaving the auditorium. Irving laughed. Something between them perhaps. But Harry’s eyes were on Ashley, in a way that seemed sincere, loving and connecting. It was one of those connecting moments for Ashley, not unlike the first time she heard joy within Mozart’s Requiem or the Reverence in Zappa’s ‘Don’t go into the Yellow Snow’. All voices seemed to approve of the match that was in the making, save one.

Elena said the words in Greek, which Ashley understood, from the stories anyway, all too well. “Don’t shit where you eat,” was the translation in English. But, for the first time, Ashley decided to listen to a new experience. Privately, of course, as it was Elena’s night to shine. Such was the least a loving daughter could do for a love-starved and burnt out mother who was regaining her fire, and perhaps warmth.

Chapter 8

“An interesting blend of traditional classics and new age swing with a rtyhm that is not displeasent to the ears. An intriguing experiment to determine the common thread of solidly traditional and kinetically ‘cool’,” Elena read in the morning paper by the light coming through the kitchen window as the sun dared to poke its way through the morning smog over send over to New Jersey from Manhattan. “With what I paid this asshole, I should get more than ‘interesting’, ‘experiment’ and ‘not displeasent’, she screamed out at her constant kitchen companion.

Maria Muffin just stared back at her, tempting Elena to read on. As did the sun, which rise further up in the clearing sky, shining on overdue bills on the table, and the divorce settlement numbers from the accountant. The former seemed to outweigh the latter, but such was just normal ‘transitional’ business which would, according to all sound economic council provided to Elena, on its way to being corrected in her favor.

Maria again saw her reflection in the mirror, which she strategically placed beside Maria Muffin. “You’re still as unstill, editable and fattening as the day you were baked, and you know that,” Elena growled at her constant opponent. She looked at the calender, noting the number of red Xs on it. “I’ve been 27 days now without a manch. I’ve dropped at least two dress sizes, and you still think that I’m yours. Well, I’m not! This size 10 waist, going on 8 says so!”

Maria Muffin answered with the help of her new ally, the sun, which illuminated an add in the paper for a production of Amadeus, to take place in Brooklyn somewhere. “I don’t have a Salieri

complex!” Elena growled at Maria Muffin and the other perhaps Greek gods who decided to come down from Mount Olympus to visit her specifically. “Just because I have a Mozart as a daughter, that doesn’t mean I’m an untalented, procedural, boring Salieri!” she blasted out at Maria, and the sun, and the smiling picture of a Jamaican girl playing a Reggae Mozart in the feminist production of the famous male play about a frustrated old man who wants to make music to praise God but whose fate is to be an untalented facilitator who only plays notes. A man who is afflicted with dull out disease, an impenetrable wall between himself and the Creative Soul he would give his life to be. And for the joy of making the music, not the applause of the crowd. Such was Elena’s affliction as well, made worse over the years by having to take care of everyone else. First Steve, then Steve’s kids, then her own children who had left, then, yes, the child who never left, Ashley. Today, she had to admit it, finally as the cold light of day hit her face, reflecting every wrinkle in it. And in the rest of the review in the times by ‘Sir Thomas’ Olsen, who wielded more power over the popularity of up and coming stars at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall than Brian Epstein ever exerted at any Colloseium. “One aspect of the Diamanti debut is the violinist, who made that single instrument sound and feel like an entire orchestra in abundant splendor, and when her voice was added to the compositions, the lyrics conveyed an intrinsic understanding of the human condition along with solutions to such which transcend cultural boundaries and political ideologies.”

“With ME singing and playing back up, and LOTS of harmony, to those lyrics!” Elena blasted back at the article, the promo for the all-female, and all Black, production of “Amadea”, and finally to her ultimate adversary, Maria Muffin. Then, to her own reflection in the mirror, her hard earned size 10 body blimping out again to a size 14, or more yet again. The worse part of the projections of the future penetrated through all of Elena’s thoughts, all the ‘what ifs’ working against her in the flow chart writing itself inside her tortured mind and burnt out soul. The first dealt with Steve. “What if” he found out that it was she who paid his new girlfriends to trick him into coming to her concert, and not letting him leave his seat till the performance was over. ‘What if’ Steve had more mob connections than Elena thought he did, and would use them all to break her bank account, then her spirit. “What if” Harry decided to not book them for the rest of the tour, as he promised, and seemed to want to do. And finally, “What if” ALL of the crowd was paid off by someone to pretend to like Elena’s musical debut after having hidden from the stage for twenty years. And “What if” it was all some kind of practical joke, with someone telling Elena at some time when she was most hopeful and optimistic, that she really never had any talent, and never will, everyone around her letting her think she was music so she could ‘feel better about herself’. And “What if” the elected leader of that group was Ashley, the one who had been giving her the most praise. The nightmare that kept Elena from sleeping at least one night a week for the last twelve years was about to materialize, she felt, when the phone rang.

Being slow on the uptake, she was unable to pick up until four rings had passed. The message went to the machine. “Ashley, are you there?” Harry said in a shy and humble tone, unlike any he had adopted as a producer.

On a logic day, Elena would have intervened and informed Harry that Ashley was still sleeping, as she had been awake the rest of the night after the concert composing new works for the next events. Along with improving and embellishing those songs that she felt still needed some more work, to match her own ever-escalating standards. But today, Elena felt the need and want to be away from the world, even the one she was in the process of creating.

“Ashley, I got two invitations to a costume ball at Gracy Mansion. I know that politicians are always wearing masks, but for this one, they do it for real. I think it would be a good thing if you

could come. I'd like you to, anyway, if you can, and if you have time, and if you want to. I can pick you up at eight. E mail me, please, or, like, call me, or fax me, or whatever, ya know?"

As the message ended, Elena could hear the sure footed, fast talking Harry Pappon shouffle his feet and babble to himself in even more regressive, self-doubting, approval-seeking 'ya know, like' lingo. By his mannarisms, and what Elena could gather, he seemed to be, underneath all the generic American melting pot bravado, a good Greek boy, The kind that Elena's old country mother would have yearned for her to marry. Maybe traditional marriages to 'good Greek boys' were not being done enough, and that was the reason why so many contemporary relationships tore people apart rather than brought them together. A 'have to' marriage was often something that worked out better than a 'want to' one. And in Elena's case, her unwanted pregnancy with child number one with Steve did push things forward. At least for her. Of course the result of that first 'accident' was now 25 years old and send a usually belated Christmas card from Korea once a year as his only remaining connection to her.

Perhaps Harry was the real deal, a hard working man who wanted a family he could trust and love in a world that he neither liked nor respected. Or perhaps he was another 'Steve'. Or would become a 'Steve' one day. After all was said, and done, Ashley was Elena's daughter and had the right to protect her. She glanced at her reflection in the mirror, seeing less of herself in it than normal. Around two dress sizes less to be exact about it. She picked up Harry's card and pondered the idea brewing in her head. A highly innovative one which she recalled had not been in any movie she watched while eating Bonbons. Nor any book she had read in bed while waiting for Steve to come home to join her in it. Nor any opera she had audited for, then gave up hopes of ever singing for anyone except the empty walls of the shower stall.

Elena felt someone looking at her, seeing her thoughts, voicing disapproval of them. "It will work!" she grunted at Maria Muffin, feeling to be more in control of her fate than ever. "Just like YOU will work, for ME," she continued. "And, in ways that they will understand someday, everyone I care about."

Perhaps Maria Muffin had seen through Elena's secrative eyes, into the plot she was incubating. All the more reason for her to be gone, or put to good use, but on ELENA'S terms..

Chapter 8

For Ashley, the art was never about the money or applause. For that reason, it sustained her in ways that crowd pleasers and money seekers would never know. Through the music she could say things, know things and experience things that were not possible otherwise. It was the matter of experience which was in question now, most particularly the man who was her boss, provider and she hoped friend, Harry.

Rising at the crack of noon as always after staying up till dawn working on new compositions, Ashley stumbled into the kitchen to see that breakfast was prepared for her, with even larger portions than Elena had prepared for the last three weeks. In the center of the bacon, eggs, honey-flavored granola and potatoes that were more grease than vegetable stood proudly a cupcake like monument, a candle sticking out of the icing on top.

"It's not my birthday, Mom," Ashley slurred out of her mouth.

"Maria Muffin says differently," Elena smiled back.

Ashley could smell the calories in the muffin, and felt the flesh which now surrounded her waist, hips and thighs, her still small breasts not enlarging to keep up them. It had become substantially padded over the last three weeks, for reasons she could not really determine. She looked at herself in the mirror and saw more in it than she bargained for.

“Your body is maturing,” Elena said by way of explanation to the question she knew Ashley was about to ask. “Into a different kind of beauty.”

“One that a man would like?” she asked.

“Harry likes his meat with some fat on it,” Mom said with a wink. “And don’t worry, you aren’t getting heavier.”

“So why are you getting thinner, Mom?” Ashley asked the woman whose body was always the one she compared her own to.

“My body is maturing I suppose, hon,” the explanation.

Elena picked up the birthday muffin and placed it under Ashley’s nose. “I baked it myself,” Mom said. “Please.”

Yet again, Ashley did as Mom wanted and blew the candle out. It took the worry out of her drawn face. The first bite Ashley took from it put her trembling lips into a confident smile. The second bite brought light into her eyes. “Thank you, Mom,” Ashley said, pretending to like the chocolate, peanut, raisin muffin that tasted like something completely different when it hit the back of her tongue. “Great cooking, as usual, Mom.”

“No!” Elena said. “From now on you call me Elena. You cool with that?”

Ashley never heard Elena say ‘cool’ before, but maybe such was part of the ‘maturing’ she was doing now. Like the body which seemed to be more womanly than motherly which Mom seemed to be enjoying. Or maybe it was how she was dressing. In clothes that seemed youthful, in a way that was very much like her own. A mid-life thing, maybe. Certainly a better option than for Mom, or rather ‘Elena’ to devolve into being an overweight and underspoken ‘Granny Dimitropolus’, like all the other Granny’s in the family tree. With a big nose, triple chin and a belly which was filled with fat but completely lacking in fire, or warmth.

There was one thing on Mom that was now ‘Elena’, or perhaps someone else. For the first time ever, Ashley saw a naked left fourth finger. “You stopped wearing your wedding band, Mom?” Ashley asked regarding Mom’s now-absent ‘not interested, scumbag Romeo’ announcement which she recommended for every professional woman at the workplace.

“Elena, please,” Mom insisted. “And I suppose it just slipped off my fingers in the shower.”

“Fingers that are getting leaner and meaner at the keyboard, Elena,” Ashley said, straining to exaggerate the truth with regard to the piano playing and method of address of the performer. “Do you have a date tonight, Elena?” Ashley inquired, noting that Elena had a tad more make up on that normal, and was wearing tall stiletto heels rather than the flat sensible pumps which had been her trademark. She seemed uncomfortable in them while walking, but forced a graceful stride out of them, absorbing the pain the tight-fitting shoes were inflicting behind tightly-held ruby-red lips. “Who’s the lucky dude, Elena?” Ashley asked.

“I don’t know yet. I just figured that I’d go to the Church dance, see if anyone is more into dancing than Church stuff, and, ya know, like go somewhere less ‘religious’,” Elena answered, mysteriously. Equally mysterious was the rasp in the back of Ashley’s throat, and the sensation of heat on her forehead, and the urge to upchuck.

Elena gently put her arms around Ashley in a ‘Mom’ way and led her to the bathroom. “You rest a few days and you’ll be ok,” she said assuringly.

“I have to be ok for tonight!” Ashley insisted. “I gave my word that I’d...”
The rest of Ashley’s verbiage was a mixture of belching, barfing and bellowing.

“Whoever you gave your word to can wait a few days, Ashley,” Elena said, again as Mom. “My word on it.”

Ashley couldn’t figure out what was wrong with her. Maybe the fame and applause were too much. Being the introvert that she was, being around people always overwhelmed her. Perhaps a few days of rest with Mozart’s music and Mom’s mmm mmm good cooking would set things right again. They always did, and there was no reason why they wouldn’t again. Scout, the dog, Ashley’s younger brother, came in on Elena’s request and barked his seal of approval, after which the canine companion was fed a generous portion of food while Ashley helped herself to an abundance of maternal comfort. Beginning with a special recipe bread pudding which went down easy and felt soothing to the throat and mind. Ashley willed her body to get better, and better looking, fast, as there was now a sense of urgency for both.

Chapter 9

When Harry came to the door, he rang the bell. No one answered at the other side. He helped himself to a look at the playbill for the next gig. “Judd’s Gone Classical’ seemed to be the logline for the new hit sensation, at least according to the critics. Some of whom were paid off by Harry to say so, and some who seemed to be speaking their own mind. But this night was about play, not playbills, or paying bills. And in keeping with such, Harry donned the garb of the Joker from Batman. Not an original costume, but then again, Harry was never an original artist. Yet he had discovered a very original act which was very, very real.

He looked at the time, noting that it was the appointed hour for picking up Ashley, and that a message was delivered to his voicemail in a garbled voice stating that she would ‘blissfully attend’ the costume ball at Gracy Mansion with Harry. Suddenly, the man who took ownership of every date he ever had felt taken over by his own fear. Fear of rejection by a young woman whose approval he sought for everything, and whose voice felt angelic, even though he had no believe in the existence of Heaven.

Once again, he knocked. Still nothing at the other end of the door except silence. And a dog barking. Undoubtedly left at home to guard while the humanoids he was in charge of were away somewhere else. Perhaps with someone else. The ‘whos’ of that ran through Harry’s now worried head as the wind blew through the thin coat of his costume and the make up on his cheeks felt to be invading wrinkles that were developing on his not-yet-thirty face. Irving. Steve. Another promoter perhaps who was more aggressive, or worthy than himself.

Scout barked again, conveying a final ‘fuck off’ to his unseen intruder. Harry decided it was time to be ‘unseen’ himself. He turned around, looked at the box of chocolates he had bought and

pryed it open, preparing to eat them himself. He did pay for them, and it was his right to eat them. There seemed to be no one else who deserved them more.

His teeth felt the soft caramel of the first bite, the sweet sensation of cherry-nut with the second, and upon his advance on the other cocoa-covered mystery packages, opened his eyes to a Light behind him. Then footsteps that felt otherworldly. Upon turning around, a vision of a goddess stood before him. Specifically, as he remembered the Greek mythology as told to him between Sunday school lessons at the Church by the nympho teacher in his childhood as 'Athena', and someone else.

"Ashley?" he asked with a chocolate-stained 'huh?' of the Vision of beauty in front of his re-opened eyes. She was clad in a white gown which despite its loose fit, revealed and emphasized everything shapely, young and feminine about her, including breasts that seemed larger than he had remembered. Her hair was tied in a swirl that made it seem even longer than the mane which she had normally worn down, and more elegant. Her face was other worldly, fitting tastefully into a seductive mask, that seemed, spookily enough, appropriate for Harry's present Bat-theme presentation.

"Catwoman Greek Goddess," he said, pointing through the his oversized sleeve of his 'Joker' tweed coat to the Lone-Ranger like mask with very feminine fins around Ashley's temples. "Where did you get it?"

Ashley shrugged her shoulders, in a girlish innocence but somehow with a woman's knowledge of the world.

"You called the costume store!" he surmised.

She nodded her head 'yes', cracking a 'you got me, Big Boy' smile at him, looking him straight in the eyes when doing so.

Harry was impressed. A Virgin goddess who was also smart, and clever. But clever enough to not be competitive with him. Or smart enough not to be. She pointed to the opened box of chocolates with the torn ribbon still attached to it.

"Oh, that," Harry said. "I thought...I thought..." he said, unable to say anything more about what was going on in his mind as he gazed into the mysterious and welcoming eyes behind the mask. He noticed his feet about to go into the 'gosh darn it' shuffle that had been his trademark as a 'good kid' and a 'nice boy', then hit himself in the thigh, shaking himself out of the control of the ghost that could reclaim his now adult independent spirit at any time. He closed the box of half-eaten candy, threw it into the trashcan, and smiled, giving no explanation for such. "I want to hear what YOU think," he both asked, and stated.

Catwoman Athena cleared her throat and handed him a note. She turned her head downward, coughing again then took a deep breath, and holding it in, very confidently.

Harry opened the note, slowly, afraid to see what was in it. Perhaps a 'Dear Harry' note of rejection. Perhaps a bill for something in the business world, something which he needed a night, or perhaps lifetime, away from now. Or maybe a confession that she had some kind of AIDS, leprosy or a girlfriend she valued more than any boy, man or god-friend.

“Sore throat, laryngitis” Harry read, feeling relief. Then disappointment, handing the note back to her. “Look, we can do this or something else another night, Ashley” he said with a tone that felt chivalrous, an state of position he usually ridiculed in others and felt ashamed of in himself. “Maybe some other time. We can go somewhere and, ya know, talk, ya know?”

While Harry sweat under his collar and scrambled for ‘cool’ words to say, she replied with another note, handing it to him gently. This one was written on plain paper with red ink, a seductively lyrical script to it. He opened it quickly, finding and saying the words, “There are many ways to communicate, and connect,” he read, and tried to understand.

Clarification came fast in the form of a flute which rang out a familiar melody from Harry’s childhood that made him smile, then laugh. Then compelled to say the lyrics to on the second stanza. “The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out, in your stomach and out your...”

Before Harry could say ‘mouth’, the goddess’ fingers gently touched his still chocolate-covered lips. His shaking ceased, another jolt driven through his body instead. Something frightening that he found himself welcoming. Just as his head was about to define what his heart and body were feeling, she pulled back her finger and gracefully put her hand into an inner pocket of her gown.

The goddess pulled out a harmonica, recorder and mandolin, offering all three to the mortal before him. Feeling Promethian himself, Harry pointed to the harp. He put it into his mouth, thinking of what to ‘say’ with it. But his vocabulary was confined to five notes that he could not link into a melody. He put down the harp, apologetically, and turned to Athena, confessing his sins and drawback to the goddess.

“My mother was a by-the-numbers God fearing nurse and my father a die-hard Socialist Professor,” he confessed. “The only musical things we did when growing up was to read Das Capital in Greek, Russian and German. I know, they opened up restaurants when they got their ass out of Greece in ’67 when the Junta took over there instead of Montessori schools for teaching new Revolutionaries in ‘new country’, but...well. My childhood experience was more about business and politics than music. And as for the politics of music, it seemed to make sense to...”

Before Harry could explain, or rather excuse, his current life, Athena Cat Woman answered him with another tune, on her recorder. “The Internationale” he smiled while hearing the rendition which had more playful mischief in it than committed revolution. Not as spontaneous or expansive as the version he had heard at the concert last night from Ashley’s violin, but close enough to make him smile again, and be ok with remembering being ‘happy’ as something positive. She pointed to the harp and invited him to join in.

Somehow, Harry’s five notes on the harp did find its way into the goddess’ music, then somehow his own. She led him down the walkway to his car, unashamedly dancing as well. The melody changed five times, Harry keeping up, somehow. The goddess played the tunes ‘straight’, uncharacteristic of Ashley’s usual style. Perhaps because she was still under the weather with regard to the flu, or perhaps because she wanted Harry to fly above the clouds, and didn’t want to intimidate him into being a musical listener by showing off her true musical talents.

However it happened, the walk down to the Harry’s car took the long way around the block, awakening or annoying several of the neighbors, but such was what a born-again Socialist does. Particularly when he was awakened to the Revolution inside of him.

Finally, the first act ended as the car appeared in his face. The clock on his wrist keeping time on its own terms. “We’re going to be late,” he said, in words. He opened the door, bowing for Athena to enter his humble mortal abode. Did so, gingerly, with legs that seemed a bit thicker than he remembered, but in ways that seemed voluptuous rather than flabby. Harry sniffed the harmonic to see if there was some kind of weed in it. Indeed it did smell of something...different. But even if it was, it was time to enjoy the ride, and a wise mortal doesn’t look a gift-goddess in the mouth, even if his own is still covered with chocolate that he was going to give her as an offering.

Before Harry could say ‘tell us the fastest way to the Olympian Hotel, by way of Gracy Mansion’ to his GPS, he felt Athena’s hand on his thigh.

“Not on the first date,” he said to her, finding that he meant it.

She turned her head, projecting disappointment. Or maybe it was something else. Harry felt drawn in to that ‘above all do no harm, if you can’ mandate from his nurse mother. “But maybe we met in other lifetimes and this is, ya know, our, like, second, third or fifth date?”

Athena answered with a smile, then the theme from “The Way We Were”, a romantically-schmoltzy tune that hit home with Harry. He added his own harmony to it on the harp, most of the notes off key but on target with the subtext of the notes. The first stanza was happy. The second profound, the goddess releasing her long hair from the tie keeping it hostage, shaking her head, Harry saying “yes, I do like long hair, please do not ever cut it,” with words, notes and finger. The third verse of the tune was played with body parts stripped naked of their clothing in a symphony that rocked the car, and Harry’s tragically-hip soul.

Chapter 10

Ashley woke up with a very male body beside her which she knew she could trust. It was as if she and he had trusted each other for lifetimes, though perhaps with a few fall outs along the way. The air was a bit chilled, but she didn’t mind. His warm chest, covered with soft hair made her feel warm and tingly. The kind of electrical-tingly that she needed more than she could ever admit to herself, or anyone else, or even to him. Her voice still held hostage by the sudden onset of the flu, she opened her eyes to look into his. But the primary sensation that hit her was olfactory, emitting a totally animalistic odor, and fragrance. “Your breath, Scout, it’s still so, ya know, dog-like,” she said to the canine companion that always slept with her on cold nights, and ones where she felt ‘shaky’ inside.

There were many reasons to be uneasy inside. Ashley had not heard from Harry since he had said ‘I’d like to have coffee or, ya know, something like it. I’ll call ya tomorrow’ to her after the concert ended and the mostly bridge and tunnel crowd got the last train back to Jersey. It had been over 38 hours, not that she was counting. She had her music and he had his music promoting. Maybe it was just a post-performance infatuation, her head told her, but her heart, and soul, knew different. Ashley had encountered many setbacks in her personal life, and she always put the pain into the music. But this time, she would not accept defeat so easily. Something had to be done about it in the Real world, not the one defined and given vitality by strings from a violin and melodies from a voice, the latter coming back in stages, for talking purposes anyway.

She pulled herself out from under the sheets, and wiped the Scout hairs from the corners her mouth. She was followed closely by the all-heart and no-brains canine companion. She shuffled out of the bedroom into the living room, opening the back door en route for Scout to go out for his morning crap, something he enjoyed as much as his evening meal. Yet he remained inside, nuzzling against Ashley's shaking thigh. She was aghast when she looked at the clock. "Nine o'clock and she's still not home!" Ashley said. She looked in every room in the house, yelling "Elena! Mom!" and got no response. Even when she pried open the bathroom that her mother was spending more time in than ever, leaving the medicine cabinet open and on occasion a bottle of firewater hidden between the disposed paper in the waste basket.

All of the worst and most ancient scenarios went through Ashley's head. She felt like the child she was when she was ten, and Mom was late coming back from the store. Each minute of her absence felt like a hour, her imaginations escalating the worst kind of scenarios in part because they could be imagined only by an adult mind with a child's terror. They came back again, in full force. Maybe Mom was in a car accident. Or maybe the guy who she met at the Church dance last night brought her into his apartment. Maybe she was taken advantage of, like Steve tried to do to Ashley, and all of her other sisters, and occasionally her brother. Maybe all of the 'woulda's and coulda's' Mom had been not able to do caught up with her, and she jumped in front of a bus. Or maybe a car driven by a 'fan' from last night who considered her the female version of the Anti-Christ.

Ashley pushed Scout out the back door and rushed to the phone. Three times she tried to dial Emergency and mis-dialed with her trembling fingers. She banged the phone down yet again, took a deep breath, and started to re-dial, slowly this time. Taking matters into her own hands. Once again, being the responsible member of the family which was now decimated to two people, and of course one very human dog.

A voice came on the other end, official, and efficient, but very impersonal. "Police Headquarters, how may I direct your call?" it said calmly.

Before Ashley could force the words from her hoarse mouth and stuttering tongue, she heard Scout bark outside, at someone who was singing, and skipping her way up the sidewalk towards the front door.

"Are you alright?" the voice at the other end of the phone asked, alarmed, and maybe concerned.

"Yeah...yeah...Sorry...yeah," Ashley said, putting down the phone, rushing to the front door, opening it before the dancing and singing nympho in the Grecian goddess dress reached for the knob, or doorbell.

"Where the hell were you, 'Elena'!" Ashley demanded in an angry maternal tone.

"Paradise, I think," she said, waving her fingers through the long hair extension still attached to her four inch natural pony tail. The color of both was lighter than the night before. "And, other places," she continued with a 'responsible' smile.

"I was worried about you!" Ashley barked out though her still sore throat.

"And I was worried about you, too, Ashley," Mom smiled back calmly. As if she had everything under control. Involved with a Creative Vision in her head that was so incomprehensible to her

daughter that she would not bother to explain it. But such was Ashley's domain and right, not Mom's, or 'Elena's'.

"I'm hungry, Ashley," the mid-life crisis 'dream goddess' said. "I have to eat. And we have to talk."

Elena walked past Ashley, the clicking of her stiletto heels on the floor having a force and cadence that meant business. Family business of the first order, her stride being much like that she had when she informed Ashley that she was going to finally divorce Steve, and why.

Elena took her usual station at the refrigerator, opening it as Ashley sat down. "So what are we hungry for today, sweetie."

"You telling me where you were last night!" Ashley insisted.

"After your favorite breakfast," Mom continued, loading the table with every fattening food that could be prepared and eaten in one sitting. Jam, bacon, bread, hotcakes, maple syrup and of course the extra-sugar Fruity-looking cereal which had always been Ashley's favorite, perhaps because of the friendly bird on the package who seemed happy for trustable reasons. And, of course, the strange-looking vitamins which Mom insisted on Ashley taking while preparing for the 'stress' of the stardom that was about to happen for 'the Dimitopoli'.

Mom cooked what needed to be cooked, insisting that Ashley feed her gullet with what could be ingested cold. "Maybe I should watch what I eat," Ashley said as she looked at the plate of delectables containing a gizzilian calories while looking in the mirror and finding her reflection 'wider' than the last few days, feeling the belt around her waist that had was too large to hold anything up a month ago.

"Maybe you should watch who you do business with," Mom said. "Ya know, you the rule about shitting where you eat."

"What if I like the taste of shit?" Ashley countered.

"Harry?" Mom said. "You still have feelings for him?"

"Yeah, I do."

"And he has feelings for you?"

"Yeah. I think so. Hope so."

"Then I'll help...make it so," Mom said, turning around with a warm and giving smile.

Ashley felt her mother's sizing her up, physically anyway. Inspecting her from head to toe, the assessment ending with a stare at the last place Ashley expected.

"My hair?" Ashley said, pulling the three foot long blondish-brown mane around her shoulders.

Mom knelt down and put her fingers through the hairy ‘companion’ which had been with Ashley for even longer than Scout. She moved her fingers up and down the thick, colorful extension of Ashley’s brain, finally let them rest at mid-ear length.

“Harry likes short hair, Ashley. He hates women with long hair. And doesn’t trust them either,”

“And you know this, ‘Elena’, because---”

“---Research, my dearest darling daughter,” Elena softly replied, pushing her clasped hand and the hair under it even further up the ears. “Something he said to me after the concert.”

“But---“

“---Shhh,” Elena gazed into Ashley’s face, a stare that reeked of experience somehow that only a ‘Mom’ would know, and was about to share with her daughter at a special moment. “You have been hiding behind this mop for 16 years. Hiding so much of your inner beauty. From the crowd who wants to love you more, and others.”

“So I’ll wear wigs, or tie it back?” Elena said.

”A wig will get you a few more performances. Tying it back or tucking it in like you used to play with won’t fool anyone. But for your professional, and personal future, some, ya know---”

“---Sacrifices are needed?” Ashley said with quivering chest, the shakes going down every extremity of her cold, clammy body.

“Transitions,” Elena said assuringly. She picked up a pair of scissors, moving them slowly towards Ashley. “You don’t want to grow up to be a ‘woulda, coulda’ loser like, ya know,” she said. “Me?” she continued, her head downward in shame and regret, a tear flowing down her cheek.

Ashley gently took hold of Mom’s hand. “You’re not a loser, Mom, eh, I mean, Elena.”

It took a few musical ‘beats’ inside Ashley’s monkey-brain head, but Elena finally broke a familiar and comforted ‘Mom’ smile. Daughter embraced mother in a long needed exchange of feelings and perspectives.

“You’re writing another song in your head, Ash,” Elena said, knowing that in such times her daughter always processed new experiences with new musical compositions.

“Which WE will play TOGETHER,” Ashley proclaimed. Feeling a need to please the only person she ever really trusted, and to make a musical impact in the world she never did, Ashley observed her hands taking hold of the scissors, then handing them to Mom. Still, there was one question she had to ask. “Harry really hates long hair on women?”

“Almost as much as he hates them having Barbie thin bodies under them,” Elena informed her as Mom.

“A strange dude, Elena.”

“But a good man, Who also knows the business of music and music fans, who we need to keep our music going, and our mouths fed.”

“And Scout’s mouth fed too,” Ashley noted as the canine snuck back into the room, nuzzling next to her.

Ashley shook her head, letting her long mane rest over Scouts eyes for the last time. She looked in the mirror, took a deep breath, and uttered with a voice of affirmation, “Let’s do this, girlfriend.”

Elena seemed pleased by the new term of address, and Ashley felt right about giving it. Her new Girlfriend edged the scissors up her long hair, requested how much further up to advance. Ashley refrained from nodding the affirmative ‘enough’ feeling her exposed and soon to be non-hair covered back, shoulders then earlobes. “A bit more,” Ashley proclaimed with the bravery of her Spartan ancestors about to do what had to be done to fulfill their duties and Passions.

‘You’re sure?’ Elena asked.

Ashley answered in Beethovenian, singing the German-text to his Ode to Joy in Ancient Greek. With the first chop her body shook, but her head remained firm. The floor below her became littered with hair as she felt her head and the brain inside of it...exposed. Open. Her imaginations about what to do with her new body having now not restricted to what could be expressed in musical notes. Yes, she was...Becoming. But becoming what?

Elena showed Ashley the final product with pride. “Harry’s gonna love it! And so will everyone else! And you?”

Ashley couldn’t recognize herself in the mirror. She seemed mature, and even ancient. As an old soul born into a young body, it felt...different. Resembling not only a material appearance, but one that was Grandmotherly, as affirmed by a glance at the old pic of her Grandmother. But this time, she imagined a grandfather named Harry next to her in the portrait.

“What should we do with it?” Elena asked Ashley while holding a fist full of hair as long as a horse’s mane.

Part of Ashley wanted to say ‘put it back where it came from’ but she allowed higher aspirations to prevail. Along with the most trustworthy choice. “Whatever you think is best,” the shorn 18 year old musical prodogee said as she looked at her new reflection in the mirror, from the neck up anyway, imagining or perhaps forcing the best of possibilities. “A personal and professional...transition.” Which now felt..irreversible.

Chapter 11

Ashley’s ‘flu’ kept her out of the rehearsal hall for nearly a week, a fortnight with regard to the stage. As for what to wear on such, Elena put herself in charge of wardrobe. Adjustments had to be made with regard to the venue which Harry was able to get, and what her darling daughter and BFF’s body could fit into. “A size...10, maybe 12,” she said, perusing the items in the closet which used be hers but now were...too small for a ‘full figured’ Ashley. Of particular note was an Italian peasant dress which Steve bought for his ‘favorite wife’. The stretch grey and white fabric would reveal every tasteful curve under it, or every slab of fat, of which Elena had plenty. At Steve’s request, then insistence, she wore it open, and made it four sizes larger than its original

size as she ran around the kitchen and other rooms doing Steve's bidding. "It would be nice to take it in," Elena thought, but, no, better to keep it as it is, for her, who squeezed into it while Elena prepared the food for the evening meal, and the special guest who she invited to share it with what was left of her family.

"I don't know, Mom," Ashley said as Elena observed her well-fed daughter's body fill out, and almost burst, the seams. "Are you sure this makes me look...presentable?"

Elena squinted, and noted that, yes, it was low cut around the chest. But at least it wasn't as matronly as the other items that fit Ashley's now size 12 going on 16 body. The old 'Mom' clothing made Ashley look like...her Mom.

Ashley looked at herself in the mirror, puffing her coiffed hair up to try to make it look somehow 'interesting'. The frowned look on her face showed her frustration, and disappointment. "You want people to listen to your music, Dear, not gawk at your anatomy," Elena informed her in her piano teacher voice, remembering that the piano piece she played that afternoon was still as dull and lifeless as ever, no matter how fast she played the notes. Or how many times she tried futilely to give them intensity and joy by playing with the pedal.

As Ashley's attention went to matter of wardrobe, Elena's were directed inwardly, again. She looked around the room and saw the Demon again. This time, its face was even more austere, and oppressive. "You aren't going to beat me this time!" she grunted.

"You say something, Mom?" Ashley asked her mother.

For the moment, Elena ignored Ashley's slip with regard to the manner of formal address. Indeed, Elena deserved to be called 'Mom'. Worse, she deserved the term 'Mother'. She looked in the mirror and saw 'old'. And underneath it, 'scared'. No matter how much weight she lost and how wildly she styled her new hair extensions, the latter made from her daughter's own hair, Elena was still was a slave of the demon. The dull out demon who got stronger each day. That 'I can never be creative because others are allowed to be' demon who robbed her of he looks as a pianist as a pregnant 22 year old, then her ability to play the instruments completely the day that Ashley was born.

Elena found herself hating Ashley more than ever, and then hating herself for having that feeling. But survival instincts kicked in, as she looked around the kitchen at the food which had been prepared for the guest. And then the bottle of wine reserved for the center of the table. Elena felt the voice of Maria Muffin come out of the bottle, begging her to drink it.

"Come on, I can numb your pain, and make you happy," it said in a swaggering tone. "You remember the good times we had, don't you?"

Elena did indeed. 'Wendy Wine' allowed her to step outside of their coffin as the hostess of the party to being the life of it. Until, of course, Steve decided to join the party. Elena remembered being a happy drunk, and a submissive one. Steve was an even more aggressive and manipulating soul after he had a few belts. It suited him, and even her, till one day she decided to get off the train that was heading to her personal hell, and his heaven. Or so it seemed. In any case, for whatever reason, be it the fear of God or the terror of falling into the abyss with the devil, AKA Steve, Elena had been sober for nearly a decade. She poured wine at the table but never drank it. But 'Wendy Wine' insisted on changing that. Particularly because she was a special gift, sent to her by an anonymous fan whose masterful poetry was, interestingly, in a

handwriting which resembled Steve's. According to the label, a new brand of ultra-low alcohol vino from a winery which had been her favorite in the 'good old days' with Steve. One which the writer of the note promised was 'the favorite of the special guest who you will be entertaining tonight'.

It was Ashley who expressed the next irony, without knowing that she was channeling it. "Harry loves this kind of wine," she said observing the vintage of the hector and shape of the bottle, the latter showing a gentle and delicate design to the 14 proof elixir. "His boss said so."

"His boss Irving?" Elena asked.

"Who else?" Ashley confirmed. "He e-mailed me."

"And Harry?"

"Was out of town for the last few days," Ashley said. "I haven't seen him since...I got this flu," she noted. "And this hair, and bloated body," she continued with a note of disappointment.

"Which is healthy, now. And maturing, Into the kind of beauty that any REAL man loves," Elena commented, noting that her own waist was now two sizes smaller than her daughters.

"Yeah...More of me to love? Or maybe I'm pregnant with new musical product," she mused.

The doorbell announced Harry's arrival, twenty minutes early. Ashley froze. Elena placed her freshly-manicured hands on her shaking 'well fed' maturing shoulders. "It's going to be alright. Everything's gonna be alright, dear."

Ashley nodded her head, accepting of Elena's maternal approval. Elena's glance was held hostage by her new mother, mentor and friend. "We can have a healthy relationship this time," Wendy Wine offered in a soft, whispering voice that felt like it came from a place of benevolent, and controllable reason. "There is less firewater in me than in a plate of overripe fruit salad," she promised. Elena chose to believe her. There seemed to be no good reason not to.

Chapter 12

The spanikopita, pastitso, pilafi and roast lamb on the dinner table were fantastic, cooked with more skill, taste and love than anything the chefs at Harry's brother's and father's restaurant could ever muster. As was the way the Walmart discount chandelier was made to seem like a thousand dollar display of candles from a Viennese opera house. But it was the beverage that disturbed Harry's palate and sensibilities.

"Your boss said you liked Chateau Guevano," Elena said as she poured him a fourth glass, after he had snuck two of his previous glasses down the sink, and one into the gullet of a thankfully-thirsty Scout. Indeed, Harry hated the smell of this presumably non-alcoholic wine almost as much as the fact that someone apparently close to her got booze back into the house, and back into Elena.

He kept his distance from her, though she was insistent on closing the distance between her and him. Every word spoken to him from her progressively more slurry mouth was in his face, missing no opportunity to brush her hands on his arm, chest or ass to get him out of the way as

she was moving from one part of the dining room to another as a very hospitable 'hostess'. She looked hot, no doubt, and attracted Harry's glance. But Harry's inner eye remained on Ashley, looking that way whenever 'forty-five going on fifteen' Elena was not in the way.

Ashley gazed at him apologetically, saying nothing, offering him another piece of mousaka, insisting as strongly as she could that her mother eat something solid rather imbibe more liquid.

"I know what you're thinking, girlfriend," Elena intervened. "And you too, Harry," she continued, swaggering around with a sexy gait that showed off a shapely figure, and the desire to share it with someone unclothed.

"What, Mom?" Ashley said.

"It's Elena!" Harry observed coming out of the mouth of the mother who looked more attractive than her daughter did. To a 'real' man who was more interested in a woman's anatomy than her mind.

Harry turned to Ashley as 'Elena' turned to another glass of wine. He observed his eye looking over her body, the 'real man' part of his mind sending gestures of disapproval and disappointment to his face.

"My hair," she said apagogically, trying futilely to make three inches of mane seem longer. "And my other parts," she continued trying to breath in the fat which had accumulated around her body. "I hope you don't..."

"You look fine," he said, forcing a smile. Knowing it was a lie, but one that he had to convince Ashley was the truth.

Ashley pulled her face back, and let herself believe it. Or so it seemed. He wondered why the Vision of beauty he first saw on stage at the audition and which he encountered that special night before the costume party, and during it, was so...plain now.

"Come on," Elena interjected, nearly stumbling on as she poured another glass of wine from the super-sized bottle of firewater masquerading as refined beverage for the cultured class. She tried to recover her loss of footing by pretending it was part of a dance. Maybe it was, but not one Harry wanted to be a part of. Thankfully, it ended in a fall on the floor, and a deep snore.

Ashley rushed to Elena's aid, having never seen her in that condition. Not that bad anyway. Harry pulled her back. "She has to sleep it off."

"Will she, ya know, wake up from it?" Ashley asked. "REALLY wake up?"

"I don't know," Harry answered, knowing that he knew more about managing loved ones who were enslaved by demon rum. And knowing something else that had to be related. "Let's talk about it," he said, pulling out a harmonica from his pocket. "Like we did the other night? Though you were playing more procedural melody than music. Maybe so I could, ya know..."

"No, I don't know," Ashley replied regarding that special night Harry had shared with him when she had laryngitis, yet spoke to him as a Cat Woman Greek goddess with her music, and in other ways with her body. Which had changed so much. But one thing didn't change...The connection he felt with her, which was stronger than any 'manly' urge to pass her up because or her now lack

of ‘womanly’ physical attributes. Her eyes were still as brilliant as ever. Even more so than that special night he had with ‘catwoman’ from Mount Olympus. Deeper, and more mature, but in ways that he wanted to connect with. Not for the fun, or the frivolity but...perhaps to grow old with himself.

“Come, let’s talk,” he wrote on a Dimatropoli concert playbill he retrieved from his pocket, leading her out to the music room, handing her a violin with a bow, and inserting the harmonica into his mouth.

The conversation continued without words, and not too many closed eyes. Until the snoring in the kitchen fell out of consciousness, for him as well as he newly found beloved.

Chapter 13

Morning came earlier than expected for Ashley. But it had been an eventful night, at least in the music room, whose walls absorbed compositions which emerged on the spot from a place Ashley could not identify, no matter how Harry tried to define them. Not a word was spoken all night. Just before dawn, Ashley had sent Harry off with a gentle kiss on the lips. In his wake, she could still hear the Silence lingering in the air, even amidst Scout’s loud barking. The hound had good reason to be alarmed. He had stood guard over a very inebriated and loud snoring Elena all night. She had somehow pulled herself up on the couch, a towel over her face saying ‘do not disturb’ to whoever dared wake her up.

“Okay, I’ll take you out,” Ashley said to Scout as she opened the back door to let the hound out for his morning bowel evacuation. She turned to her mother, her disappointment in ‘gal friend Elena’ turned into pity. “Hate the sin not the sinner,” she reminded herself, a ‘to do’ item which fit well into her Life Agenda, until she noticed something about the hair extension on her mother’s dolled up head. “That hair is mine!” she grunted. “Was mine,” she lamented when a mirror found its way into her line of vision.

Ashley looked at the rest of her ‘maternal unit’, a term which her two sisters adopted as a form of reference that allowed them to dehumanize Elena enough so they would have the courage to leave the house. “Why am I here?” Ashley asked herself as she looked at the house she grew up in, and, if things continued, would die in, slowly. As a matronly young maiden taking care of a dog, and a two legged creature who she knew now had the capacity to be a bitch.

It wasn’t so much the drinking, or the desperate plea for attention from a younger man, but how Mom was trying to enter her new childhood. Wearing her daughter’s beautifully-long hair, and her seductively-virgin daughter’s clothes, while Ashley was assigned the role of being ‘the mother’. Ashley wondered if the next stage of Elena’s plans was to decapitate her hands, attaching them to her own in the hope of having the musical talent in them migrate into her talentless body and non-musical mind.

Ashley looked at ‘the bitch’s’ paws, the hangover still keeping her very unconscious. Indeed, unconscious was the operative word here. Unconscious and under-developed. Ashley fumed inside, mentally preparing to pack her bags and do that move which all of her friends, and siblings, begged her to do. She envisioned waking up in an apartment of her own. Cooking her own food. Going to an answering machine that had only HER messages on it. And enjoying the adventure of having to worry about having to pay the rent each month. The closest thing to that which the 18 going on 80 year old musical protégée had was a week at a private dorm at violin

camp. She remembered hating it. Feeling as out of place as introvert Johan Sebastian Bach at a Bangal's Revival Fest or a B-52's Rave. Though now more 'full bodied', Ashley was not very much more muscular, particularly with regard to the strength she needed between the ears to brave the world out there, and to duel with what the songs she sung talked about most... 'freedom'. But the money was around now to do it, and Harry was there to share it with.

"Sharing freedom with someone," Ashley mused to herself as she allowed her voice to speak what her mind was speculating. "An oxymoron," she continued. "Just like 'freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose'," she said, then sang. The words never made sense to her, but when put to music that she allowed to go through and INTO her, there was a meaning to it that now felt Right in a way that the brain could never define. Maybe she would write a new string quartet celebrating that discovery, and channeling it into the notes. But living it would have to come first. Unless of course 'Roberta Responsibility' decided to have her voice be heard as the first violinist in the piece. Or if 'Geraldine Guilt' worked her way from the background harmonies into the main theme. But "Franny Freedom" begged to be born, and given a chance to experience who she could become.

"Yeah, I know, I'm naming things like you do, you, yes, loser," Ashley whispered towards the still slumbering Elena, who was finally regaining the remnants of consciousness.

Ashley retreated from the awakened 'patient' for whom she, as doctor, did everything. Elena's right hand slowly emerged from under the blankets, extending its way to Ashley.

"She wants to make amends," Ashley said to herself, brought back to the 'take it on the cheek' Pacifist who she was at the Core. "She's going to pledge to never take another drink again," the next projection voiced silently. "And finally, she's going to get some PROFESSIONAL therapy instead of having me get my training as a Therapist at this home schooling program I got born into," she prayed as Elena's hand reached out of the cover, moving towards Elena.

Ashley took hold of Elena's pale, cold, shaking forearm, gently at first, ready to be firm as she had to. She readied her brain to instruct her mouth to say just the right words to make things right, and synergistically good for everyone, maybe even herself.

"Mom?" Ashley said, asking if the mother who at one time was capable of love born of Light rather than necessity. "You're---"

"---Not a loser," Mom said, extending her third finger upward in a defiant salute. "You selfish, stupid, spoiled bitch."

Ashley felt hot flames of something demonic in the hand of the woman who bore, and raised, her. 'Elena' kept her 'fuck finger' up, aimed directed at her. "Fuck you, you fucked up idiot. After all I did for you, you do this to me, you do this to me, you selfish cunt?" Elena popped her head out from under the vomit-caked towels and saliva-covered blankets, staring directly at Ashley, leaving no doubt as to the target of her accusation.

Before Ashley could let go of the arm that had attacked her in ways more horrible than Steve ever did, or could, Mom's other arm grabbed hold of it. "You're gonna stay here. With me. Because I said so. And because I am who I am and you are who you are, Daughter Dearest."

Though the voice sounded demonic, it was Mom's. It always had been Mom's, and maybe the 'devil' always was in her, masquerading as a love-starved, needing someone to love, mother.

Ashley never felt herself in the presence of so much...evil, be it channeled by intent or accident. Her brain said that Good thoughts and Solid Reason was the way to neutralize it, but as 'Demon Mom's' left hand dug her glued on, lustfully red fingernails into Ashley's flesh, the 18 year old's gut took over.

Ashley observed her free hand slapping Mom across the face. Once, twice, then three times. Elena's head didn't move but her eyes did. They became human again, as Ashley felt herself losing her humanity, but gaining something in return.

"I'm sorry," Ashley said to her mother's face as 'Elena' finally withdrew her fangs from Ashley's arm.

Ashley observed blood coming out of her flesh as profuse as the tears from her mother's face. And felt the pain close to her wrist which, if inflicted a few inches more distally, would have done permanent damage to the tendons which she used for her music.

A de-possessed Elena extended her hand out to Ashley, extended outwardly in a show of peace, a begging for reconciliation. But Ashley saw something else on her mother's wrists. Slash marks which she knew would be self-inflicted one day soon, given Mom's escalating pathologies of mind and weakening discipline of emotion if Ashley left. Or slash marks in Ashley's own wrists if she stayed. Clearly, another solution was required. One that was threatened by Steve in his darkest moments, and which now fell to Ashley, the family's 'Angel of Light' to set into motion.

Chapter 14

Elena's inner eye saw Visions of Carnegie Hall, having completed a concert at which she channeled the gentle flowing streams of Debussy, the bold noble rivers and Liszt, and profound 'highest mountain' truths of Beethoven. A concert for Earth Day, in which she was Mama Nature clad in a long, flowing white gown, her NATURALLY long and blonde hair adorned by flowers, to a crowd, which included a happily married Ashley, that actually did adore her, and acknowledged the nobility and sincerity of HER struggles. A night where the struggles were finally all over. Yes, it was real, or would become so, very soon.

Elena knew she was dreaming, but that it was also a prophesy which was inevitable even in the most sadistic of universes. She had paid her dues, on the inside and outside, and as God was certainly in Heaven, some indication of His Goodness had to materialize on earth. She just had to wait, a little longer.

How much longer became evident when she woke up, finding that her Earth Maiden dress was a hospital gown, the flowers around her wrists ID bracelets. Her wrists held in place by someone, of something, very strong.

"Where am I?" she said, opening her eyes and seeing nothing but white in the room around her. "What am I doing here?" she blasted out, finding her wrists strapped to a bedpost, and the last man she wanted to see in front of her, smiling fondly, stroking his newly-grown goutee like he knew something both profound and demonic. "What the fuck do you want, Steve?" she blasted at her ex-husband, ex-abuser and, at one time, love of her life.

"For you to take a look at this," Steve replied, gently, handing her a playbill.

“This can’t be,” she gasped, the cold light of day forcing her eyes to see the picture on the front cover.

“But it is,” Steve said. He sat down next to her on the bed, requesting the Nurse about to come in with more medication to come back later, which was obeyed as a commandment. He pushed the playbill with the photos of the new performers in the ‘Dimitropoli Dimension’ in toward her face. “That’s your short-haired daughter as lead musician, and that geek beside her on gong, tambourine and harmonica is your music manager. Now her manager, and by the looks of how they’re looking at each other---“

“---Shut up, Steve. How did you get in here?” she demanded in a loud voice. “And how did I get in here?” she yelled at the Nurse, now backed up by two orderlies carrying more restraints.

Steve motioned again to the Nurse, who motioned to the Orderlies to back off, for now. “Steve” pointed to Ashley and Harry as the sources of her ‘relocation’.

“Who’s taking care of Scout?” Elena found herself asking, the issue of primary betrayal by the only daughter she cared about and the only man she ever really loved currently in the ‘shock’ phase of her mental ‘processing’.

Steve pointed to himself, smiling reassured.

“If you turn that dog into horsemeat, like you threatened to do, I’ll fucking---” she blasted at him at the top of her lungs before he put his hand over her mouth.

“Kill me?” Steve whispered. “That’s doing harm to others AND yourself. Not good for your prospects of getting out of here. And you do want to get out of here, don’t you?”

Remembering what had happened to her lobotomized sister, and almost her when she was held for 24 hours ‘observation’ during her troubled time as a teen, Elena nodded ‘yes’. Trusting her innermost secrets to a shrink, even the most open minded ones, would cost her freedom of movement and mind. But one life was more important than her own now.

“Scout is a good dog,” she said. “He doesn’t deserve any of us,” she continued.

“I know,” Steve said, nodding to the Nurse. The canine companion was brought in by another orderly, jumping atop Elena with a big, wagging tail.

Elena’s voice raised up several octaves as she felt herself to be young again, that state of Being activated by the all-heart, no-brains Lab-Collie cross mutt that was now the center of her attention. The only one left who she could love, and had to.

“You’re probably wondering how I found out you’re here,” Steve said.

“Not now,” Elena said, her face and consciousness embedded into unconditional love dog hair.

“Well. I have business associates who look out for me.”

“Who fucking owe you, after you fucked them over,” Elena said. “You loan them money again and you own them. Or think you do.”

“Money’s always more powerful than music, Ellie,” he said, holding her hand in a way that he hadn’t done in nearly 20 years.

“Or love?” Elena said, looking into his eyes, trying to define an old motivation which maybe was becoming new again.

“You put a lot of love into your music, but all it needs now is a little bit of money,” he said.

“And you think you can make money on my music,” she said.

“Only if you believe in the music, and in me, and in what I can do for you, me and us,” Steve asserted, defining ‘us’ as himself, her and the canine child between them. Elena peaked a look around her, noting the cold steel of everything that wasn’t sterile white. The place where the dull out demon would have his best shot at killing whatever musical vitality she had left. She would die before that would happen, vowing inside that she would rather slit her own wrist than become the totally boring, lifeless, talentless player of musical notes that she was one breakdown from becoming for good. Seeing the youth be the carriers of God’s Heavenly music, and vitality and laughter. While she was to become old and, worse than that, benched from the only game she ever really wanted to play. No, death was better than that. Even if it had to come earlier than expected.

Steve whisked the hypodermic needle armed Nurse and her white clad goons away with a wave of his hand. Indeed he was powerful, but for what end. A manifestation of such happened when he pulled out a knife from under his jacket, from a holster next to a small pistol. He showed her its blade, fondling its sharp edge. A look of destiny and finality overcame his long, recently-bearded face.

“You want to cut my hair like I did our daughters?” Elena said, trying to divert the issue, determined that he last gesture be one of wit, as close to humor as she was able to reach at this point in her artistic devolution. “She DID need a change in venue,” she said. “And I had no intention of cutting that wild mop of hers two inches below her scalp, which is the latest fashion in mobster-mod,,” she continued, formulating a gallows humor joke that actually made her smile, though not Steve. “And I do remember that it was not your intention to make me look matronly when you cut MY hair to ‘Mom’ length, after I THINK I asked you to fifteen years ago. Did I?”

“Yes, you did,” he said, sadly. “After I did the kind of things that---“

“---Are YOU. And what you’re good at,” Elena said. She brought the blade close to her throat. “One quick jab, please. For both of us? Just don’t let Scout eat the meat afterwards. I DO have dull out virus in me after all. Don’t want to infect him with...”

Before Elena could describe her inner afflictions and how she could no longer live with them, she felt the cold steel of Steve’s knife on her wrists, cutting off the restraints, then the ID bracelet. She felt her hands moving freely for the first time in what was probably days, then the soft touch of leather on her chest, from a coat Steve threw onto her.

“It’s a size 8. Just your size, now,” he said with pride regarding the low cut tightly fitting leopard dress that she always admired, and envied others for the ability to wear.

The Nurse stopped by, giving him a chart to sign. He whisked off his signature with a confident 'doctorly'-like flare. "That is my signature," he said to the nurse.

"If you say so, Mister Giovanni," she acknowledged with shrugged shoulders. "Good luck," she said to Elena with a 'you're alright now' grin. "Here ya go, sport" she smiled widely at Scout, sneaking him a piece of meat from a food tray.

Scout accepted the piece of half-cooked grey flesh masquerading as meat fit for human consumption with minimal eagerness. He knew his place, and that accepting such gifts, even if not wanted or trusted, was the smartest thing to do to survive. As did Elena as she put on everything Steve bought for her, smiling at her newly found liberator, or executioner. Either way, she had a lot of Forward movement to catch up with in the real world outside the Psych Ward's walls. And a score to settle with the people who put her there.

Chapter 15

"She may want a radio in there," Ashley said when going through Elena's things, trying to choose what would go into the CARE package which was not supposed to containing anything potentially harmful to herself or others. "Something to keep her mind occupied at night so she doesn't have to hear the music in her head," she continued, turning around to the man behind her. "Talk radio, maybe. As long as they don't talk about music, right?"

"Yeah, it would probably be a good idea, Ash," Harry said, wondering about how true his statement really was.

"A good idea which we'll say comes from who, Harry?"

Ashley needed an answer, and one that would take her mind off the central question at hand, or paw. "Scout!" Harry answered. "It was that mangy mutt's idea to gather all of these things and get them to her. Maybe he could be sent in by one of the nurses with this bag around his neck, a 'get really well soon' sign around his collar and a..." Harry looked around, still unable to locate the hound. "You're sure your sister came by and took him?" he inquired, smelling something fishy.

"She left a note saying that she did," Ashley said as she rummaged through the clothing which would make Mom feel perhaps like Elena again. As well as the hair extension which Elena chopped off of Ashley's head. Long enough for Elena to perhaps strangle herself with in a suicide attempt, or if Ashley followed in her mother's footsteps to the abyss, sufficiently strong for daughter to commit matricide.

Harry looked at the writing on the note. True enough it was in female handwriting, but with a very dominating male pattern to the script.

"And who else would have a key to get in here?" Ashley said while cramming blouses and skirts which didn't required ironing into the bag.

"Maybe Steve", Harry wanted to say, but didn't. His eyes wandered to the note left behind by Elena's secret admirer on the large 'low alcohol' vino that delivered her into a raging, and ugly, stupor, and an ancient madness he had finally driven her back into. Yes, the handwriting was

probably Steve's, an intuitive feeling he knew would check out as fact. But first fact to deal with was Ashley, and her suspicions, or leads.

"And who else would know where Mom is?" Ashley said as she continued to pack things Elena would need, or perhaps want. "Only me, my trusted sisters and brother, and the Big Boss Upstairs."

"Who all answer to Steve, if he presses them hard enough," Harry wanted to say, but didn't. Such an accusation would cause undue panic if untrue, and evoke even more horrible terror if it was. "I need to make some calls," he said, pulling out his roladex.

"To Irving? Your boss?" she said, reading his mind somehow. "You know, I know you told him you were downtown today talking to copyright lawyers and drumming up some more business for his company. But he doesn't own you, ya know. It's just you and me now, right?"

"Right," Harry replied, saying what he meant to be true. What he wanted to be true. What he NEEDED to be true. But one truth of the matter was that Steve Giavanni still wanted to own his wife, and that Irving had a score to settle with him. Mobsters like Steve and Irving always used pawns like Elena to do their dirty work. Such was what Harry accepted as part of life. But the prospect of Ashley being used in the chess game between the warring Moguls, that was something he would not accept. And as long as Ashley was living in a world of musical melodies instead of hard facts, the notes between her ears would always be written by, or for, the puppet-masters. Dare he introduce her to the world of those that do UNTO instead of FOR others? His instincts said yes.

"Ya know, Mom really likes chocolate," Ashley said while observing another corner of the bag still not occupied by goodies for the Mother she still considered her best friend, or potentially such. "But I heard that some medications and chocolate don't get along. I don't know what's in chocolate. But I remember the time that Scout got into the Baker's semi-sweet chips and he was as hyper as---"

"----Scout may be with your father, who may be with your mother, who might be---" Harry interjected, picking up the phone and dialing it.

"---No! Impossible!" Ashley insisted, hanging it up. "Mom is at the hospital right now. I just talked to the Nurse."

"The one who your father maybe paid to say whatever he wanted you to think?" Harry interjected. "The same nurse that told you, for the second day, that your Mother was too heavily medicated to receive visitors? And that her doctors advised you not to come by until you heard from HER directly?"

The logic of manipulation finally was sinking into Ashley's usually-upbeat head. Though she was brilliant in the ways the world should be, she was, after all, pathetically ignorant of the way it was. A master of Metaphysical realities who had no idea about the pathophysiology or anatomy of base human cruelty. Clearly more explanation was needed for her to make sense of it all, and to do something about it.

Harry put his strong hands on her shaking shoulders, but Ashley pulled away. She stormed over to the piano bench, and sat in front of the notes. Her angry and terrified eyes were drawn to the keyboard. Her hands tried to 'play' the problem out, so perhaps the solution could come through

the music. But as she rocked back and forth to the Symphony of Horror in her head, no answers came. Harry felt compelled to continue the explanation in words.

“There’s been a war going on between my boss Irving and your Dad--”

“---EX-Dad!”

“---For a long time, Ash. He knew that your EX-Dad never took your Mom’s music career seriously, or was seriously afraid of her becoming a success at it. So, Irving saw an opportunity to stick it to your ex-Dad by sticking your mother on stage and buying the crowd off,” he confessed.

Harry expected Ashley to ask more details about the revelation he was sworn to keep quiet, at the risk of losing his own life. She answered him with more notes, more music, all of it disharmonious, and fearful.

“That doesn’t mean that YOU don’t have talent,” he assured her. “You DO! More REAL talent than you ever realized. More than the bought off crowd realized. More than Irving realized. More talent than I realized!!!” he related, feeling his face wet with tears.

Ashley stopped playing perhaps because she felt Harry’s tears and could define where they were coming from, or perhaps she was finding something in herself. “We have to do something about it!” she asserted. Her stare was fixed on something in front of her fire-emitting eyes. She grabbed the phone book, tearing the pages open to Private Investigative entries.

“These guys! Aaronson Investigators!” she said, pointing to the first entry. “We’ll hire them to find out what Dear Old EX-Dad is doing with Mom, and how he’s going to screw US! We have money. I do anyway.”

“After Aaronson gets paid twice what you have by Daddy Steve to spy on and screw US! That Jew bastard has a reputation for that, and worse,” Harry said.

Ashley moved down the page. “OK, Cho and Associates.”

“Chinks who work for snakeheads. He’ll take all the money you have and I have and find a way to find no answers, or find a way to make twice as much from your Dad. Maybe after selling your Mom to a sweatshop in China for the price of an eggroll.”

Ashley took in a deep breath, moving over to the next page. “Papadopolous Detective Agency!” she asserted. “They’re Greeks. I’m Greek. All of my MOTHER’S side of the family are Greeks. And YOUR Greek. He’ll protect his own!”

“Like the other Greeks in Greece who get hired by a client to reclaim their land in the old country, then tell their cousin Nick that there’s property up for grabs. Nick lays a claim on the property while the client is told that the property is lost, to squatters right. Cousin Nick gets the land, legally, then sells it, sharing the profits with Pappadapoulus et al. Perfectly legal, according to---“

“---Then we do things ILLEGALLY!” Ashley insisted. “Any way we have to so we can get Mom and Scout back!”

Harry knew that Ashley never so much as got a speeding ticket. Her legal record was clean, and though she was probably fascinated with outlaws, she was as inexperienced with doing what they did as Harry was at having a stable relationship. Both deficits had to be corrected fast for anything to continue, for Harry, Ashley, Elena and Scout.

“You have a plan?” a terrified Ashley asked Harry as he pondered the possibility.

“Yes, I do,” he said, lying through his shaking teeth and a sincere, assuring smile.

Chapter 16

The winner of the contest for a free gourmet meal, anything you can eat or take home with you in a knapsack, went to Carla Edelmann, delivered to her place of work personally by the owner of the restaurant. She had no idea why she won, or who entered her in, but the staff working under had her encouraged her to go. Nurse Edelmann, after all, worked harder than anyone else in the Ward, much of that work involving making as much work as possible for her subordinates. “I only push them as far as I know they can go,” she said. “The patients thank me for it the next day, and my staff will thank me for it in a week, month, or maybe a year. But I do what I have to do,” she continued, looking at the menu. “As you do, I suppose,” she said with a condescending eyeroll to the waitress. “You are the only blonde in an all-dark haired restaurant, and I DO know why Greek restaurant owners like to work long hours. To make their wives at home richer and themselves, well, happier.”

Carla’s stare turned to the waitress’s face. “Do I know you?” she inquired in even more of a North of 68th Street East Side Uptown tone.

“Don’t thank so, Ma’am” Ashley replied with as much Texas in her diction as her ‘perty little head’ could manage, hiding behind downwardly turned eyes and the mop of hair which had been once attached to her head by the roots rather than pins. “Less ya been on the rodeo bunny circuit in San Antone. Or getting’ tanked afterwards at the Alamo Saloon. Mean place ta be smilin’ fer tips. Reason why I came up here. Weather’s as cold as as a bull rider’s heart, but the pay is--“

The very NON-down home Carla commanded Ashley to shut her pie hole with an effortless lifting of her palm. She pointed her long fingers at the items on the menu with an autocratic attitude expressed with minimal exertion, as, after all, it was “the help’s” job to sweat for the smart, and talented. “This, this, this and this,” she ordained, pointing to each item on the menu, all from the part of it written in Greek.

Even Ashley could figure out that Carla couldn’t tell the difference between an alpha and an omega in Greek, but she could read the prices of the items. Yes, dollars were the universal language. And the instinct to smell where it was most easily obtained knew no ethnic boundaries. It made sense now why Nurse Carla rose to the top of the ladder at the hospital, and why she was the one ‘Daddy Steve’ had paid off to hide Elena’s whereabouts and conditions from Ashley, the daughter who had the courage to bring her in for help. And probably paid the hospital administration with a healthy donation as well to keep Nurse Carla in her position.

As Ashley took down the orders on her pad, her hands trembled with guilt. Maybe she should have looked into the facility she brought Elena to more closely. Perhaps there were better places for her mother to get the psychotherapy she needed. Possibly taking Elena to a priest rather than a shrink would have been the better way to go. And why did Ashley choose the shrink for the primary referral who had been the marriage counselor for her parents? Yes, Doctor Weinburg could have always been on Steve's payroll, faining support for Elena even throughout the divorce for some bigger plan down the road. "The dirty, fucking Kike headshrinker," Ashley thought, and accidentally let slip through her forced Texan smile, in very non Texan language.

"You say something, Sally Slowpoke?" Nurse Carla asked, noting the nametag over Ashley's very padded bra, having not ascertained what her subordinate uttered without permission.

"Auditionin' fer a play...sorry, Ma'am," Ashley replied.

"An audition you'll fall on yer fact at if y'all mutter yer lines 'stead sayin' them so the words can be understood," Carla said in a mock Western accent. "Ya'll git my meanin'?"

"Yeah," Ashley answered, clearly. Though not clear as to whether Carla was friend, foe or innocent bystander to what was going on between Irving, Steve and perhaps Harry. And if Carla actually gave a shit about Elena, or any of her other patients, as she carried herself off more like a doctor than a nurse.

As for Harry, Ashley noticed him from the corner of her eye as she bowed to her customer and slipped away into the kitchen. Harry paid the leather-jacketed gentlemen with Slavic accents good money for the brown bags of 'baklava' which they gave him. After some sternly, yet politely, offered 'dosvidonia's', the 'kids from Kiev' walked out of the door, past an old Greek who looked at them suspiciously. The old man stared down Harry, demanding an explanation.

"To make a people's revolution happen, sometimes you have to do some uncomfortable things to some of the people," he said.

The old man seemed satisfied, for now, having had the words of Lenin quoted to him. Or maybe it was a line from Nikos Katzantzakis, the only writer of fiction whose ideas Ashley bought as fact. But one fact was certain. Whatever was in that bag had to go into Nurse Carla's mouth, and the right people had to be around when that oral orifice opened up.

An hour later, Carla finished the 'baklava', its real pharmaceutical identity hidden by the spices and flavorings in the best food available this side of the Acropolis.

"My Dad can really cook when he has to," Harry said as he observed Carla giving in to a happy slumber at her private booth. "He told me that he was once offered a job cooking for stubborn prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. And some other places."

"Which someday you'll tell me about?" Ashley demanded, phrasing it, for the moment, as question.

Harry threw a 'do what is on the agenda now, I will tell you what you have to do later when it becomes later' stare back her way. Not quite a 'Daddy Steve' look, but close enough for her to remain distrustful of him. Maybe vindicating Elena's claim that she went out with Harry as her daughter to check Harry out before she fell under his spell. Perhaps Mama Elena was not that

crazy after all, but just too committed to the Calling of Caring. But she was missing. Forceful manipulators were better skilled at finding her than imaginative musicians.

“Where do we take her?” Ashley asked of her ‘collaborator’ as Nurse Carla’s always chin-upward head fell back, drooling out of the side of her mouth like a common drunk.

Harry pulled a hotel key out of his pocket, forcing it into Ashley’s point of view. “As far as I know, she likes women more than men. Trusts them more too. Ask her any question when she’s comfortable, and she’ll tell you all we need to know.”

Ashley was as inexperienced in the area of romance with men as any 18 going on 19 year old she knew. Unfortunately, she was equally unfamiliar with even the thought of making love to another woman. Imaginations of such frightened her, and yet intrigued her as she looked at Carla, imagining what she would look, and feel like under her designer label wrap around skirt, tightly-fitting sweater and pearl-imbedded scarf hanging around her long, slinky, swan-like neck.

“If I were a woman, the only person I’d trust in bed, or anywhere else, was another woman,” Harry said, as if reading her thoughts, and emerging feelings.

Chapter 17

Elena didn’t know where she was, but she knew what she was, finally. An excuse that Ashley had used to stay at home and take care of her which prevented her most talented offspring to go out into the world and make something of herself. Then again, Elena used the ‘I have to put my daughter’s career and well being before my own’ reason for not exploring her own professional and personal options away from the cozyness of home. A comfy kind of death that kills slowly, till one day you wake up and it’s too late to do anything about it.

Upon waking up in the hotel room, it felt like there was time to do something. And not about the filet mignon which had a touch too much garlic in it, or the lobster which was a tad overcooked, or her tough-skinned dinner companion from the night before. Steve was still in the shower, washing off the body secretions which Elena chose to keep on her. Why she agreed to having sex with him was beyond her. And why he insisted that they did the naughty-nasty seemed to be a secret he was maintaining behind his ever-elusive, yet welcoming eyes. Maybe he wanted to annul the divorce, as having sexual relations would have some kind of legal power with the courts. Or perhaps it was the sex with your ex thing, an event which came with no real expectations, so anything ok that happened would feel great the morning after.

Elena pulled herself out from under the sheets and helped herself to another look in the mirror. The hotel owner knew enough to put in ones that made you look thinner rather than fatter, especially the ones on the ceilings, but even so, Elena enjoyed the view. She had become younger. More desirable to men, but more importantly, more desirable to herself. On the outside anyway. But as for the inside---she was empty. A song came to her mind, then lips.

“Sometimes I feel like a childless Mom...a long way from home,” the lyrics, sung in an African rhythm from very white lips. The hatred for Ashley and her new man Harry somehow merged into self pity, then sorrow, then vendetta, against not only the two ‘kids’ who put her in the nuthouse. Every range of emotions went through Elena as she attempted to find the ones her dried up throat and boxed in lungs could handle.

Just as Elena entered a world of her own in the windowless hotel room with blinds that would not open, she was brought back to the 'real' world by a male voice as operatic as it was accurate. "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child," he sang over it in an East Indian accent. "A long way from Ommm," he continued, folding his hands in a Paki prayer, or was it a Hindu prayer? All Elena could do was to pray he would stop singing, stop smiling and stop whatever he was thinking behind those shifty yet sexy eyes of his. Still, he was an ally now in a war which she was determined to win. A nomination for a Grammy, some of which could be bought, the other that had to be earned, somehow. Maybe by a forty-something woman who re-entered the concert scene after doing the family-scene. Yes, she would be a role model for other Moms. Who had other Ashleys who tied them down. And other Steves who kept them 'domestically under-expressive'. Unless of course Steve could be beat at his own game. After all, the manipulative abuser was a great teacher. And every great teacher always produces students who excel him.

Chapter 18

Nurse Carla woke up into a happy slumber, experiencing the better halves of the dream world and the awake world. She flung her red hair around her with a shake of the head, realizing that she had been resting on a very big pillow on an oversized bed. She felt seen through by life, made all the more real by a gentle hand making her even more naked. Nurse Carla seemed to like it when the Doctor with the face of a Valkyrie unbuttoned her blouse, slipping it off her overburdened shoulders. Open to the music of the earth when Doctor A pulled down her skirt, allowing the undergarments to remain on until...later. Nurse, now patient, Carla, reached down and ran her fingers through the hair atop the of the angelic-like practitioner messaging her arms, legs and chest in places no medical textbook described, knowing the anatomical points of interest as if by Divine instinct, and the loving care of a goddess, or assistant to such. "Hmmm, I smell...cinnamon, Doc," Carla slurred out with eyes closed and nostrils wide open. "And ginger. And fresh bread. Does this mean that I'm---"

"---Dying, yes," the aura-surrounded caretaker of her soul assured her. "And where you go from here depends on you answering questions that I ask you truthfully," she continued, looking up at the corner of the windowless, dimly-lit amber chamber. The dead silence was filled by music, a hymn-like heavenly melody with an sensuous demonic countertune, both merging into a single entity. A bit like Tanhauser, but more...contemporary, and immediate.

Carla opened her eyes and sized up the place. "No, I'm not dead!" she protested. "If I were, I would not be able to do this!" she continued, reaching for the wall with an assertive push. But her arms would not move. Neither could her legs. Her fingers and toes went numb. Then a cold chill went through her body. The ex-Catholic atheist gasped, realizing the reality of her transient un-reality. "Oh my God!" she gasped.

"He's listening," the Doctor Angel said, pointing to the sky. "As am I," the now clearly feminine Messenger said, taking out a pad of paper and a pen, writing down the notes in red ink that seemed more like blood. "We first need to know your name. Your real name."

"Carla?" she muttered through shaking lips, unsure of what she knew as fact.

"Yes," the Doctor Angel replied, checking the answer against something in a leather bound Holy Book with Greek lettering on the cover. "That is correct. Now, we will proceed in the next question for your...entrance exam."

“Entrance exam to...?” Carla inquired, her face shaking, the body below it numb, getting even colder. “Heaven?” she asked. “What if I don’t believe in heaven?” she continued. “I converted to Judiasm, you know. My husband’s idea. Ex-husband actually. Who fucked...eh...screwed me over big time. Of course, I also, maybe, possibly, probably screwed him up to. Hey...we did horrible things to each other.”

“Yes, we know,” the Angel Doc said, checking with the Record of records. “But...you did what you had to do. Like maybe you did what you had to do when you maybe, possibly, cheated on your exam to get your Nursing certificate?” The view from above revealed that the Angel Doc’s intuition was right, but her timing was not in keeping with her Supervisor’s protocol.

“Skip the fucking part about the Nursing School diploma!” Harry grunted from the room next to them to the cameras above which were recording the event, to the accompaniment of the most recent composition by Ashley. “Everyone cheated on their exams in school!” he blasted back to ‘Doctor-Angel’ Ashley through the earpiece she had secured in her left ear, under the blonde wig lit up with small lights around the base of her neck to make it look like a halo. “We all cheat in school so we can practice cheating in life,” Harry informed her. “The system is fucked, so to survive it, we fuck it back. Just like you did, maybe in ways you don’t even remember.”

Ashley threw an ‘I climbed my way up the ladder honestly,’ stare back at the camera, while hugging her patient, and hearing Carla’s confession about giving herself extra points in the mandatory Physiology Lab Practicum while screwing up the lab results of everyone else, her defense being that she would be a better nurse than they would be, and it was all in the service of her future patients.

“The drugs we gave this bitch aren’t going to last forever,” Harry said. “We need to know where Steve is, then where he took your Mom.”

Ashley wondered why Harry asked about where Steve was before bringing up the issue as to where her Mother was. But as they were both part of the same question, she let it slide. Just as she let Carla slide down her arms, into a tighter embrace.

“I’ll confess everything if I don’t have to go to that horrible place,” Carla asked like a whimpering child. “Please tell me what I have to confess to make it right,” she continued, as one would to a Mother. An Angel. Or perhaps the Virgin Mother Angel, which Ashley was now. At least to the mark, and the only person who could find the people Ashley and Harry needed to locate, at all costs.

Ashley looked at the watch hidden under the gown she wore for her ‘ghost of Christmas past’ Dickens play. The time had past. And the pulse in Carla’s wrist was beating stronger now. Soon she would recover all of her senses, the doorway to the truth inside of her closed forever.

“Your most recent transgression is what the Good Lord need to know about, my child” Ashley asked, as something she never envisioned herself being. A Mother, and not like a mother to her own mother. A mother to a child of her own, as the camera saw it. It was a dream she that became activated somehow when she met Harry, one which he never spoke about but welcomed, in his more optimistic moments. Maybe it would happen or maybe not, but only if she cracked the lock on the mind and soul of the child in her arms now. “You met a man named Steve.”

“Yes, I did,” Carla wept. “He did worse things than I ever did, or even wanted to do. He told me some of them, and I found them exciting to hear about. Like----”

“---We don’t need to know what he did, my beautiful, deluded child,” Ashley said. “We only need to know where he is, and what he is going to do.”

Carla thought about the question, looked up to the ‘sky’ above the ceiling, then into the eyes of her Mother confessor. Harry watched through the camera lens as Carla leaned over to kiss her Angel Helper on the cheek, then whisper something in her ear, then faint into a deep sleep.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen,” Harry blasted into the mic connected to Ashley’s earphone. “We have to do something.”

“Yes, WE do,” Ashley replied, looking into the camera. Sure of herself. And of the information. With a ‘I know as much as you do now’ stare that also said ‘we are in this thing together now, whether we like it or not’ coda to it.

Chapter 19

Elena played to a captive audience the next night, gentlemen of real power and influence in the audience, seated comfortably in suits made by the finest tailors from all over the world. Those with no power or influence were her other audience, on either side of her and in cage-like rooms behind the stage, all of the opposite gender than the ‘gents’, in clothing that covered very little, designed by their Master.

The assigned piece was Clair de Lune, one of Elena’s favorites. A piece about innocent beauty, played for men who were buying beauties who soon would lose all of their innocence. It seemed to sooth the gents who were bidding on which love slaves they would purchase for their clients back home. And made some of the girls whose lives as free women were over feel a little bit better about themselves, as long as the drugs they had been given kicked into gear of course.

Elena glanced away from the spotlight to see one of them, a Russian girl no older than Ashley, caressing herself with a swan-like motion, displaying her wares under the see-through ‘bikini’ in the hope that someone would take her under their kroysha. ANYone but the Master Puppeteer who had just freed Elena.

“She’s beautiful,” Steve commented to Elena as he slipped his way next to her discreetly. “A real money maker,” he smirked. “But you, Elena, my dear ex-wife and new partner, you are even more beautiful,” he smiled.

“Because I’ll bring in more money than her?” Elena said, snidely, pretending to be more wicked than scared.

“Yes, indeed,” Steve said, pointing Elena’s attention to her reflection in the mirror. “Ever since that divorce, and that diet you went on, and the facelifts and belly-tucks you paid for with MY hard earned money, you aged backwards into a hot babe, cool looking chick, bombshell bambi. One who I---”

“---Will sell for top dollar?” she bluffed with her most arrogant poker face. “Or yen. Or Mark. Pound. Or Euro. Or if Greece goes back to a currency it can trust, along with the rest of the Continent, olive pits.”

“Not as long as you keep playing so beautifully,” Steve said, pointing to the piano. “These wetback illegals can tap music on thighs, chests, and balls, but no one really hears the music. You, you play the music that everyone can hear, and feel and...dance to,” he continued, grabbing a freshly branded Albanian teenager no older than 15 whose English was restricted to ‘no, please no, Mister,’.

Apparently Steve could not understand his diction. Neither could she understand why God had seen fit for her to be delivered into this kind of ‘work’. Nor why Elena, the woman at the piano who played such angelic music had that ‘you are now my property’ look in stone cold face.

Elena continued to play, knowing the consequences of stopping. Steve had to know that she was now not only a worthy partner in bed, but one to compete with in the board room as well. She turned her smiling face and exposed leg through the slit in her skirt to the ‘Samouri Seijo’, owner of the Yamaha Piano company sipping scotch in the third table to her left. Played a special passage to the Herr Professor Doctor ‘Hans’ from Zurich whose voting power in the pharmaceutical companies in Switzerland could bankrupt most of the drug companies in New Jersey. Winked and nodded to the nerdy Bill Gates look alike whose Silcone Valley company made possible every Christian Chat line in America, as well as most child porno sites.

Yes, Elena had gotten what she wanted. She was beautiful to look at. Her music was being appreciated by gentlemen who would sell her to every concert hall and record label in the civilized world. She could write her own ticket. Unless of course Steve decided she should go back into the nuthouse. Or maybe, with the help of Samouri Seijo’, Herr Professor Hans and Nerdboy Gates, he could have HIM committed to the nuthouse. Or, perhaps give Ashley and Harry a taste of ‘therapy’ in a locked ward. The ‘loving couple’ still angered her beyond measure. It drove her to play better, stronger and more expressively. To fight the dull out demon who said ‘Elena, you are a piano player but will never really be a musician’. The fight with that demon continued into the second movement, then the third. Then the next assigned piece...the Pathatique. Which would have been far better if there was an improvised musical accompaniment with a violin.

As Elena played the notes, convincing herself and most of her audience that it was music, she recalled how Ashley could read Beethoven’s mind and find the additions to the piece that never made it to the published score. Those improvisations which must have been played by the classical geniuses while they were alive.

Elena struggled to find Ashley’s voice within the notes, and the music. Behind a forced and seemingly effortless doll-like smile, she struggled with all of her might to visualize the notes. Feel the passion of the piece. Connect to the Fire inside of it. And to see something that could make it all work.

Elena’s desperate prayers to the God she officially acknowledged but never really loved, or trusted, were answered when she looked at the back row. There, standing next to the doorway, two figures. Their faces beacons of light, despite the fact that their features were hidden within the shadows, and hair on their heads that didn’t fit their eyes or faces.

The ‘gent’ seemed more like a boy than a man, though he was dressed as if he had already had more than his share of success. His ‘babe behind the nerdy library glasses’ secretary seemed to know more than he did about the place. She looked Elena’s way and nodded, apagogically and confidently.

“Yes,” Elena said with her eyes to the ‘librarian’. “We have to forgive each other, Ashley, and work together, really together, for the first time in our lives, despite the fact that you are and always will be a spoiled bitch who deserves to get whatever she wants, according to your HEAVENLY Father above,” she continued, muttering under her shaky breath, while pretending to give tongue to Steve, the man who would be her executioner, who had already done far worse to the kidnapped young women who now had become her OTHER daughters in need.

Chapter 20

Librarian-Secretary Ashley helped Elena ‘feed the animals’, wondering if her mother had turned into one herself. She watched the now beautiful Elena shove plates of food to the ‘for now’ beautiful love slaves chained to their beds in their rooms, emptying their bedpans of urine, feces and blood. Particularly fresh was the blood shed by ineffective attempts to slit their wrists, evidence of such in at least one in eight of the non-English speaking ‘puppies for sale’.

Ashley knew that if Steve or his well-armed biker goons spotted her, she would wind up joining ‘the girls’ in ‘the kennel’, as would Elena. She knew that Elena was also required to show that she had developed a tough skin and a cold heart, as tenderness in the eyes would be the easiest way for both of them to be found out. Perhaps Mama Elena had become more than Steve’s victim, but now his assistant. Identification with and serving the aggressor, after all, is the easiest way to not be killed by him, and to get some goodies in the meantime. But for what purpose? Elena’s face seemed one ‘eat slowly, dear, there is always hope’ away from shedding a river of tears for the girls she was not determined to help at the cost of her own life, and perhaps daughter’s life, but there was still a plot incubating in Elena’s brain that she would not share with anyone, even her own soul.

Elena asked many questions of Ashley when the surveillance cameras weren’t listening, and she finally got around to the logical one. “Where are we, Ash?” she asked Ashley while removing the excrement around ‘Asia’, a Thai with a child-like face that had turned unreachably vacant, as well as irreversibly old. “I know this is Hell. But is it the sub-section of that dimension that the commuters and other commoners call New Jersey?”

Ashley answered with a sad smile, acknowledging Elena’s wit, and humor. It was an accomplishment after all. At least it was the kind of comedy that made you smile inside the mouth.

“You found me through Nurse Carla?” Elena inquired as she moved on to the next of Steve’s ‘employees’, past a behemoth, head-shaved guard who has more tattoo on his skin than skin, all of it in German which presented its message in the harshest of terms and symbols. .

“Nurse, and other things, Mom,” Ashley answered.

“Yes, I know, Ash,” replied in half-truths.

“And you are going to be some of those other things?” Ashley advanced.

“Now that someone made her disappear, yeah. Like the saying goes, the show must go on. And the opera ain’t over till the formerly fat lady sings,” Elena continued, with a subtext that was Mom, who looked at Ashley’s ‘full figure’, too proud or scared to push her explanations into an

apology. "I'm sorry about putting so much, stuff on you under the neck and taking so much off the top of your head. But---"

"----It was just business, 'Elena'? Mother-daughter business?" Ashley blasted back, still bitter about the drug and food induced overweight problem that would probably plague her for the next few years, or perhaps her entire life. Feeling the shortness of her hair under her wig, that hair requiring at least five years to grow back to its previous length. Then there were all the years when Ashley had stayed at home to take care of Mom, to be her 'best friend' when no one else would. Golden years in her teens that she would never get back, no matter how much money or fame or popularity Harry or anyone else could get for her.

Mother stared down daughter, and daughter stared down mother, in a haunting musical showdown that Ashley did not bother to write nor define in her head. A head which was now very non-musical, something for which she was most resentful to Elena, and life, for inflicting on her. But the dirge in the key of everything minor didn't last long.

"Bitch number four needs a body bag!" the biker dude yelled out, referring Elena to a live 'Bejing special' puppy who was now a dead corpse.

"It figures," Elena said. "Four is bad luck in Chinese. Whoever gave her that number should have known that. He'll pay up big time if I have anything to say about it!"

The Biker dude became a dud, having realized that he was the one who branded the number four on her chest, wrists, and ankles. Losing no time, he motioned for his underlings to gather a body bag to take into the kitchen, so the chef could prepare more stew for her room-mates in the kennel. Such was Elena's explanation of the protocol for unanticipated damage to goods anyway.

Elena seemed to be the perfect 'head bitch', but her tough as nails attitude could not fool Ashley. It was only a matter of time till the Biker, or Steve would find out about it. Ashley heard the clock ticking on the wall, then the one inside her heart counting down. Elena turned to her and asked, "What did Carla tell you? Really?"

Ashley assessed her current situation, looking and feeling like someone completely different than the 'good girl' who had celebrated her 18th birthday in a sheltered and, all things considered, happy life a mere 2 months ago. She had, rightly or wrongly, shared the relevant information obtained from Carla during her 'heavenly confession' to Harry. He was not here, having disappeared without explanation, and a promise to return.

As to what to do about everybody's situations, Ashley turned to her childhood and collective unconscious inside of again, a source of inspiration which never failed her when wanting to find musical solutions to the world's problems. It was the myths and legends that she felt herself seeking sustenance and data from now. Of particular note was 'Robin Hood', where the good guys, and gals, do their damnest to fight the evils of Prince John, their efforts redeemed and rewarded by the return of King Richard.

As for Ashley's present King Richard, Harry, he was already half an hour late. And as for the Camelot credo that 'Right is Might', that had as much relevancy now as the Hollywood movies in which 'moral bookkeeping' always resulted in the Heavenly Father keeping balance in the universe. Ashley felt her belief in that Unifying Goodness vanishing, yet she held on to it as hard as she could. She looked at the chains around the girls waiting, and begging, to become corpses, then stew. At the guns kept on the sides of their leather-clad protectors. At 'Daddy

Steve' through a window leading to the office where he smiling with another man of power and influence who seemed as important as heartless. Then at 'Warden-Maestra Elena', who was still 'Mom', and somehow still worth saving.

This time no music went through Ashley's head. Just dead silence, as she struggled to keep herself Alive, anyway possible, caught between being pissed off at Harry for not showing up for reasons he never game, and terrified that he never would come to rescue her.

Chapter 21

The Diner down the road from the Compound was named 'The Olympia', an establishment owned by Greeks since the days when Teddy Roosevelt insisted that the Customs Agents at Ellis Island at least pretend to be courteous to immigrants from Athens, Sparta and Crete. It was now owned by Russians, for reasons that only Harry's dinner guest knew, and never really shared. He was still late, but Harry knew that leaving a note for him or even going to the can and not being there when her arrived would have even more dire consequences than sneaking back to the Steve's Compound to direct Elena and Ashley in a plan that would save everyone, or to somehow get both of them to safety, somewhere, somehow.

Harry looked at the clock again, and dialed his cell phone. "Come on Ashley, answer," he said, knowing that it was futile. The Giovanni Compound was one of those places which was dead to cell phone calls in, or out. Such was procedure. As was waiting for 'Don' Irving Horowitz to show up on HIS timetable. Finally, he did.

"Awy! The traffic!" he said by explanation with exaggerated hand movements and a boisterous complaining voice that gave new meaning to the old Yiddish term of 'kvetching'. "It was murder," He continued as he ambled himself at a leisurely pace over to the booth and squeezed his fat belly between the table and the backboard. Though he belly was full, his face seemed thin, paler than normal, the whites of his eyes more yellow than white. "I tell ya, if these Jersey politicians ever had to drive that road themselves, they would fill the potholes with ANYthing to fill them up. Even with bullshit, they could fill them up. And there's more bullshit in Jersey politics than anything East of the Hudson. That's why you and me only do business with gonifs in Manhattan, the Bronx or the Communist Bulshevik shitheads who are now Capitalists in Brooklyn. KGB washouts, shitheads and assholes that they are," he ranted on, stopping himself to wave a 'hello' in Russian to Boris, the manager sporting a leather jacket and depressive grimace on his face behind the counter.

"Russians never smile," Irving offered by way of explanation, showing a big fat Greek grin of 'happy' to him. "But Jews and others who are getting set up to fuck them over like they fucked everyone else over always smile. And when you get them to smile, that's when you know you got them!"

Boris's hard lips broke into a smile. Not a happy one, but a trusting one. "Now I got him!" Irving whispered to Harry while pretending to be the happy 'Jewish Zorba' everyone in many business liked, loved, or feared. "I'll get my pound of flesh from him later," Irving said, picking up the menu.

"Your family interested in getting a restaurant cheap, Har?" Irving offered. "If I give them this one, one thing I promise. Hand to God," he continued, coughing some red-tinged phlegm into a napkin.

“That they make money for you?”

“That they stop making this cabbage and borcht shit,” he said, disappointed with the fare offered. “Or put something interesting in the perogies besides onions, garlic and ricin. Or whatever other biological weapons their exKGB uncles brought over with them that they can’t sell to anyone else. And once KGB, always KBG. The only thing Russians are good for is using them to fuck others, or getting them to fuck each other up.”

Irving looked at the menu which had become more Slavic than Greek, looking at the samples of such at the tables around him. Finally, a waitress came over. “I can to help you, Sir” she asked in a diction more Ukrainian than Russian.

“First, you can to speak better English. Good for business and is to easier to say,” he sneered. “And get me a bagel. With cream cheese and lox. And for my friend here?” he continued turning to Harry.

“The same,” Harry said, knowing that such was always the correct answer when dining with those who are above you or those to whom you want to get close to.

“Mazeltof!” Irving said, dismissing the waitress with a twenty, put into her cleavage, with a wink and a nod. She smiled, in a way that was both fearful and trusting, but grateful. She departed from the table with a slight bow, tending to her maidenly duties.

“Hey, money’s money,” Irving said by way of explanation. “And time is time,” he continued, looking at his watch. “And you have ten minutes to tell me why you are asking me to spend time schlepping all the way down here to talk with you.”

“Investing time,” Harry said, by way of explanation. He opened up his cell phone and showed him the pictures taken at the Compound. Along with pics of important people in it.

“Uncle Steve Giavanni’s holiday camp,” Irving said, impressed with the findings. “With a piano player and everything to keep the guests satisfied.”

“And the employees from leaving,” Harry continued, focusing Irving’s attention on the captive girls rather than the captor ‘gentlemen’ who bought and sold them. “Slavery is illegal,” Harry said by way of explanation.

“So’s everything else that is good for the soul or happy for the brain box if you ask enough lawyers about it,” Irving replied. “Maybe you should hypnotize Don Stevey and convince him he’s President Lincoln, whose only gotta get a good rep in history if he frees the slaves. Hypnotherapy turned around Nurse Carla, so I heard,” he said. “Heard she vanished. Maybe the Jewish bitch who gives the finger to God and everyone else became Catholic again and joined a Nunnery, Har?”

Irving’s legend was interesting, and maybe true. But how did he get the pieces of fact to put it into fantasy? As usual, Irving answered Harry’s question before he could ask it.

“You’re doing shit to Stevo and his lieutenants, and you want me in on it with you, right, Har? No, you NEED me in on it, because half of Stevo’s gentleman buyers and sellers are Cops

themselves. You don't trust the Russians. You can't trust the Cops. God's still on his two thousand year lunch break. So you're trusting me again."

Irving's smile was genuine, and sincere. Even vulnerable. "We need to do the right thing here," he said to Irving. "The Talmud says we have to. So do the rules of business, if we want to stay in business. Yeah, we have to do the right thing."

Irving stared through Harry and seemed satisfied with what he saw. He handed 'Har' an envelope, marked 'Harry' on the cover. "To do the right thing, we have to sometimes do necessary things," Irving said with regret, and finality. He insisted that Harry not open the envelope. "If I give you my help, you must trust that what I ask of you is possible, painful and necessary."

"No! I can't!" Harry said.

"Yes, you will," Irving replied, with a fatherly tone that reeked of something which Harry knew was in the old fart-- 'Love', big L, honoring every definition of the five words which existed for that ultimate state of cooperation in Greek. "Because you have to, and we have to, and it is the only way that things will not become far worse than the way they are," he proclaimed as wise Rabbi. "Even worse than that Slavic cabbage filled slop these Russian shithead cooks are trying to sell as mousaka," he continued looking at a plate of the Day's Special going to a table of unsuspecting out of town customers.

With that, Irving walked towards the door and bid a less-miserable Boris a happy Zorba-Tevya 'dosvidania' and snuck the indignant waitress a card containing the best agent in New York for up and coming legitimate actresses.

Meanwhile, Harry knew he had to act in an opera in which the script was being re-written by parties far more powerful than himself, unless he could improvise his own ending before the 'hook' pulled everyone of value off the stage. Harry dared to open the envelope, feeling Irving's lingering eyes over him. They were in the print as well, the letters in a language that only the multi-lingual Ashley could decipher. To be translated 'in 72 hours, no earlier, or you and those you value will not survive to see what it means' it read in clear, correctly spelled English.

Chapter 22

"To be fuck or to be fucked, that is the question," Elena thought as she prepared to walk out of the luxury bathroom to the king sized bed in her private suite to pleasure her ex, and get some satisfaction for herself as well. This time she knew where she was, who she was and what she was doing. Mirrors were all around, but she ignored them this time. Her total focus was on jar of peanut butter in her hand, and instructions as to how to use it.

"I like it crunchy, not smooth," Steve reminded her, preparing to dine on his new beloved, after having dined with her at the table earlier. "You make a trail for the big bad wolf, and he'll lick his way back to your cave, sweetheart," he said licking his lips, and pouring chocolate sauce over his chest. "Chocolate and penis butter go together," he mused, imagining the most deviously delicious dessert he had experienced in months. Or so Elena wanted to believe.

So much depended on this 'last meal' for Steve, at least with respect to his present condition. It could be the last supper for Elena as well if the peanut butter wasn't served right, and the powders in it were detected too early. Or in the wrong company. As for that company, Elena's assistant

was summoned into the room by Steve blowing into his Viking horn. On cue, the young Gloomhilde came in, carrying her stenography pad.

“I want you to watch, Lady Librarian,” Steve said to Ashley, not knowing who she really was. Or perhaps not caring. “And when I say ‘hohohoho’, you jump in and join in the feast. Capiche?”

Lady Librarian nodded in approval, keeping her head down and as alert as possible. Meanwhile, Steve took another swig of rum, specially delivered to him by her new boss. “Ya know, I didn’t know Newfoundland had anyone who could read more than a box of fish bait,” he said of Harry, thinking him to be a Newfy fisherman who struck it rich in offshore oil, then invested his money into a proper and competitive education rather than more fishing nets or fishmongering whores wearing fishnets. “This Schreeh tastes like koolaid. As bland and safe as Maple fucking syrup. As spicy as French Canadian pea soup, without the piss in it. They call this rum?” he continued, his sips escalating to swallows, then gulps. “This shit has as much kick as...”

Before Steve could throw yet another New Jersey or New York dig at the dump Canucks in Norman Rockwell land North, his face lay on his arm, his tongue out, drool slurping out of the side of his mouth, caking his beard with saliva.

“Fuck!” Elena grunted out. “He wasn’t supposed to fade out yet! Not like that.” She pressed the emergency button in her cell phone, summoning in a very angry Harry.

“I thought you too said that Steve could handle rum, wine or beer!” he said.

“Not when it’s 100 proof,” Elena replied, reading the label on the bottle that looked so innocent.

“It did what it was supposed to do,” Ashley interjected, determination in her high octaved voice.

“Not what we said we would do!” Elena protested.

“Or what I strongly suggested we do,” Harry added, assessing Steve’s state of un-consciousness, then looking at his watch. “But if we hurry, we can still stay with my plan. With a few changes that, well, we’ll have to make, fast,” he grunted, grabbing hold of the special spice he had delivered to Elena through Ashley that was intended to go into the ‘penis butter and vagina sandwich’, now flushed into the toilet.

Elena could feel something secret behind Harry’s face, but also something urgent. The first step in the process was a razor-sharp fishing knife with Yiddish writing on it, which had Steve’s name on it. “Well” he said to Elena, then Ashley. “Do you want to do the honors?”

Both accepted, but for a plan which seemed as bizarre and dangerous as it was potentially satisfying.

The blade cut into Steve cleanly, his flesh transformed into something that was,,, ‘Smooth,’ Ashley noted as she gently ran her fingers over his arms.

“And hairless,” Elena noted, examining the legs, chest and his face, his Pacino wannabe goutee gone. As for his top knot, that was another matter.

“The hair extensions are tied on right?” Ashley asked, fluffing through the 2 foot mane that had been added to her father’s two inch-long, and slightly thinning ‘executive cut. Steve’s mouth started to say some words, mostly mumbling, as he seemed to be waking up from a very pleasant and happy dream. So his erect penis seemed to say. As did his lips, which were now far redder than they had been. And his eyes that blinked, blue eye shadow and mascara making them look bigger.

Ashley assisted Elena in putting on the rest of the wardrobe for the performance Steve would be waking up for. A see through blouse, slinky pencil skirt and three inch heels, fingernail polish on his freshly shaved fingers.

“He looks so...” Ashley said, trying to find the right ‘Tootsie’ dig.

“Vulnerable,’ Elena interjected by way of the emotional descriptor of the slave master who was now clad as one of his slaves.

“Ready to be processed,” Harry commented, peaking through the curtain at the audience waiting for the performance. He looked at his watch, yet again, and instructed Ashley and Elena to gently put Steve into a ‘love cave, adapted from a dog cage. Perhaps one which housed Scout somewhere, hopefully as a LIVE canine rather than dogmeat.

Finally, the audience came into the room. Gentlemen who were new to the room, at least in the positions, eager for the performance they were promised. Ashley noted that they were smaller men than had previously occupied the room, cleaner in some ways, and familiar in a bigger way.

“Their faces...I know them from somewhere,” Ashley noted.

“You should,” Harry replied. “Your mother adopted them as daughters, and as far as I’ve seen it, you’ve pledged your life to them as sisters. But as long as they look like brothers, they have a shot at getting out of here, and out of this country. Home of the greed, land of depraved, God help us.”

How Harry had liberated the female love slaves and made them look like male slave sellers, or buyers, was something that baffled her. Why he did was obvious. “You really do give a shit about us,” Ashley said.

“Most of the graveyard shift guards could be bought cheaper than any other shift,” he said by way of explanation. “The others had to be medicated, but outside of here, your father has a lot more influence and profile than you ever imagined, or your mother ever knew about. Or was able to handle knowing about,” he continued.

Maria added some more make up to Steve’s cheeks. “Gee, man. Now you’re a G man, just like J Edgar,” she smirked.

“With one more touch,” Harry said. After seeing that regular male customers had entered the bidding hall and entertainment lounge, interspersing with but not noticing the women with new male identities, he whipped out something from his pocket that made Elena cringe with guilt.

“Yes, it is a catwoman mask,” Harry commented. “Like the one that I fell in lust with that night when...well.”

“Things we won’t talk about?” Elena replied, recalling the night she hid behind that mask to be “Ashley” for the night she tested Harry’s morality, and lost her own in the process. “No, we won’t talk about it,” she insisted as she gave the mask to Elena to put around Steve’s temples, along with a price tag in pink lettering to hang around his now naked and vulnerable neck

“You will talk about it!” Harry insisted. “With a therapist!”

“Of your own choice,” Ashley countered, with kind sincerity, her most powerful and natural method of persuasion.

Ashley and Elena shared a mother daughter moment, thinking it to be perhaps the last one they would ever have. After all, there were still very heavily-guarded goons still working for Steve, and his bosses, in the Bidding Hall. And as for who Steve’s real bosses were, Harry identified them by name and habit as they walked into the room to take their places. For the upcoming sex slave sale. “Achmed owns a quarter of the oil fields in Iran, and a third of the oil mogels in Iraq, who are not American. Steal anything from him and he cuts off your arm. Ivan lost a fortune in the Georgian Civil Wars but got it back dealing drugs, guns and people in Afghanistan, where his brother died in the War against the Taliban back in the 70s. The Taliban are now his best customers. Trying to get the better part of the business deal with him will cost you the better part of your family. Chang was a top Communist leader in China under Mao, now working for himself, in service of the people of course, who wrote the book on torture and interrogation techniques that make what the Soviets did in the Gulag Archipelago look like a...”

“Enough!” Ashley insisted. “Do you get off trying to scare us, Har!”

Harry fumes behind a beet red face, clenching his right fist, holding it back with his right hand.

“I see,” Ashley surmised, holding back her real thoughts behind eyes equally as armed as ‘Har’s’ fist..

“No, you don’t,” Harry said, pushing his eyes downward, letting his fist spread out into a hand full of open and shaking fingers. “And I hope you never do,” he continued.

Before Ashley could trap Harry’s eyes into hers, and find a way into his troubled mind and anguished heart, fate stepped in, yet again.

“She’s ready,” Elena said proudly regarding ‘Steve’, his new name ‘Cupcake’.

Harry pulled out the last syringe in his kit, injecting the remaining material inside it around ‘Cupcake’s’ lips. His eyes couldn’t help noticing the chest on the specimen. “You couldn’t give him bigger boobs?” he asked Elena.

“He always liked medium sized, or smaller,” Elena related, looking over to Ashley. “He tolerated mine,” she continued, feeling her ample and, to her mind now, excessive sized mammary glands.

“Whatever,” Harry said, doing a final check on the goods to be sold. He turned around to Elena and Ashley, assessing their presentations. “Library Lady” he said to Ashley. “You have to be prettier behind those black rimmed glasses, and harder behind the eyes as the auctioneer. “And you Elena,” he said to her mother, looking over her “forty is fucking fantastic’ concert ensemble.

“Cut that slit on your dress up another three inches. And when you play the piano, be sure that every man in the audience thinks it’s for him only.”

“I hate those bastards!” Elena grunted.

“Then play for the men they could have been, or once were,” he offered.

“Like you played for Dad on his thirty-fifth birthday,” Ashley suggested. “When he, ya know.”

“Yeah, I know,” Elena replied. No words needed to be said regarding how he had celebrated by whipping Elena senseless with verbal digs that wouldn’t heal, inflicting wounds that had paralyzed her fingers and ability to play music with them for the next ten years. Or how Steve showed his ‘tender appreciation’ for his three daughters, one of whom committed suicide, the other two leaving home when they could with no forwarding address. Ashley was spared that night. Maybe Steve was just too tired to continue celebrating. Or maybe Elena diverted him into her room for a nightcap until he became ‘normal’ again.

“It’s time,” Harry said, looking at his watch cautiously, fearfully, then assertively. “Showtime!” he muttered from lips pushed up in a smile, disappearing from view.

Elena pushed Steve’s lips up into a wider smile and propped him up, so as to display as much of Cupcake as she could, then covered the cage holding the ‘delectable delicacy’ in a red felt table cloth. Ashley unlocked the wheels on the cage holding the ‘price puppy’ for sale and pulled it out on stage.

According to Steve’s instructions, it was Ashley who was to be the mistress of ceremonies as well as the auctioneer, Elena to provide the music. Such was a reversal from every show Harry envisioned for the “Classical Judds’ as well as any presentation Ashley had ever given. Her voice was never loud, and certainly never boisterous. But she did recall one trick that Harry suggested. “Grab the mic like you’re grabbing someone’s neck. No, like you are grabbing fate by the throat.” Grabbing another human by the throat was something Ashley had never done, and perhaps was never capable of. But grabbing fate by the throat, this was something Beethoven said he did. His music proved that he did anyway. And Ashley above all didn’t want to disappoint Old Ludwig, a man who even in death was more alive to her than any man, or woman, in the flesh. Even herself.

Maria took to the piano, playing, as if guided by the Old Master and Friend, Ludwig von’s Pathétique. “Gentlemen!” she found herself asserting through the mic as her first truthfully spoken lie. “They call me Library Lady, and do we have a book sale for YOU today!” she continued with a seductive smile.

‘Whoops and hollars from the audience followed, along with wolf calls. Some from the lesser buyers. Some from new ones, whose gender was very womanly under their suits, tightly-fitting shirts, short wigs or, voluntarily in most cases, recently cropped hair. Most from the three Police Commissioners and two Congressmen who were very good at keeping secrets, large Swiss bank accounts, and their jobs, some of those job descriptions including delivering wayward orphaned girls to “Uncle Steve” so they would have a family.

“No, not me,” Ashley smiled, admittedly feeling flattered by her being desired sexually, even if by dealers in the sex trade. “or her,” she referring to Elena, whose ability to fake being liked by the pretend ‘gentlemen buyers’ was being rapidly overtaken by her hatred of the ‘real’ ones.

“Who is already spoken for by Mister Giavanni, who is on a secret mission keeping the world safe for free trade, free commerce and freedom for those strong enough to earn it.”

Such was not a lie. One thing Ashley did know as fact was that her father’s US Military affiliations were real. And that he did the kind of work that he was not allowed to talk about at home, even with her, or Scout, said canine being perhaps the only family member left to survive this night. And that night had to move forward.

“But what we do have is someone more special. The Special of the night, for a very special night, A delicious dish on any table” Ashley proclaimed with the zeal of a Baptist preacher selling Jesus to a rich congregation of heathens in need of salvation. “Cathy Cupcake!”

Ahead of the pre-designated musical cue, Ashley pulled the red table cloth away from the cage, displaying the goods inside. But something was wrong. The pastry didn’t have a happy face on its presenting side, but grunted. Thankfully the words were still grunts, from a voice that was still unrecognizable. The hands were still secured to the cage, but it would be a matter of time till Cupcake’s very male and military-trained muscular arms would let loose. Thankfully, the mask was still on. But was this a good or bad thing?

“I want to see her face!” one of the real buyers said.

“Only after you made a bid that’s worthy of the goods,” Ashley said.

“I bid a quarter,” Asia grunted in a deep voice, convincingly carrying herself off convincingly as a Chinese businessman.

“She not worth dime,” Natasha, now ‘Nicoli’ according to her newly forged passport, added in broken English which was dangerously still too high-octaved.

Another of the ‘gent-girls’ whose real name was an unpronounceable to Ashley as the young woman’s ability to speak any English reached into her suit pocket and pulled out a nickel, throwing it to Ashley,

The crowd laughed. Cupcake groaned angrily, thankfully with tones that were more high than low octave. Lady Librarian Ashley looked at the nickel and recalled something about reframing’ from a motivational book she had read once and tossed back into the Give Away box of the Library in Paramus, NJ, hoping that it would be used as firewood rather than reading material by someone else.

“This nickel is...worth a lot more than you think it is, gents. As I see it,” she continued pursing it carefully. “Yes it is. A nickel worth five thousand dollars at least. A 1902 Washington Buffalo head.”

“With the buffalo giving head to General George?” Police Commissioner O’Leary offered as further explanation, having seen through Ashley’s best attempt at lying.

Thankfully the audience was more in need of a laugh than an sound economic deal. The laughter started with the ‘girl’ gents, actively excluding one who, by the way she looked at O’Leary, had a personal score to settle with him. Then the real gents joined in. Sensing the need to keep good humor going for as long as possible, Elena made some musical jokes on the piano, which bore

some resemblance to Ashley's jokes shared with her before. But with some embellishments that were Elena's alone.

Ashley thought of singing along with the music to keep the crowd entertained, but something in her said that if she was having a hard enough time lying with words, deceiving with music would be disastrous. For her entire life, all of Ashley's songs, be they of her own composition or from someone else, had too much truth in them to be a medium for lying. Even now, when her life depended on it, she could not fake a 'cool to be cruel' message with even the most viciously popular tune. As for the promoter who reminded her of that, and other things, he was gone.

"Where the hell is Harry!" Ashley grunted inside herself, the superlatives describing him escalating to the f word, the mf word and the 'cs' word. But this time, losing her temper and composure wasn't enough for the gods to finally deliver. All that was right now as an audience that needed to be entertained, a sale to be made, and the arrival of an escape vehicle which was promised by a now absent pledge.

Meanwhile, Elena kept the genuinely male gents occupied by more 'look but can't touch' displays of her body, emotionally engaging the others with her musical skill, wit and humor. As for the girls', they were getting restless. One after the other, they wanted to have 'Cupcake' for their own. Ashley recalled something Steve had suggested and tried at one time to inflict on her. "If you don't value your services, no one else will." It was intended to make Ashley demand top dollar for piano lessons, concert recitals, or any deals offered to her by any man.

The teacher of that unlearned lesson stared at his former pupil with intense rage. That 'after all I've done for you, this is what I get!' thing. "I did learn something from you, Dad," she said from a mind which was now void of any hint of music going through it. A soul which would be all business from here on, and no pleasure or passion. "You are worth more than a nickel," she whispered to him, assuringly, stroking his cheek.

"We start the bid at five thousand dollars!" Ashley proclaimed as Steve bit into her fingers, causing them to bleed.

"Ten!" the Iranian gentleman said, apparently finding something seductive in Cupcake's struggle to eat rather than be eaten.

"With tits like this?" Ashley continued, winking the price puppy in the snout with the back of her hand, pushing it to the back of the cage, then pulling her up by the collar, showing off the wares to the crowd. "And long hair you can lose yourself in," she continued, stroking her fingers through the hair that had been secured onto Steve's, a mane which she now realized was her own one.

"Twenty," 'Ivan' offered.

Cupcake struggled to get free, her eyes behind the catwoman mask even more terrifying, particularly when looking into the ocular portholes of the next three bidders.

"Thirty thousand" another one of Steve's former female 'employees' said, putting up her fingers. "Forty thousand," the next asserted. "Fifty!" a shy liberated love-slave who had never talked since her capture screamed out, her hand showing all five digits openly, then clenching them in a fist.

Ashley looked to Elena for an answer, but this time Mom was at a loss as to what to do. This wasn't the plan. 'Cupcake' was supposed to be sold to the highest bidder, her mask to be taken off only after he arrived at the destination, by contract. And Harry was supposed to be here, five minutes ago. "No wonder why Greeks never really pulled off any successful revolutions," she thought. "They operate by Greek time. Storm the walls of the Bastille at five means five thirty, maybe six," she continued in her head.

Meanwhile, Cupcake had other ideas as to what to do. She got one hand loose, working its way to the latch on the cage. The plan was to lock it, Ashley's plan anyway, but it was unlocked. In another angry bid, or two seconds, whichever came first, Cupcake would have left the kitchen, heading to a getaway in the back.

Clearly force was needed to keep the price puppy from slipping away like the cockroach he was. Ashley had never punched anything other than a board, and when she did, she had lost use of her fingers for a month. Then again, there was only one finger she needed now, the third digit to give the Bronx salute to everyone in the world, including herself.

Ashley directed a blow straight into Cupcake's oven, just below the fake boobs, a necessary action. The humanoid pastry shriveled up into a fetal position, withering in pain. The crowd seemed to like that, asking for more. "Gotta please the crowd before you can ever please yourself," she remembered from another 'Dad' lesson that never quite settled in with her as a child. But, as she was an adult, and other adults depended on her being 'all grown up', Ashley took in a deep breath and decided to join the adult world. This time, the blow would be delivered out of pleasure as well as necessity. And delivered in a place where Daddy-dearest deserved it most.

Ashley grabbed Cupcake by the dog collar which was customarily put on all of Steve's 'goods', clenched her fist, and allowed herself an appetizer of sadistic grin before their main course of revenge. The crowd seemed to get into it. Like those boxing matches that Daddy Steve dragged daughter Ashley to on more than one occasion to show her how the real world worked, guilted her afterwards about the high price he paid for the tickets. And insisting Ashley tell Elena that they went to the Opera, a Ballet or an Art Show. Yes, there was much that Ashley would and MUST now tell Elena about her and Daddy. She let the memory of those things linger in her head, and just as she was forming the memory of such, she grabbed hold of the dog collar even tighter, finding her fingers breaking the string above it.

Before Ashley's fist could find its way into Steve's testical, the mask over his eyes fell off. It was in full view of everyone, A hush came over the room as Police Commissioner O'Leary, trained in facial recognition, identified the price puppy as the Puppetmaster in drag, "Steve Giovanni?" he asked, then asserted.

Having been found out, Steve made kicked the door open with the three inch stiletto boots secured to his feet and made a getaway towards the back door, knocking Elena off the piano stool in the process. 'Cupcake' ran the first three steps struggling to stay aloft with the footwear strapped to 'her' feet, then fall for the next three steps, crawling for the rest. But before 'she' could get to the door leading to the escape tunnel, several sets of hairless hands grabbed him and pulled him back, pulling him back on stage.

The lady gents surrounded him, now, than faced the crowd. "He's ours!" Asia announced in her best Chinese Businessman's baritone voice. The ladies, including Ashley and Elena, with her

were armed with only their strong wills and, to the extent that they could still access them, wit. On the other side of the bright lights were real men with real guns, prepared to use them.

“These bitches doped me up, then did this to me!” Steve asserted.

The formerly amused crowd felt pity for Seven, then disgust at him.

“They doped me up! Shoot them!” he yelled out through lips still stained red with lipstick rather than blood.

“Shoot them yourself,” A voice rang out from the back of the room. “If you have the balls, or boobs to,” Irving continued, pulling a gun from under his coat and throwing it on stage, yep feet from his reach.

Steve got back on his feet and walked over to the revolver, struggling to stay on his feet, then finding that he could walk in the very feminine footwear.

“He’s walking better in those than my wife does,” O’Leary said.

“Maybe sucks cock better than your wife does too,” the Iranian gentleman offered with a wry smile. Professor-Doc Hans, Samouri Seijio, Jr. Billy Gates and all of the middle grade moguls laughed along, given permission and requirement to join in the ruse by those more powerful than they were.

Elena smirked with delight as Steve tried to pick up the gun and handle it with the extra long fingernails that were glued onto his hands. Ashley noticed ‘Rabbi’ Irving adjust his yarmaka, no Harry behind him, but two limos ready to go. However, one detail had to be dealt with.

“Nobody move!” Steve said in voice as manly as dangerous voice. He aimed the gun at everyone in the room, starting with Elena, then going to his girls, then Ashley, then the buyers whose humerous faces turned somber and obeient, then finally at Irving.

“Go ahead. It is not like I don’t deserve it,” Irving said, coughing up blood, followed by a death rattle loud enough to hear throughout the room. “It will be a mercy killing. A mitsfa. Good deed. Can buy a hundred cancer clinics with the businesses that we all are in, and thousand research labs but if the Mench upstairs, God to you goys, says you got the big C, you got it. And have to deal with it. So, deal with it, Steve.”

“I will,” Steve insisted, pointing the gun at Irving, then pulling one out of O’Leary’s jacket, disarming everyone in the room of the ability to end a business man’s career no matter how rich or connected he is. “We’ll sort all of this out later, gentlemen, but rules of this house is that I’m the one in control. Me! Me!!! Me!!!” Steve ranted on in-controllably, ending his striding through the crowd with Iring, pointing the gun straight at his head. Straight between his open, sincere and strangley God LOVING eyes “I hear that you Jews don’t believe in heaven,” Steve said. “So, what do you believe in that makes you so confident now?”

“Life?” Irving offered.

“And honor,” a voice rang out from out of nowhere. Before its course could be identified, the intention behind it materialized. Harry flung himself at Steve, pushing him to the ground, then delivering three punches into him that dislodged his senses, then his firearms. With a Godfather

like nod of the head, Harry motions for the goons who had been working for Steve to put their former boss into the hands of paramedics who injected him with 'happy juice' and a straight jacket.

"He was supposed to kill me, Har," Irving said to his protégée who had now graduated from a school which Irving had regretted enrolling him into "What am I supposed to do now?"

"Live, as long as you can, Iv," Harry said. "And as honorably as you can. If there is a heaven, maybe there still is time to earn a way into it."

"And even if this 'heaven' is someplace that's better than here?" Irving protested, coughing more blood out. "No one in this room is going there! You hear me!" he blasted out to the bosses and under-bosses in the room. "No one! Except for, maybe."

Irving looked at the girls on the stage. Though they looked like grown men, they were as scared as they ever had been as littler girls." He handed each of them an envelope, each shuttering at what was inside. "They are passports, And money. For a new life. Someplace else," Ashley informed them in as many languages as she could recall from her extensive training, and recent research.

"And a new life for us all, as I have saved yours," Harry said to the bosses, and underbosses, as he led the liberated girls out of the door into their limos, handing each of them a firearm that had been owned by a goon or a love-slave trader. "This shop is closed for business," he announced to the buyers. "Though I know that it will probably open up somewhere else," he continued, staring down O'Leary. "But not for these liberated women," he said of the recently liberated and now gone 'prize puppies' "Or for these liberated ladies," he warned regarding Ashley and Elena. "And for a puppy who NO one will do ANYthing to harm, as long as I'm alive!" he continued, finding his way to a hidden door on the wall, prying it open and retrieving Scout from a cage. He wasn't in bad condition, all things considered. Actually he was in good shape, a label on his collar indicating that he was about to be sold to a foreign buyer.

Scout ran to Ashley and Elena, feeling equally glad to be re-united with both of them. Yes, there was enough love to go around, and without the contamination of jealousy.

With that, Harry disappeared, leaving behind only Irving, and a single vehicle to which he led them. Waiting on the seat for Ashley was an large envelope, marked 'For Harry's eyes'. "Irving's orders' it read in smaller print. 'Open it, please, Ashley. I took the liberty of having it translated before asking you to,'" it continued in Harry's writing.

Ashley looked at the Ancient Greek writing. "Be happy, and don't lose the music in your Soul," she said, turning to Irving. "This is all you asked Harry to do for you?"

"He's an overachiever. Likes to please his teacher," Irving confessed. "He's mashugana, but he's got a good heart. An honest head. Hope that he doesn't get his tuckus burnt being so honorable." Ashley watched as Harry disappeared in a cloud of dust, feeling that she would never see him again. "He's not coming back, is he?"

"Not for me, but for you, if he's any brains in his head," Irving answered.

"So, are you our new manager now, Irv?" Elena interjected, knowing that such a form of address cost more than one person their lives, or livelihood.

“You got any music in your Soul that I can share with the world, or sell to the gatekeepers?” the dying gonif who seemed to be more honorable than crafty asked, demanding a real answer, no matter how painful.

Ashley looked at Elena like it was in the old days, As she remembered it anyway, or wanted to remember it as. As Elena said ‘yes’ with words, Inside Ashley’s head was brewing something else. First notes, then music, then a new composition which was writing itself, as she was reinventing herself with a mother she was seeing for the first time.