

GENIE

Copyrighted, May, 2012

MJ Politis

mjpolitis@yahoo.com

CHAPTER 1

Cathy McDermott opened the box of green and red decorations, preparing to lay them across the walls of the bus station which doubled as a general store, smoke shop, gas station and eatery---an 'A and W', its gustatory wares pleasing enough to the tongue, and throat, but the auditory side dishes to accompany the deep fried 'food' as painful as ever. For the third time in an hour it was 'Having a Wonderful Christmas Time', by Paul McCartney, sandwiched in between other 'hip' 60s tunes about the season such as 'Rockin Around the Christmas Tree', 'The Man With All The Toys', etc., which featured the 'happy' musical groups of that time which was, as Cathy recalled it, not so happy. How Cathy wished that there was more than one time in 3 hours that the Charlie Brown song would come on, which revealed the true yearnings, sorrows, and accomplishments of the season. Or that Dylan would have taken a holiday break, or addressed such, to write something about the yuletide season. Or even Peter, Paul and Mary. But, working at Jack's General Store with the A and W just across the open doorway was as prized a job as any in Crystal River, a town named for the water that ran through it that did match its esthetics, and aspirations. Visited by RVs bearing licence plates and tourists from more populated locations during summers when the weather was good, truckers who stopped for nothing more than to gas up when that season brought excess mosquitoes, rain or dry heat. A town that was once important in the 'good old days' of the Cold War when the missile base was on-the-ready, and reserves of gold, diamonds, uranium and copper were taken from the mine, until the cave in that shut it down 'till further notice', said 'notice' now going on twenty-plus years with no one left in town to ask about any real details.

The forty-three year old mother of no one biologically, but everyone in every other way, looked out the window at that river through the garlands and bows, noting that it was frozen a week early, a layer of white covering the mountains all the way down to the shore. No, not even the people living in the valley this year would be able to escape another 6 feet of white stuff this winter, so it seemed anyway. But though Nature was never kind to Crystal River, she was not sadistic. Cold, wind, and snow never came all at once, allowing those who could to adopt to one challenge at a time.

A new employee came into the shop, Jackie according to her nametag, those identification brands which never provided a surname for its bearer with an 'adult' title. Maybe it was easier that way, more 'friendly'. Still, it would be nice, Cathy thought, for employees to be addressed as Mr, Mrs, Ms. or some other kind of adult title. But even at the bank, everyone was on a first name basis. The only people addressed by formal titles and surnames in Crystal River were the doctors, all of whom were locums who were there for a day, week or, in the case of the 'permanent' ones, a month at a time. Maybe

they knew something about Crystal River that the residents didn't. But as for Jackie, the 17 year old with the pink hair, size two body and metal rings pierced into her ears, nose and tongue, she didn't use nor care about a surname. Indeed, she didn't care about anything except earning enough money to get out of Crystal River when she turned 18 and hoping that things would work out with her older sister in Vancouver so that she could crash there. Whereas Cathy took some reverence in the routine task of hanging up the Christmas decorations, stepping aside to see that they 'talked' to each other just right, Jackie flung them wherever it was easiest, tapping her foot to a tune not playing on the intercom. It was probably against the rules for Jackie to have portable headphones on while at work which blasted out punk rock grunge into her ears, but Cathy allowed it. It was only fair that at least one person should be spared enduring the 60s music which everyone working, and dining, at the A and W hated but which someone at 'central management' determined was obligatory.

There had been two days that October when the music track was broken. No one seemed to know what to do with themselves. People actually talked and listened more effectively, and the fry cooks were said to be whistling tunes of their own. But that was before Jack came back from Kamloops with the repaired music playing unit, and a fresh set of new uniforms for the employees to wear. "New rules, not my rules," he said by way of explanation and apology, showing them that even he had to adorn himself with a shirt that looked more clownlike with its multicolored striped design than professional.

Even with the small cotton plugs she inserted into her ears without Jack knowing it, Cathy could hear the real subtext of 'Having and Wonderful Christmas Time' all too well. None of the singers nor musicians on that tape were happy, doing it all by the numbers while pretending to be so, for the paycheck, which bought the food, shelter and opportunity to buy music playing units at home which would play 'happy' music by others. Or big screen tvs. Or other sources of distraction which masqueraded as entertainment, or 'esthetic enrichment'. As someone who brought herself up reading more books than watching tv with her siblings, or boyfriends, Cathy knew that she knew too much to be really content in Crystal River. But she also knew that the chronically under or unemployed population there was set in its rhythm, and ways. Everyone she knew who was over forty was doing their best to maintain their independence, while doing what they could to keep those under forty from moving away. The latter was a losing battle most of the time, as living in a place that was about Mother Nature in the raw was an aspiration for those who were older rather than younger. No matter how many virtual video games set against the backdrop of mountains still holding on to their native trees were designed, sold or inflicted upon the kids. Yes, 17 year old Jackie, no relation to Jack, unless you believed the rumors floating around in the bar after the fifth beer, would leave Crystal River as soon as she could and all the other Jackies would follow, and within a very few years, maybe numbering one this time, Crystal River would be one of those ghost towns that got featured on the History Channel, which only the old farts who were into history would watch.

Cathy caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, noting her reddish-brown hair developing more white than grey at its roots. She still had a good looking figure---not great looking,

but likable enough for most men in town and, more importantly, for herself. It had grown down to her shoulders, she noticed, nearly half of the length she had when she was Jackie's age. She pushed the left side of it upward, thinking what it would like cut just below the earlobes, as was the custom and expectation of women such as Elaine, an Edmontonian of Cathy's age and self-educational background who worked at the bank. Elaine didn't have to wear a 'clown suit' uniform at work, and brought home more in her pocketbook at the end of the day than Cathy brought home into the pocket of her jeans. Or so it appeared anyway. Or maybe she should go in the other direction, Cathy thought. Let those ratty ends grow into locks, get a series of earrings put into her lobes, and get a tattoo on her neck and or some other place where people could see them when she was clothed rather than butt naked.

Cathy's self-taken 'reflection' break was interrupted by the churn of an engine, then a loud bang which blasted a hole into the Beach Boys' 'The Man with All The Toys'. Looking outside the yet-to-be decorated window, she noted Hans pulling in for gas with his beater, more rust than metal underneath, its cab loaded with freshly chopped firewood. The 70 year old, miserly-beyond-measure, Bavarian who had more resiliency in his eyes and strength in his body than 5 Jackies', four 50 year old Jacks, and even 3 Cathys waved a 'Vie gehts!' to Cathy as he filled the tank of his barely-legal pick up truck with gas. It was always reassuring to Jack that his establishment was frequented by the Hans' that populated the upper elevations of the mountain community. It gave hope to Cathy for the less hardy 'valley people' that such Hans' still were possible. Maybe when she outlived her usefulness to Jack as the only one who really knew how to run his shop, she could become a 'Hans' herself. Someone who comes down the mountain only when necessary, and who designs one's life to never have to go into a town of more than a thousand people for any necessity.

But, for now, Crystal River depended on towns of more than four thousand people for its survival. A messenger to and of that world pulled in behind Hans, larger, bigger and more ominously 'civilized' in presentation and form.

"Bus just pulled in," Jackie noted, using the opportunity to take a bathroom break. Yes, Cathy would be the one to take the packages off the bus, load it on the trolley, and put it on the shelf in the back room, yet again. It was a more painful way to get things done, but all in all, a better one. The packages would not break, be opened, or go missing, as was the case on more than one occasion when Jackie was on duty, for reasons that Jack said was pure coincidence. Besides, it would be a chance for Cathy to develop her Hans muscles, and other ruggedly beautiful features for someone she valued, for the moment anyway, more than herself.

"Good job getting this sled in with the weather the way it is," Cathy smiled to Bill Dmitrovitch, veteran bus driver whose nametag only had his first name on it as well.

"Would have been here faster if I had runners on this coach instead of wheels," he replied with a hearty grin, his short grey beard making his blue eyes look deeper, younger and more vibrant than ever. As it was still a balmy minus 15 C, not yet 'deep' winter, Bill

was wearing only a light vest and a short sleeved shirt, his going to long sleeves only happening when the temperature dropped below minus 20. With his ‘Hans in training muscles’, the forty-five year old bachelor (according to what he didn’t say in any conversations and didn’t wear on his wedding finger) unloaded the lighter parcels first and put them on the transport cart, warning the passengers on the bus who were getting out for a smoke that he would be leaving in five minutes, with or without them. Normally Bill was as kind and courteous as he was experienced, but to some passengers, firm was the only language they understood. Such were these underdressed, eyebrow-raising, ipad-over-equipped urbanites on their way from one blue collar hole to another, as Cathy perceived them to be anyway.

“What kind of coffee do you have today, Cathy?” Bill asked Cathy as an out of town visitor bound for Kamloops scurried from an incoming car, presenting him with a bus ticket.

“Hot, black, and not without too many eggshells in it, Bill,” she replied. “The ‘help’ drank most of the good stuff, and spilt the rest.”

“Or gave it to her boyfriend?” Bill added.

“Everyone’s gotta do what they gotta do,” her reply, which fit most of the questions shot at her by Bill, or most anyone else for that matter.

“I hear that,” Bill’s reply, said always when he had ‘leaving’ as his next immediate agenda. He glanced at his watch, wincing painfully at the time, and the black snow clouds the mountain showed him on the Southern horizon.

Cathy pulled the cart of parcels over the snow-covered concrete which was supposed have been shoveled by Jackie, or the guy who hired her, Jack, noting that wheels were not the best invention for moving objects from point A to B once the snow flies. It was a light load this time, until Bill yelled out, “Wait...there’s one more thing,” he yelled out, with a different kind of tone than he ever displayed,

Cathy waited with baited breath as to what that ‘one more thing’ meant. Maybe it was of a personal nature. Of all the men, and 40-year old boys, Cathy had dated over the years, Bill seemed to be the one least offensive to her, perhaps because they never had a firm date. A half hour over a coffee at the A and W was the customary situation, with often even less time than that. Though the conversations were about ‘things’, the subtext was always about each other somehow. Maybe that subtext would be said in words, a Christmas hug and clandestinely delivered kiss, or dare she dream, a ring. Those corny songs that bore no reality to real life that blasted over the intercom of the A and W had to have SOME basis in fact---maybe.

Bill went inside the bus and retrieves a package marked ‘special handling’, in script-font with circled dots on the ‘i’s’ and rigidly rectangular ‘n’s’ and overly flagged ‘r’s’. He

delivered it to Cathy's open and quivering hands. "It's fragile inside," he said, looking into her eyes. "Be careful with it."

"I'm always careful with what you give me," she said, referring to something other than the package. She let the moment linger, seeing what Bill would do, and what he wanted to do. What he needed to do.

The moment of intimacy was interrupted by another passenger handing Bill a bus ticket, a oversized knapsack over his shoulder, hiding it from view as much as possible. "When does the bus leave?" he asked, looking lost, desperate and in a hurry for something very important at his destination.

"Now, if we're gonna beat this storm out," Bill said from the corner of his mouth, taking the lad's ticket and motioning him to go to the bus.

"You didn't ask if he had a tag for that knapsack," Cathy said as the kid struggled to pull his knapsack through the narrow door of the already loaded bus. "Isn't it too big for a carry on?"

"I'm feeling generous today. A special occasion in town when I get in," he said.

"Your son coming in for Christmas this year?" she asked.

"My...friend, Ralph. We're getting...connected, I suppose you'd call it. It's legal now," he related, and confessed. "That is, if he decides to show up."

Cathy's heart dropped down into her stomach. Never did she suspect that Bill was of that sexual persuasion. If this man's man was into men, then what else about the universe was she mistaken about? How would her expectations for the world now have to be adjusted, now that he was 'taken', or about to be anyway.

"You'll keep this under wraps. If my ex-wife finds out...." Bill asked.

"No problem. Everyone's gotta do what they gotta do," Cathy smiled back, somehow finding the humanity inside of Bill, as well as herself, a constant which goes beyond gender. According to the highest aspirations of her mind anyway.

With that, Bill loaded his passengers on the bus, and 'mushed' the wheeled sled down the snow-covered highway. Cathy put the special handling box on top of the other parcels and looked at the address to whom it was to be delivered. The road was correctly named, but not the number. No such numbers existed on that road. And the box had been opened, then reclosed. The phone number for contact lacked two digits, the name showing only some of the letters. The only ones visible, A, N, E, and a 'one' as its suffix.

Cathy loaded the appropriately-labeled parcels in the appropriate places in the back room,

and took the special handling one to her own desk, a small corner of the counter which she had reserved for herself, and which, thus far, had not been invaded by anyone else. Feeling the need for a smoke break herself, she pulled out a pack of cancer sticks, her lighter, and looked back at the package wondering about what it was and why it was there. It answered with a movement that seemed to echo her unspoken questions, then juggled around, nearing falling to the floor. As it fell into Cathy's saving hands, the box opened up, revealing a strange face inside, that begged her to see what was behind it. "Rub my belly and make a wish" the Santa-gone-cyber said, followed by an omenous and inviting 'ho, ho, ha!'

CHAPTER 2

The news this November 25th could have been taken from last year's Nov 25th and have been accurate down to the day, time and place. With the exception of the day being Tuesday vs Thursday, the identical events were taking place, with the same people. Such was what Norman Thompson noticed after writing the article in his capacity as editor, writer and, when the messenger boys were delayed playing hockey, deliverer of 'The Crystal River Times.' He thought about omitting the year from the announcements of the upcoming Christmas events, and the pre-written review of 'A Christmas Carol' to be performed at the High School and seeing if any of the readers would notice. Of course, such would be as disrespectful to his fellow citizens as it would be painful to him. But there was one fundraiser ad that was not in last year's paper, nor any of them in previous years.

"You're sure this is for real, Jackie?" the Russian immigrant, by way of Austria, who had changed his name, accent and aspirations decades ago to be as Canadian as possible asked. "And all of the money will go to the village we're adopting in Africa, aye?" he continued, glancing over the ad for yet another time.

"Like it says," Jackie spit out with her ring-pierced tongue and eyebrows set into a full condescending roll. "A lunie a rub."

"On this 'Santa Genie' Cathy just got in, aye?" Norman inquired, gazing at the picture of the cyber-toy adorned with a mountie uniform to compliment the white-ball-tipped santa hat. "An RCMP Santa, aye? Suppose that means that any wish you get by rubbing his belly gets reported to Canada Revenue Agency, aye?"

By the roll of Jackie's eyes, and now head, Norman knew that he was laying way too many 'ayes' her way. Before falling into throwing in an Atlantic 'don't ya know', he pulled himself back in standard contemporary Canadian diction, hoping to not fall into his preferred and natural method of speech. By being too expressive with such, he would certainly give away his true identity, background and original purpose for coming to Canada. Norman hated having to speak 'normal' Canadian English just as much as he hated the name he had adopted when landing in Montreal. But his position, and assigned reason for being in Crystal River required him to be 'Normal Norman' professionally,

personally and socially. It did have its benefits, though. There were a number of 'Mediocre Marys' who had actively courted his ass into the bedroom for a poke and, if not for his insisting on using a condom, the alter for a wedding ceremony. And some of them even seemed colorful, but none of them really interesting. Indeed, nothing since 1989 for Norman was interesting, a lot of it having to do with the ending of the Cold War. Yet, he was still on the payroll in the event that it heated up again. Smaller checks each month coming in from Brighton Beach and other Russian locations in North America, but one day, he may be called upon to service for the country he still loved, and yearned to serve. He pondered as to what to wish for with regard to the 'Santa Genie' now on display at Jack's General Store, kept in the backroom on Cathy's 'desk' after hours, next to the other cybertoys she and others kept there.

"What did Cathy wish for?" Norman asked Jackie as she pretended to make copies of Yuletide Canadian Legion fliers for Jack, while her eyes scanned the room for drawers containing money, pocketing a few pens and other incidentals for herself when she thought 'Normal Norman' wasn't looking. "Did she get a man yet?"

"Not unless you can turn a fag into a macho man," Jackie slurred out of her mouth, some blood from yet another tongue piercing mixing in with her blue lipstick. "My father told me that the American Army used to try to do that with red meat with guys drafted in the 60s to turn Hippies into Rednecks."

"You need special spices for that," Norman smiled, remembering some of the experimental drugs used by the Army on the other side of the Iron Curtain for those purposes, and the failures of such. A frightening time, for those eating the meat. But more frightening was how he felt his tongue roll his r's, and sharpening his d's into t's. Fortunately, this time, Jackie didn't notice. As didn't everyone else in the newspaper office, who kept about their assigned tasks with their eyes on their work, saving all their passions and vitalities for 'play' afterwards.

The remark about the special spices was intended as a joke, which Norman hoped Jackie would have gotten. But one look at her already hard-bitten, cynical face said that she was as dead to humor as were the wage-slaves who were two and three times her age, and Norman's employees. Worse, she was even more refractory to humor. How Norman wished that humor would be resurrected in the young, as it was dead or dying in the middle aged, and old. Indeed, any humor Jackie ever expressed was based in cruelty, as it was cool to be cruel now. Especially to oneself.

Ida, Norman's second in command, who corrected his spelling mistakes without making him feel badly about making them, pointed out to Norman that Jackie had heavier pockets going towards that door than she had coming in. He 'sshed' her, allowing the lost 19 year old to find her way to the door, and the cold air outside. "You know, it's not good for anyone, even her, to get away with that," she admonished her boss.

"Maybe one day, she'll turn mischief into Revolution, Ida," Norman wished, knowing that such was never the way real Revolution happened. "But she'll learn her real lessons

one day.”

“She sure will,” Ida smiled. “Half the pens I let her steal were empty and the other half were leaking.”

Ida smirked as she looked out the window and saw Jackie notice her blue fingers and ink-stained coat pocket. Norman pretended to not notice, as he signed another employee check with his signature penmanship that was still partially adopted partially from the Russian alphabet, incorporated into Romanic script. He pitied Jackie, and Ida, for the smallness of their present lives, relative to the bigness of their most valued dreams. Almost as much as he pitied himself for being paid for a job he hated doing, and not being able to do the one he was really trained for. He looked at the ad for the Santa Genie, reached into his pocket, and pulled out five loonies, thinking about how those ‘happily named’ Canadian dollars would best be spent. But there was something special about the photo of the cyberdoll which looked very familiar, and the serial numbers below his feet, to Norman’s hopeful eyes anyway. As if it was sent to him, to use in ways that Cathy, Ida or even Jackie in her wildest acid trips never imagined possible. Yes, Comrade Norman ‘Nicoli’ Thompson was going home again.

Chapter 3

Sam Risling was given his Christian name by blue collar parents who had expected to have a boy with a Herclean body instead of a ‘different’ mind. Most everyone else expected the same too, and according to the baby pictures, Sam was destined to be a Sampson as soon as he sprouted public hair. But such was not the case, to the surprise and disappointment of all of his family, and friends. If there were teams of 9 for football, he would be the 11th guy picked. His body was as scrawny as his face, so gaunt and thin that on more than one occasion his parents were called in by social services and asked if they were feeding the lad enough to eat at home. His glasses were moderate prescription by the time he was 8, thick lens that required constant readjustment every year by the time he hit his 17th birthday, which was celebrated alone. Though he spoke out of his mouth, it sounded like all of his elocutions came out of his nose, a hooked honker which was two sizes larger than his chin. Had he grown up in Spartan times, Sam would have been tossed into the river for the fish, as well as worms, to eat. But whereas Spartans needed warriors to defend their proudly un-walled city, and hunters to slay large game to eat within it, 21st Century Canada required special skills that only Sam possessed.

“You sure you can fix it?” Cathy asked Sam as he removed the panels from the ‘ass’ of the cyber ‘Genie Mountie Santa’, examining the circuits underneath. “We charged a dollar a rub to make a wish on his belly, and I hope one of the kids didn’t make a wish that Santa get cancer, or a hernia, or some other kind of disease that would make him stop talking,” she continued regarding the cyberdoll’s sudden inability to respond to a belly rub with anything out of its mouth, or even a ‘grrrr’ from inside his head, or a twinkle in the eye.

Sam understood the joke, but didn't laugh. Maybe because to him it really wasn't funny, or intelligently designed, or relatable or...as he recalled, whenever he did laugh, the way that he did made others laugh at him. Two of the main sources for that ridicule which had lasted since grade 7 came into the door, Bart and Becky, the Ken and Barbie 'cool kids' who were the most popular kids in school in most everything. Both of them were as dumb as hammers when it came to doing anything on their own, but they both knew one of the two most important skills in the post-2012 world---how to make others do their work for them. The other most important skill in the post-2012 world was of course knowing how to negotiate one's way around the cyberworld, but until people in Crystal River started thinking like, or with, computers, the 'Bart and Beckies' would still rule. But though they had everything, they still wanted more.

Towards gaining such, they sauntered their way to the display booth for Genie Mountie Santa, each pulling a loonie out of their pockets and showing them off as if they were krugerans that could buy Jack's General Store and everyone in it. And, to be accurate, as long as all the customers around them who moved aside bought that, such was the worth of their currency. "I want to make a wish," Bart said with an upturned chin and arrogant smile from his six-foot-two vantage point atop a body that was perfectly shaped for any sport designed by man, or woman, gazing confidently at his 'trophy babe' who was using him to show off his social status as she was using him for his alleged financial connections to the world outside Crystal River. "WE want to make a wish," Becky added with perfectly proportioned lips and a mouthful of blindingly-white teeth.

"For the kids in that village in Africa who we're collecting money for to never be sick or hungry again?" Cathy 'asked' in the manner of a stern schoolteacher, as one of her jobs was such for last year when chastity-campaigning 'Miss Jones' quickly developed a big 'beer belly' and came back three months later looking a lot thinner, and 'guiltier'. "We should wish for what is good for others as well as ourselves," she continued.

"Yeah, we should," Bart said, taking Becky's small, petite hand into his massive ranch-hand paw, making it look like it was something romantic, as if they were doing yet another performance in the school plays in which they always wound up playing the leads.

Sam knew that the wish Bart and Becky had when rubbing the Genie Santa with their combined hand was about something other than the welfare of the kids in Africa, or anyone in Crystal River other than themselves. "More" is all that Sam saw in their greedy eyes, possessed by that vice in ways that maybe even they didn't know. 'More' money. 'More' popularity. 'More' worship from individuals who they made feel average, special souls who they made feel ordinary. Or maybe 'more' of what they needed, rather than wanted. Maybe what they deserved?

Sam looked at the eyes of Genie Santa, and felt the mystery cyberdoll speak to him. "Yes," the penis-less little gnome confirmed to the testicularly-small computer geek who made Sheldon and his Big Bang buddies look like NFL quarterbacks. "It's time that you

get what YOU want for Christmas. And everyone gets what they deserve. I can help. It's all in my plan, or rather OUR plan. Right?"

Maybe it was a fantasy from one of those made-for-geeks sci-fi movies that was more about CGI eye candy and state-of-the-art special effects than profound writing, but Sam allowed himself to believe it. Perhaps the dimension he lived in alone was about to merge with the one that most of the humanoids in Crystal River seemed to share together. Why else would this cyberdoll with no return or destination address be accepted on the bus for delivery, then find its way to Cathy, a former Peace Corp volunteer with a promoter's skill for money raising and a heart big enough to handle whatever Genie Santa could give her?

'Doctor Sam' the computer doc completed his surgery on the Genie Santa, covering his handiwork with the mini-mountie coat Cathy had provided for him, a garment which she had acquired from her grandmother, and was unable to put on the miscarried child that had been the only resident of her now uninhabitable womb. Jack paid him the agreed upon rate of \$50 for services rendered, then proceeded to tend to the long line of customers buying other things from the store which, according to Sam's calculations, would bring in \$100 an hour of extra profit. Extra booty obtained from people coming in to see the doll which would grant you your wish if you rubbed its belly, gave a dollar to save a few thousand Africans, and said a prayer for the world.

According to the chart of testimonials on the wall which Jackie embellished, and the radio ads Jack paid for, Cybersanta was delivering on his promise, to some people anyway. This year, Santa would be giving gifts to ALL the kids in Crystal River, no matter what age they were, for a dollar a request of course. All except for Cathy, and Sam, the latter vowing to correct such as soon and effectively as possible.

CHAPTER 4

Jack had decided that it was appropriate to close the store from 11 pm till 6:30 in the morning. It didn't make sense, as the bus coming through from Edmonton on its way to Vancouver was scheduled to come in at midnight. Perhaps it was because of security problems, or 'main office' issues. But whatever the reason, it suited one resident of Crystal River very, very well.

"Spike" was the best guard night cleaner any money could buy. No mouse, roach or bird that found its way into the building lived long enough to dine on what had been spilt on the floor in the kitchen, or had fallen from the shelves in the Grocery section. The nearly twenty pound calico-coon cat was also known to growl at human intruders, his green eyes and snarled teeth having scared away more than one teenager doing independent study towards his, or her, B and E degree. Jack saw to it that Spike got all of his shots, particularly rabies, as not having such would require the cat to be euthanized in the event that he bit anyone, but it also protected Spike from contracting the disease from human

hosts. Jackie noted that the feline guardian was a good protector against intruders from unseen realms, deeming him 'ghost hunter'.

Spike was in the habit of hanging out around the building during the day, with very occasional visits inside despite the weather. But he would enter his 'hotel room' each night at precisely 10:55 pm, meowing a 'go home already, stupid human who doesn't think I understand any English unless it's spoken with a high pitched voice and condescending tone' to Jack or whoever else was substituting for him five minutes later. It was his private kingdom, shared by no one else. That was until Genie Santa came around, being put to bed in the storage room just above Cathy's desk---the location where Spike chose to make his personal nocturnal throne.

Spike roared out a hiss at the mouse that had no tail, the bird that had no wings, and the roach which was a hundred times bigger than its relatives. But each time Spike threatened to eat its head off, the intruder flashed its bright eyes. After five warnings, Spike had had enough. He leaped up on the shelf next to where Cathy, his thus far favorite owned human, had put the intruder and prepared to swat it down onto the ground. It turned around, yelled a 'touch me and I will kill you, ho, ho ha!' at the lionlike feline, and batted Spike back on his face with its arms with the strength of ten dogs twice his size.

Spike's body and mind were thrown off balance, catapulting him to the wall then down to the floor. Had it not been for the pile of dirty laundry on the floor which Jackie neglected to do, yet again, the fall would have broken his toe, maybe his leg. Recovering his senses, Spike looked back up at the Mountie Genie Santa and stared him down. Then prowled around the room. Each time, the reptilian-like beast's eyes, and head, followed Spike. "Leave, I have work to do," it said in very plain Canadian English.

Pretending to do so, Spike hid in a cubbyhole, acting as scared as he could. It was not hard, as most of it wasn't an act. Particularly as Santa developed legs and walked around the room, gazing into every computer on the shelves, turning them on with his holly jolly nose, hacking several people's e mail addresses and taking notes with the lights under his ass and penis-less crotch. Then perching himself atop the surveillance cameras, avoiding their lenses of course, and observing the traffic outside. Registering several 'bleeps' in the lights under his back with each passer by who admired his stagnant and non-lighted features from the front.

Spike knew that Santa was watching him too, gazing into his feline soul. Yes, this doll which was sent by an unidentified sender to a very identified place, with no forwarding address for pick up had its own agenda. Maybe it was the real Santa, armed with the edge in language and inner info about people through the internet. What better way for Old Saint Nick to upgrade his methodologies to determine who was naughty and who was nice. But was Santa going to redefine those terms this year?

CHAPTER 5

Cathy's list of people who she had to get gifts for was always bigger than the one of people who got things for her. But, that was okay. It was the way things were, anyway. This year she had her freedom from Lars, an abusive, bipolar jealous alchy who thought he was a protective manfriend. Lars was away now, two provinces away by RCMP mandate. The restraining order dictated, and absolutely necessary for her biological survival, was that it was still in effect if Cathy didn't break it herself with a call, hug, or kiss. A Christmas card with a gift would, according to her lawyer, be an acceptable way to tell Lars she cared about him, but only from a distance. As for what that gift was, there was only one store in Crystal River that Christmas which had it.

"Electrical Eddy's", a hypnotic flashing lightbulb dotting the 'i' on the sign, had opened up shop just after Canadian Thanksgiving, replacing "Smith's", the low cost General Store which had most everything a resident who never wanted to leave Crystal River could ever need. Smith's was a Canadian landmark, as universal in small town anywhere north of the 49th than Tim Hortons, but then again, Crystal River didn't have a 'Timmy's' either, particularly after two of the mills closed down, the third hiring people for one shift only. Everyone had done their Christmas shopping at Smith's, where you could buy anything Made in China for dirt prices, particularly 'I Am a Canadian' mugs. Electrical Eddy's featured goods made, for the most part, in North America. True, most were US imports, and they were priced a bit higher than equivilant stuff at Smith's, but with the price of gas going up, it made sense to still buy local.

Cathy had never been in Electrical Eddy's before, but when she slosed through the snow towards the door, she noticed the owner's car bearing a Washington plate. Not from the State of Washington, but from DC. That small 'state' in the East that screwed up things for all the bigger states, and provinces, in the West. But, Eddy seemed more Montanan than Manhattan-like, a spitting image of Sam Elliott, but with a bald head under his hat rather than a full head of redneck hair. Such was the report Jackie related when she snuck a look at him when he went into the back room and slipped on a loose piece of cardboard, retrieving his hat from the floor faster than he recovered his footing.

"How can I help ya, Ma'am?" Eddy asked Cathy in a deep, baritoned voice and friendly smile made more sexy by its being hidden by a thick greyish-black mustache.

Cathy knew what she wanted when she entered the store, but who she wanted changed very rapidly after gazing into Eddy's confident, and very manly eyes. "The amphibio-plane," she said, pointing to the item hanging from the wall. "But only if it really can do everything the label says it can!" she insisted.

Eddy looked at the label, reading the claims. "Let's see. It can walk, fly and swim. Anywhere, anytime, at your whim."

"That sounds too poetic to be true," Cathy mused regarding the remote control model tank that she knew Lars would like, and would probably use to drive his new girlfriend crazy in their new kitchen. Or use to impress her four year old boy. In any event it

would be the closest Lars would ever get to tank driving again after having been 'let go' from the Canadian Forces for 'battle fatigue' with a general, but not honorable discharge.

"Believe that what you see, is what you maybe can be, 'cause when the sun shines over the range, it don't mean there's bad change, just maybe some gentle snow, or meetin' a friend ya don't know....yet." Eddy pontificated as a cowboy poet, as if the words were fresh out of his head. It didn't answer any technical questions regarding the tank that could fly like a chopper, swim like a speedboat and boogie on the ground like a jeep, nor did it give any indication as to why its single gun looked more like something to eject sperm than artillery shells. But Cathy was convinced that Eddy was a man of his word, even though he drove a four cylinder Ford Firefly car instead of a Ford 150 Truck, and with DC plates. Her eyes wandered over to it, thinking to ask him about such.

"Oh, that!" he interjected before Cathy could open her mouth. "My ex-wife's car. Got it in the divorce. She got most everything else. Includin' the house."

"In Washington, DC?" Cathy asked.

"Stupidest move I ever made," he confessed. "And the briefest. Went back on the rodeo circuit as fast as I could soon thereafter," he continued, gazing down at his belt buckle.

Sure enough, Eddy's belt buckle read All Canadian Cowboy rather than a Yankee affiliation. From what Cathy knew about rodeos in Canada is that awards were never given to Gringos from South of the 49th who wanted easy pickings. Or who were even good enough to compete with the Canuk cowboys. Yes, Eddy seemed Canadian enough to trust, even though he was selling American products. Maybe it was something from his ex-wife's inventory, or maybe just an Alberta thing, that province officially having been the 51st State since the oil boom of the mid seventies.

Cathy let her eyes gaze upon Eddy's ass while he wrapped up 'Tanker Dude', and imagined her as his saddle. The law of averages said that you couldn't make a wrong decision about men 10 times in a row, and the expression goes, 'nine's the charm'. Just then, she was tapped on the shoulder by a hand she recognized by sight but not by feel. "What do you think?" he asked.

"Bill?" she said, turning around quickly, seeing something vulnerable in his tearing eyes. Then someone open in his hand. A small box, opened up with the flick of his other hand. "I think that your...friend in Kamloops will really like that ring," she asked, tempted to reveal the male gender of said friend, but in the Christmas spirit, electing not to.

"I was hoping that my fiancee here would like it," he said, bending down on one knee and offering it to her. "Cathy will you...ya know....?"

Cathy's body felt light, then heavy then like it was floating around the room. And in that room, faces from every corner looked at her nodding 'yes'. She turned around to Eddy, whose head motion was the least but whose intensions were the strongest, as his eyes said

'yes' very assertively, as her father would have done if he had survived cancer, Alzheimer's disease, and his third wife's nagging him into the grave. What to say was no matter of question at all. But why her Christmas wish materialized became Cathy's main focus of inquiry.

"I discovered who and what I was, and that my friend's biology was wrong," Bill said by way of explanation. "Someone uncovered some of the e mails he sent to his other friends, and forwarded them to me. Better to know the truth about someone now than when it's too late....Is it too late, for us?"

"No," the townspeople who had become Cathy's family said with their heads, Eddy appending it with a cowboy eyeroll of his bushy brows.

"Wanting and needing sometimes come in the same package," Bill continued.

Cathy wondered why and how he had memorized the words she wrote in her personal e mail diary, which she shared only with her brother, a Priest in Vernon whose vows of confidentiality were stronger than Crystal River's dedication to not become Aspenized. But before she could see if anyone knew the answer to that question, Eddy broke the silence with a booming proclamation. "Wedding can be at my place. You ride in to the alter on two horses, ride out on one."

"And who gets to ride on the front end of the saddle?" Cathy inquired of the new unofficial social 'sheriff' in town as she tries the ring on for size.

He broke out a wide smile with the left side of his face, pulled out a coin, and flipped it into the air. Bill grabbed it before it hit the ground. "We do this anyway you want," he said to Cathy, hugging her more tightly than anyone else she remembered having done so, and in a way that felt connected rather than confining. Yes, that rubbing on Genie Santa and the dollar she put in the Save Our African Village fund did work. Even though said Genie had been moved from her good luck spot several times that week, by no one in the store who would admit to it.

CHAPTER 6

Jackie picked up a mop, assigned to USE it this time to clean up the mess left behind at the A and W after the chief cook and bottle washer there went home early. The red and green muck stuck to the yellow-linoliumed floor pushed against the mop, resisting every attempt Jackie made to wipe it away, wear it down, or get under it. Genie Santa, who was conveniently just in view of the security servailance cameras now, smiled at her wishing a 'holly jolly Christmas' with a wide smile while singing an endless tune that nauseated her more than the stench of the peuked up and discarded food caked on the floor. But it was the moral arithmetic of it all that bothered Jackie more than anything else.

'Santa' math said that one unit of being nice gave you one unit of a present you wanted. Being good got you two units of goodies. Being noble got you three. But what if what you wanted was what someone else didn't? Or if you getting stuff robbed other people or their stuff? Such was what went through Jackie's mind as she saw 'naturally beautiful' Becky get a diamond engagement ring from Bart. Cathy getting an extra five bucks an hour from Jack, made possible by deducting hours from Jackie's schedule. Geekboy Sam getting the one and only Jenkins Memorial Math and Science scholarship award to UBC, as a result of him scoring highest on the exam Jackie took alongside of him, for which she overstudied the information as well as the flash drive of the teacher who was grading it. Jackie's hippie Mom AND Dad getting higher grade pot this year than last, making them fade out into Wonderland at 7 every night instead of 8 while secretly-sober Jackie was left to deal with everyone's else's problems in the house from the real world, which involved diaper changing of her real life younger brothers, and approaching end of life grandmother. Jackie muttered the details of such in angry protest to the roaches and rodents hiding behind the walls, each sentence begun and ended with those 'vulgarities of extreme discontent' which would get her fired if Bible thumper (and hooker humping) boss Jack heard them, or if schoolmarm Cathy were to report it, or if another customer were to be in range of it again.

Each of those gifts to those who were 'good little boys and girls' took something away from Jackie, local bad girl who didn't fit into the 'good' crowd or the 'bad' one. Maybe it was because she had put crushed cow terds wrapped by stolen gold chocolate wrapping into the 'wishing well' slot instead of a dollar coin for Cathy's 'Save our African Bretherin' fund. Or because of the way she rubbed Genie Santa's belly, a procedure that involved sticking her finger up his ass hard rather than stroking his Buddha belly gently. Or the way that she talked to him. Or yelled at him. Or made fun of him. Maybe there really were feelings he had behind those flashing lights when she called him a fag, a loser, a bonehead, an idiot who believed any story told to him by any asshole telling it with a smile, a Pillsbury doughboy who ate his own shit thinking it was cookies. Insults which, when thought about, she had delivered to herself on more than one occasion. A mirror caught her glance, the handle of the mop catching another bottle of 'special sauce', delivering those chemicals mascarding as food to the floor.

"What are you looking at?" she barked at the cyberdoll who seemed to be everywhere. "Why the hell don't you go home, or tell us who you were really mailed to!" she continued, allowing herself to think about that concept. Ignoring the clock, which ticked away, she looked out the window at the dark sky. She imagined what life was like on one of those planets surrounding the distant stars, which shimmered next to a poster of a vintage Superman poster. It was an imitation of course, made to make those who grew up in the 50s reminisce about the 'good old times' that were more re-invented than real. But there was something about the old, and new, Superman fable that appealed to Jackie. No, it wasn't about being swept up by a guy who sported a red cape, tights and skin-tight light blue outfit. She was alternative, true, but not a fag-hag in training. It had something to do with the Kryptonite, and the planet from which it came from.

A large truck thundered down the highway outside, its lights flashing upon a sign advertizing the 'UFO Café' in Red River. It featured flying saucers with bringing burgers, fries and shakes to planet earth, as corny as one could get, even for a the chronically-stuck-in-retro idiots who ate there. The food at the UFO was definitely of THIS world, but the delivery system advertized was suggestive of a better time, one that could be imagined as being real. On more than one occasion Jackie dreamed about being able to fly on earth, as an alien visitor with powers well beyond those of the earthlings who she had to serve, and from whom she had to hide her real identity as an advanced being. It made for interesting stories to tell her shrink, something to entertain boyfriends with who were more interested in her earthly ass than otherworldly head.

Coincidence and practicality pulled Jackie's eye to the tee-shirt rack, featuring all sorts of sayings that dumb people would wear on their sweaty chests. "I'm with Stupid" pointing to the left. "The Other Guy is Paying the Bill" pointing to the right. "Baby on Board" pointing downward. But also one which was old, yet possibly true, and valid. "Beam me back up to Om Planet," the arrow pointing upward.

Jackie grabbed the 'ET' tee-shirt from the shelf, noting that it had been marked down five times in price. No one would miss it if it went missing. "Even fewer people would get the joke," she found herself saying, looking up to the sky at a light which, maybe was a star, or maybe a plane or maybe....something else. "When is my shift here done with?" she asked the flashing light that seemed to move slowly in sort of a rectangular circle. "If you fuckers dropped me off here when I was a baby as a joke, it isn't funny anymore. And it never was!" she blasted out.

Genie Santa slipped into a version of "Hey, Mister Spaceman", or maybe it was something from the A and W retro music track coming from the speaker behind him. Santa widened his smile at Jackie, and gave out a hearty laugh as an appendix to the song. "Fuck off!!!" She growled back at him, not caring if it was being recorded or not.

Santa answered with a shaking of his head, a very affirmative 'no', which knocked down a bottle of root beer. It fizzled on the floor, bubbling into glob of half eaten meals from rushed or dis-satisfied customers which converged into a spill on its way to become a stain, which if not removed this time, would cost Jackie her job, the only paying gig she had left in Crystal River, which if lost, would set her even further back in her quest to get enough money to leave the town that Nature deemed with the kind of beauty that Jackie had grown to consider ugly. She looked back up the sky, gave the unidentified moving light the finger, then pushed her fist into the Om Planet tee-shirt and used it to clean up the mess. After it was caked with the glob, she used it to spread around some ammonia mixed with yellow food coloring to match the rest of the floor, to make the floor look and smell clean enough to please 'Masser Jack's' and 'Miss Cathy's' new standards of hygiene. Feeling like a piece of dirt, she locked the door and walked into the dark night, towards 'home', hoping that everyone there was asleep. And that maybe another fast-moving truck would not see her on the dimly lit highway so she would go into a deeper slumber.

CHAPTER 7

When Norman Thompson looked at the layout for the Crystal River Times, he felt like Nicoli, for the first time since his arrival in Canada decades ago. For the first time in twenty years of his operating as a mole for the KGB, there was something above ground worth reporting. Something interesting. And not just ‘pure and perfect’ Becky and Bart being arrested for having a drunken brawl with each other on Main Street, destroying public property and professional reputations after someone sent ‘dirt’ on one to the other, and vice versa, through their security-tight e mail boxes. And not just more speculation from John Williams, the local gun-toting, eco-survivalist, socialist, granola-head Buddhist about how the evils of capitalism were destroying the network of the world.

As for the world outside of Crystal River, the Occupy Everywhere movement was spreading, having come to the small towns thinking themselves to be cities in Interior BC. Though there was no office building in Crystal River worthy of holding a protest in front of, the self-demolition of the Capitalist Ideal into a nightmarish reality was beginning. According to Marxist theory, it would be a prelude for a resurgence of Socialism the way the founders of the REAL founders of the 1917 Revolution in Russia intended, Trotsky in particular and, in his kinder moments, Lenin, both of whom had always been Nicoli’s personal heros.

“Hmmm,” Ida commented as she read the first of the headlines. “School board recalls test scores for the Jenkins Memorial Science contest.”

“Which means that everyone except Sam, whose score was too perfect, will get a better shot at it next time,” Norman noted regarding the message between the lines in the article he wrote himself, being as factual as possible. “Maybe it’s time for someone else to get that Scholarship money this year.”

“Like someone who writes stories about ET’s but fails every astronomy exam she takes unless she cheats,” the 60-something grey haired gossip spat back. “Jackie is a dreamer who is our worse nightmare, who may have a hot and fit looking body but it’s a lazy one.”

“All except between the ears,” Norman replied, pointing to the next article, to accompany the unsolved scandal story about the defective test scores on page one.

“No! That can’t be!” Ida gasped through her dentures and hollow, pale cheeks. “She got her collection of stories published! The ones that YOU printed!!!”

“Yes, she did,” Norman smiled, prouder of Jackie than he was ever of himself. “Our punk, Goth, body-pierced, tattoo-covered, loser is a winner who is now a published author!”

“In a REAL publication!” Ida noted, suddenly laying claim to the girl as her own discovery. “In a REAL newspaper! And a real book publisher as well!”

Norman held back his anger at Ida’s non-intentional insult. He had done his damnest to make the Crystal River Times a newspaper rather than just a local bulletin board, and to transform the locally-based Crystal River Press into a venue for real literature. In this ‘sidebranch’ activity he was far more noble than any of the intentions, or writings, of the local authors who he assisted, often with his own money. But maybe that was the problem---being local. For the first three years after his arrival, he was known as a celebrity, a European writer and publisher who obviously was smart because he came from somewhere else. But staying in Crystal River for the next 17 years made him ordinary, boring and unremarkable, particularly to the neighbors he served, and valued, until they gave him an insult such as Ida just did. But, to be fair, Jackie’s having been picked for syndication and publication came from editors in Vancouver, a place which was important. Soon she would go there, and be important too. Meanwhile, Norman, the only resident in Crystal River who really understood Jackie or her stories, would continue being ‘normal’.

How he wished he could write the REAL story about how he mentored Jackie behind the scenes, and made possible the manifestation of her most valuable dreams. His adopted daughter who never called him ‘Dad’, ‘friend’ or even ‘Sir’, had other Christmas gifts delivered to her, as evidenced in the next article, slated for page 2. The local Cops finally had been forced to arrest, rather than just unofficially warn, the growers of ‘wonder weed’, a genetically-modified brand of cannabis designed to turn even the most workaholic New Yorker into a laid back BC zombie. Such would mean that Jackie’s father and mother would both have to face life without their ‘stress’ release at the end of the day. Those ‘parental units’ would discover that they had children who really loved them, and that those children’s grandmother needed, and deserved, the family to act responsible for the last Christmas she would spend in the land of the living.

And as for local matters, which didn’t make it into print, that news was delivered by Cathy herself as she stormed into the office, grabbing hold of the Help Wanted section of the paper, circling ads with a shaking fingers with angry strokes. In her eyes was betrayal of the worst kind. Her left hand was held in a fist, the fourth finger on it ringless.

“Bill cancelled the wedding?” Norman asked, having just written up the announcement of the numptual for page 3.

“Jack pulled back on my hours,” Cathy ranted.

“Why?” Ida inquired. “You’re the best worker he has.”

“But not the youngest,” the forty-something grunt through a face that had acquired another set of wrinkles and an extra chin. “Bill got his hours cut too. We both have to sell the rings he got just to make ends meet.”

“But the marriage is on, right?” Ida inquired.

“As long as we give each other plastic rings out of a Crackerjacks box and no one who comes to the ceremony expects anything to eat except cheeze-spread and crackers.” Cathy took in a deep breath, trying to make sense of it all. She looked up at the sky, begging for an answer from somewhere. “It’s as if someone wanted what I had, and got not only that, but other stuff as well. Stuff that...well.” She dived back behind her angry eyes, pulled out some spare change from her pocket. She dumped it into the collection box and focused her attention on the first circled ad. “Conscientious teacher with clerical experience in retail sales,” she read.

“Which is right up your alley,” Ida noted, very accurately.

“And way up North in Whitehorse,” Cathy noted. “While Bill got demoted to a three day-a -week dump run a hundred miles South of Kamloops.”

“Maybe you could rub Genie Santa’s belly and wish for...something else?” Ida asked with a well meaning smile, and open heart.

But Cathy’s heart was closed, her eyes hard. She threw a venomous stare back at Ida, fueled by whoever was responsible for her abrupt change in fate.

“God never closes a door without opening a better one,” Ida offered. “Particularly for good people like you who---“

“---Fuck off, Ida. And the next time you talk with God, tell him to fuck off too!” Cathy blasted back at the stern but always caring Minister of the most attended Church in Crystal River. With that, she stormed out of the newspaper office, slamming the door behind her, nearly knocking it off its hinges.

Norman thought of going after her, offering whatever help he could give to her in this, her hour of most desperate need. But his limbs and mouth froze, held hostage by a primal guilt, the details of which he could never reveal to Cathy. And by the knowledge that even if he could fix Cathy’s problems, he would somehow create bigger difficulties for others. New secret orders were delivered to him from bosses who were now resurfacing in the old country as relations between Canada and Russia became ‘strained’ over the Georgian and Chechnian ‘problem’, and rumors about a trans-Alaska gas and oil pipeline going through Crystal River were finally becoming closer to becoming a reality. They seemed to require such things to happen in Crystal River as ‘collateral’ damage. Or so it seemed to him as he oscillated between being Norman and Nicoli.

CHAPTER 8

Sam was not used to seeing what had occupied the tips of every one of his fingers and most of his bleeding palms. “They’re called blisters,” Constable Linquist barked at him

after being forced to do two days of what for Sam was hard labor cutting wood, splitting it, then stacking it in the shed behind the Legion Hall. By the third day, Sam made a deal with Linqvist after the cyber-challenged constable broke the computer in his squad car with an assertive 'bang'. The rest of the fine option work for cheating on the Jenkins Scholarship exam could be served getting a job somewhere else if Sam repaired the damage done to the delicate circuit board by Linqvist's hard fist. Thankfully Sam, and his athletic conditioning for any game played in cyberspace rather than hard dirt, there was an opening....chopping wood for someone else.

"Still don't get the hang of it, partner?" 'Cowboy' Eddy commented to the lad as Sam swung at the chunk of tree which he still was not able to convert into sticks of firewood outside the back door of the Electronics and Hardware shop. "Figured that you'd feel where the weakest part of the wood it by now, smart as they say you are," the dude with the big stetson, big belt buckle and big smile continued, with an accent far more American than Albertan.

Sam hated everything about the small-minded owner of the electronics and hardware store who insisted on everything being 'big', including the number of tree chunks to be split into firewood. Then again, maybe it came with being an American, which was most probably his real, or at least preferred, 'culture' of origin. As did what came out of Eddy's mouth when he opened it. "Proud to Be an American", he sang within twenty feet of the Canadian flag across the road. It irritated every circuit of Sam's intracranial neural circuitry, even more than the blisters on his hands, the aches in his joints, and the anger at being labeled a cheater on an exam which he KNEW he had scored a 100% on because he knew 100% of the answers.

When asked to do a retest, and it was graded by a 'neutral computer', he was even more confident regarding his answers, yet the cyber-referee said he scored below 26 percent. There had to be a defective hand involved, and a very human one. Maybe it was Bart and Becky who paid off the assessor from Kamloops so that they would come up with high enough scores to impress their rich parents to give them even higher allowances, as it was cruel and inhumane punishment to make 17 year olds have less than \$500 a month of spending money. Maybe Cathy, who with her mediocre, average IQ, thought with her pea-brained morality that it was a way to teach Sam some 'humility' Or perhaps Jackie, geekette who never bothered to work for anything higher than a B, and who miraculously scored a 98% on the retest for the Renkins scholarship. Sam vowed vengeance against them all, but most particularly for his own parents, who thought he was guilty of fudging not only the Renkins exam, but most of the others he took where he scored way over the right end of the bell shaped curve. Never again would Sam share his Master Plans to revolutionize the universe with them, and most recent ones to transform Crystal River.

Sam stared at the wood in front of him and visualized everyone who had now demoted him from loser genius to clever cheater, but still he couldn't make the axe find its way to split it into tiny, insignificant pieces. Finally, after the twentieth grunt-driven swing, a crack in the wood materialized, which opened up by the next swing into an opening, then by the next swing, one which expended the last of his muscular strength and ability to

endure pain, a knot in the middle of the wood chunk that kept it intact. To add frustration to misery, the axe handle had found a home in the wood which it did not want to leave, no matter how hard Sam pulled, and no matter how many times he tried to apply the laws of physics to create sufficient leverage to pull it out.

By that time, Cowboy Eddy had polluted the Nature-cleansed Canadian air with five stanzas of 'Proud to Be an American and completely transformed every other log in the pile into firesticks. He turned to Sam and pulled up the log that now held the ax hostage. "That axe was busted anyway," Cowboy Eddy said. "And it takes a real man to attack the hardest piece of wood in the pile to split first, partner."

Sam recalled that it was his 'partner's' finger that pointed to that 'demon' log with the hidden knot inside it, not his own. He felt the cowboy's large hands on his small, frail shoulders, sensing a scene from "Brokeback Mountain" coming up rather than "The Magnificent Seven". "I heard that you have a lot of talents that you ain't shared with too many people. And other talents you ain't shared with no one yet."

Sam attempted to contemplate what those talents were, particularly the secret ones. The cowboy's eyes seemed to see the darkest ones first. Such as how to use cellophane inside your underwear so the bedsheets would not get wet overnight. How to take a pee in the open boys room urinals faster than it takes the guy next to you to see how small your pecker is. How to adjust the straps and hooks on your sister's garments without stretching the material. Or how to slip just the right kind of medication into his father's after-dinner coffee so that he would disappoint his mother under the sheets, and thus spend more time with her son asking about his day than wasting time with the two-digit sub-humanoid who she called her husband, her lover when she got drunk with him.

Cowboy Eddy gazed at the pile of wood he had chopped while Sam had tried to split the demon log, then a large truckload of firesticks which had been created two days beforehand. "Looks like you cut enough wood there to keep all of Crystal River warm for a month there, partner," he said proudly. "It's only appropriate that I talley it up so when it comes yer time to go to court, they know that you're of good mind and solid character. And if me or the Good Lord have anythin' ta say about it, yer gonna be the big boss of the cattle drive that's the world, even though most of the trail hands and the cows don't know it, or have to know it. And as a way ta help ya into that destiny, I got some special work I want ya to do fer me."

Cowboy Eddy kicked away the straw caked on the back door on his shop and bowed, inviting Sam to enter and enjoy the warmth inside first. Sam's honker breathed in the air, prepared for a big burst of stale toilet-tainted odor to enter it as a prelude to him cleaning said toilet, along with probably the horsebarn and stall that Cowboy Eddy slept in to be more intimate with his Mr. and/or Ms. 'Ed'. But what Sam smelt, and saw, was quite different than anything he expected from this dude, who apparently was no dud, at least in the ways that mattered most to the aspiring Nobel Prize winner.

State of the art computer equipment lined the walls and occupied all of the tables, far more advanced than any of the toys, tools and telephones that were for display in the front room where the customers came in. "I got lots of patients in need of yer special services, doc," Eddy said, closing the door behind him, pointing 'Doctor Sam' to the 'clinic' bench. Most of the devises seemed like they could be repaired easily enough, for Sam anyway. But one patient attracted his attention most. It 'smiled' at him in ways that felt very familiar, its skin mutilated, its guts visibly torn into by a vicious intruder.

"Genie Santa," Cowboy Eddy said. "Guy who brought it in for repair said the cat got into a scrap with it, but---"

"---It was a very human cat, or a very animalistic humanoid who did this kind of damage," Sam interjected, his mind feeling the chaos of the electronic mess like the way, so he was told anyway, a brilliant reconstructive surgeon gets an intuitive feel of a mangled body. One of those medical docs was, paradoxically, instrumental in Sam's body being reconstructed after a snowmobile accident that nearly killed him when he was a kid.

"Can ya fix him?" Sam asked. "Would be really good fer lots of people if ya could. Even if ya have ta turn him into a her to save 'his' life. Folks would balk at it, but the smart ones would appreciate it. Besides, most mares I know are smarter than stallions, or geldings. But don't tell no rodeo bunnies I said that. Or my ex-wife."

Doctor Sam did a quick look-see on the mangled Genie Santa with his eyes, a feel-through with his fingers, then an exploratory with the electronic probes his assistant, Cowboy Eddy, had on hand. For the most part, it was a matter of putting together what the hand of cat, man, woman or some other kind of creature had torn assunder. But one piece was missing, the central integrating circuit unit which gathered all of the information and distributed it. Sensing that Eddy was more of a biologist than electrician, as confirmed by a glance at a diploma on the wall indicating that he was a Ph.D. in 'Neurobehavior and Neurological Processing' from somewhere South of the border, Sam related the diagnosis in language that he could understand. "We have an intact sensory thalamus, sensory cortex and good motor output cortical areas. But the association cortex is....not here anymore. In electronic talk, that would mean that we need---"

"---This?" 'nurse' Eddy said, an electronic component in his hand that was just what Doctor Sam needed, requiring the lad's special skills to make it work of course. Or so Cowboy Eddy seemed to say when he entrusted Sam to it install it.

"There ya go, partner," Sam found himself saying.

"No, there WE go," the 21st century 'McCloud' said with a nod, allowing Sam to see the two Colt Revolvers and Bowie knife under his bloodstained sheepskin coat, inferring an offer that Sam would be a fool to refuse. A corpse laid out in the bush for the coyotes to eat if he even considered turning it down.

CHAPTER 9

“So, where do you want to go?” the clerk at the Kamloops bus depot asked Cathy as she stared at the map, her eyes pondering the attributes and consequences of the four directions. “East or West?” the ticket vender asked. “North or South?” he continued.

“I don’t know,” Cathy said. “I’m still thinking about it.”

“Well, perhaps you could think someplace else while I take care of some other people who DO know where they want to go?” the angry retort.

Cathy looked behind her and felt the justification for the clerk’s indignation and impatience. The line of two people had grown to nearly twenty, most of them stomping their feet anxiously as the clock ticked down to departure time for their buses. Still, Cathy allowed her oscillating brain and tired body to consider the choices. Option A was to go North, back to Crystal River after having failed to get work in Kamloops and beg for her job with Jack again, with whatever hours and pay he agreed to. Option B required her to go further South to Kelowna, where Bill was, for the moment, on probationary part time routes following e mails sent by angry, yet still unidentified, customers who complained about his ability to drive and be civil. Option C involved Vancouver, a place for Cathy and Bill to start out sort of fresh. Option D, Toronto or beyond, to the Maritimes. Nova Scotia, or even Newfoundland. Perhaps Labrador, where there was still no more than 100 miles of road for anyone to drive, and where if a bus driver was sober, such was enough qualifications to rise to the top of the transportation company in question. Wherever the destination, there would be delays, the most important one being the date for the wedding, which Bill had put off for at least 9 months due to financial reasons he explained all too clearly, and ‘family’ reasons which he referred to with minimal details.

“Miss, would you mind?” a customer behind her ‘asked’ in an imperative tone.

Of course Cathy minded, but she was too depressed to care. Too depressed to argue back, even though that customer’s bus didn’t leave for another two hours. Too depressed to commit suicide as well, as the ‘joke’ went that was told to her by her Uncle Larry, whose biological life ended at 71, but whose ability to smile, laugh or do anything assertively had ceased at age 43, an age which Cathy was about to reach in forty days.

There was something odd about ‘forty days’, something very ‘biblical’. She thought about how Jesus had been tempted by the devil in the desert for 40 days, according to the tales she believed as a trusting girl, and wanted to believe in as a thinking adult. According to the story in Sunday School, Jesus won at the end of that trial period. But according to the most believable account of it, as postulated in ‘The Last Temptation of Christ’, the devil won the duel in the desert and came back to claim Jesus and his Vision as late as the time of the Crucifixion. Until, at one desperate and brave moment, Jesus,

with the depths of his humanity, said that he preferred the suffering of Crucifixion to being saved from it by the devil. Would Cathy be so bold after her 40 days, or forty years? Though Cathy had barely survived college, having dropped out after a semester and a half, she had read more than anyone in Crystal River, and had a working vocabulary that was way too big to use there in conversation. Perhaps she should have taken up writing more seriously. Perhaps she should have DONE it instead of taught it. Some students in the high school got the bug from her, but the disease had taken hold in one person most of all. The headlines in the local paper showed it in print and pictures, but the teacher was envious of the student.

“If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t have written ANY of your stories!” she yelled at the picture of Jackie getting the Renkins Science prize as well as a contract to publish her set of short stories from a Vancouver publisher. “And another thing!” Cathy grunted at the smiling picture of the Goth who always wore a condescending, or distant, frown in the presence of ‘commoners’. “A lot of those stories were MINE!” Cathy thought about it, then rephrased her accusations. “Or maybe yours. Or maybe lots of other people’s. Or maybe you found a new way to...well.” Cathy felt another malady overtaking her now rapidly aging body, the ‘Salieri’ syndrome to be exact. She looked up the blue sky outside the window as it was turning black, addressing the Light beyond and behind the stars. “Why isn’t it ME who gets to be the one to be the instrument of your glory? Your Vitality! Your Humor! Your, Ya know...”

Cathy was listened to, despite her predictions. But it was by human ears rather than that of the ‘Big Boss’ upstairs. Sensing that curiosity from civilians would soon lead to confinement at the hands of uniformed personnel, she smiled sheepishly at the onlookers, made a few excuses about it being a part in a play she was rehearsing for, and headed outside ‘for a smoke’..

Alone with her thoughts, agonies and picture on the cigarette package of what happened to the lungs of people who smoke, another reminder of the world Cathy had left visited her. It was yellow, made of hard metal, and startled her like shot of primal thunder. “I can perhaps take you somewhere?” the turbaned cabbie asked in a thick East Indian accent. “I do so very, very cheap,” he continued with the kind of come on line that she had heard again and again from merchants from his country who advertized a bargain but at the end of the deal, robbed you of whatever you had in your pocket. But there was something else that bothered Cathy, and shook her out of the spiral downward that had taken Uncle Larry into the abyss. She pointed to it.

“Where is he TONIGHT!” she growled, pointing to the top of the cab. “And how did he get on your cab!”

“Genie Santa?” the driver asked, noting the new display on top of the roof. “He was at the Best Western Inn, you see. Very very good luck to rub his belly. Ten dollars a wish. Or for really really big wishes, twenty dollar.”

“To save a village in Africa?” Cathy asked.

“This I do not know. But I do know that if you rub his belly, and pay your monies, he gives you very, very good luck.”

Cathy looked in the back seat, and saw the ‘good luck’ for herself. She was hot, young, very White and very interested in the driver. She whispered something in Russian in the driver’s ear that diverted his attention to another destination. “So sorry, I have fare to do now. You will be alright?” the driver asked Cathy.

“Oh yes! I have to be!” Cathy growled at the picture of Genie Santa. “Him and me are going to have a long talk. Do you know where he will be tonight?”

“You call number under his belly, and they tell you, but very, very long lines to see him,” the driver continued.

The Russian babe motioned his ‘master’ to move on, which he did. But the cabbie smiled a Merry Christmas wish to Cathy first. As for the recipient of that greeting, she held back her anger behind a cordial grin. A gesture she knew she would have to maintain till she got to the bottom of something that smelled very, very rotten. Most particularly when she read the notification on the bottom of the Santa Genie’s feet. “10 days till Christmas, for that very special, final wish that will last forever!”

CHAPTER 10

Norman woke up to an exceptionally cold December 15th. The sun illuminated the mini-crystals suspended in the air, freeze-drying the nostrils as it was inhaled. It felt more like Winnipeg than Interior British Columbia. Indeed, more like NorthEastern Siberia than NorthWest North America. The sky was a deep, dark beautiful blue, in all directions, having cleared the cloudy warm air from the night before, but not before those two ethereal gods met up in the stratosphere, dumping a foot of fresh snow on the mortals below. Thankfully, Norman’s car was protected by a hayshed which he had converted into a heated garage. Not so thankfully, the tires on it were more surface than tread. But, the engine and brakes worked, most of the time anyway. And with enough weight on the back, it could make it down the driveway to the sort-of plowed dirt road, and the most-probably plowed highway.

As editor of the Crystal River Times and two time mayor of the town that never really took its municipal status very seriously, people expected Norman to have enough money to buy good snow tires. And a good roof for the house that was always in need of repair. And a good set of clothes. And perhaps a good wife (or ex-wife somewhere) and kids who were away at college to share his professional prosperity and reputation. Little did his fellow citizens know that Norman’s income was lower than most of the people who called him ‘boss’. Part of it had to do with the run in he had with Revenue Canada, a reminder of which had come in the mail yesterday.

While pouring the remainder of the ration of oatmeal from the no-name brand box into the plastic bowl obtained from the thrift shop---the highlight of his 'breakfast dining' set, Nicholi looked over the notice again. His pension income from the 'St. Petersburg Institute for Higher Learning' was indeed taxable. That 'stipend' he had been receiving from them for 'professorial duties and academic royalties' had diminished enough over the last few several years, and was now more taxable than ever. Ironic, he thought, that funds paid to him by the still-active divisions of the KGB from Russia for being a super-deep-cover spy on Canada would be taxable to the country he was spying on. Calculating the worth of any information he transmitted back to his 'academic colleagues' on the other side of the former Iron Curtain against what Revenue Canada got, it seemed that Canada was the main beneficiary of his activities. So far anyway.

Norman pondered issues of the past just like he had every day in his present, allowing his eyes to look upon the photo of the woman who he introduced to his guests as 'his sister' back in Kiev pursuing a degree in the fine arts. Elena was of course far more than that, and he dared not relate anything about his real affiliation with her nor her real location nor what she was really doing there, or rather, what she was being FORCED to do there by circumstances beyond Norman's control, or hers.

Feeling the need for some music to break the Silence which sustained on some mornings, and tortured him on others, Norman walked over to the CD collection, pulling out the cover labeled 'Stompin' Tom Collins Greatest Canadian Hits', inserting the disc into the discount CD player that required a bang just in the right spot to kick its ass into gear. The Red Army Chorus' version of folk songs from his native land helped him give definition to the day, and made the mountains seem more like home. While slurping his morning oatmeal into him, flavored with a splash of Canadian maple syrup and two splashes of Russian vodka, he imagined what his home village looked like now. His inner ear heard mandolins, his inner eye saw grumbling faces which were still optimistic about the future, still purposeful about it all. He hoped that there was enough food for whoever was hungry, enough coal or firewood for those who were cold, but above all he hoped that the main street of the 300 year old village back home was still a place of discourse and discussion rather than a strip mall for discount fashion clothing, video games and fast-food joints.

Norman thumbed through his bank statement, cognizant that he was about to go into overdraft, yet again this month. How he envied his brother Ivan who had learned how to be a Capitalist, his most recent success being a chain of laundrymats in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. Ivan was barely literate in English or Russian, but he knew how to read people, and had sufficient ingenuity to manipulate them for personal profit. Clearly, Ivan was laundering more than dirty underwear and stained trousers in his laundrymats, a skill Norman, while he was Nicholi, never quite 'got'. Nicholi got all of his accomplishments by following the rules, doing the work, and receiving 70% on every exam that he knew 100% of the information on. One of the men responsible for the final grade on those exams being 90% stared at him from the wall.

“Yes, Papa,” he said to the faded picture of the man who he introduced to visitors to his house as his Austrian literature professor. “That scar you got on your left cheek was something you didn’t deserve, and the time you spent on ‘sabbatical’ in the non-independent Siberian studies was something else you didn’t deserve. And Comrade Stalin didn’t deserve everything you gave to HIM when you saved his city, and his country from the Germans. And I didn’t deserve what I got because of you, and the times when we were...”

Tears flowed down his cheeks. He remembered the good old days when there was order in the streets of Moscow instead of chaos. When the iron fist of the Kremlin ruled with predictability rather than the unpredictable activities of mobsters who took over after the Soviet Union was officially dissolved. When being obedient and hard working was enough to earn a living, rather than having to be capitalistically-innovative. And when a capitalist with a gun, grudge, and enough money to pay off the judge, got all charges against him dropped after he had shot Papa in the heart after he had legally and morally arrested him for exporting unwilling Ukrainian girls to Middle Eastern sheiks for their harems.

Norman found himself being Nicoli again, vowing vengeance against the Capitalistic system that had rudely interrupted the admittedly in-efficient and unfair, but .very necessary Soviet Socialist experiment. And the countries, Canada and the United States in particular, that refused to independently investigate the death of his father for ‘political reasons’. But there were other agendas to deal with first. One, negotiating a way to get a studless set of tires to take a beater car into Kelowna. And second, get his ass to the mall where “Genie Santa” was, according to the radio announcement last night, slated to be the main attraction for another set of ‘Christmas Wish Makers’ who were believing in his power to grant them as much as their kids believed in the existence of Old Saint Nick himself.

CHAPTER 11

Cathy didn’t recognize herself without the dumpy uniform that accentuated her flab, the ‘shower and go’ chin-length hairdo and the functional hiking boots which were all her trademark in Crystal River at Jack’s General Store. The mirrors in the Kelowna Convention center were everywhere, reminding her that with the ass-long black wig, flaired black lace dress and three inch heeled leather boots, Indian beads, skin coloring that made her look more Red than White she was, and had to be...someone else.

Just as Sam was someone else now. He was seated authoritively behind a big desk which was behind thick glass a floor above her, without his geek trousers and Spaceman teeshirts, replaced by a suit that actually fit his anatomy, seemed more like a Samuel, with a degree in business administration rather than an aspiring double doctorate in Physics and Theoretical Mathematics. As for Cowboy Eddy, without his oversized stetson, rodeo belt buckle and horse manure-stained boots seemed like ‘Eddy’. Or more accurately, ‘Edward’, with the way he was blending in with ‘the suits’ around him, not

only in appearance but demeanor. As for those 'suits' some of them on the main floor were wearing American and Canadian military uniforms, others more dangerous wardrobe---plain black suits with red or blue ties. White shirts for the Yanks, off blue or pale green for the Canuk officials who had 'made for Ottawa' stamped on their foreheads above their exaggerated smiles. There were other politicians hanging about as well on the second floor lobby overly catered with good looking food that, upon further examination, looked like it contained more mayonnaise than meat, more vegetable filler than actual substance. But even computer geeks and Albertan rodeo cowboys who doubled as electronics salesmen had to eat, taking a break from their work on the first floor.

As for that first floor's activities where the commoners were allowed to mingle, they involved Genie's Santa's progeny. Apparently, Genie Santa had spawned sons, or rather 'cyberhelpers'. Each looked like their Dad, some looking more female than male, but all did the work of their Papa in the service of the Greater Good. As for communicating with the public who they served, it was by computer this time. Parents with children, or children with parents, came to the tables with their lap tops open and ready to go. "Please tell us about yourselves so we can best serve your needs, and wants," Genie Santa's 'helpers' said in droningly delightful 'cyberspeak'. "And please, ignore the helper behind the curtain," each continued. "Bad luck if you peek. And good luck if you put money in the charity slot."

The line up of parishioners in the new religion threw more slots into the various slots indicating all manners of charity more eagerly than Crusaders back from the Holy Land having raped, pillaged and stole their way to Jerusalem, and back. The bankers and lawyers were Santa's most eager clients, Sam and Eddy the silent priests behind the curtains. Everything fed into a computer they were monitoring from a distance. Neither of them recognized Cathy, nor cared about a drunken Reservation Mom strolling around the floor looking like she misplaced her welfare check, bag of booze or missing kid. Neither did the politicians upstairs, more concerned with impressing each other than serving the commoners downstairs, even though said commoners would be the work force that would be building, guarding and buying oil from the pipeline going through town, as well as pulling extremely rare and valuable ores from the mines that, rumor had it, were going to be built 'any day now'. That 'any day now' involved sites in Crystal River for the last fifteen years, in areas that were behind the missile silos which had been abandoned five years earlier which still had military signs on them saying 'Do Not Enter'. The signs were never changed, but were always obeyed.

Though the Convention Center was turned into a Mall for the Happy Christmas season, with a 'pay what you can' Winter 'farmers market' for local merchants in the lobby normally reserved for high-end companies who normally paid four thousand dollars a table, the whole thing felt rotten to Cathy as she continued to act like a lost Injun straight off the Rez on Indian time. As for the time, that was what frightened Cathy most. Keeping her extra-dark sunglasses tightly around her ears, she went to the phone booth and put in another fistful of quarters. "Yes," the dispatcher said to her again. "The bus from Penticton DID get in two hours ago. Half an hour early! Like I told you an hour ago!" She asked who the driver was, giving his employee ID number and name, stating

that she had important confidential medical information to give him. “I left a message on his phone to call you, Doctor McDermott!” the impatient reply. “If indeed you are a real doctor! Who is still calling from a pay phone. At what hospital again?”

Something in Cathy’s gut told her to not tell Bill’s boss who she really was. And that there was something very wrong about his being an hour late in meeting her at the Center. She prayed and prayed that Bill would come in through the door behind her, assuring her that everything was alright. Telling her that he had been stuck in traffic. Or in an argument with one of his confused kids about a family Christmas thing. Or with his very ex-wife about who should be paying the bills for the kids’, and grandkids’ Christmas presents. She even looked to the Genie Santa, above the other Genie Santas and asked him.

Her prayers and desperate hopes were answered when she saw a hooded man in a Greyhound coat through one of the many mirrored surfaced to her left coming through the door, blowing into his cold hands. She hung up on the ranting dispatcher, who maybe was trying to locate where the phone booth was, or maybe was just blowing off steam. She allowed a warm smile to overtake her face, taking off her sunglasses so that her man’s man could see the woman who she really was. He did.

“Cathy,” Norman said after letting her see just enough of the face under the hood of the Greyhound Delivery coat. “There’s been an....accident.”

“Norman!” she gasped, noting the face around the angry and terrified eyes. “Tell me the truth!”

He discretely looked around him at the Genie Santas, the politicians upstairs going into room that was quickly locked behind them labeled ‘Energy Resource Focus Group’, the scared cybergeek and the confident cowboy behind the curtain, and the unsuspecting crowd of people overfilling the ‘Wish’ boxes with their hard earned money. “My name is Nicholi,” he whispered to Cathy in a diction that was very Slavic.

“What else can you tell me?” she demanded to know of newspaper man who always spoke like, and as, a White Bread Canadian.

“Nothing that I share with you here,” he said, whisking her to the exit door, offering her a bottle of vodka en route which she lifted to her face just as one of the White guards did a condescending redneck eyeroll at the drunk ‘Welfare Injun’.

CHAPTER 12

“What do you mean you can’t publish it!” Jackie yelled into the phone. “Everything in the story could be true. All of the ‘what ifs’ are, ya know, feasible? And if something could be true, there’s probably some idiot or asshole someplace can make a feasible a probable and with the right luck or curse, a probable becomes a possible, then a fer sure.”

But no matter how much the new authoress argued with her publisher about the piece of sci-fi fact-based fiction she wrote, the same words came back, in very English accents, making corrections sound like chastisements. “Implausible. Far Fetched. Beyond the scope of believability”

“Yeah, for moronic assholes who never left the box!” she screamed out. “Like maybe you!”

Dead silence came over the phone, the kind Jackie had heard before from others when she had gone too far with her Passions about the way things should be, and the protests about how things were. “We’ll be in touch,” the terribly English ‘lady’ editor said, appended by the clicking of the phone.

Jackie knew that she would not get a call back. Not a positive one anyway. Not from THIS publisher. But there were others on the list. Maybe some that Norman, the newspaper editor, didn’t know about. She searched the Writers Guide at the library for the fringe publishers, the ones who printed weird stuff. Then stopped herself when she got to the ones who only did e publishing, remembering something that Norman said which stuck. “Print last forever, and those who don’t commit something to print will be blown away with the wind as fast as you can say ‘microsoft reformatting program’.”

It was true. Jackie recalled all those web publishers who specialized in strange stories. Ones that were as believable as the tales in the National Inquirer and other ‘journals’ that were always on the stands in the grocery stores at the check out, and always sold out at the end of the day, but by no one who would let anyone see them put them in between the box of spaghetti and the bag of tomatoes on the moving platform. And for good reasons. Half of the stories in there were probably true. Like the American Military spreading a new kind of cancer in Apache Indians in New Mexico so they could use them as guinea pigs to test ‘cures’ which were already tested in mice, so the cures could be exported to third world countries occupied by people of color in countries not loyal to the American Agenda after they were inflected with the cancers. Or the plan bankers had of making zinc the new gold, changing the standard when they had cornered the market on mines in exotic places that only they knew about. And Neuroscientists hired by the Alluminati finding even more ways to formulate music so that people listening to pop tunes would obey whatever lyrics the performer was singing. The easiest way to falsify a truth which was probably true is to paint it up like an unbelievable fantasy.

“No, Spike”, Jackie said to the resident ‘guard cat’ who now begged to go home with her, as she looked at the Tabloids which sold just as fast at Jack’s General Store as they did at the Grocery Store down the street which charged affordable prices for food. Sort of affordable, anyway. “My story about Genie Santa being an instrument of evil aliens who have taken over the minds of unsuspecting humanoids and doing it through computers that will take over the world is going somewhere IMPORTANT!” she vowed, gazing at the stand in the middle of the store which now had one of Santa’s clones firmly in place. “As sure as Britany Spear’s IQ is two digits, as sure as Smokey the Bear shits in the

woods after fucking Mrs. Smokey, and as sure as I'm out of this town as soon as I get enough money, this new story of mine is going to be printed, and believed!"

Genie Santa stuck his tongue out at her and Spike. Spike hid behind her leg like a scared dog. Or maybe an intelligent cat, who had enough brains to be scared of something far more terrifying than a cybergirl with an attitude, who was now protected by an electric 'fence' installed by someone who left no instructions as to how to unplug it.

CHAPTER 13

Sam did decide to finally come home, the place he seldom left prior to Eddy's arrival. As he entered the doorway and settled in to his 'favorite spot' on the couch in the 'living' room in front of the 'family' computer (which he had built himself when he was 12), it seemed more like the house where his parents lived rather than home, by any definition of that word. He didn't know what to do with himself, now that he had money on a relatively balmy December 18th, measured in the more contemporary calendar as seven days till Genie Santa would grant his final and everlasting wish to the 'good boys and girls' who paid homage to him, and perhaps to the other playmates on the playground which was planet earth. The salary the 17-year old loser-genius was given by Eddy was far more than any faculty position he dreamed of at MIT. Two hundred dollars a day!!! And the credit card with a thirty thousand dollar limit for whatever he felt was necessary to 'advance his tech skills' could buy him anything he wanted!

"When you grow up, you'll appreciate the real value of money, and what it can really buy," his father said to him as he came in the door carrying the day's mail in his hands, a day's fistful of sweat in each palm, in that 'I'm paying the bills here so far, so so far, I AM the boss of you, even though your IQ says you will be the boss of me someday' kind of way. "Besides. All of those new state of the art things you get today are going to be old hat tomorrow, son."

"'Old Hat' is so out of date," Sam sighed out of his dropped jaw after checking out the prices on line for what he wanted. "Just like you," he continued, turning around the 45 year old stuck-in-time sperm donor who life made him call 'father', and Mom made him call 'Dad'. How pathetic he looked in his work clothes, stained with muck. His work boots that seemed heavier than the feet they suffocated. His grey-stubbled face which if grown into a beard made him look ancient, and if shaved made him look geriatric. And his eyes which looked defeated, and angry at anyone who still had the balls, or opportunity, to keep on fighting for their Dreams.

Sam's eye caught a glimpse of the guitar hung on the wall, the saxophone buried behind the stereo, and the picture of the band that used them both in the 'good old days'. When, according to Dad, music was original, fresh and positive. Sam could feel him going into another 'computers are the ruin of this generation' speech, and after each time he was done with one, he e mailed his new conclusions about it to his other 'old fart' buddies. But this time, Dad didn't yell back at Sam, nor did he give him a lecture about how he

would die of ematiation in front of a computer if he didn't go outside and do SOME physical work, or play, for an hour a day. No, this time it wasn't about Dad's own mental healthy, or Sam's 'morality' retraining after being convicted for cheating on school exams which included not only the Renkins test, but others before it which were mysteriously re-evaluated. "Your mother," he said, assertively with terror sweats coming out of his wrinkled forehead. "I just got word today from her sister, who said that..."

The man who said that real men never cried let out a wave of tears down his life-hardened, wrinkled face. Sam let him unleash his grief, complete with a 'hug' that felt constrictive and uncomfortable, which Sam elongated so he could sneak a look in an open envelope marked 'Confidential' in his father's pocket. In an instant, everything Sam knew, or wanted to know about his mother was changed forever. But first, he had to settle a score with someone who had de-legitimized his already boring life, labeling him an academic fraud before even having entered academic. Yes, the new winner of the Renkins science prize he deserved would pay big time for her newfound 'luck'. And another audience with Genie Santa was required. And NOT one of his helpers, even Cowboy Eddy.

CHAPTER 14

The date on the Crystal River Times was December 20th, while in every other newsletter or promotional announcement it was 'Five Days to Genie Santa's Biggest Wish' day. Jackie thumbed through the Crystal River Times, the paper she always used as asswipe or dog shit wrappings.

Catching her eye, then attention, was the story about Sam's mother contracting cancer of the brain which drove her to plow her car into a military storage unit behind the old missile silo site had as many holes in it as the rusted 'No Trespassing' signs posted around the property which had been shot up by bee bee guns since she was knee-high to an apple box of bootleg whiskey and vacuum-packed weed. The explosion was huge, illuminating the sky, the fire department which was ten minutes away arriving five minutes after the big bang. The body was amazing preserved from the flames. The very non-neuro trained pathologist in Kamloops diagnosed the problem in record time, not a hair on her dead head having been removed during the autopsy of what was going on inside her skull. 'An act of a God who we all have to believe is merciful, in His own way' it was, according to the excerpt of what 'Reverend Ida' said at the eulogy. An invitation only affair, to which Jackie, nor Jack, were invited. Other interesting aspects about the story, in the out of town rags anyway, included a man in the seat next to her charred to a tasty crisp, whose sperm was found in Sam's body, the donor of said 'little swimmers' 'Busdriver Bill', as known to Jackie anyway. Whose sperm cords had been tied, according to Cathy anyway, whose 'notes' about Jackie's deficits at work were left on her computer, and found their way to Jack's desk. But, putting her own vendettas aside, Jackie felt her attention focused on the real victim in all of this.

“At least Sam’s Mom doesn’t have to worry about paying rent now, or keeping her husband sober enough to bring in SOME of it,” Jackie mused as she petted Spike on the stoop of the ‘open aired’ village ‘mall’. The cat had taken to hanging around her more than ever, despite the fact that he had a far warmer place with better quality food at Jack’s place as the indoor guard cat. Spike edged up between Jackie’s shivering legs, helping himself to the dumpster-dive obtained sandwich she had retrieved to sustain both of them as she read on.

“Help Wanted” she read as she flipped the pages of the Times to the most frequently read portion of that ‘publication’, having been ‘dismissed early’ for Christmas break by Jack, and told that verification of her winning the Jenkins scholarship money that would buy her the chance to go to University in Vancouver rather than a Community College in Kamloops was ‘delayed until governmental approval and other assessment processes’ were completed. As for her literary career, opened up, so she thought, by Times Editor Norman’s contacts, it had closed down tighter than a wife’s vagina after she just found out her husband was cheating on her. She was now getting rejections from publication companies she never even knew about! As if she, Times editor Norman (if that who he really was) or the fact (or speculated fact)-inspired fictional stories she had written had some kind of leprosy that was recognized as untouchably toxic by everyone ELSE who came in contact with it.

Spike pointed to the jobs in search of humanoids to take then with his very human-like right paw. The logical part of Jackie said that he wanted some of the stale meat-stained bread that lay on them. The other side of her brain, the one she seemed now to value more than the survival of the ‘artifact’ below her neck which the world called her ‘body’, gave pause (as she considered writing it as ‘paws’) to consider that the feline had ET origins and could read English better than even she could.

“Let’s see,” she said as she offered Spike the lion’s share of her sandwich while she looked for other ways to feed them both. “There’s grocery clerk. Secretary. A ‘stock person’ at a warehouse. A carpenter’s apprentice. A mechanic. Mill operator. Big crane operator. All jobs about moving and orienting your life to ‘stuff’, meat and potatoes ‘stuff’ as an operator of stuff whose supposed to be turned on about operating and operations of ‘stuff’. Or there’s...hmmm....being a PEOPLE operator as sales rep for a pharmaceutical company, after I take enough drugs to dull me out between the ears. Like those high blood pressure pills all the docs put their patients on. Can’t have any humanoids running around with blood pressure that’s fired up above 120 because of anything passionate, artistic or real, now,” she said, petting Spike to calm him down, knowing that it was doing more to lower her escalating heart rate than his.

She looked into his eyes, then into the faces of the ‘citizens’ around her in the mall doing their sunset hour Christmas shopping. They seemed more ‘meat and potatoes’ than ever to Jackie, focused on things very ‘physical’ or pleasingly pleasant. A lower shakra species, for lack of a better categorization, that was a completely different species than Jackie was. “Subhuman?” she gave voice to, taking note of the accomplishments she knew about. “Or,” she said as her eyes were taken hostage by her pale reflection in the

glass of a passing truck that parked in front of her. “Maybe it’s ME who’s the defective human sub-species. Who still hasn’t been able to find a suitable mate, or even fuck-buddy who shares SOME between the ears vibrational thing. “ She looked at Spike, considering other options as he nuzzled his head under her tight and shivering neck. “And, no, you and me doing the beastily thing. It wouldn’t work. What would the parental units say? We do have to honor them. Not talking about mine, of course, but yours.”

Spike meowed something in feline talk which didn’t translate into anything that Jackie recognized in human speech. She did know that it didn’t mean ‘feed me’, ‘take me out’, ‘bring me in’ or ‘I wanna get laid by another cat, even if the goddamn fuckhead vet, who took my balls off and thinks that animals really like country music, took off my balls.’ No, it was in one of those other ‘languages’ which Jackie felt Inside, big I, that was far more familiar to her than English, and non-translatable into such, for now anyway. Maybe it was some form of Ancient ‘Atlantian’, Jackie pondered. Recalled by the ‘feeling’ part of the brain only after having fucked up a lot of ‘lower beings’ in a past lifetime as a ‘higher being’ there, resulting in her present state of being born as a ‘different’ kind of humanoid now, at the bottom of every ‘meat and potatoes’, and now literary, totem pole around her.

“Coincidence” intervened again, Jackie’s eye catching the sign on a snow-covered van for ‘ReinCarnation Flowers,” then a rusty blade in the gutter sharp enough at one end to make a sizable enough hole in an artery. “Better luck next lifetime?” she pondered, proposing the idea to Spike. He meowed something ‘negative’. “No, I was talking about me, not you,” she reassured him. “Maybe I can come back on four legs this time. With whiskers on the side of my nose instead of rings and wrinkles. I’ll float around then find the right pregnant mama cat four weeks after she’s been knocked up, get my ovaries matured within a year. Or balls if the Y chromosome kicks into gear, and you don’t mind doing a gay thing. Just you and me, if you’ll wait for me and---”

Spike meowed another ‘no’, appended by swatting the blade out of Jackie’s shaking right paw with his left. “Yeah, I know,” she said, recalling a line from Professor Jack, an intense novel from an author who, like her, would only be discovered after his death. “I do myself in now, by my own paw, then the bastards will have won.”

There were many bastards in the world that Jackie vowed to fight back against, and neutralize, if she could. Some for humanitarian reasons, for the long list of ‘men against man (or woman)’ crimes in EVERY country. Some for global reasons, for the sake of the animals on the ever-intoxicated planet. Some for Spiritual reasons, as God still seemed to be on his three-thousand year lunch break, being three days ‘tardy’ in resurrecting his own kid from the agonies of the cross. But some grudges were personal. At the moment, the one against Cathy for souring Jackie’s professional, and personal, relationship with Jack came to her fast-racing mind. She plotted and planned various ways to make that 40-something ‘has been that never was’ bitch pay, and pay big time.

Again, coincidence reared its opportunist head, this time in the form of a Genie Santa,

more accurately another one of his ‘helpers’, recently ‘birthed’ from Eddy’s Electronic Store. Cowboy Eddy’s new delivery boy, Bart with new military-length crew cut and omenously-empowered smile, parked the van two stalls next to her in the ‘handicapped’ spot while he ran into the drug store for something that seemed urgent. The battery operated Santa doll peered out the window of the back seat at Jackie, its eyes flashing out in monotone meat and potatoes 4/4 rythm to “Jingle Bells” from his mouth. The stanza ended with an open mouth, and two hands extended out in godlike demeanor as if saying ‘ask and you shall receive’.

“I really wanna ask, but---don’t think I should this time,” Jackie said, in a hushed voice hopefully audible only to Spike and not to the citizen onlooker who would definitely put her in the psych ward this time, and WITH her parental’s unit consent this time. Feeling the need to move on, without Spike’s proding this time, Jackie put her feline companion under her coat and moved on to the next ‘dining area’, the dumpster behind the pizza joint that turned her down for work three times already.

CHAPTER 15

When Cathy opened the door to the hotel room, she was very ‘anxious’ about what she saw inside. “You said you wanted only one bed, Mr and Mrs. Smith,” the thinly-mustached Clerk said in a heavy East Indian accent. As for what ‘Mister Smith’ had to say about it, Nicholi was silent, paying off the clerk with a tip larger than the cost of the room. “Very good, Sir,” he said with gratitude to the man who Cathy knew only three days ago as ‘no-sex, thank you ma’am’ Norman Thompson. “Enjoy your evening,” the skateboarder-turned-servant said to ‘his ladyship’, Baroness Cathy. Or was is Duchess Cathy? Or whatever term ‘arm candy’ a Russian mogel who had everything called his girlfriend.

Cathy’s first stop in the overcarpeted room where overly-soft cushions covered every hard surface was the phone. She picked it up, and dialed her answering service at home.

“No messages?” Nicholi intuited, painfully correctly, in a Slavic accent that flowed far more naturally from his tongue than the forced Canadian one which she and everyone else in Crystal River had heard from him for the last, yes, 15 years.

”I’ve been gone for three days from home without telling anyone and no one’s called?” she said. “My brother, sister, mother, aunt. Not a word from them about complaining about their problems to me. Tis the season when they complain about each other, with me in the middle. Maybe I’m off their list of trusted doormats to lean on, and blame afterwards for helping them out. Or maybe Genie Santa granted all of their wishes, and--”

“Shhhh!” Nicholi blasted out of his closed lips, his index finger in front of his nose. He put on the radio to the loudest station he could find, examining the room for hidden microphones.

“Moose and squirrel say room ok, Boris,” Cathy said in a heavy ‘Natasha-like’ accent.
“And Mister Big he is----“

Nicholi’s lack of interest in Cathy’s Rocky and Bullwinkle act out turned into active discontent. He slapped her across the face, pushed her onto the bed, then toppled on top of her, shutting her about to scream out to SOMEone in the ‘real’ world, his lips gluing a kiss onto her mouth. It felt...

“...Interesting?” Nicholi whispered, intuiting the words Cathy was thinking, but afraid to say. “We have a lot of work to do,” he continued, doing a final look out through the closed blinds, taking out the briefcase from the rental car, opening it on the desk and examining its contents under the light. He removed several documents from it that looked very official from afar, highly military from closer up. He removed a pair of spectacles from his pocket, a few blank booklets, and went to work with his set of pens, glue and intricately engraved stencils.

“Changing a D minus to a B plus on your report card to your boss, Comrade Nicholi?” she asked.

“I told you what you need to know,” he said, sternly, denying her the courtesy or warmth of eye contact.

“And if you tell me any more you’ll have to kill me,” she mused.

Nicholi’s silence said ‘yes’, as clearly as the radio changed from the last obnoxiously catchy, mind numbing tune to the next one, a ‘happy’ tune designed to drive a music-loving Beethoven crazy, a thinking Einstein into committing suicide so he could enter a music-less universe.

“Sure,” Cathy said, settling in on the chair next to the bed, opening up a Cosmo magazine and taking off her coat, while Nicholi removed his regulation-Russian mobster leather jacket, revealing a very deadly looking pistol under it. The writing on it looked very Russian, matching the mutterings from ‘Mr. Smith’s’ mouth.

How Cathy wished that she could ask Bill to help her out, but to do so, she would have to cross the life-death line. It didn’t seem like such a bad idea, ironically enough. But her survival instincts told her that of all the people who were still in her life, Bill wanted her to remain in the land of the living. So did Nicholi, between the muttered and loudly-expressed threats. While pretending to read about Hollywood stars screwing up the quality of the media industry, as well as each other, she sneaked a look into Nicholi’s eyes through the mirror. He was more terrified than she was, so it seemed. And perhaps with good reason. His ‘bosses’ from Russia, who he said had ‘the best of international intentions’, had to stop a ‘highly destructive weapon’ from making ‘its final and ultimate impact’ on dawn, December 26^h. Bill and his alleged mistress, Sam’s Mother had

stumbled on information which they were not supposed to know. And behind it all, 'capitalist industrialists who are more dangerous than Hitler ever was'.

When Nicholi had related that last comment, tears came down his cheeks, followed by a heart-felt account revealing of the perils his father and grandfather suffered at the hands of the Nazis. And how they saved Russia from being a colony of the Third Reich. As for 'Uncle Joe' Stalin being more vicious to his Soviet citizens than Adolf ever was to his people, Nicholi had acknowledged that such was the case, admitting that anyone taken prisoner by the Germans rather than dying on the battlefield was thrown into a Gulag after being 'liberated'. But, he had said that such were 'small bumps in the road which still can lead to a Democratic Socialist Paradise'.

Yes, Nicholi had said a lot of things. But he was not saying a whole lot more. Yet, he seemed more trustable than anyone else after Genie Santa had transformed Crystal River, and was on his way to doing so to many, many other places, and people. It was just a feeling that Cathy had. Like the one that Bill was a man's man who would live forever. And that Mother Nature would see to it that her most boring child, Crystal River, would never change.

CHAPTER 16

Sam was never particular about how he looked, his hair always more of a mop than a mane at any length he wore it. But for his new position with Cowboy Eddy's International Electronics company, an upgrade was requested, and demanded. The 'trim around the ears' he requested from the barber resulted in a buzz cut 'down to wood' on all portions of his scalp except the crown, which stuck up neatly like a short-spiked brush. After the transformation, he hardly recognized himself. Most anyone else he had ever known didn't recognize him either.

Such was ok with Sam, as he had left home in body now as well as in mind. Particularly after the stories he had heard about his mother at the funeral with a closed casket. Yes, her sister was right. Mom was a whore, and a nosey one at that, accessing clients who were off limits to anyone, by morality and law. It was the stories from the Canadian and American soldiers that shocked, then angered, Sam most. They were all confessed to him 'soldier to soldier', as Sam now looked the part, with his new regulation jar-head haircut and suit that looked more military than civilian. Particularly the shoes, Oxfords that were black and shiny, no matter how much snow, muck or dust came to cover them.

While seated at his new desk, a bigger one than ANY owned by the officials who expelled him from High School, Sam 'the man' looked out of his new window at the old people below him. "Yeah, they are small," Cowboy Eddy said regarding them as he walked in, outfitted in a green suit with stripes down the pressed trousers, adored on the shoulders with epilettes to make his shoulder look gigantic rather than just large, accessorized by jewelry on his left breast with two matching gold pieces on his jacket lapels.

“Crossed single shot long rifles, Colonel Williams,” Sam noted regarding the man whose REAL rank and scope of influence was probably much higher than that. “I didn’t know the American Army still had single shot long rifles, Sir.”

“Tradition, Sam,” ‘Colonel Eddy’ replied prophetically and sadly, apparently very satisfied with his new manner of address. “Our Army honors tradition, Captain Risling,” he continued, shooting a congratulatory smile Sam’s way.

Sam thought about reminding his ‘colleague’ in electronic devices development that he never signed an enlistment contract into ANY army except for the Star Fleet Command when he went through his Star Trek stage as an eight year old. The imitation Rodenbury-signed certificate came with a uniform and Starship Enterprise insignia which was, for reasons he would not admit to anyone, part of the selected stuff he packed into three suitcases when he left home now. But even a lobotomized Romulin would have enough brains to not ask Colonel Williams, or whatever his real name was, what the next mission was to ‘honor tradition’. A traditional burial awaited those who did so. But there were benefits to joining the American Army, one of them dumped onto Sam’s desk in an opened envelope.

Sam cautiously opened it, noting the Latin inscriptions and 200 year old art work on the letterhead stationary. “You’ve been accepted to Harvard, with a full scholarship, Captain Risling,” the cowboy-Colonel smiled, the sides of his oversized mustache on the right side of his face coming up to nearly the tip of his freshly trimmed-off sideburns.

Sam thought about mentioning the small detail that he never even applied to Harvard, but such was irrelevant. What was important, to ‘Colonel Eddy’ anyway, was in the file he had put on Sam’s desk, the prototype of a robotic rabbit on the cover.

“Genie Easter Bunny?” Sam commented. “I thought we were working on Genie Santa, and how it can gather information, process it, and deliver intel of the right nature to the right people,” he said. “And that December 25 was the official closing day for the experiment.”

Sam was correct to repeat the word ‘experiment’ and not say ‘mission’ or worse, ‘war’. The latter two terms were the most accurate, of course. Something about the whole process of his demotion from most prized geek in Crystal River High School to his promotion to admission to Harvard and other ‘Institutes’ of Higher Influence smelled rotten. Like the odor from inside his mother’s coffin which reeked of a peppermint-tainted toxin that he was determined to identify, no matter how many Cowboy Colonels he had to use, manipulate or, if it came to it, eliminate. That ‘aroma of death’ was something he smelled as well on Colonel Eddy’s most obedient zombies, most notably on All Canadian ‘Most Likely to Succeed at Everything’ Bart, who was now in full American military uniform, having done many duties for his new country, including most recently finding dope and explosives in his soulmate’s locker, buying Becky a one way trip to a FEMA camp just south of the 49th parallel with no forwarding address.

But, ‘Captain Sam’ was alone in his conviction that the sour peppermint odor was linked to anything except a new brand of chewing gum. And as helpless to do anything about it as Jackie, authoress of sci-fi tales which seemed more able to come true than ever. And Cathy, who was more of a ‘Mom’ than his mother ever really was, or could be, who still was not answering her phone, e mail or messages left with everyone, including Genie Santa himself.

CHAPTER 17

Jackie’s ‘home life’ became a homeless one very quickly. Particularly after her father read the now never-to-be-published stories she had written, and her mother called them in to the authorities, after her daughter hit her husband BACK this time. The Cops had answered with men in white coats, intending to lock Jackie away for GOOD this time. Or so it seemed a few hours ago before she fled into the woods, for GOOD this time.

The location of her intentional wanderings was, paradoxically, the same folds in the mountain that she had sought refuge in when a child, pretending to run away, asking the birds feeding in the leave-covered branches what she should do about her family, the world, and herself. But now, the leaves were off the trees, the birds hibernating somewhere else. Winter had sent all of the comfort and animals supporting that experience away. But maybe it was something else. Spike heard it first.

“I know,” Jackie said, huddling in the clothing she had grabbed from her closet, pushing whatever heavy garments she could against the branches of fallen wood that had provided the framework for her spring and summer treehouse that year when the ‘muscles on her chest’ burst into very feminine, and tender, breasts. “The sound of quiet in the woods is...different,” she said to Spike, warming him up as best as she could under her arms, affording him the closest access to the fire she had built, the light from which she hoped was still hidden from view of those who were now seeking to find her.

It was now two days till Christmas, the day Jackie privately celebrated the season during ‘normal’ seasons. People on December 23rd were generally kinder than any other day of the year, and more intelligent about the way they displayed that quality of communal vitality. Plans about who one would spend Christmas with were still dreams, rather than regrets. It was a time of ‘truce’ to be called in the various competitions that human life became infected with, in areas of work, culture, family and oneself. Christmas lights would all come out one by one, illuminating the sky as well as the hopes and aspirations of all the mortals whose fate it was to live under it. Ironic that on this ‘Jackie Christmas’ night, all she could see from the ‘windows’ of her hastily rebuilt ‘treehouse’ nestled within the open bowels of the mountain was the old missile base to the East. The new proposed pipeline site to the West. And to the North, a direction which beckoned her in more ways than one now, a glow coming out of the area which had been, until now, covered with muck. A strange kind of florescence popped out of the proposed mining site that had never had so much as a shovel put into it after it was declared ‘empty’

twenty years ago. And coming from all three of those directions, North, East and West, an eerie vibration that made Spike's ears hurt, so it seemed anyway. It made Jackie's skin crawl, causing oscillations to go up and down her spine just like the time when the neurologist who was more interested in her emerging breast tissue than the functional state of the grey matter between her ears had 'played doctor' with the tuning fork vibrator, asking 'do you feel this?', moving it between her legs when her parents left the room for a smoke.

As for the clouds in the Southern sky, they seemed to be 'obeying' something coming from the other three directions. Indeed, when that 'whining' sound got louder, the clouds seemed to dance to its tune. A deadly symphony that felt like a dirge, with a rhythm that celebrated death. Emanated by large structures that looked like metallic penises, zooming up from the earth like they had a hard-on for poking a goddess or anyone else unfortunate enough to be hanging around the sky.

Jackie was no great physicist, but there was one man whose physics was beyond anyone else who put formula to paper. The only scientist who she ever learned to trust, like and admire. "A Tesla weather machine!" she intuited as to what was going on under the brush in areas which now had some trucks and other vehicles move in, without headlights. "Change to climate and you can change the lives of everyone exposed to it, or...end those lives."

The Southern sky seemed to answer 'yes' to her horrific speculation, that even Nicola Tesla would question. The earth spoke next, shaking the ground Jackie had camped out on which had always been solid, in ways physical and metaphysical.

The earthquake shook the branches above the treehouse first, then the foundations of the structure, then even the rocks around it. With reflexes Jackie never knew existed inside of her very sports-uncoordinated body, she gathered everything she owned and valued, most importantly Spike, and fled from the 'cave' nature had carved into her favorite childhood mountain. From what felt like a safe location, she saw the house she had wanted to grow up in fall apart, collapsed into the cave within the mountain that folded in upon itself, closing like a door. Following her were the 'eyes' of the metallic penises, or so it seemed. They seemed to read her every thought, and Spike's ever fear.

Jackie ran like she never had before, letting whatever the ground offered take her where she needed to go. It led to a downward fall down an icy slope, the bottom of which was a pile of deep snow that buried her and all she had gathered with her. Spike emerged from the rubble, as did something else. Jackie's cell phone did indeed still work in prime condition, which was more than she could say about her bruised and possibly broken legs. A message came in from the last person she thought would ever want to speak with her. It was in Klingon, a language Jackie had learned so that she could speak on the phone with a boyfriend who was more a nerd than a friend, so that her bosses would not think she was talking about him, or her. But, Cathy McDermott had apparently learned the Rodenbery tongue, or googled it. It translated all too well. "Help, now, please," it said, providing coordinates, times and deadlines as to the how's, but not the 'why's'.

CHAPTER 18

“To know everything is how we can best serve everyone,” Cathy wrote on the napkin she passed to Jackie at the diner where she had just purchased a much needed meal for her former employee, rival and now only trusted ally. “The motto of the East German Secret Police in the good old days of the cold war, and the motto of everyone else, apparently, in the lukewarm war that, well...is even more dangerous, and deadly,” she continued, in hushed words over table in the all night café in the truck-stop outside of Kamloops that was frequented by trucker who knew nothing about the loads they were carrying, and who cared even less about who they were delivering them to, unless the check didn’t clear. The food more grease than substance, everything fried in oil which was perhaps also used as motor lubricant. But Jackie gobbled it down as fast as she could. Until she took note of the familiar font and the off color red it was scribbled in. “The r’s, I’s and n’s. Just like the writing on the original Genie Santa invoice, in ‘Cowboy Eddy’s’ electronic shop, and in the ‘gifts’ that son of a bitch wrote to his wife, mistress, and girlfriends that he delivered through the bus courier office when you and me were still working for Jack, who never showed up to his ‘never miss for any reason’ poker game with the guys last night.”

The realization of ‘why’ the meeting was taking place wacked Jackie inside her gut harder than any blow her father ever delivered to that spot with a punch, or self-esteem demolishing insult. Jackie dropped her fries and fish in mid chew, letting them fall onto the second dish that the ‘all you could eat’ menu provided.

“Yes, it matches, connecting Cowboy Eddy, or whoever he is, with Genie Santa and God knows what else,” Cathy affirmed, adjusting the bangs on her recently-stolen ass-length blonde wig, hoping that no one would see that her complexion and composure was more suited for brownish red cut squarely just below the chin. Three of the ‘working class stiff’ truck drivers around her gazed her way with intense interest, two of them with shoes that looked more military than industrial. Testing the hypothesis that it was about the hair covering her head rather than the thoughts incubating inside of it, she gave each of them a ‘howdy, boys’ smile, and gently took Jackie’s hand and kissed it tenderly, then seductively stroked the cheek of the unsuspecting teenager.

“I need you to kiss me now,” Cathy said. “On the lips!”

Jackie quivered with fear. “What if your new boyfriend comes in and sees us?” she inquired.

“Nicholi doesn’t know we’re here, Jackie” Cathy replied.

“And if he did, Cath?” Jackie asked, daring to address her former boss by the only name she insisted on not being called.

“He’d probably kill us both, and give away that cat you have stored in your knapsack to the Chinese restaurant,” the reply. “But, I think, for the right reasons.”

“Because none of us deserve to live?” the chronically self-effacing authoress whose literary career skyrocketed then crashed all in the course of less than a week.

“Because of what I think I know, if I have the courage to acknowledge it, and because of what you speculated, or...maybe knew psychically?” Cathy produced copies of the stories that she had given to Nicholi, when he was Norman, his journalistic literary agent. Each of the fantastic 1984-like “Big Brother” events that Jackie had written about were circled, some with check marks on them, some with dates written in Russian above them, some with question marks above them. “When did you get the ability to predict the future?” Cathy asked Jackie as she looked over the copies of the works that she had stolen from Nicholi after he was washing himself in the bathroom or snoozing under the covers, following being ‘entertained’ by Cathy’s charms, and romantic ‘investigations’.

“Are you sure Norman is a spy?” Jackie asked. “Inventing this ‘good guy working for the best intensions of Mother Russia’ thing could have just been a way to get you to go to bed with him, ya know.”

“Yes, this loser who everyone in Crystal River called a flakey slacker knows more than she should at her age, or maybe any age,” Cathy thought. She pondered inquiring more from Jackie, such as perhaps what she was writing in her fictionalized stories---the facts that were happening all around her now---was dictated to her by Nicholi, or someone else. But for the moment, such discussions would have to be worked out by action rather than words. Two police cars pulled up, two bubba bellied cops lumbering out of them, gazing at the menu, but one with a trim waist gazing at Jackie and Cathy, his fingers itching to pull out his service revolver.

Jackie took the initiative, hiding her face within Cathy’s, landing a big fat kiss on her lips. Though the caress accompanying it was heartfelt, her lips trembled with fear, her skin pouring out cold sweat. Cathy snuck a look in a mirror, spotting the slender ‘constable’ smiling with delight at the display of affection, along with the truck drivers who applauded, giving the ‘happy couple’ a loud and sincerely-meant round of ‘bravas’. Staying in character, Cathy escorted her young female lover out of the café, giving the ‘lads’ a third finger salute as they tried to follow, a gesture which enabled them to enjoy the spectacle even more, but from a safe distance.

Cathy opened the door to rental car she had signed out under an assumed name using one of Nicoli’s fake driver’s license templates and shuffled Jackie inside, intending to leave as much distance as possible between the ‘lads’ in the café and them as possible, just prior to arrival of more vehicles which looked very official, a ‘concerned’ conversation between plain-clothes Men in Black and the stud cop taking place.

“So, where do we go from here?” Jackie asked Cathy, in the way that felt...maternal, displaying more affection and trust than any niece, nephew or non-relation had ever done

before. Unfortunately 'Mama Cathy' felt as scared as any of her adoptive 'children' ever did, doing her best to hide it from this 'child', who seemed to be able to see through anyone and everything. A gift in times when the Truth shall set you free, a curse in times like these when knowing too much would put you into the grave, or worse.

CHAPTER 19

Nicholi woke up to an bottle emptied of vodka, and a bed emptied of the woman he had lured into it. He had no memory as to which happened first. "Maybe it was all just a bad dream," he said regarding the hangover. "Or a very good one," he continued to himself recalling the smell of Cathy's hair and the touch of her skin." He pondered the good and bad, as well as the right and wrong of it all as he stumbled towards the window with the drawn shades, the morning light finding its way through enough small holes and pockets to remind him that it was daytime, and time to get to work. He could feel his feet on the hard floor, though they didn't seem to be connected to his body. Yes, he had been drunk before, a condition of self-induced masochism ingrained into the Russian genetic code since the time of Ivan the Terrible, but this kind of inebriation was different. As much as the innate talent to be able to eat someone else's shit and look like you were enjoying it, while of course occupying yourself between 'dumps' forging the shit-emitter's signature and imitating his penmanship.

A knock on the door startled Nicholi. "Housekeeping!" the visitor said as she knocked on the door which was now, unlatched, apparently by Cathy, who was no where to be found, seen, touched, caressed, nor yelled at. "Housekeeping!" the woman said again, in a voice that was not Cathy, despite the fact that Nicholi would have given everything he ever valued for it to be her. "Mister Smith?" she repeated.

"I'm alright," Nicholi proclaimed in his best accentless 'Canadian', remembering that he had signed in as 'Norman', or some other North American name with as much spice to it as a Saskatchewan perogy, or a Vancouver Playhouse rendition of ANY Chekov play.

The East Indian woman chose to believe him, wheeling her cart at a slow 'worker's' pace to the next unit. Meanwhile, Nicholi did another check of his belongings to see what was missing, or moved. He cursed Cathy in muffled Russian for having left the Mission without his permission, or instructions. He yearned for her in another language which was neither Slavic nor Canadian. Did he really come to love her? Nicholi was not sure as he had been living lies so much for the last 20 years that he himself never knew when he was telling the truth or when he was bullshitting others. Perhaps that was why he was believing his own lies. But, he was in 'colorful' company, as he was reminded by a picture of an old man hanging on the wall with a wide brimmed hat and large mustache.

"So, Comrade Basili," he said to the photograph of the famous Canadian outlaw Bill Miner who was really an American. "You were the most accomplished gentleman-bandit train robber in Canada, and when you got what you wanted, you didn't go back home to

your home country. Maybe it was because the lies you told others about being gentleman mining engineer George Edwards when you were hiding out in British Columbia, were more pleasant to believe than the reality of where you really came from? And what you really did during your lonely times when locked up in that cell in San Quinton for 20 years? And that the reason why you moved someplace else was that you were a failure in the place you came from, and always would be, even if you COULD return? Hmmm?"

Neither Bill Miner nor George Edwards answered Nicholi of course, but someone else. The Russian expatriate looked at the call display on his cell phone. "Yes, she is trying to call me," he said to the photo of Old Bill, with a long-overdue smile on his face. "After so many times when I tried to call her and she didn't answer. She is calling ME this time. Ironic that she is calling me after I did what was...necessary last night, but she will forgive me as---"

The upturned lips on Nicholi's face nearly cracked the skin above it, as they had not been in that position for a long, long time. "Elena!" he said in Russian as he put the phone to his ear.

From the other end of the phone, Nicholi was addressed by his real name for the first time in decades, and by someone who pronounced it both authentically, and sincerely. It seemed like fifteen years had never passed at all, as he felt a conversation about to happen exactly where it left off a decade and a half ago. But before the first deeply felt words could be spoken, a horrible screech came from the other end of the phone, then a scream of terror, then spray of machine gun fire through the window of the hotel. Delivered with silencers, blood flowing from the other side of the door. One of the bullets hit the cell phone, though Nicholi wished it had shattered his hand instead. With reflexes he hadn't used in years, he reached for his revolver and fired back at shadows that seemed to be the source of the gunfire. But for each shadow he put into the ground, another two popped up.

A tear-gas grenade found its way through the duct into the middle of the room. Remembering lessons his great-grandfather had told him about the War against the Kaiser, in service of the Czar who was as hated as any German, or Bolshevik, Nicholi pulled down his drawers, grabbed a washcloth and urinated into it, using it as a mask. He hastily put on whatever clothing he could and slithered into the bathroom, throwing a jar of oil in front of him. He ignited the material, setting the room on fire, making a getaway through the bathroom window just before his assailants got through the door. The smart and noble thing may have been to see who they were. For now, being safe was more important than being effective.

CHAPTER 20

December 24 morning came on hard and fast, and warmer than any October 24 on record, in accordance with the wishes of most of the residents of Crystal River, who had already

suffered through a bone chilling November which was more like January. “Looks like Genie Santa will be delivering his other Christmas gifts to everyone in bermuda shorts instead of that red snowsuit,” Colonel Williams said as he swung his ass into the saddle of the most ‘energetic’ horse he could buy in Crystal River. “That Mountie coat sure as hell don’t fit him,” he continued, throwing a stetson on his hat. “Ya comin’?” he asked ‘Captain Sam’ as he picked up the reins.

Sam’s list of phobias included most things that gave kids who lived in the ‘real’ world pleasure, including girls, hockey, high speed cars on the flat, ANY travel involving heights and of course the ‘big wide open’ most anywhere outside of his computer cave. Representing elements of all of those primal fears most were beasts bigger than him, particularly horses. “I don’t know. I think I still have some work to do,” the terrified recently-shorn cybergeek said with as much ‘duty before pleasure’ machismo as he could muster. The horse turned around to look at Sam with its large eyes which seemed kind from the ground, but with perhaps a hidden agenda once his feet were not on solid earth.

“I’m givin’ ya the mornin’ off!” Eddy offered, more as a command than a gift. “And that mare is as lovin’ as any woman you or I ever had the opportunity ta be pleased by, or will,” he continued.

Such gave Sam even more cause for concern, as ‘love’ was one of the things on his ‘top ten things to avoid for life’ list as anything else. Particularly because he didn’t understand it, and most particularly when it came to girls, or women. For reasons he couldn’t define, making the thought even more terrifying, Sam’s ‘mental imagery process’ shifted over from cybercircuits inside computer frames to the inner workings of Jackie’s Soul, and the body that it currently inhabited.

Though she had always been the source of most of his backbiting, satirical on a good day, cyberdigs, he seemed to want Jackie for something else now. Nay, NEED her for something else. Even though she had always made him pay marked up prices that no one else had to fork out whenever she was the clerk at Jack’s General Store. Even though she would raise her eyebrows in that ‘I’m born and always will be cooler than you ever will be’ flick of the head whenever his eyes met hers in the school hallway. And even though she was the one who had outscored him on the Renkins Scholarship Award competition that he considered his right to have. He wondered where she was now, envious of the fact that she got out of Crystal River, and on her OWN terms, no doubt on some kind of book tour now as a new emerging writer in a world that may one day may even get back into reading. Hey, if Sam knew how to be a black Goth erotically-ematiated babe who looked like she could swing her tail for both genders, he’d do it too.

The mare snorted, throwing a spray of saliva on Sam’s contact-allergic hands. He felt violated, dirty and scared. “But,” he thought as silently as he could, hoping that one of the computers he built for ‘Cowboy Eddy’s posse’ wasn’t reading his mind. “What would Jackie say if I didn’t get on the back of this mare? That I was afraid of horses?”

And a female one at that? No, if I don't get on her, I KNOW I'll feel Jackie laughing at me. No one laughs at me! Not anymore, anyway!!!"

With that, Sam took in a deep breath, rammed his right foot into the stirrup, and pulled his still frail body over the top, landing his tender ass on the hard leather.

"There ya go," Colonel Williams said as 'Cowboy Eddy', with pride. More proud of Sam than his father was for him sprouting pubic hair. Or his mother for getting straight A's in every class he took, excluding gym of course. Or anyone else who he considered worth impressing.

Cowboy Eddy moved his recently-acquired gelding out of the bounds of his small recently bought acreage, paid for in hard cash, across a broken fence onto land thus far still owned by the Crown. He seemed to be humming something more Western than military, more Cowboy than American. But though he said he was taking Sam for a pleasure ride, it seemed to be about more work than pleasure. Or maybe the most important work of all---finding and being true to one's innermost Core.

The soft, melting snow muffled the concussive forces on Sam's ass on the hard saddle, and he found himself less hard-assed about his opinion about the asshole who was now his boss by necessity, and lifetime friend if Sam consented to it. What came out of the cowboy's mouth confirmed Sam's hypothesis.

"Ya know, I had five kids," Eddy related. "Three of which I didn't know about of course," he smiled. "One dumbass fillie that ran off with a bastard who rode her hard and put her away every night until one night, she beat herself up harder than he ever did," he confessed, rage and grief viciously competing for domination of his mind, and soul. "And one who signed up for the War in Afganistan, won two medals for capturing an Alcheida stronghold, another for not letting other members of the platoon get captured. Came back home, and after having the first real shower and real meal in a year, decided to----"

The Cowboy Colonel's mouth froze in mid memory, the details of which he needed to relate, but couldn't. Whatever it was, it was something bad that perhaps could explain the many bad things that Eddy had done, or was about to do. But bad men and real cowboys don't cry, or so Sam thought until he saw tears streaming down his boss/benefactor's face.

"You must have been proud of him, Sir," Sam offered, feeling the need to be both surrogate shrink and trusted military attachee.

"I was, and am, Son," Colonel Eddy related, sending some kind of message, and request, into Sam's now very wide, open eyes. But there was something else to it than just the meltdown of the tough guy thing here. It was the first time Sam had been called 'Son'. Or maybe to be accurate, the fourth, fifth or tenth, if Crystal River's teenaged computer whiz counted the times he went on 'farm calls' to people still living two centuries back

who needed help with their 'e mail machines'. But this time, 'son' was meant in a real relational sense.

Sam found himself visualizing the rest of his life with this new father, and it didn't seem so bad. If Colonel Eddy was a cowboy trying to make the world a freer and safer place for democracy, such would be a noble cause, nobility computing into Sam's vocabulary as something very, very good. If the smiling 'there ya go' cowboy was a deceitful piece of detritous, he was a well-connected one, and, as the expression from the 60s went that he heard over and over again from those who made a real difference in Life before they died, 'if you want to change the system, change it from within'. There was no one more 'in' the 'system' than Cowboy Eddy, or Colonel Williams. And once 'in' himself, Sam could perhaps, nay, certainly WOULD, integrate with the bad guys and either turn them into good guys, or take away the machinery from 'the system' and turn it into something....good. Such was what happened in any computer game of advanced moral intelligence, and as the cyberexpression (and reality) goes, 'real life imitates the cyberworld as much as the cyberworld imitates real life.'

The ride went, as the song goes, 'over the river and through the woods', but it was not 'to grandmother's house' that Sam had led them. It was more like a hastily constructed metallic shack, guarded by men with guns, others who had been recently stripped of theirs inside. From atop the mare who still, out of habit, boredom or mercy, had not bucked him off, Sam recognized one of the 'guests' at the pre-Christmas dinner, being fed a knuckle sandwich into his already bleeding mouth. "That's Hans!" he said.

"That's an armed intruder, Son," Cowboy Eddy informed Sam with firm conviction.

"Who was just out hunting!" Sam argued, trying to dismount. A man in military issue Parka stripped of its insignias with strong hands and eyes covered by reflective sunglasses pushed him back atop the saddle. "On land that belongs to everyone!"

Hans heard Sam. The eighty-something, defiant against authority but forgiving to everyone else mountain man blasted out a call for help to Sam through a mouth flooded with blood.

"What did he say?" the civilian in the military issue parka asked Sam.

"I don't know," Sam said.

"Du sprichst Deutch, nicht wahr?" Eddy said in diction that was suprizingly more North German than Southern American.

"Yeah, I DO speak German," Sam said, nor remembering that he ever informed Eddy that he did. "But Hans speaks Bavarian. A language that even most Germans don't understand. Verstehst du?"

“Verstehen SIE!” Eddy replied as a Colonel, reminding Sam that in front of the ‘men’, formal terms of address were appropriate. As a side product of it all, Eddy did get the ‘men’ to stand up with more formal, upright backbones after they had heard him speak German. But to be fair, and accurate, Sam felt himself stand up a little more proudly, and assertively, when he spoke German rather than English. And such was...scary. There was something about the ‘talk’ going on with the other ‘terrorist masquerading as a Native hunter’ was getting. A First Nations Aboriginal Elder as he was known in Canada. A ‘sneaky, dirty old Injun’ to the Yanks who had tied him up, punched him in the belly, and now pulled out an electrical instrument that had its own power of persuasion for the old man who had hunted the land for decades, on the land’s own terms.

“One more time...If ya don’t tell us what we need to know there, Chief,” the ‘master of ceremonies’ said in very Alabaman diction as he grabbed hold of the three-foot long braids that had been the ‘Old Injun’s’ trademark, and religious obligation, as the only member of the local band that still could speak the language of his ancestors. “I’m afraid we’ll have to send you to the happy hunting grounds with a buzz cut.”

The Old Injun whose traditional name could not be pronounced by anyone, even his wife and kids who were making a go of it in the big city, spit into the face of the very White Redneck. He proudly announced something in Cree.

“It’s a good day to die,” Eddy translated, sadly, to Sam, as the Old Man got his first haircut in twenty years, the interrogator working his way up the mane gradually, hoping that after three inches of his Sacred braids had been lopped off, the Old Man would consider talking. The honor of doing the sacred braid chopping, in stages, went to a new Canadian recruit, Bart. He didn’t seem to remember who he was his own buzz cut and sour peppermint-stenched breath, helping himself to some interestingly-odorous beef jerky between hair chops.

The other armed guards seemed equally hungry. After a foot of the Elder’s long locks was gone, he would say something moderately useful, or so the plan seemed to be. But, the old man held defiant, even to the point of having the electric razor chop off his hair an inch BELOW his exposed and bloody scalp.

“The purpose of interrogation is to humiliate people, then to break them down, then to own them,” Sam recalled from a reading of the Gulag Archipelico, the recommended reading about Soviet prisons made mandatory when Cathy substitute taught for the week that became six months when Sam was, for ‘administrative’ reasons, forced to attend classes with the ‘normal’ kids.

“Everything that’s going on here is necessary, Son,” Eddy related to Sam, believing it to the depths of his hurting and sorrowful heart. “For us, our families, your families, these horses, and their families. And even that Old Man’s family, wherever they are now. We need you to understand that.”

Sam nodded a 'yes' to it all, but inside his head something else was stirring that he found even more disturbing. Though Eddy didn't seem to enjoy being cruel to some people as a necessary part of saving the rest of humanity, Sam's introduction to 'what was necessary' made him face something inside him that was even scarier than the business end of the Cowboy Colonel or anyone else's gun. And even scarier than the stray of silencer-quenched machine gun fire that brought a small flock of birds down to their ground as they, apparently by accident, or perhaps on purpose, were drawn to the trees around one of the 'sensory transmitters' that had just been turned on. Or the vacant looks on the guards-turned-goons who enjoyed the peppermint-spiced beef jerky, getting more happily sadistic with each bite of the fragrant red meat.

"I'm...enjoying this," Sam's mind said while observing his brain caught in a self-perpetuation reflex loop he never knew he had. "I am enjoying seeing that Old Injun's hair being chopped off, each foot hitting the floor, and seeing him cry in sorrow, agony and shame! I enjoy seeing these Yankee and Canadian yahoos shooting birds that accidentally land on trees next the office they built in the middle of their winter nesting ground. And I enjoy seeing Hans spit out blood, along with his guts, and teeth and---"

As if he knew they would be his last words, Hans said something else, in very muffled Bavarian. Though Sam could barely understand old man Hans when he ranted on in English, he understood completely what he was saying now. The mare sensed it too.

"I gotta...wanna go for a ride," Sam said to Eddy. "Get to know this mare a little better?" he asked.

"She'll treat ya better than any woman I know, or probably you ever will," Eddy smiled with a warmth that meant 'Son', but didn't have to say it.

"Yeah, she probably will," Sam said, allowing himself to lapse into a slight Texan drawl that he hoped was admiring but not insulting. "But first, I need to fill my own belly."

Sam dismounted, helping pretending to help himself a sandwich marked 'officers only', while sneaking away a fistful of jerky that seemed to be turning men into jerks of the worst kind. He took a bite out of the sandwich, gave a thumb's up to the chef, then mounted the mare, turning her head into the woods for a 'get acquainted' walk, trot then, when the snow could muffle the hoofs and his screams of terror, gallop. Hans' last words had determined the destination, with no turning back this time.

CHAPTER 21

Being a cat, Spike was not supposed to be able to understand 'humanspeak', but being the special creature that he was, he felt every word. Most particularly because of who was doing the talking. It being Christmas eve, he dined on the most expensive catfood that could be brought down from the shelves in Jack's General Store, the establishment closed

for the evening and the next day. It seemed to suit the new unofficial co-owner, who seemed to be ready at any time to displace the old one, without his knowledge or consent.

“I got a feeling that he could move around, but I think he’s goose-steeping as well as leap frogging,” Cathy commented regarding Genie Santa’s new and very much improved method of getting around the store, stopping to look, and undoubtedly scan, every car that passed through the intersection ahead, which now seemed to flash on a red light whenever anything on wheels or legs approached, registering info on their inhabitants, and any blackberries or cell phones on board. “I didn’t know Genie Santa was a Nazi.” She continued, staying within the lanes in the store that Sam had told her were his blind spots. “I didn’t know that you became one either,” Cathy blasted back at Sam.

“It would explain why he was so interested in learning German,” Jackie interjected with a snide grin. “And why that he got that military buzz cut. And big pocketful of jerky. Which isn’t human of course. It’s ‘chicken’”

“I don’t know what the hell meat it started as!” Sam shot back in as loud a volume as a fire-fueled whisper could carry. “It’s inhumane something now, with something in it that made my mother go mad, then---“

It was Spike who nuzzled in with Sam to remind him that he wasn’t alone, after having lost someone he had cared about more than he imagined he did while she was alive.

“Jackie!” Sam shouted out. “You’re the one who could always make mind-fucking drugs out of fucking anything in the chemistry lab. Maybe you can tell me what’s in that meat that gave my mother ‘cancer’, made Bart go macho-military on Hans and the Old Indian he hung out with, and----“

“Has a sweet peppermint odor that is irresistible to the tongue?” Cathy noted, smelling the jerky Sam had acquired from the ‘mess tent’ after making a quick getaway on the mare that had given him saddle sores on his very virgin ass. “What did you do with your getaway vehicle anyway?” she asked Sam.

“Let her go. I think she’ll find her way home. Hope so anyway,” Sam said in defense of his actions and manner of carrying them out. “Hans told me with the last breath inside of him that I should come here! And I’m here!”

“Did he talk?” Cathy asked. “Did he tell them anything else about us?”

“Who is ‘us’?” Sam demanded to know.

Silence penetrating the room, all three humanoids looking at each other with more distrust than Spike ever got thrown back on him for doing anything. It lasted for an entire can of ‘Special Kitty’ catfood, even when eaten slowly. Finally, the back door opened up, a sole set of footsteps entering in assertively and quietly. The humanoid was wearing a brown hoodie, pulled over his head, carting a big bag of goodies in a ‘Santa

Bag' that had been taken from the lobby of the Food Store which had been used to deliver goods to the foodbank...remnants of beef jerky in it.

Cathy, Jackie and Sam looked at him with awe as he put down his wares, as if he owned the place. Then pulled back his hoodie, and smiled at them with a cut up face impregnated with soot, bloodstains on his hands. "We all have a lot of work to do," he said in a Slavic accent. "To save the world from democracy," he said by way of explanation.

"For the sake of humanity, Nicholi?" Cathy smiled back at him.

"What's going on, Norman?" Sam asked the man who he still knew as Norman Thompson, the newspaper editor who was always the source of boredom and reliability.

"For tonight, and tomorrow, we all have to become people who are..." Nicholi-Norman pondered. "Better and more efficient than we used to be," he continued.

That was the only thing that the humanoids seemed to agree upon. And the unsaid fact that if they failed, the Mayans' would be correct. The world would end by the end of December, 2012. Or certainly be very much more different than in any previous age, or era.

CHAPTER 22

Sam's mare had chosen to enjoy a Christmas eve dinner in a field of tall winter grass exposed now to the moonlight by weather that was melting the snow almost into mud. March in December, so it seemed. Nicholi had dismissed him to take care of that task and find his way back to Cowboy-Colonel Eddy's new 18 acre 'ranch'. "Now that you've made the proper adjustments on the machinery here, we need you to see that such matters are looked after there," Nicholi instructed the new Knight in his new Arthorian Army. "The most effective way to defeat your enemy is to be his closest friend," he had said as his final words in Russian AND English, not sure if he said 'defeat' or 'subvert' your enemy. He probably meant the latter, particularly because in KGBese, they meant the same thing.

The agent still on the KBG payroll set up shop in the last place 'Cowboy Eddy' would expect him to be this time----the newspaper office in which he worked. A place from which he was preparing the last edition of the rag that he had tried to elevate into a current affairs journal. The article he was writing, the contents of which he hid from Cathy, or any viewpoint Jackie could have of them from a mirror, bore that 'last edition' stamp at the header and tail. "Who will be your replacement?" she asked him.

"As what?" Nicholi's reply, begging for a bold, or honest, answer. Cathy dared not voice one. But as for Jackie, she was another story, her mind constructing a very real NOW story which had no time for sentiment or reflection.

“There’s an Army of Genie Santas out there, granting somehow small wishes to people in exchange for getting access into their most personal files, and ultimately the part of their brains that make, or made, them independent thinkers. Hundreds of those cyberrobots spies have been already sold in the stores!” Jackie reminded her former literary ‘agent’.

“Thousands, actually,” Nicholi said. “Each with the capacity to find out what people are writing about, thinking, or wishing for...”

“A world where no working person has to work,” Jackie blasted out, Cathy staring her straight in her cynical, terrified face as to where she obtained that concept.

“A line from famous movie, ‘Reds’, about Russia in 1918,” Nicholi said, reading Cathy’s next thought and putting it into words. “A movie about Revolution that went wrong, in some ways. And other Revolutions still in progress. Revolutions make for hope. God help countries that do not have Revolutions anymore, such as Canada, or in the United States,” he continued, again reading Cathy’s thoughts again. Too bad he couldn’t read her heart, and instruct her as to whether it was love or hate that she felt for him. That heart beat with a thump driven by emotions which she never felt so strongly. But not as loudly as the ticking of the clock on the wall, counting down the hours, minutes and seconds to the scheduled conclusion of ‘Operation Christmas’ as outlined in the top secret file that Sam had hacked into in Colonel Eddy Williams’ computer, with a little bit of help from Nicholi, and a lot of encouragement from Jackie.

It was Jackie who seemed to worry about Sam most now, having volunteered to go back into the lion’s den to gather more information and be the inside man to defeat, subvert or, to be mathematically correct, invert it.

CHAPTER 23

It was a work day for Sam, seated as he sat at what he thought, or hoped anyway, was the command station above all other command stations in the apartment above Cowboy Eddy’s newly-established and now very-well stocked in Electronic’s Store. While at a much needed, and scheduled, break he took notice of the ‘hand wrote’ notes around Cowboy-Colonel Sam’s personal phone, which Sam was now allowed to use on the desk cluttered with official files, and smelling of horsedung. They dealt with personal matters more than anything else. “Call Dad before he starts his Christmas drinkin’.” “Call Mom to see how her and her new manfriend are getting on.” “Call Uncle Jake to remind him to not get on horses he can’t handle ‘cause his body can’t handle another fall.” “Call my own kids and hope they talk ta me.” Yes, Eddy was a family man. One that cared about family a lot, and Homeland. Perhaps more than than other lands, and countries. It was the American Way, after all. Family first, inferring that one is allowed, nay, required to fuck everyone else in their service. But for now, Sam was ‘family’, adopted family anyway. A family member who took note of not only what his new ‘Dad’ was writing, but how he wrote it. The r’s, n’s and dots over the ‘i’s’ identical to the broken script on

the delivery tag carrying the first Genie Santa to Jack's General store, with no clear return nor delivery address.

As for Jack, an invitation to a 'real Cowboy Christmas dinner' was extended to him as well as everyone else in town. The affair was already underway downstairs, the shop converted into a dining hall with more 'authentic Western props' per square inch than any REAL dining hall in the Old West could handle. The spread was authentic too, 'Genie Santa's helpers' having delivered succulent turkey stuffed with 'something fruity' that would make even a vegan turn into a carnivore, the juiciest roast beef East AND West of the Pecos, Mexican chile that would send even an East Indian cowhand to the 'crick' for water to cool down his palate after eating it, and five kinds of beer, including Big Fish, Montana's finest elixer from the Sagebrush gods, 'Moose Drool'.

Everyone in town seemed to be in attendance, except one who Sam missed most of all. He picked up the phone to call his father, one more time. Still no answer, as Sam remembered the various insults associated with the refusal to share Christmas dinner with a 'fraud, cheat, and traitor to his own family, people and country' in the last few phone calls. A good thing, perhaps. If Sam's Dad did show up, he'd probably be put in the loonie tune factory for a 40 year 'observation period' as a conspiracy freak, a fate far worse than being put in a grave for finding out too much and Genie Santa and his 'helpers', as his mother and her presumed 'lover', bus driver Bill must have done.

Meanwhile, Cowboy Eddy strummed away on his guitar in the store below in a corny singalong of 'This Land is Your Land' that everyone seemed to join into. Ignoring, of course, the REAL lyrics to the original Woody Guthrie song which, at the end, said something about 'this land was made for the rich and powerful, and not us anymore'. A song to remind the displaced people who got the blunt end of the stick during the Great Depression that they didn't have to take it all up the ass.

Sam decided to take time off from his duties to his new father Colonel Cowboy Eddy as well as his other duties to his new Uncle Nicholi. A quick google search for the original lyrics, so at least Sam could hum them to himself. And maybe sing them with Woody's ghost. But neither the lyrics nor any real info on Guthrie's legacy could be located on that search engine, not the REAL meaning of what he had to say. Sam's eye found itself noticing an old set of encyclopedia's, that 'book of all books' from somewhere in the previous century, 1984, ironically, which had special sentimental meaning to Colonel Eddy. Maybe they had been read, or believed. Whatever was in those books, Eddy believed as fact, so it seemed. Most everyone did, at the time.

But in these times, 'encyclopedia' was spelt 'google', accessible to everyone. Sam pondered the idea that perhaps whoever controlled what was on the 'google' encyclopedia would control what the world thought, or believed. It made sense, as the idea of the internet was originally from the American military, and installed by such. A 'free' service which, perhaps was designed to enslave others, making them feel free of course.

As Sam thought those ideas, and postulates, he hid his eyes. Perhaps the computer in front of him could read his thoughts and modify reality to fit it. Genie Santa was, after all, designed for that purpose. The weather machines delivered warm climate by popular vote, as most of the people who came to visit the cyberdoll smiled more widely when seeing pics of Hawaiian beaches than Swiss ski resorts. Prosperity came to Crystal River and the surrounding communities because there were more people coming to Genie Santa wanting to be rich than to be enlightened. And ‘mating activity’, particularly when it didn’t have to involve real love, was sky high, as getting tail was a top priority for both genders, which of course led to really good business for hotel owners, and other vendors of ‘stuff’ which people who wanted ‘stuff’ above substance bought, mostly with credit cards that were traceable, paid off by funders who never identified themselves. “Yeah, give the people what they want, and what they need only if you have to,” Sam recalled from All American inventor Thomas Edison, who stole or bastardized most of Nichola Tesla’s ideas, and ideals.

But in Sam’s REAL pocket, was what he hoped was something real. A piece of beef jerky containing, according to Nicholi’s speculations anyway, just enough peppermint-flavored elixir to turn one person into something he, or she, was not. Perhaps, even a six foot three cowboy would be souced on enough Moose Drool to notice that it got into his feed. With only an hour of time to do what had to be done before it was feeding time for the most dangerous beast in the barnyard.

CHAPTER 24

While Jackie was on the computer fabricating Christmas fantasy tales through a very private link, Cathy helped Nicholi with Christmas dinner. It was more about Yuletide spice than substance, his kitchen dedicated more to culinary science than art. “Looks like chef’s school for the Big Bang geeks,” she said regarding the test tubes and distillation flasks that now occupied shelves that were designed for glasses and mugs. “But then again, cooking for geeks is probably biochemistry that doesn’t count,” she allowed to come from a smile that fell easily onto her tired face.

“Biochemistry always counts,” Nicholi said with deadly serious determination, working on the fifth distillation extract to see if it would turn the indicator in the test fluid red. “And if we don’t get this right, we, well you know,”

“I know, can’t get secret rocket fuel to Mister Big,” Cathy thought in “Ruskie Natasha spy-ese”, but didn’t say. She knew that the peppermint-smelling extract from the jerky Sam had stolen from the shack where Cowboy Eddy’s boys were having a ‘good ole time’ being turned into torturers had to be identified, and neutralized fast. She also knew that the elixir which seemed to be able to kill the part of the human mind that was most involved with independent thinking was in the paws of beasts working very independently of any international law or legally-sanctioned policy. Or so she still hoped. Just like she hoped that Genie Santa’s REAL final wish he would grant would be world peace for everyone, even the restless who were addicted to war, and that world

hunger, misery and despair would become 'pre-2012' states of mind which would be read in the history books by a new race of humans who knew nothing but Bliss, cooperation and, yes, that most elusive yet sought state of Being, big B, Love.

As for the 'L' word, Nicholi seemed to be in love with his work, muttering in Russian as he came closer and closer to finding the right titration. Finally, he got it. "This is the antidote!" he announced, proudly. "No matter how much of anti-brain candy Colonel-Cowboy gives to my fellow citizens who he considers guinea pigs, this will make them find their way out of the cages, and back to their own caves, which they may dwell in should they wish or need to, or destroy if they dare to look into the light rather than with the shadows the the fires in them project onto the walls."

"Plato's Allegory of the Cave, Cath," Jackie offered by way of explanation to the 'story' which Nicholi seemed to recall like a primal nursery rythm, addressing her still by the name she hated most. The young rebel diverted the rest of her fear into an explanation of such, incorporating part of the ancient Greek tale into the modern one she was fabricating, hoping that whoever read it would consider it as fact, due to the colorfulness of the language, the texture of the metaphors, and of course, the authority the kind of font she was using conferred to the unsuspecting internet surfer dude, or dud. "Most people in the world live in cold, damp caves, chained down by shackles of their own making, watching images on the walls of the cave made by shadows, which are made by the warm sunlight outside the cave. A few Visionaries decide to turn around and look at the light, and get the picture of what is really going on. If they are masochistic enough, they try to return to the cave to tell their fellow humanoids that if they tear off their shackles and turn around, and have a good bath in the warm, and very real Sunlight."

"And for their courage, and wisdom, they get an extra helping of hemlock in their breakfast cereal," Nicholi said, looking at small ampule of raw powder which Eddy had no doubt sprinkled vigorously on anything his guests were eating. He smelled it, something familiar in his eyes, accompanied by a reminiscent smile.

"Just like Mama Stalin used to make for her son's guests in the Holiday Camp Gulags?" Cathy snidely offered.

"Yes," Nicholi answered, his jaw pulled down by guilt. He turned around to Cathy, giving her a "shut up if you know what is good for you" stare, which was far more intense than any she had given the kids in Crystal River as they were growing up, including Jackie, or Sam. "We did what we had to do. Just like you did, and will."

"And what we decide we have to do happens after you sneak some of that peppermint-paddy powder into OUR feed bag, 'Norman'?" Cathy challenged. She found her feet carry her around the room, her head infused with thoughts and ideas she felt herself incapable of generating herself, no doubt fueled by something in the belly. Fire, it seemed to be, which never let her feet stay in one place, as she, for the first time since she found out who Norman really was, tried to put him in HIS place, and hers.

“I’m getting tired of being told what to do by men! Men who think they know everything, and that ‘the little woman’ can’t handle the truth,” she blasted out. “Ya know something? I can handle the truth better than you can! And can find it too! It was me who figured out that Cowboy Eddy’s handwriting was what was on the delivery label of the original Genie Santa. And I was the ‘little woman’ who figured out that he was more American than Albertan, and that he not only admired the American Military, but that he was in it, and even maybe owned a big part of it. And it was me who figured out that Genie Santa was a listening device for people who granted the wishes of those unsuspecting souls, no matter what they wished for. Or granted other wishes if they were ‘naughty and not nice’, ‘naughty’ being determined as----“

“---Shit!” Jackie interjected, as the thud on the floor turned into a loud gasp.

“Nicholi!” Cathy blasted out, trying to lift his shaking body from the cold floor. His limbs were cold, his heart pumping a million miles an hour, his face pale and caked with cold sweat. “I’m getting you to a hospital!” she insisted.

“No you won’t!” he insisted. “You will carry our plan, as you see fit, but before December 26th! It will all be over by then if you don’t!”

Jackie retrieved a few drops of the antidote, rushing it to Nicholi’s mouth. “Here! Take it!” she insisted.

He shook his head in a defiant ‘no’.

“You’ll die if you don’t!” Cathy informed him.

“But you all will live if I don’t,” he insisted.

“Or maybe not, Cath?” Jackie postulated, asking Cathy a question with her eyes.

The message was loud and clear. Nicholi, most probably, had breathed in the toxic mind-destroying drug, in doses that killed brain cells. Maybe the antidote worked, or maybe it didn’t. Or maybe the antidote was just more toxin. Nicholi was the only guinea pig around who could be used to test it.

Cathy held him down, while Jackie dripped two drops under his mouth. He gagged, then opened his eyes wider than any time in memory, as Norman or Nicholi. Then stopped breathing, his shaking body going stiff. Then...began to breath again, the muscle tone in his limbs returning to normal, his eye winking, seeking, and obtaining, a sound, and safe slumber. By the smile on his face, it seemed that the dream he was experiencing as life promoting. “Elena, I am still alive,” he said. “And you will be too. God, Cathy and Jackie and Sam willing.”

Cathy and Jackie looked at each other, both of them having grown up very, very fast into the kind of adulthood which no parent every expects nor can teach a child. As the clock

ticked down, Cathy knew that they had to continue the ‘biochemistry’ cooking very fast, and sent Jackie off to the computer to write the most important stories of her career, or perhaps the career of any author she ever emulated.

CHAPTER 25

Jack swore that his body would be buried six feet under before anyone would hear him sing ‘Proud to Be an American’. Yet, the Canadian-to-the-Core Yankee-phobe who cursed the NHL for expanding more teams into the US than cities more deserving of such North of the 49th and who sold ALL American-made products at his general store at twice the price of Canadian wares sang the pro-American, screw-every other country tune louder than anyone else in the dining room. The lyrics came bellowing out of his Zombified mouth, fueled by a well satiated bubba belly. The off-key vocalizations harmonized perfectly with the rest of the dinner guests at Cowboy Eddy’s Christmas ho-down, who were equally souced on something they hardly expected to be eating or drinking. But the guitar which was strumming out the tune did not come from ‘Doctor Eddy’s’ hand this time. It could only be heard by the ears of the de-Canadianized citizens of Crystal River who were singing the pop-culture battle hymn. Thankfully, the country-pop anthem was not going through Sam’s mouth as he witnessed it all, having just completed his official work for Colonel Eddy, and the Real work for Uncle Nicoli at the computer terminal upstairs.

As for Cowboy Eddy, he was gone. As was Colonel Eddy’s horse, both leaving heavy tracks in a trail of mud and snow leading upward to a mountain trail which was as slanty on the path and steep along side of it. As was Nicoli’s plan to put some of the ‘zombie juice’ into Eddy’s feed, or sneak it into his body through a transcutaneous carrier. No, science was not an answer this time, nor anything between the ears. It was balls that was required this time, not brains, and any doughhead with half a neuron left in his association cortex knew that if Eddy wasn’t caught, contained or killed within 8 hours, ‘Operation Santa’ would find its way to its intended conclusion. Even with what Sam had done to the central computer programme.

While Eddy was downstairs entertaining his newly-conscripted Canadian troops, ‘trooper’ Sam was upstairs, having secretly changed all the cyber-pluses to minuses. It would invert the Mission, and its results, such being the Achilles heal of any binary system based on material world duality. But Colonel Eddy was no dummy, and by the note he left on Sam’s new ‘Christmas saddle’, he was as capable of inverting a negative to being a positive again as Sam was at sabotaging the original ‘Genie Santa’ program. “I know what you did,” the note read. “Or was thinking about doing. We’ll forgive it, this time, because, after all you are one of us, whether you know it or not.”

Eddy knew that Sam was afraid of heights just as much as he was afraid of wild horses, and Cowboy Eddy was sure to leave nothing in the coral that was even close to being green broke. But, perhaps, one of the wildies could be persuaded to become tamer with some extra ingredients in his feed. “Come and get it,” Sam said to the one with the

kindest eye, and the firmest looking legs. “This Zombie juice will make you stupid and obedient, but really happy,” he continued, mixing the peppermint-flavored mind-numbing extract into ‘Buttercup’s’ feeding pail with enough sweet feed to hide its offensively candy-like odor.

Buttercup decided that he liked the sweet feed, then that he liked the freshly-smelling leather saddle on his back, then that he didn’t mind a thick-rimmed glasses wearing humanoid yanking on his mouth and kicking his flanks. Or so it seemed to Sam as he discovered ‘brains in his feet and intelligence in his hands’. Something that Cowboy Eddy said would happen one day with regard to handling difficult to manage equine beasts. The critical question was whether Sam could find the more manipulative beast at least an hour’s ride ahead of him.

The sun set over the Western sky, the moon rising in its place, shining a bright light over the snow. Enough illumination to easily gallop ahead to where Colonel Eddy was headed, as well as enough to be seen clearly by any satellite or observation tower. As Sam headed out over the slopes that became hills, then the hills that became mountains, he felt like he was being watched. Perhaps by ‘God’. Perhaps by the REAL Santa in the North pole who would grant him his final Christmas wish. Or perhaps by someone ahead of him who was luring him into a trap from which there was no escape. “The way out of the maze is to move ahead into it,” he informed Buttercup, hoping he’d live up to his name, which he did. Sam found himself living up to strong name that his blue-collar parents had given him, for the first time in his life. But there was one thing that came with strength---fear, which was paralytic unless it was channeled into something Sam was more uncomfortable with than any other woman.

“Come on, Buttercup!” Sam found himself grunting to the horse, easing him into a trot that fit his seat, then a lope that was contained by his hands, then a gallop that didn’t connect to anything except the mountain itself, and something in the tracks in the mud that had become slush, then snow. “Yeah! Its blood alright! Maybe horse, maybe human,” Sam informed the steed. “But someone else’s!!! Nothing to be afraid of!”

Buttercup forged forward into the increasingly red snow, but now because of not the clearing of grass or something remembered as pleasant ahead of him, but something behind him. And in the woods alongside of the trail. It hummed like no four legged animal nor four-wheeled beast that Sam knew. Deadening Sam’s ears into feeling a sense of ‘numb’ between them. Then a pounding headache. Then something even more painful in Buttercup’s perceptive brain. The steed pulled back his ears as if a thousand equine eating dragons were behind him. Rushing ahead at full speed, jumping bushes, rocks and fallen trees as tall as any fence that had contained him back home at the acreage which was now under Cowboy Eddy’s ownership.

Sam felt his heart drop into his stomach, the world around him losing all sense of dimension as he became a passenger on the equine rollercoaster that had lost its brakes. A world of hard wood, cold snow and sharp pine needles whizzed by Sam’s head on IT’S terms, until from his wide open ocular portholes, Sam saw something on top of the

mountain in a clearing. A large beast which turned around, lifted its paw and fired what felt like a bolt of thunder his way.

The lightening bolt from Cowboy Eddy's Winchester nicked Sam's arm, or maybe the bullet went into it, or maybe it was just another branch that had become a knife as a result of approaching it fast. In any case, Buttercup decided on another course of action rather than follow the tracks in the snow. He reared up, gravity pulling Sam to the ground with all of its might. But despite the fact that physics would win against human flesh, which it always did in Sam's world, his feet developed wings, his hands brains and his brains the kind of balls that he never had in his scrotal sac for real, or the imagined 'locus masculinus' in his cerebral cortical association areas.

"No fucking way!" Sam yelled out, followed by expletives never yelled out nor felt as strongly. "No goddamn fucking motherfucking way are you gonna dump me, you cunt of a horse, and no fucking way will you, Cowboy Eddy fuckhead whatever the fuck your real name is, going to get away with undoing the plan I implimented MYSELF to let you own MY town, MY country and MY world!"

True, Sam's claims that it was HIS plan to sabatoge the computers so that they would invert everything Cowboy Eddy and his American Military-Industrial Complex Cronies intended to do was not completely accurate, and he completely ignored the contribution of his mastermind Nicholi, fact-within-fiction Visionary writer Jackie and 'reader of people who she didn't want to know anything more about' Cathy. But conversion of terror into action converted Sam into a Knight of the most Fierce order. Now, Buttercup's gallop was under SAM'S control, despite the fact that he was a first-timer to that gait. With skill he never thought in him, he evaded the rest of Eddy's bullets, as well as the 'hummers' coming up the slope that tried to block every access of White Knight Sam to Black Knight Eddy.

Eddy ran out of bullets, or perhaps time. He looked at his watch, checked something in his chest pocket, then galloped up towards what looked like a black wall recently built near the West slope of the mountain. Or maybe within the mountain. In any case, it was a two minute easy lope to that destination, a semi-circular route along flat, easily traversed ground.

"Come on, Buttercup!" Sam said, in more abbreviated language, to the source of mobile terror that now was an extension of himself and his Fire-infused Mission. "That computer implant goes into the main drive of the computer, and that computer will own the world! And by my calculations, a straight line across whatever kind of ground finds us will get us to him before he gets to somewhere we can't let him get to!" he thought, relating that vitally important data to his equine co-worker with a "Yah!!!!" of his feet and an affirmative whip on the horse's ass with the his reins.

Seeing an opportunity ahead that couldn't be missed, Sam grabbed hold of a large stick, holding it at first like a sword, then a spear, then a lance, determined at all costs to drive it

into the chest of the Black Knight in the event that he even thought about reaching into his chest pocket for the inverting device.

Colonel Eddy rushed towards the black wall, which became light, a door opening to it. A blinding light with things industrial and demonic behind it. The details of which were irrelevant right now. “Turn around and face me!” Sam yelled out to Eddy. “NO one tells me what to do anymore. Not even you!”

Cowboy Eddy stopped his horse and slowly turned around to Sam. The geek-turned-cowboy could see the reflection of Eddy’s big, blue eyes in the moonlight, the shadow of his large mustache casting an ominous shadow over a mouth that seemed to say ‘ok, you want a fight, boy, you’ll get one’. But COLONEL Eddy owed his allegiance to the gods of practicality, not the legends of Old West honor. After the third ‘bell’ and some kind of command ordered in a language Sam did recognise, Eddy turned his horse around, and headed straight towards the opening gate. The only way to get between it and him was a gallop up what seemed to be a mountain, or perhaps it was just a clump of trees. Sam didn’t seem to care, pushing Buttercup onto it, then over it, with hoofprints that left crumbing branches and metallic plates in his wake. Finally, he saw his opportunity for a final jump, taking the plunge, landing horse and rider firmly in a pile of snow, Sam feeling and hearing a big bang between his ears.

The snow broke the fall, and by some miracle, perhaps delivered by Genie Santa, or one of the stories/commands Jackie had delivered to it, the horse found firm footing without dumping its rider. With ears made deaf by the thunderous fall, and a body which felt like it was both as small as the knot in his gut and as big as the mountain, Sam gathered up his reins, finding himself in between the black door and Colonel Eddy.

“I want what’s in that coat!” Sam commanded, regarding Cowboy Eddy’s left breast pocket. “And not the heart that you THINK is...”

Before Sam could say the words that perhaps would connect Eddy back to the caring humanoid who the young White Knight once thought he was, Eddy’s heart DID bleed. Real blood, that spurted out on the virgin white snow, followed by his body. Sam jumped off Buttercup, reaching in to Eddy’s coat. Inside he found the inverting device which was about to be used to put Genie Santa’s commands back on track with Eddy’s original mandate, whatever that was. And next to it, three large bulletholes that felt like craters. Delivered by smoking guns from shooters in the woods, who vanished into the bush as fast as they came. Their path of exit led to what seemed to be tunnels, leading to the Black Metallic Cave. The doors to the Metallic Santa’s Workshop closed up hard and tight, the moonlight shining on two places Sam never saw at night, nor from this perspective, not realizing how close they really were to each other. \

“Yeah, Buttercup,” Sam commented to the horse which he tried to reassure with shaking hands, but a firm mind. “The Old Missile Sites where my Mom died in her ‘accident’ a week ago, and the Old Mine that my Dad and everyone else who’s underemployed in this town were told would re-open for business ‘any month now’ for twenty years,” he

concluded, figuring out what didn't make sense, finally. But what didn't make sense was why the door to the Black Cave opened. And the sensors on him that 'sized him up', then pulled back into the cave, the engines inside becoming silent. Leaving the mountain and the creatures on it to their own normal business of surviving the winter. And leaving Sam to get onto his, which, for the moment, was getting Buttercup and Sam's steed back to where they should be, and his own ass to his new boss, nay, Comrade. With the inverting program from Cowboy Colonel Eddy safely, and for the moment, secretly stored in the last place anyone would ever suspect, between his legs.

As Sam rode off, he felt a rumbling behind him. The sky opened up, the warm air converting into a cold blast that delivered a blanket of snow from the sky over the mountaintop, with a rumbling of the earth that caused an avalanche which threw down rocks, snow, mud and even lava atop the Black Cave.

Buttercup hadn't seen nor felt such a storm. He asked Sam through the language of his telepathic eyes what was going on. "Gotterdamerung," Sam smiled. "Twilight of the Gods," he translated into English, the Wagnarian finale of that opera which Hans had loved, and which Sam until now had hated, going through his head. "But," he postulated with as much certainty as $f=ma$ and e equals MC squared, to himself, "One more act to follow," not knowing how much of the rest of this Opus would be as planned, or improvised, or survived. Still in the dark as to who the real composer of the score was, or would be.

CHAPTER 26

Jackie decided that she would give herself a treat, a selfish one given the time left to do what had to be done, a deserved self-initiated favor given what she had done. "King Nikos decided that each city would be a different experiment, so as to see which kind of subject was most suited for Nikosland" she read from the computer screen when bringing up what she had written an hour ago. "And to show King Nikos that him thinking himself a god was the worse thing for any mortal, the gods atop Mount Olympus told the ditzed out mushroom-intoxicated Oracle old lady with the long white hair that she still thought was blonde to grant him exactly the opposite of what he asked for," it continued as she slurred up a triple-sugar thick-like-yogurt mug of hot chocolate that had become warm in Nicholi's basement.

"That's, like, so...inaccurate," Sam pointed out, slipping out of his tethered coat into something with more cloth than holes to it. "Nikos was never a name for anyone in Ancient Greece! I know that Genie Santa is, like a, ya know, Saint Nick, but---"

"---Look!" Jackie insisted. "The Oracles at Delphi really were ditzed out old hags who ate too many mushrooms who didn't have any boyfriends, or manfriends, or even woman friends under the sheets. And it was only discovered when---"

“---Sparta and Athens had their political problems, yeah I know,” Sam acknowledged, feeling the chill in the air. “But the part about the Oracles, who had no power, having the power to grant idiots and assholes exactly the OPPOSITE of what they asked for---“

“---Was just done by YOU, King Samuel!” Jackie said, proudly, smiling at the frail geek who looked like a Herclean Greek now that he lost his glasses, after having gained new eyes in the bush.

“I HATE the name Samuel!” he continued.

“Okay, I’ll call you King shithead, or Prince moron, or---“ she hesitated, holding back a thought, and idea. She looked into Sam’s tired eyes, hoping he would say, “It wasn’t just me Queen Jackie, or Princess Jackass if that’s what you think you deserve,” but he said nothing. Not that she expected him to say what he really felt. A man’s mouth’s was, after all, built to not say what ever was on his mind or in his heart. And, for better or worse, Sam had become a man. Not a conquerable boy anymore. It would make connecting with him, harder, but maybe more interesting. As was the world around them, as Christmas Day was now chimed out of existence, North Pole Santa retiring to his Arctic hibernation cave, or perhaps his secret Arizona condo, leaving in his wake a whole bunch of people whose Christmas wishes had been inverted into the exact opposite of what they asked for.

Evidence for such was in the air, in the form of a cold snap that came just after a warm spell which was majority desire. The Canadian loonie dropped relative to the US dollar in early trading back East. And as for the most wished for things in British Columbia that were most universally asked for, the Vancouver Canucks announced that 4 of their best players had incurred skiing or driving accidents which would put all of them on the bench for at least four months. The BC Lions lost their four best players to the NFL in a surprise deal that no one expected, leaving that football team with a third string roster that would have to really gear up over the next six months to be able to have a chance at winning any games in the upcoming year.

There were other inversions as well, but some conversions back to normality. Bart had, according to the gossip over the chat lines that Jackie hacked into, given up trying to be GI Joe and made up with Becky, proposing marriage, and the promise to raise their kids as Canadians, who would not even be allowed to VISIT south of the 49th parallel until they were in their teens and rightfully educated about American history and the real workings of its political systems. Jack saw the video of himself singing ‘Proud to be an American’ and decided that the money that had mysteriously found its way into his bank account on December 22nd should be in the pockets of those more deserving of it and in need of such, giving half of it to sick kids in Africa, the other half of it to starving homeless kids in Vancouver, and another half that he found freed up from his life savings for the elderly who had lost their life savings in the financial shifts that had been inflicted upon the market in places other than Crystal River, and nearby locations where Genie Santa’s could be accessed. Minister Ida, who had been Nicholi’s right hand woman at the newspaper, wished above all to be the editor in chief of the Crystal River Times so

that she could get more pay and credit for less work. But now, she appointed none other than 'slacker' Jackie to that position, promising to do all of the back up work so that Jackie could concentrate on developing her craft.

As for Cathy, her wish lists were not inverted nor fulfilled. Yes, it did give her vicarious pleasure to see Sam and Jackie, Crystal River's two most intensely tortured misfits, fitting in with each other. But who would or could SHE fit in with? Bill was now dead, and as for Nicholi, the mastermind of whatever 'cure' had taken place for the town, was not gone. She remembered bringing him to his bedroom, then doing hourly checks on him while continuing to produce the antidote to 'dull out elixor', as he called it, then on the last bed, body and Soul check, found him gone, the window open. But next to the bed, a letter, written in English, to his Russian friend, Elena, with instructions to leave it for her. It was not the words or language which threw Cathy off balance, but the script which revealed something about itself to her through eyes that were tired beyond measure, and perhaps for that reason, unable to see anything but the real truth of the matter, and all matters.

"The n's, I's and r's!" she proclaimed, finally noticing what was unexpected, and perhaps wrong. "They are---" Her mouth froze in mid thought, as her head continued. "Exactly the script that was on the original address label on the box containing the original Genie Santa that Cathy herself had received and signed for. And the lettering on the various notes, memos and other items which were in Cowboy Eddy's shop, smuggled in to Nicholi's secluded home by Sam. Or, perhaps they were planted at Cowboy Eddy's electronic shop, and everywhere else Sam had been with the American Colonel, or whatever rank he really was. Perhaps planted by Nicholi himself, to be found by Sam, Cathy and/or Jackie." Another note left from Nicholi for Cathy, in 'non-cowboy Eddy' script, named her as 'the new master of the operation, for as long as it needed a master', signed 'N' with no forwarding address, or sentiment.

Cathy looked out the window at the snow coming down, seeing no tracks of anyone having left the room. The window had been opened, the only way out being by air, or astral projection. Or maybe---She ran outside, looking up towards the roof, then in the basement. Still, no trace of the man who seemed to know every danger that was ahead, and every plan that had been initiated.

Reading Cathy's mind, and soul, Jackie walked into the room. She picked up the note to Elena and read it, aloud. "What I did here, I did for you. I hope that you know that and are alive so that you will know that whatever I do now is for both of us. And all of us." Turning to Cathy, Jackie asked "An unborn kid, Cathy?"

"Or one that isn't enjoying a happy Christmas," Cathy surmised. "One that we have to find to---"

"---Nicholi's gone!" Sam announced, having exhausted himself running around the property.

“But where, and why?” Cathy put to voice, hoping someone would have an answer. Perhaps Sam. Perhaps Jackie. Perhaps someone on line though the chat lines both of them were able to hack into now better than Cowboy Sam’s computer goons ever could. Or perhaps the cold sky outside, which decided to stop dropping snow, turning into a hard, cold and dark blue as the sun rose up over the frigid horizon, illuminating everything under it except the answers to what Cathy and her new Comrades needed to know about their now self-departed Comrade. One who was KGB from the start and, by all she intuited about him, to the bitter end.

CHAPTER 27

New Years came and went, with no word from Nicholi to anyone. Sam lingered on at the former newspaper editor’s house, as there was no where else for him to live. And as Jackie needed a place to crash, and was a far better cook and housekeeper than Sam ever was, it made sense for the two of them to share the dwelling.

As for Cathy, she got her job back at Jack’s new general store, as a co-owner with elevated responsibilities, and perks. On an unusually warm day in January, Ukranian Christmas according to the Calendar Bill had given to her during the regular Christmas season, a card came by bus. It was addressed to Sam, with a return address somewhere in the US. Marked Confidential with exclamation marks, in font which looked very...official.

Sam opened it up and smiled, proudly. Jackie, having come in with him to see that the money they had budgeted for the month was spent on food that served the body rather than Sam’s sweet-tooth, winced at it.

“If they want me, I have to go,” Sam said regarding the invitation.

“To a conference behind closed doors in the same town where the Bildingburg Corporation is meeting!” she blasted out. “That’s the same group that has American Presidents, Canadian Premiers and Prime Ministers from all over the world ILLEGALLY attending, and being told what to do by the BIG bosses who are---“

“---the real Illuminati,” Sam interjected.

“Shitheads who will turn you around into something and someone who---“. Jackie’s terrified eyes unleashed a flood of tears. The first time Cathy had seen it, or for that matter, anyone in Crystal River, including Spike the cat, who nuzzled in next to her.

Sam showed Cathy another correspondence he had received earlier that day, through another route.

“An e mail from Nicholi?” she asked. “Asking you to work for ‘the other side?’”

“It keeps Nicholi employed on his side,” he explained. “And as long as he spies on his people, and I spy on my people, I can---”

”---I know, protect OUR people, ‘us’, from ‘them’,” Cathy blasted out under hushed breath, noticing Jackie feeling the most intense kind of grief. “You WILL tell Jackie about this, right?”

Sam smiled a ‘when I can, and when the time is right’ reply back at Cathy. With that, he walked out of the general store and made a call on his cell phone. Within twenty seconds a car with licence plates covered by muck and mud picked him up.

Spike meowed a ‘it’s alright, guys’ to the gals who had found love, only to lose it, or perhaps to have it postponed. The men were out doing what they had to do now, and would return someday, So Spike meowed to Cathy, and tried to say to Jackie, as the air outside became warmer, the sky clearer and the air more...open somehow, for a year of challenge to come, and renewed hope for Crystal River which was now back to defining its own future, and destiny. Cathy looked up to the mountains which had been there since her arrival in the town that was best remembered by the people who lived there, and forgotten by those who had left. They smiled an ‘its alright’ which she chose to believe. Perhaps because this time, it was true.