

LUMINESCENT SISTERHOOD

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CHAPTER 1

The gods above the clouds were being bipartisan again. For three days it was scorching hot, following by 4 when the skies were grey, the rain was cold and turned to snow at elevations just above where the heartiest of humans called home. Still, it was just another day for the Old Bavarian as he lay in the bed at the hospital in town. A place where he knew he would never leave, though he insisted on the docs promising him to not send him home to his farm up the mountain 'in pieces'. His skin was yellow, his muscles thin sheets overlying a bumpy skeleton, his breath putrid, but his eyes were still open, gazing out the window. His urine was more blood than water, each piss he took another loss of vital protein from his already albumen-deficient plasma. In a room without radios, televisions, ipods, internet or anything else other than useless medical equipment from the present century. What he thought, where he was between his ears and where he was going were a mystery to Elena Gonazales-Schwarz, though considering her own time on this planet, in her current body, theoretically with clear access to her well developed mind, she'd be taking that trip herself soon.

"Do you want me to get you any more fruit juice, water or pudding, Hans?" the 65 year old woman with good health and a slowly aging body asked the 75 year old Bavarian who, up to two months ago, could do the work of three healthy dudes a third of his age. "Maybe some soup?" she continued thinking that conversation about food would avoid talking about matters of more importance, of which she was completely ignorant. "I think they put some real vegetables and chicken in with the processed chemicals and chemically microwaved water," she mused. "It smells edible. Better than anything I could cook myself, anyway."

"Which is not saying a lot, Eli," Hans muttered through dried up gums in an accent Elena could still understand. "I maybe try some."

As Elena spooned out the first slurp and moved it towards Hans' open mouth, she knew he had chosen to eat not because of his own hunger, but from her own need to feel needed, and effective. Still, she pondered that with enough nutrition, he would get well again and hop up from the bed, leaving stage 4 metastatic cancer behind. Growing a whole new liver like Prometheus of Old, after shitting the tumor loaded hepatic tissue out his ass. Sprouting two new lungs after coughing up portions of the lumpy bread pudding that were his current breathing tools. It worked that way in the 'MedaDoc' video game anyway, and in all the medical shows on the tube that featured high tech speculation and cyber biomedical toys rather than the reality of guts, brains and 'worked to the bone' finger power vs. disease.

Elena sensed that this would be the last time she would see Hans Weimar on this side of the veil, but that was the impression she had so many other times as well. Was he holding on because he was afraid of dying? Was it so that he could say something to someone she didn't know about? Though she had rented a house from the freedom living, hard working, frugal beyond a fault German expatriate for 12 years, and bonded with his now deceased wife, Lisa, far more than she did with her own mother, girlfriends,

man-friends, or Inner Self, Elena had no idea that Hans had two children by a former 'marriage' who he left when they were very young. She also didn't know that Hans had stashed away so much money, and the reasons for it. He spent nothing on himself. When around town, he was always clad in pajama pants from the Second Hand shop. When going into the city 2 hours down the road in GOOD weather, the only upgrading he did was to wear 'big boy' trousers, with a shirt that had less than three holes in it.

Yes, there was so much Elena didn't know about Hans, except for the fact that he represented world which would exist no more once he passed. A glance of herself and Hans in the mirror that caught her tired eyes reminded her of that. A glance that forced her to look at the five foot six woman whose hair was still thick, still falling down over her shoulders into the small of her back, and still framing a face that had no wrinkles except for the bags under her eyes and a neck developing 'character crevaces'.

After a few bites of the soup, fed by Elena, Hans went to sleep. At least that's what the biologists called it. He had already told her that she could stay at the 50 year old patchwork of lumber called a 'house' halfway up the mountain to his own make-shift dwelling for as long as she wanted to, and said something about letting her have it for free, along with his own place further up the mountain. But there were no witnesses to that. Out of stupidity, ignorance or a continuing habit/need of life penance, Elena didn't pursue the pledge he had made to her. Didn't seek to make it legal. Didn't have the forethought to bring a tape recorder in to verify that it would replace anything he had put in writing with manipulative people he mistakenly considered friends beforehand. No, now it was now about saying to Hans what Elena had said to Lisa, who died in the same hospital, from the same disease, 4 years earlier. "Gehst zu das weiss Licht," she said to him as his eyes were half closed, and his conscious ears were probably hearing. "Go to the white light". That credo from the Tibetan Book of the Dead that informed those taking the journey away from the most ineffective realm designable to somewhere Bigger, Better and at least more honest. A guiding principle so one could avoid being distracted by the lower, colorful orbs and get stuck somewhere in limbo, or an incarnation that sucked even more than the present one.

With that, Elena put the Wagner Overtures CDs by Hans favorite conductor that finally arrived in her mailbox that morning into a CD player, as he had requested when in sound mind AND body. She could feel the immediacy of that Metaphysical Music, starting with Loengrin. In seemed to evoke in Hans, and her, the snowy fog-protected plateaus that lined the mountain they both lived. Plateau which were steps en route to somewhere far higher and more Life sustaining place than Heaven or even Valhalla. It drowned out the drip drip drip Elena could feel in the IV line which, despite suggestions to the seemingly understanding and progressively thinking nurses, still didn't contain that extra bit of morphine that would push Hans over the edge and up beyond the stars. Seeing an affirmative smile come to Hans' face, Elena left the room, as the sun set outside on the Western horizon.

Hans, like Lisa, passed before the next sunrise, after being given appropriate guidelines to the Lights within the Darkness, and the fuel of their chosen musical accompaniment.

Such left Elena, and the other misfits and oddballs who called Freshwater, BC, home, in a world now completely devoid of Old Fart, freedom loving German expatriates. And a world where the golden rule was replaced by something else.

But maybe something necessary for Upward Evolution of the species, and animal kind as well. It was not long till she got her answer.

Hans had requested that there be no funeral, and that his ashes be taken to Germany along with those of his beloved, yet so often pain in the ass, Lisa. “I just want to move on and let others do the same,” was his final request to the night nurse. Delivered with dignity, and the insight that he should welcome rather than fear what was awaiting him. He also said that he didn’t want anyone putting up plaques around town with his picture on it noting his death and, within two paragraphs of descriptors, ‘comprehensively’ conveying everything he did in life. But, Hans didn’t say anything about the newspaper where Elena worked, or the next novel Elena had been planning to write. That is if she could get enough time off from her position as the most skilled and edited writer at the Tomkins River News, the ‘feel good’ rag that was more of a journal for advertisements than a reporter of facts, trends or, dare she even dream to put them into print, ideals. This Tuesday was like any other at ‘The River’, as were the new additions to the print, and by economic necessity, cyber publication that lay on the desk in the middle of the office.

The first story embellished a happy wedding photo in which the bride was both bubbly and bossy, the all beauty and no brains groom, in his cowboy hat and tux, having no idea what kind of fillie he saddled himself. Featured for page two were the new owners of Diamond Trails Resort, showing off their new rates, new horses, and new \$600 dollar made in China authentic Western gear, to be paid for by Tourists from the other side of the pond who didn’t know that they would have more encounters with six legged mosquitoes on the wild west adventure rides than easy to get along with four legged horses, or two legged Indians who spoke anything except gangsta-shopping mall English. And yet another story about a new study done by another indy university team who claimed that using their new geological toys enabled them to discover ‘better than golden goodies’ under the ground up the mountain. Non-described Mineral finds that would not finally get everyone in the community of Freshwater, BC off their part time wage-slaves service jobs and into high paying gigs in the new mines, and allow them to be served by ‘working class servers’ at Five Star restaurants and hotels anywhere they wanted. Of course, that’s what the picture of the geology team said if you looked at the right and left sides of the photographed smiling faces, as well as the messages between the lines that could only be deciphered by someone who could smell bullshit in the lines. Lines that, yes, Elena had written, in the first draft anyway.

Elena envisioned what those and the other stories would look like if she was editor in chief. She imagined herself behind the desk on the partially enclosed elevated platform

in the middle of the ‘newsroom’. One which bore the name of Rita Tomkins, B.S., Ph.D. “Bullshit, filled hip deep,” Elena said to herself, in Spanish. A language her non-documented immigrant Mexican father taught her. Meanwhile, Rita sasheed into the office in pre-torn designer jeans that she knew was obtained for \$400, a vintage “Revolution Now!” blouse with sequence letters, and yet another pair of ‘authentic cowboy’ boots with not a single scuff mark that was made by a horse, or walking across any kind of pasture or wilderness. She power-danced her way into the cushioned leather chair and tended to her duties as ‘the servant and voice of the people’, in keeping with the logo bearing the name of the newspaper.

“So, anything else for consideration?” Philosopher Queen Rita asked after looking at the copies of the stories and photos on the desk, having never glanced once at those who provided them.

“A happy wedding story,” Jack DeVries said with a lisp, pointing proudly to his story about the wedding of the month. “You like?”

“Give me a reason to,” Rita pressed.

“Well, the bride comes from a very influential family in Vancouver, and the groom was the most popular football quarterback who ever went to this high school,” he offered with limp wrists but steady hands. “And half of the buyers of our paper----“

“----graduated from High School here and never left, yeah I know.” Rita’s reply. She turned to the Cowboy Adventure Tours story photos featuring German, Japanese and Chinese writing behind the Canadian cowhands. “And this one? Hoaky as shit.”

“Sheisa, ya mean,” Randy ‘Bulldog’ Newmann replied with the Western twang inherited from his bootlegger American outlaw grandfather, his local cattle baron dad, and the buckle bunnies he tried to impress as an up and maybe coming (if he survived yet another fall on his slow thinking head) bronc and bull rider. “But it supports what this town is all about. Our greatest and most favorite industry.”

“Tourism, yeah I know, partner,” Rita noted, with an accent that was pure Toronto containing not a trace of any element West of Thunder Bay, Ontario. “But...there’s something about the language here. The sentence structure. And the rhythm of printed diction.”

“I’m sorry. I can up it. Make it sound more scholarly-like,” Bulldog offered with a bowed head as he grabbed for the copy.

“You do and I’ll fire your ass, fer GOOD this time!” Rita replied, in over the top Rodeoese. “Ya’ll are speaking the people’s language here. Giving them happy words. Happy thoughts. Simple thoughts that they like believing, and that we need them to believe.” She then moved on to the story about the newest mineral survey on the Eastern slopes bordering the River three miles north of town. “And, Elena. This is story is----”

“---accurate. As informative as I could get. And uses direct quotes,” Elena interjected.

“True enough,” Rita conceded. “But, if you could, so I don’t have to, could you please---

“---dumb it down some more?” Elena said, hating both the surrender in her voice as well as its tenor.

“Make it more likeable and relatable,” the reply from her boss, and rival. A rival who got up from her leather padded throne, looked at her phone, and noticed something in the display. “Gotta go, guys, gals and everyone in between,” the homophobic editor who had quenched at least 5 stories about LGBT intolerance in the Freshwater community announced, with yet another political face. She took that face out towards the door, leaving Elena with yet another task to do, which if not done, would leave her with no rent money, no food money and no internet connection money. Especially if she got on the wrong side of the editor who knew enough people, and ways to manipulate people, to destroy anyone.

Yet, Elena still had to ask Regal Rita about one more issue on her list of ‘have to do something about or with’ this that has skyrocketed to the top of the A list. Beyond the latest attack of an LGBT student that nearly led her/him to suicide, and the interview she inadvertantly had with a metaphysically-interesting geologist from UBC at the local Flying Saucer Café who claimed that there were ‘better than gold goodies’ in the hills within Freshwater’s jurisdiction that would somehow be good for body, mind and spirit of everyone in town. “Hans Weimar,” Elena yelled out to Rita just before she was about to leave. She showing her a pre-cancerous picture of the Old German, featuring his bright blue eyes which were always somehow more energetic and Alive than anyone younger than himself, especially her. “We should write an article about him. And not just a mention of his passing in the----“

“----obituary column, which is where your career and life, dear deluded dinosaur Elena, will wind up if you continue to insist on giving the world, this community, and this newspaper what you THINK it wants. And keep thinking you’re ‘offering from a deep core’ what it needs,” Regent Rita shot back with both barrels.

Elena considered throwing a cleverly constructed quip back at Anti-Philosopher Queen Rita, pointing out all of her inadequacies, flaws and failures, but as the fire from her gut came up to her throat, it was stopped by her heart. And the knowledge that Elena was very bad at being an asshole or manipulator, proven several times with vicious girl friends in high school, an assortment of man friends in college, and literary gatekeepers in the private sector after leaving the bubble of academia. Such required that Elena adopt the ‘strategy’ of being honest, compassionate and hard working, relying on the ‘if you do the right thing by God’s laws, somehow He/she will do right by you’ . Unfortunately, such didn’t seem to work for agnostics or those who were constantly trying to figure out the Creator’s real identity, intentions and overall ‘gender’.

Thus, the remark that 'it is far more of an accomplishment to fuck or asslike your way to a higher up than to actually do something yourself from scratch' intended to be tailor made for Rita, who could criticize everyone's writing with wit and charm yet was unable to write anything on her own that had any kind of humor, flavor or real edge to it, went unsaid.

Elena heard, and felt, the clicking of Rita's bootheels as they left the building. They sounded like power stiletos in 'important places' like Vancouver, Toronto and New York, where she had been, apparently, exiled from. Perhaps because of who what Elena was. A 65 year old woman who was never able to hook a husband, give birth to children, or confer her real truths to grandkids or grandnephews. But there was one family that liked, respected, loved and, yes, maybe understood the hybrid between a Mexican illegal immigrant father and Trotskyite German Communist mother envisioned on 'mystical' days.

His name was Pancho, named after Villa of course. The Revolutionary Visionary who captured the imagination of non-Mexican Democratic Socialists, hard line Communists and Anarchists. The bandit who hide behind a Robin Hood reputation to the American Capitalists. A horse with a mind of his own, but a soul who, if you connected to it, and what it was ok with, would do anything for you. The gelding had tossed off Elena more than any of the other three horses who owned her, but he always seemed to apologise afterwards. But since it was Pancho who ran down from the hill before Sultan and Fred did when Elena called them down from the top pasture at her acreage, it was that old battle horse who she chose to do a morning ride upon.

That longer and more necessary than usua ride led to the edge of her property, taking Elena and Pancho around the fields of three other residents on the mountain who chose to ignore or forget, as it was said in Jeramiah Johnson, 'the trouble down below'. As the sun rose further up the sky, it shone upon the pair sojourning into unspoken for land on which the rusted and shot up 'no trespassing' signs had been removed two months ago.

Elena was exhausted, but not from anything in the world she was living in now. She had been awakened from restless 'sleeps' by various nightmares, each one of which left her more exhausted than the last. One was particularly horrific, causing her to wake up in a her cold ground floor 'cotroom' in a cold sweat, the dogs that usually slept at her feet as far away as they could be. It was about being lost someplace in her past, unable to come back to her home, and equine companions, in her present. Or was it one of those surreal journeys about failing at something? Or that recurring nightmare about being sent back to college, screwing up, being sent back to High School, and being not only at the bottom of the totem pole but below the muck on the ground where it was implanted?

While Pancho continued to blissfully munch on the alphafa grass lining the logging road, Elena tried again and again to figure out why last night was especially bad relative to other nights. Did it have something to do with the Old German who had passed three long and lonely days ago? “No, it can’t be you who visited me in ‘dreamland’, Hans,” Elena said to the burst of wind blew through the trees around her, swirling around clockwise, then counterclockwise with a rythm of its own. “And just because I can’t see you as a ghost as clearly as I usually can while you’re on your way to becoming something else, somewhere else, that doesn’t mean I’m scared. But, it seems my horse is,” she said, looking downward, anticipating another buck from the independent steed who was surprising not spooked by the unusual burst of wind. “Alright, so my horse isn’t scared of ghosts. But maybe because he’s....”

“Hungry?” the wind seemed to say regarding the horse who decided it was still an ice cream break. After stating that fact, in ways that seemed to be about a lot more than a herbivore designed by human genetics doing its natural dharma and karma, the wind gave way to an upward burst of ‘victory’ somehow as it went up into the sky, leaving something down below on the ground in its wake.

Elena looked down to the ground, noting that the sunflowers were somehow brighter than usual in this area of the mountain she had wandered into, or was drawn into. They seemed somehow better ‘fed’ than the other grasses and blooming bushes around them, standing tall, firm and unmoved by the wind, somehow. Pancho, with his strong, long stride, worked his way to what was usually his favorite road food and instead ate the grass around them. Elena treated herself to a brunch of clear blue sky above and just below it, a rock cliff which had been split open by the recent rains, or maybe something else.

The multicolored, randomly-homed split-open rocks on the side of the hill seemed to be connectable in Elena’s mind. Just like the stars above, she imagined the lines connecting them revealing a portrait of an extinct animal, or a visiting god from outer space. Green, red and yellow dots against a backdrop of blue bumps that looked like magic berries on their surface. Blue berry-like bumps that she had never seen before. But then again, she had never been this high up the mountain in the last few weeks, and at this time of day. Still, Elena thought about how to replicate those hues, or, on her next trip up here, perhaps chisling out those specs and creating new hues on her easil at home. “After all,” the writer who was told she could paint a better picture of the world than write about it thought to herself, not wanting to break the magical Silence of this very odd moment. “There are more colors in the universe than in Crayola’s designs of a physicist’s imaginations,” Elena whispered to herself, and the spirits of the trees and animals whose various etherial forms she could now decifer, somehow. But that would be for later. For now, her phone rang. A strange event as normally cell service ended 2 miles and 50 feet lower. Even stranger because of who was doing the calling.

CHAPTER 2

“So, El, I just wanted to check in to see how my only sister was doing,” Carlata Gonzales-Schwartz said to her sibling by way of explanation. “I heard you got a new horse. Though it would have been smarter to get a new man instead. They last longer, and leave less shit for you to clean after.” Carlata waited for her sister Elena to laugh, or even chuckle, but got three seconds of dead silence, yet again. “That’s a joke,” she said from the driver’s seat of the rental car she had just picked up from the airport. “Like how many ungrateful pie in the sky liberals does it take to screw in a lightbulb?”

“One, as long as he’s overpaid, got a grant from Canada Council, has an audience applauding him, and has a hard working Conservative paying the light bill,” the snide reply from the other end of the phone from Elena.

“Very...”

“Correct, Carlata? According to the idiots and assholes on Fox and Friends, that I had the unnecessary pleasure of seeing this morning at the bus station here, now owned by Americans who---“

“---are in the business of making money instead of losing it, Comrade El.”

“By charging prices working people can’t afford, but have to pay, because they’re the only show in town.”

“Because they won in the free capitalist market, fair and square.”

“AKA, legally, according to a well paid judge. And speaking of judges, Carlata---”

“---Donald Trump has the right to appoint whoever he wants to the Supreme Court, El.”

“Even racist, homophobic, xenophobic bigots who would have not only disallowed our Mexican father from coming to Canada to escape being killed by political opponents in his homeland, Carlata? And who would declare both you and me as deportable, because we were born south of the Rio Grande, even though we both have lived North of it most of our lives, studying hard, working hard, and paying our taxes on time and in full, Carlata?”

Elena’s biologically younger but mentally far older, and more ‘responsible’, sister was at a loss for a comeback “You pay taxes up here in Canada?” Carlata enquired, after which she corrected herself as quick as possible. “I mean up there in Canada?”

“So, what finally brings YOU up here?” Comrade Elena pressed. “Immigration Officers from ICE raided the law firm you work for because one of the partners was getting too close to finding out a government secret, or getting the real goods on who Melania Trump’s REAL beloved is?”

While looking over the terms for renting a car at the Kamloops airport, calculating how many American miles there were in the 500 free Canadian kilometers, Carlata heard from her sister another several colorful, but still feasible, reasons why the undocumented but still very patriotic American would flee to points north of the 49th parallel. They were far more biting, and witty, than what Elena was able to put into print in her self-published books, sometimes published articles, and blog. Indeed, Carlata felt a certain kind of pride for her Lefty Hippie Dippy ‘baby’ sister who was three years her senior, fighting back with her pen for being pushed around with a fist. But, after being accused of coming for an unexpected visit because Carlata ‘wanted to broker a deal for Don Donald Trump to buy British Columbia in exchange for a special American health care plan that will give all of us free lobotomies just like Don Donald has under his bangs’, Carlata had had enough.

“I came to see YOU, El!” she blasted into the phone. “And to---”

“---See if you could do anything to ‘help’ me? Like you ‘helped’ Pop, and Mom when they needed it?”

The arrow shot into Carlata’s agonizing soul ricocheted for another hit when her glance was held hostage by an accidental look into the rear view mirror. She was forced to behold an overdressed, overpaid, and under-challenged rich American with a chic, stylish chin length bob. One whose depression was amplified with each dollar she so easily ‘earned’. And whose failures to expand beyond comfortable and effortless embedded deep wrinkles into her face, complimented by a torso that required her to be outfitted in the size 14 and above section of every store she entered or co-owned. Yet back home, there was no shortage of ‘yes’ men, and women, who would give her compliments on how beautiful she looked.

Still, there was some ugly business Carlata had to work out with her deluded, always in debt, liberal, and still sort of beautiful sister that had to be resolved fast. “I know where you are, and I’m coming for a visit, Elena,” she said as her final say on the matter.

With that, Carlata flicked off her \$3,000 phone, started the \$40,000 rental car, and drove out of the parking lot, off to a backwoods community where, according to the stories she had heard, from Elena as well as the guests who appeared regularly on Fox and Friends, everyone was underpaid, unpaid or secretly paid off.

CHAPTER 3

“What I’m doing is natural, and soon will be legal,” born to the woods and adapted to anything it could deliver to anyone Dan Renshaw asserted to the short, skinny city slicker above him with manicured fingernails and un-blistered, clean fingers attached to them. “Want some?” the six foot three package of hard muscles, sun-baked skin and shaky nerves said as he handed the cigarette without a label to the academic arrival from UBC.

“I thought that you said that weed was tailor made for you, for medical purposes,” F. Michael Carlson, Ph.D., replied.

“Just trying to share good health and good feelings with you, boss,” forty-year old Dan smiled back through a mouth filled with a mixture of white, rotting, black and missing teeth. Not that he considered this wet behind the ears forest geologist who was allergic to trees and breaking any rocks with his own hands worthy of being called anything respectful. But calling others you wanted something from ‘boss’ was a sure fire way to get what you wanted. Whether it be twenty bucks between paychecks to keep the gas tank on your clunker rust bucket from going empty, scoring some freebee food the grocery store was about to throw out so the kitchen cabinets at home, or keeping your very addicted brain fed with weed, booze or something stronger to numb pain in body, mind and spirit. Or maybe paying off the gods and the fates so they would piss on someone else instead of you, and your old lady at home, who brought with her to the ‘relationship’ not only her own family problems, but a cloud of ‘bad luck’ which lifted just long enough for you to catch your breath, so your could be ‘challenged’ with something else. “We’re all just trying to get through the day, and the life, and anything that helps is what you do, right Professor C?” Dan continued to the privately-funded post-doctoral fellow who had still not been able to obtain a faculty position from a ‘real’ university.

Carlson’s grimace gave way to a sigh of exhaustion. Indeed, maybe he was doing the best he could with the hand Life gave him just like Dan and his common law wife. Maybe a sit down with the best weed Dan had obtained since his last arrest for driving to a much needed job without a paid up auto insurance policy would turn Carlson back into the idealist, people-rather-than-profit-or-position dude he once was. After checking to see that all the other workers in the geology exploration site were out of sight, the under-aged and oldly dressed geologist took in a whiff of the reefer.

“Good, boss?” Dan asked, proudly. “My own stock.”

“Which is where?” the reply delivered with a big, wide smile the cracked open his tight face.

“Some at home where I grow it, most of it here in my pack.” Dan reached behind him, pulling out the stash.

Professor Carlson examined it like a pro. And not the stoned, drunk and looped out Rasta haired locals in Freshwater who made their living dealing what everyone in Freshwater, including the Pastors and the Cops, wanted and needed. Yes, this dude was a real scientist. Someone who not only read all the books in the library, probably wrote a few as well. Someone who Dan could have been, had it not been for his father dumping him in an abusive foster home after he put Dan's mother in the nut house. Had it not been for Dan's first love in college being a narc, who framed him for dealing crack after she found out he was secretly seeing her girlfriend on the side after their relationship went cold. Had it not been for Dan being the last to rat out on his fellow outlaws at the Cop shop, the hammer of justice pounding on his head after his 'best pals' gave up the goods on him. Had it not been for the multiple diseases that fucked up Dan's brain, and the many labor-related injuries that left him hurting and arthritic long before his time. Had it not been for...

"I'll just take this, for safe keeping," Carlson said as he put the entire stash of weed into his satchel. "For research purposes, of course. And to save you from doing something stupid that will cost you not only this job, but a lot more, Dan."

"That's my property," Dan asserted, getting up on his well muscled, scarred yet disease ridden feet. "My medicine, that I NEED!"

"Maybe, or maybe not, but...that's not my problem," Carlson conceded as he strolled with ease back down the hill to his brand new Suburban Truck bearing the University Seal. "And you're rapidly becoming my problem, Dan. But I'll give you one more chance."

Dan could sense another pink slip coming his way, at a job where he was the one who had cut down a lumberyard's worth of trees and cracked open a meteor-hole full of rocks from a mountain that had done nothing to deserve such invasion. With his stash of extra income out of his hands, and no doubt the ability to sell what he still had at home without getting informed upon, there was no other choice. Dan picked up his ax, chainsaw and spike, walked back to the foreman where he would get his new assignment, and watched as Carlson drove back to his trailer.

Under the moonless night, after Carlson went into town 'for supplies', guided by the stars and the smell of the stash, Dan snuck out of his pup tent, slithered through the camp like the cougars he feared, admired and loved as a kid, and broke into the trailer. He found his confiscated weed gone, no doubt being sold to another buyer. Maybe Dan's pre-arranged buyers. But there was something else that Dan noticed in the over-equipped, comfort-loaded trailer. Something that Professor Asshole valued as much as Dan valued his own survival, and hope for some kind of dignified future. "Yeah," Dan said to himself, and the young Professor's well groomed mouser cat, who decided to not kidnap as a gift to his old lady at home, this time anyway. "You take something from me, I take something from you." Dan didn't know exactly what was in the large briefcase in the safe which he could so easily open. But it seemed like the right thing to take. Perhaps it

had something inside which was the key to an all new future. Little did he know, that he was very right about that prediction.

CHAPTER 4

It was still a mystery to Elena, historically as well as psychologically. When in the evolution or de-evolution of the human species did we allow those who didn't do to criticize and critic those who DO do? And elevate those who do 'critique' to a social status higher than doers? Yet, as she sat at her usual booth in the most isolated corner of the Flying Saucer Café, she was put into that position, yet again.

"So, do you like it? Tell me the truth, really. I want and need to know," came from the mouth of Kelci Farnsworth as the blonde haired, blue eyed manager, cook and (when her millennial staff were too stoned to come to work) bottle washer whose genetic roots included nothing South of Berlin presented her with her newest dish. "Mexican chili, which I worked on all week," she said to her most valuable and liked customer regarding the bowl of unsolicited free food which was about to go on the menu. "Part of you is Mexican, right?"

"It certainly is," Elena replied proudly in her dear, departed father's native tongue.

"So, dig in and tell me what you think! Por favor," Kelci eagerly requested.

Elena's nose already knew what her tongue would experience with the first bite, and what her palate would have to endure when it went down her throat. And she confirmed it with the second bite. Aside from being offensively mild, whatever fire was in it was...something between putrid and pungent. To her palate anyway, which admittedly was different than anyone else's in Freshwater, having been brought up by a German mother who incorporated everything Russian into her sausages and soup, and a Mexican father who took over the stove when her Mom was in jail for saying the Right thing to the wrong people or the nuthouse later on for doing the same. Still, Elena put on a 'you made a great effort' smile, like her parents did for her.

"So, you like it?" Kelci exclaimed as she pour out a bowl for the other diners at Elena's table, Dan Renshaw, who reeked of sweat, and Carlata, whose perfume drowned out any aromas within three feet of her.

Elena had to think fast, as Dan had no filter regarding what he really felt. Carlata had made her living at work and established herself within all of her social circles as a colorful and witty critic. A dirty job that she was well paid for and for which she was highly valued by many an urban 'spectator' of life..

Elena thought about telling Kelci the truth about the mixture of beans, spices, meat and veggies that seemed to violate rather than compliment each other. To her palate anyway. To tell the hard working and aspiring to be better than her assigned station middle aged owner of the Flying Saucer that in Mexico or Texas even the cockroaches would pass up a meal of Kelci's prized chili would break both her heart and spirit. If the comparison between real Mexican chili and what she had concocted 100 miles north of the 49th parallel was stated too accurately, with explanations as to why Kelci's food was as dull,

flawed and uneventful as her real life, it could lead to harming her in many ways. Like when Elena wrote stories based on real people, putting them into composite characters which included many of her own psychological shortcomings and moral transgressions, then getting chastised for putting a mirror into people's face so they could see who they were, the stories themselves giving very valid suggestions as to how they could transform themselves into what they should and want to be. Elena had lost so many friends and Comrades that way, and for a time, her sister Carlata. A sibling with whom she had re-established connections only because now there was more that she didn't talk about with her than what she did. But, aside from getting blamed for hurting people, there was the harm one could do to oneself for being of service to others, intending to do so anyway.

As established Old Philosophers such as Plato knew, and not-allowed to be established Contemporary journalist-novelists kept learning after it was too late, the punishment for telling people the way things really are is banishment, confinement to the nut house or permanent residence in a coffin. Survival for those who know is only possible among those who don't know or don't want to know if you can keep the masses entertained or provide a technical skill they need to survive. Unfortunately, Elena was always more about steak than sizzle. And as for specialized technical abilities, her skills as a horsewoman would be valued in the 19th or even 20th century, but they were as useless as a buggy whip in the cyber-infused 21st. Thankfully, Elena's knowledge about taking care of cats, dogs, horses and cows medically, which were mostly self taught, made her of some use to the community, as long as her supplier of drugs was not discovered.

One of those suppliers, none other than drug connoisseur Dan, sat in front of her. Waiting with baited breath as to what Elena would say to Kelci regarding her chili. As was Elena's biggest critic regarding her life style, and possible informant to end it, 'for her own good' of course, 'loving' sister Carlata.

"So, what do you think?" Kelci inquired yet again with big, wide open eyes. "About the chili."

"Do YOU like it, Kelci?" Elena asked, turning to the waitress-cook-owner.

"I think so," Kelci replied.

"And...I do too," Elena smiled back, knowing all too well that if she liked something, no one else would, and vice versa. With so many things, including food. "You are educating people's palates here."

"Great!" Kelci said. "I'll put in on the menu. And use it as the basis for a whole new section of the menu. Maybe a new café down the street, Pancho's Place, named after your horse. Whose picture I'll put in the front window. In the meantime, ya'll enjoy. Por favor."

"We will," Elena assured Kelci as the middle aged youngster tended to duties at other tables. "All of us," she blasted into Carlata's face before she'd ease into a condescending

eyeroll with her perfectly shaped brows. The overly well dressed urban sibling who looked nothing like Elena grimaced at the bean-filled gruel still on her spoon. “Because a smart man educates his palate,” Elena informed Dan. “And this chili is an education.”

Dan took in a bite of the well intended Mexican delight, and seemed to like it. A moderate first bite merged into a larger second, then a gargantuan sized third. Elena didn't know if she had manufactured consent in the talkative, know it all about all matter political who had never even heard of Noam Chomski. Or if Dan's growling and usually stomach demanded anything that could delivered over a tongue that didn't stop to do anything except swallow. Or if the munchies from the weed he still reeked of had given him an appetite for ingesting anything, including dirt. Or if he really did like the 'authentic' Mexican chili that would be perfect for Western Canadian palate and, with the right advertizing, everyone in Freshwater. What was of more concern was what Dan brought to the table, and how he got there.

“Interesting coincidence that your friend here was broken down on the road that I almost went down, while trying to get to your place, Elena,” Carlata said to Elena as she snuck the lion's share of her chili into her sister's bowl while Kelci was out of sight, and hearing range. “With directions to where you were, and with this briefcase that you----“

“---will deal with later,” Elena interjected. “And will verify the contents of before I do anything with it.”

“Verify it with who?” Carlata challenged regarding the briefcase that the head geologist had kept in his safe. “If it's drug money in there, or drugs, maybe the ones you're using to open up your own illegal veterinary practice here---“

“---Which is needed!” Elena shot back. “Because the veterinary professionals out here do more harm than good, medically and otherwise. Caring first about the profession, then pleasing the client, and the welfare of the animal dead last. Of course, topping all of that, is lining their own Dockers and fifty dollar 'farmer' jeans pockets with money from hard working stiffes here who----“

“---Will turn on you the minute your scientifically-based or alternative healing treatments don't work to their satisfaction, 'almost' Doctor Elena,” Carlata reminded her sister. With a voice that was...caring. And evoked other woulda's and coulda's in Elena's already over taxed brain box.

Elena thought about defending herself again. About why she did a 'Gertrude Stein' in her younger years, following in the footsteps of the author who abandoned a career as a doctor so she could cure the collective human soul through the arts rather than just patch up bodies that were connected to defective minds. About how Elena had honored her cancer-ridden father by doing the 'safe' option of being a doctor of medicine. Then promised her over-idealistic (and to Carlata, crazy beyond cure) mother on her deathbed that she would follow her passions and become the next female John Steinbeck. Instead, Elena dealt with a more relatable and perhaps relevant topic.

“Your hair,” Elena said with a complimentary smile regarding the elegant coif with every strand in its proper place. “It looks---”

“---Like your mop doesn’t,” the snide comeback. “You know, there’s a new invention out called scissors, and combs. And---“

“---hair color, I know,” Elena replied, stroking her long unkempt mane containing more grey and white than black strands, complimented by bits of straw still lingering from the morning’s horse feeding. “But it’s cheaper, easier and---”

“---not very smart in today’s climate, you know, Elena,” the busy body who perhaps was talking out of concern, or ignorance, or a combination of both asserted. “You’re no spring chicken, you know. And you’re still trying to become a journalist, novelist, ghost-seeing horse whisperer, ‘body mind and spirit’ healer, or whatever. You should try to fit in visually with the younger crowd, or accept your limitations, like the rest of us do.“

“And Mom never did,” Elena wanted to say, but didn’t. “And Dad refused to do, even to the bitter, cancer-killing end,” she yearned to say. Instead, she listened, yet again, to her sister’s rants. Rants about how everything Carlata did was sensible. Adult. Politically responsible. And, if you listened hard enough to her success life story, a tragic tale. Yes, such is what a reporter and analyzer of the human condition is supposed to do. Listen, absorb, assess, write, and hope that someone at the other side of such ‘gets it’. Without you dying or being shunned first, in an ideal world anyway.

CHAPTER 5

“So, who has my briefcase?” F. Michael Carlson, Ph.D., blasted at the blue uniformed commoner at the Cop Shop. “That 12% extra I pay at your grocery store, and the Provincial tax Revenue Canada dinged me for this year pays your salary, and I demand results!”

“If you told me what is in it, we may be able to help, Sir,” RCMP officer Glen Holz replied in a calm voice, a volcano of exhaustion and rage under it for the most recent university-conditioned geology government and/or corporate over-funded ‘expert’ sent out from Vancouver. Or maybe somewhere else he wasn’t talking about. He picked up the phone. “I can call your employer and verify that the robbery was not your fault. And that you’re working with us to relocate whatever was in that briefcase which----“

“---is somewhere in this ‘village’” Carlson grunted, looking out the window. “This ‘village’ that could be a town, or a city, if you played ball with us instead of just giving us lip service, or took the offers we give you to actually USE these mountains for REAL economic gain instead of letting this big hunks of rocks remain expensive scenery, which during forest fire season, could go up in smoke any time, and will some day.”

Holz knew that Carlson was right. During the nearly two decades he had been stationed in Freshwater, which was supposed to be only two years at the beginning of his now stagnant career as a law enforcement officer and protector of the people, Glen Holz had seen not that many kids graduating from the High School each year, and even fewer staying in town. Indeed, most of the musicians on any kind of stage in Freshwater, be it classical, rock, folk, country or metal, were eligible for senior discount bus tickets. Why Freshwater still existed as a village, town or whatever it was now was still an economic mystery. Maybe there were five families of foreign tourists from points Eastward who secretly funneled money into the economy so that they could vacation in the Wild West for three weeks a year. Or one of the German pensioners still living in the hills were shuffling money from a separatist movement in the Old Country to establish a New Germany in the more woods than people community that would be an experiment in a new kind of government. Or perhaps there was a drug trade that even Holz didn’t know about which was manufacturing more weed, meth or some other brand of mind-numbing pleasure potion that made life temporarily bearable for so many lost souls in Toronto, Seattle and Vancouver. Yes, those scenarios were made for Alex Jones or B movie fantasy, but they were far less scary than something under the ground in the hills which would bring in the dozers and drillers to dig it up. Of course, such would create jobs, but for who and at the expense of who? And at the expense of all the wildlife which even the city raised and yearning to be assigned back to such Holz had developed an affinity for.

Carlson ranted on about finding the locked metallic leather-covered briefcase, describing its outer appearance with inferences that if anyone got their hands into the contents, they would pay dearly for their curiosity, ‘biologically and otherwise’. Meanwhile, Holz reflected on his own stolen goods situation. A life he had stolen from himself. A life where he kept waiting for the big break, passing up the opportunity to have a wife, or

family, so that he could dedicate himself to ‘the job’. A job that left him alone after his shift was over, watching sitcoms and dramas set back home, in very NON-rural Toronto. Where, unless he was to return an accomplished hero of one sort or another, or with a big economic score he could use to establish his OWN ‘serve and protect’ force, he would not return at all. Where Glen Holz still had a brother who eased his way up the social and economic ladder by breaking every law, still married to a woman who should have been, and still could be, his.

CHAPTER 6

Though she identified herself as a Canadian, considering the Revolutionary War of 1776 a rebellion perpetuated by greedy New England smugglers and rich slave owning Virginia plantation owners, Elena did have a soft spot for some of the founding fathers of the country that fucked over her wetback father's beloved Mexico. On the fourth day of Carlata's unannounced 'just wanted to see how you were doing' visit, Elena Schwartz-Gonzales recalled the words of the immortal womanizing (and according to some, best buds of several young French lads as well) icon Ben Franklin. "Yeah, I know, houseguests, like fish, after three days start to stink," she quoted to her feline companion and guardian against bad aliens, Prometheus, while opening up the window to the bathroom to air out yet another cloud of Carlata's 'deodorant', and other odors that seemed to linger wherever she was. And like the repugnant aromas that followed Carlata, be it from what she cooked in the kitchen or baked into her own skin, Elena's 'beloved' sister seemed to linger. Always inside. Always behind closed blinds. Always telling Elena when calls came in from friends and relations in Toronto and the States, 'I'm not here'. Yes, Carlata was hiding from something, or someone. "But maybe she can hide somewhere else," Elena proposed to and promised Prometheus, who, like her, had not gotten more than 3 hours of shuteye since she invited her insomniac sister to 'bunk in' with her.

By coincidence, or perhaps intervention from Prometheus' ET friends, that opportunity came up. "It's my old Landlord's house, that, according to the executor of his will, is mine until the family sorts things out in Germany," Elena told her sister on the ride up the paved road that turned into a wide washboard 'path'. "Hans didn't look after the roof or the gutters, but he did keep everything inside his house functional. And very clean, except for his mouth when the cows broke through the fences, or when the coyotes got into his chicken coup, or when Bernie the bear decided that he preferred Hans' favorite keg of homemade beer rather than the apple tree he kept around for the beloved beast to munch on. And if Bernie decides to say howdy to you----"

"---I'm sure it's fine," Carlata interjected. "And so will I be. I just need some...quiet time. To, ya know, process some things."

"Yeah. 'Processing'," Elena replied, finally finding common ground with the sibling with whom she shared genetic encoding in her DNA, a room when they were growing up, but little else since. "I do understand that."

"You THINK you do," Carlata said with downturned humbled eyes, appended by superior bordering on condescending smirk.

Elena was too tired or too smart to press her sister for more information. Or to ask Carlata why she, who as a kid always respected Elena's privacy, had taken a peak into not every drawer in her house while looking for 'extra towels', as well as everything else she had acquired in the last three months stored in the attic. Then somehow 'accidentally' broke into her e mail. Then into all of her novels and short stories. "Maybe she will be

educated about the world, or at least develop an understanding of what I think about it,” Elena rationalized about it all, as she ‘processed’ her unexpected and, in some ways, welcomed as well as dreaded, visitor.

CHAPTER 7

“So, Mister Renshaw, what’s on your problem list today?” the locum doctor at the Freshwater Medical clinic asked Dan as he pulled up his file on the computer in the exam room.

“To start out with ‘Doc’, you can look at my face and body instead of that that fucking computer screen,” the reply from Dan through grunts and groans coming out of clenched teeth. “And yeah, I know, that saying that used up one of my allowable complaints I can come in here with, but some things have to be said, for the fucking record, ‘Doc’.”

The urbanely-hip dressed and sterile-souled health care provider who probably had more experience operating medical software than managing or operating on real human patients didn’t even blink. His clean shaven wrinkle-free face showed no expression at all, not even condescension as he wrote down something in the file that Dan obviously was not supposed to see.

“Where’s Doc Sloan?” Dan demanded to know. “He knows my situations.”

“He left me his notes,” the reply, delivered coldly, still without eye contact. “Which I’m reading right now.”

Dan allowed the wet behind the ears, and cold behind the eyes Physician read what was on the file. Either he was a slow reader or Sloan and the other Docs at the clinic wrote far more than Dan ever told them, or wanted them to know. Finally after ten ‘hmmm’s’ from the young physician to whom Hippocrates was a new video game or heavy metal group, he awarded Dan that ‘look’ he had experienced at the clinic in Freshwater as well as in three cities around it when he went for referrals.

Still, Dan commenced to report what he was feeling, and experiencing. “The pain in my back, and legs, it’s still there, and getting worse. I don’t suppose YOU can give me any pain relievers. And as for hot baths and exercise, the baths hurt my skin, and I get enough exercise chopping wood for my old lady at home and hauling around rocks for the bosses at work,” Dan related, as respectfully as he could. “But there’s something else, Doc. The pain in is the lower back, and I’m starting to pee blood. And my lungs when they breath, they hurt, and---”

The physician pointed to the sign above him. “Please refrain from discussing more than three issues per visit” it read in official government font, in English, French and now Spanish. “Government policy,” the professionally detached MD ‘confessed’ with shrugged shoulders. “New rule so we can accommodate more patients per unit time, while we have a severe shortages of Doctors relative to the increasing number of patients,” the physician explained with a monotone voice. “We have to streamline health care if we’re going to keep being able to provide it without doubling everyone taxes.”

“Or maybe you can hire more docs so we peons can ask you about TEN issues, if you make the rich fat cats, including the overpaid docs who hire you out, pay their fair share of taxes instead of letting their lawyer buds find them loopholes in their returns,” Dan replied. He still hoped to find some commonality with the new, no doubt city-raised, doc who probably was facing heavy student loans to pay, or having to work off his educational debt by putting in a whole bunch more years working in backwater communities like Freshwater. He ran his fingers through his sweat-soaked, greasy hair still bearing bits of wood and sawdust, noting several strands coming out into his hand, most probably as a prelude to losing all of his hair to worry like his old man did.

Dan waited as the young doctor considered what was said to him, then looked up some more things on the file which no doubt said that he was a ‘problem’ patient with a history of multiple medication/drug addiction, caused by a mixture of heredity, previous docs, and good old fashioned shit for luck. He braced himself for yet another prescription of ‘take some Tylenol, use real soap when taking a shower, and consider staying with a 12 step rehab program this time’. Then something came out of the young physician who probably never experienced a sick day in his sheltered, economically privileged life.

“Hematuria and pulmonary pain,” he said after pensively typing something into the computer. “How long?” He got up from his chair, put a stethoscope around his neck and listened to what was going on under Dan’s torn and smelly shirt.

“Two weeks or so for blood in the urine. Lung problems for the last 6 days, and this back pain...for a while. Now in the lower back,” Dan related as he finally felt some kind of concern coming from the hands of one of the multiple locums Doc Sloan hired before he took on ‘management of two satellite facilities’.

“And this?” the Doc asked, pointing to Dan’s hand.

“My fingers, Doc?” Dan glanced at the paws that had been injured so many times, and in so many ways, he had lost count. “Something wrong with them? Besides working them to the bumpy bones and beyond?”

“Maybe more bumpy than normal lately?”

“Yeah, now that you mention it, Doc. And---“

“What’s in them? Your palms that is” the next question, going well beyond the three issues allowed per visit. “A lot of hair,” he noted having seen the clumps of recently shed strands from his forelock.

“Well, my bald Dad said that no grass grows on busy streets,” Dan explained, recalling the better parts of his very erratic childhood. “And maybe it’s my time to---“

“---still keep that mop of greasy, natural-smelling hair,” the ‘whatever’ post millenia physician asserted with the determination of an old fart veteran healer. With that he put

the hair that had fallen from Dan's head into an envelope, then cut off a small clump from the back of his neck, placing them into jars. He took a pen in his right hand, paper into his left and wrote feverishly. "I'm going to sent you out for some tests, that we have to do immediately."

Dan had heard that voice of concern before, from a distant past. He tried to recall from where and when. He searched his memory as fast and hard as he could, finally coming up with the answer. Indeed it was what Dan heard Hans being told when he took the Old German in for an overdue exam a few months earlier.

CHAPTER 8

Two weeks later, that felt like two years due Carlata's external wants and real needs were miles apart, Elena visited Dan in the same hospital where Hans had spent his last days with body, mind and spirit all on one location. In the same ward where access to medical records, even for those listed as 'family', were not locatable during and after. And in the same bed.

"Shit happens," Dan explained to Elena as to why his belly was swollen up, his arms and legs not much more than bumpy skeletal bones covered with tough, loose skin. "Including me passing away from this miserable planet looking like a Chinaman," he mused, gazing at the yellow tone of his skin, from eyes where the whites were now a deep orange. "But there's one thing I won't miss," he said with a wide, shit eating grin.

"Getting paid shit wages for doing shit jobs that no one else would do?" Elena answered, following to her best abilities the Tao of the moment, that keeps changing with the living and changes even more unpredictably with the dying. "Or getting pissed on by the rich fat cats who fuck all of us up, after of course they've had a fuck fest with their twenty year old mistresses? Or.----"

"----My old lady, Priscilla. I won't miss 'Princess' Pricilla yelling at me for having a well deserved and needed drink at the end of a hard day. Or taking a toke of legally-allowed medically needed weed to get through another day of body pain and mental agony. Or having to tell her that I love her ten times a day."

"Which loses impact after the first three times, and makes you love each other less," Elena offered.

"And I won't miss you, who never got drunk, stoned or happily fucked your entire life, telling me that I should get of the sauce, stop medicating my very addicted body, or getting my rocks off after smoking a good joint when I have to," Dan snarkled back.

"I'm sorry, I---"

"And about you using me to study 'the human condition' so you can write about life without really experiencing it?"

"I'm sorry about that too," Elena confessed.

"You shouldn't be," Dan asserted through labored breaths that now sounded like rattles. "You're doing your Calling figuring out what makes the world tick. And I---"

The rest of what Dan had to say, and wanted to be known, got lost in the thick phlegm that erupted from his lungs. And the red urine coming out of his bladder. Elena lifted him up from the yet again soaked bed, then elevated his chest in an attempt to find a position that was grossly uncomfortable rather than agonizingly painful.

“I’ll be alright, soon,” Dan said, coming from a place far deeper than Elena had ever felt from him. “Sooner if you...” He pointed to the IV line.

A Nurse peeked into the room. “What does he want?” she asked, in a very official capacity.

“Some...juice,” Elena said. “From the store,” she related, excusing herself. “I’ll go get the juice. Real juice?” she asked Dan.

After a moment of final reflection, Dan nodded yes.

With that, Elena exited the hospital and headed to the store. A store owned and operated by Promethius, her cat, and his two canine assistants. Reaching into the stash of highly illegal drugs she used for very humanitarian purposes, she explained to him the reason for the withdrawal of so much material. “I know, guys,” she told her animal buds, comrades and friends. “These drugs are supposed to be used to help your fellow four legged creatures, but there’s a two legged one who needs them more. Besides, without his help, we wouldn’t have so much of this anyway, right?”

The animals seem to say yes with their eyes. ‘Yes’ to Elena taking four dog and twenty cat’s worth of anesthetics, pain relievers, and nerve blocking agents and putting them into the recesses of her bag. ‘Yes’ to cheating demon disease from torturing another humanoid who has no hope of getting better. ‘Yes’ to doing that most merciful and morally difficult acts which she should have done for Hans, the ailing Old German, and her parents, after she promised them on a stack of Bibles and the eyes of her four legged children that she would intervene when the time came. ‘Yes’ to slithering into Dan’s room while the Nurses were enjoying the weed-spiked banana bread that she knew none of the staff could resist.

That plan of ‘yeses’ hit an abrupt ‘no’ when she arriving at the hospital, finding Dan’s bed empty. His body gone. Sent to the crematorium, according to the head nurse anyway, at the request of his wife and his Will, neither of which were accessible.

CHAPTER 9

She rattled off her theories, accusations and very strong ‘suggestions’ at the Cop Shop with more reason and passion than any of the characters in the mystery novels she had written. “Those rocks that had purple berries painted on them are probably pitchblend. Raw uranium that the wild sunflowers indeed DID absorb, as did the potatoes planted in the fields around the excavation sites. Which I did submit to an independent lab, at my own expense, at the University of Calgary,” Elena blasted into Officer Glen Holz’s ears in an office which he assured her was not bugged.

“And as for the kidney problems, bone bumps and cancerous lungs that killed Dan, and the hair that he was losing ‘worrying’ about paying his bills and not violating probation by quitting his job at the excavation site. Dan never wore protection suits, or maybe wasn’t given them. And he carted around more rocks than anyone else working for ‘Professor’ Carlson and his maybe University-based cronies at the site of the mine that’s about to ‘save’ this community from dying from un and under-employment. And when I tried to get his medical records, and find out what happened to the hair samples the new Doc at the clinic, who isn’t there anymore, sent in for analysis----“

“----You got the run around, and walls of red tape. Told that it was confidential information. And that you needed a court order to release them,” Holz replied, calmly.

“And when I called old Doc Sloan, who was listed as Hans Weimer’s main doctor, he didn’t deny that his cancer was due to ‘yet to be determined environmental causes’. And when I asked him about why his wife Lisa, a homebody who came down the mountain once every two weeks for supplies or ‘necessary visits to people so she knows why she is hiding out from humanity’, died five years before her mostly on the road husband did. And why every one of the Old Germans on the mountain died from the big C.”

“You were told that he was looking into it,” the evenly delivered response to the rage-infested Mexican-German idealist.

“Actually, he said that Environment Canada did a study on it, but the funding ran out so it couldn’t continue.” Elena got up from her chair and closed up a slit in the blinds she requested be shut for the meeting that had been opened by the air conditioner finally kicking in. “But Sloan did say that they reached a tentative conclusion. That the claim that there are environmental causes for the unusually high rate of cancer here is due to multifactorial causes to be determined at a later date when there is more ‘conclusive data available’. But I suppose that saying that them thar hills that fund tourism, logging and mining would be ‘economically compromising’ to everyone in this valley if the truth got out. Covering up or not seeing the environmental truth is after all a criminal offense all ‘responsible’ citizens who live under roofs rather than the stars are guilty of. And I’m as guilty as anyone else.” Elena’s eyes turned downward, her accusational arrows aimed at herself, hitting her in the most vulnerable parts.

“Guilty of what, Elena?” Holz inquired.

“Putting my sister up at Hans’ house, which is probably sitting on one of the highest concentrations of uranium on the valley.” A flood of tears emanated from her bloodshot eyes, streaming down Elena’s cheeks. “Where Carlata insists on staying. Not believing anything I tell her about...” The tears stopped, her face becoming red with rage. Volcanic emotions of anger, shame and fear competing to possess her very vulnerable and defenseless soul.

Elena then pulled out a tightly folded large piece of paper from the depths of her cleavage, ramming it onto Holz’s desk, in between the pile of traffic tickets that had been issued to the tourists and the robbery reports made by locals who really were broken into, as well as those who were looking to get quickly insurance claims. “The landmarks on this ‘map’ are geological. No road names, rivers, or historical landmarks. But as far as I can sense, smell and intuit, the largest vein of whatever ‘goodies’ are in the ground are centered around where Hans and the other old Germans lived during the ‘good times’ here, or died before their time.”

“And what else was in that briefcase that Dan stole from Carlson’s safe?” Holz asked, still maintaining a calm sense of reason rather than passion fueled indignation. Part of both the job he was paid for as well as conditioned to, and the role Life assigned him now, as SOMEONE in the room had to keep a cool, level and passionlessly objective head.

Elena remained silent, clenching her overstuffed ‘going to town’ stachel with a shaking fist. She stared at the door. Holz pulled his ass out of his comfy chair and showed her, yet again, that it was double locked. “The world out there, us in here. Us and our demons, of course, Elena. And the ghosts of the departed Old Farts who, yes, I feel just as much as you do. But my eyes still can’t see because my still stuck in linear reality mind can’t handle it,” he delivered with a warm, understanding and jovial smile.

The outer margins of Elena’s lips turned upward for a moment, then joined a tightly clenched mouth. She pointed up to the ceilings, noting the location of a camera.

“Like I told you and assured you, it’s there for me to film idiots and assholes, not you,” Holz assured Elena of the camera he had turned off upon her entry.

“Hmmm,” Elena’s skeptical reply.

Holz made no effort to hide the fact that he was very tired from an already long day of dealing with idiots and assholes. He let out a sigh overloaded with disappointment in Elena, and feeling, yes, hurt, that she thought so little of him. After he had turned the other eye so many times when he could have, and was told to, arrest her for infringements on ‘law, order and the new harmonic’ of Freshwater ranging from riding her horse into town where it held up and endangered motorists, to the very unlicensed yet effective and well used veterinary practice she was running out of her barn.

Holz took down the inactive camera, inserting it into his right hand drawer. He say down on his chair, folded his hands in front of him, and addressed her, eye to eye. Protector to protector. With that stare that he had acquired at birth rather than during his training which invited those in need of help to confide in him. And said to anyone holding a secret that he knows what it is, even though he didn't.

Elena finally released her clenched fist from the 'going to town' stachel, then pulled out the items one by one, laying them on his desk. They included five two inch stacks of fresh Euros, mostly fifties. A wallet filled with credit cards. Post dated checks written to Professor Michael Carlson from several foreign companies, the largest from Family First Enterprises in Salt Lake City, Utah and Cemya Piervy in Moscow. And framed certificates from the University of British Columbia, Alberta, Toronto, Washington and Harvard, with acknowledgments ranging from Honorable Doctorate to offers to be Chairman in a variety of Departments. Names and numbers of hit looking Black, Brown, Yellow and White babes with their phone numbers with various expressions of submission on their thick, red lips. Some over 18, most of them not.

No question, Elena had discovered something she was not supposed to. And in the real world rather than in those metaphysical realms of ghosts or literary fiction in which she felt most at home, and welcomed. But given everything that Glen Holz and Elena Gonzales-Schwartz had experienced, really were, and were capable to do anything about, there was one question he had to ask before proceeding with any other.

"Why are you trusting me, Elena?" Holz inquired of the determined woman and Passion-possessed yet still naïve idealist in front of him.

After a pensive pause, disallowing Holz from seeing what was really behind it, she finally delivered an answer to that and so many more of his yet to be asked questions. "You look Right in blue, big R," Elena said fondly, and firmly. "You serve and protect us, and our animals, not the bosses, the rich tourists, the hippie dope dealers who somehow never get arrested, or yourself. And, as I recall from the night I won't write about but always remember, you look better naked." Her long mane seemed to be both elderly white and girlish blonde. Her eyes changed color every time Holz tried to define what hue was evoking fascination in his own mind, and heart. Then Elena's face turned into someone else. Someone both young and old. Someone who knew both nothing about the way things were, and everything.

"Hmmm," Holz said, using his signature line whenever posed with something that challenged his abilities, and conscience.

"So, are we both in on this?" Elena inquired, seeming very much to be in the real world. A world that required an answer, from every part of the underutilized, ever able yet still not ready for the rocking chair Cop. "A Mission that will exhaust us, test us, and maybe kill us?"

“And to be able to die knowing that we both really DID do something” Holz replied, recalling a line from a movie about Jewish prisoners in a Concentration Camp who finally fought against their captors. Still not sure if he was a prisoner, or a commandant.

CHAPTER 10

It certainly wasn't a new strategy, but it was an effective one, historically. If you want to get someone out of your town, city or castle who you don't want to be an enemy who will do the same to you one day, you make it as uncomfortable for them as possible without killing them. It was literally a dirty job for Elena to clog up the water supply from the make shift plastic, rock and wooden reservoir connected to the underground spring that somehow provided water to his Hans' house when the thermometer hit a dry and toasty 110 degrees as well as a frigid, petrified ice, minus 30. Still, Carlata made more excuses for not moving away from the recently deceased German landlord's house which she had made her own with insulated curtains, a new wifi system and a surveillance system against bears, cougars and no-goodnick 'back to the land' dope dealers looking to pilfer supplies from Hans' always oversupplied barn. All powered by the battery and solar system that Hans talked about, and tried to get Elena to use at her place, claiming that there were 'too many moving parts' in it for her to put it in.

"No one sees me here, and if I need to go to town, I'll just jump in the lake down the road," was Carlata's answer to this latest convenience that decided to break down on its own, delivered with a body that reeked of four days of sweat covered by two brands of her own perfume, and the imported aftershave that Hans had claimed scared away wild coyotes and attracted humanoid cougars. "So, how goes it down below?" Carlata asked Elena as she portioned out the water she had carted up from the lake into buckets for cleaning, washing and drinking.

"How goes it above?" Elena answered, sensing that Carlata had not only lost most of the make-up caking her skin, but a substantial portion of body weight under it. "Are you alright?" she inquired while rushing to help her lift the heavy bottles and buckets from point A to point B.

"That which doesn't kill me makes me stronger," the reply as Carlata took over the lifting of a capacity filled jug of drinking water from the floor to the kitchen counter, her thinned out arms seeming to have more muscle than flab in them. For the moment anyway. "Help yourself to some stew, if you want," she offered. "Made with some beef I found in Hans freezer. Though it would have been tastier and more nutritious if it was human meat churned up from my ex-husbands, ex-best friends who went off with those pieces of shit, ex-business partners and ex-...."

Carlata's rants stopped, the floodgates to what she was really thinking, and feeling, plugged up yet again. She froze in mid-kvetch, her gaze held hostage by a mirror. "I look like shit, don't I," the once self-assured poster-gal for how to look sexy and radiant on your 60th birthday party related, and confessed.

Elena approached slowly, choosing her words very carefully, feeling the wrinkles in her sister's face getting deeper with each step, the drooping skin under her jaw falling down to the margins of the scarf around her neck. "You know, if you need any-----"

“---Beauty tips? From someone who doesn’t appreciate or work on what she’s naturally got?” Elena’s younger sister who now looked TWENTY years older than her sighed. “I can still get myself worked on,” she said with a stiff upper lip, examining her left and right profile. “By top notch doctors back home in the States who are expensive, but better than any of the losers here in Canada who are content to work in a socialized health care system that tries to protect everyone but winds up under-serving everyone. Especially with pre-existing conditions.”

“Still,” Elena protested, her mind informed, but her back arched. “Up here, all things considered, medical care is given according to need rather than ability to pay, and you’re---“

“---In NEED of taking care of myself, MY way,” Carlata asserted with the collected assertion inherited from her Mexican father, and the stubbornness of her German mom. “Please,” she continued calmly, placing her hand on Elena’s forearm.

“Is there anything I can do?” Elena asked, demanding an answer. “Aside from moving you from this dump to someplace nice, comfortable and..” she sniffed the air, then tasted the water. “Better for you health, and my conscience as a host?”

Carlata folded her once ‘fat’ face into her lean fingers. After several deep breaths of deep reflection, she finally answered. “Yes, there is something you can do for me.”

“Which is what?” Elena said, leaping up on her toes.

Carlata pointed to a large, cushioned chair, in front of a her state beyond the art computer. “Sit, relax, play some video games of mine that you ENJOY rather than real life games that you feel that you have to, while you let ME make you lunch.” With a sad yet caring smile, Carlata walked to the kitchen, her limping gait emerging into a bold and confident stride. While cooking the stew, she broke out into a medley of songs from her very non-commercial childhood, mispronouncing but still using sprinkles of Spanish and German words the still unilingual, yet internationally traveled, Carlata recalled from a happier past two decades ago.

Noting that Carlata was in a healthy head place and probably a curable body place, healthwise, Elena put on the video game offered to her, then minimized them. It had been two hours since she checked her e mail. There was much to catch up with regarding what was really going on at ‘Professor Carlson’s Mine’, the title she would use for the novel she’d write about her real life investigation which no doubt would be made into a movie very soon, perhaps with Carlata’s connections in Toronto. So that Old Farts like Hans, Irreverent untitled Sages like his wife Lisa, and likable druggo deadbeats like Dan in other towns could die of NATURAL causes instead of environmentally-linked cancer.

As the entry ports to her inbox appeared on the screen with the musical accompaniment of “Amazonian Dragon Slayers”, Elena could ‘feel’ the story coming together. Starting

with her story in the Tomkins River News, which she had submitted to very willing boss, and rival, Rita last night. An article that related both facts and the Truth, big T. About local events, and humanity at large. The best piece of writing she ever did, according to Elena and, most importantly, her sister Carlata, who read it over three times the previous afternoon. Whose opinion, for better or worse, Elena valued more than her own, or most anyone else's.

There was an unusually long delay in getting into the inbox. Elena attributed it to slowness of mountain wifi during a windy day. Or perhaps jarhead geeks in a military bunker in Iowa 'taking a gander' at it, which means that she was making an impact, which beat the hell out of being ignored, like her conspiracy-crazed and very unpublished Democratic Socialist-Marxist Mother. Or maybe there was a hacker in Russia who wanted to steal a great story so he could stop shoveling shit in Moscow so he could dig his way up the ladder in Hollywood with a killer fact-based script written and copyrighted well before Elena could put it on paper.

Finally, the inbox came up on the screen. Ignoring the online petitions she usually went to first, Elena went straight to a message from Rita. Her jaw dropped when her eyes saw, and her soul processed, what was in it.

"So?" Carlata said with optimism and shared enthusiasm in her voice. "What news for Mom's favorite Activist daughter, and Dad's genius healer of the collective human consciousness?" she continued as she entered the living room, placing her hands on Elena's shoulders. Shoulders that were shaking in disbelief. "A pink slip," Carlata said, summarizing the e mail from the owner and editor of the newspaper. "Your services are no longer required, due to budget cuts, changing of venue, and the agenda of new buyers for the River'," she read. "'We all wish you good fortune in your new journalistic and literary endeavors and...'"

"...? Your new location, wherever it is," Elena saw and somehow pulled up the courage to read. "Which means?" she continued, fear finding its way into Elena's crusader soul.

Carlata took the liberty of clicking on another e mail, from Glen Holz, which said 'very important'. Both sisters read it with the same mind, heart and soul.

It read. "Investigation into what we talked about is on hold. Investigation into you, Doctor Elena, is ongoing. The suits in the military tunics, Brooks Brothers jackets and lab coats. I'm eternally thankful for you saving my dogs, and horse, but...as we know, no good deed goes unnoticed, and unpunished. If you need help relocating, for you and ALL of your animals that is, please contact me."

Elena didn't know what to do. Or what to think. She felt like she was a character in one of the novels she had written, with her fate in the hands of another writer. One whose motives and agendas were as elusive as wondering how and why she was being strongly encouraged to leave town for both her investigative and medical Missions. Elena always meant to do no harm, while doing as much good as possible. But somehow, both of those

agendas seemed to be in a final conflict now, both mortally wounded as a result of them finally colliding.

“Mom would be proud, as would Dad, as am I,” Carlata offered from a place Elena didn’t expect, nor knew. Her outstretched arms slipped over Elena’s tight chest, loosening somehow the air that was involuntarily going into and out of it. “The most valuable revolutionary healers are hated, shunned and, if they don’t get out of Dodge fast, crucified. And unless you have twelve really dedicated Jewish Agents, or a dedicated and literary schmoozer like Plato to write down what you did, it will be blown away by the wind. And besides, no Camelot in the woods like the one you DID create here lasts forever.”

“What does last forever then?” Elena asked, demanding an answer from Carlata, the ghosts of her Enlightened parents who never quite revealed everything to her, and a God who she still tried really hard to believe in. “What the fuck does last forever!!!”

“This,” Carlata offered, gently, putting a dish of stew to her left which upon tasting revealed itself to be the best elements of solid German and spicy Mexican cuisine. “And this, my own special recipe,” the younger sister who now felt to be more like a mother, and a friend, continued regarding a cup of tea, which upon sipping felt sustaining, healing, like it contained an elixir that could protect one from any ‘enviromental’ toxin life threw at you. “And this,” the finale, a hug from Carlata that was tight, but not restrictive. Protective, but not condescending. A ‘forever’ which nothing could make go away.

CHAPTER 11

“So, you finally did find my private property,” F. Michael Carlson said as he perused the contents of his briefcase. “And I see that all the Euros are still here, along with my checks, and maps about what’s two days digging under the ground,” he said as he looked them over at the very private room at the Police Station four hours after most everyone in town was in bed and two before anyone before anyone woke up, even the chronically diurnal Christian farmers for morning prayers. “And what’s two weeks’ worth of digging under the ground as well,” he smiled. “Well done. Indeed you earned your paycheck, Officer. And a commendation for not spending a drachma, deutchmark or ruble of this money on donuts, dope or a domicile for your ex-wife and wannabe new one.”

“Elena wouldn’t accept it if she knew where the money is coming from,” Police Sergeant Glen Holz wanted to say, but didn’t while his client and boss turned to look out the window at the mountain that was about to be all his in three days. “Though she does deserve better than life could deliver, or I could,” he contemplated from the depths of his being.

“There are some other agendas that you did drag your feet on, and shouldn’t have,” Carlson continued as he turned to Holz yet again. “A shirking of your very legal duties. That matter with the SPCA, hmmm?”

“An organization which is supposed to protect animals and serve people who take care of them, which Elena is. No matter how many trumped up charges of abuse were made up about her, and who made them,” Holz yearned to say, but couldn’t. At least in a language Carlson could really hear, or understand.

“And then there’s the legal situation that, well, involves you and me personally,” Carlson said as he walked to Holz, getting into his face without any regard for protocol or courtesy. “And what I still can do to you if you keep staring at me like that,” the usually self-assured almost Professor on his way to becoming King of several universities and corporations that funded them uttered with shivering lips.

“Haunt you for the rest of your days while you’re in the land of the ‘living’,” Holz’s spirit replied as it seeped back behind the penetrating eyes and confident smile of the corpse it inhabited. “And if you think that you can sell to ANYone here that it was me who tried to shoot YOU in my office, or that I decided to shoot myself with my gun after we struggled, and talked, and struggled, and talked and, well. There is a thing called justice. And karma.”

Holz’s spirit hoped he was right. And prayed that the courtroom up in the sky, or deep into the earth where he was headed would provide a good lawyer for him. One that could understand why he did what he did. And one who could see to it that the birthday card he sent to Elena just before his predicted and premeditated execution would reach her. And that she could do in the land of the living what he couldn’t do, or was too late to dedicate himself to finally doing.

CHAPTER 12

Elena looked back at her house through the back mirror of the horse, dog and cat-filled stock trailer, recalling the good, bad and still to be labeled times there. She had experienced 14 cold winters, as many hot summers and three evacuations due to forest fires in the facility it was legally never up to code to rent to humans, but which was occupied without any complaints by countless animals. But, there was a silver lining to the very black cloud. Carlata was finally back together with her. Carlata, the only two legged family Elena had, unless you wanted to count cousins in Mexico and Germany who considered Elena's father and mother black sheep to be ignored, their offspring to be marginalized into the obscurity of North American Siberia, otherwise known as Freshwater, BC. But, it was time to move to another region of Canadian Siberia.

"The place I picked out for us is better than this one," Carlata assured her as the last remnants of the house that become more than a home disappeared from view behind the trees that covered the mountain and made everyone on it un-spottable to any areal Google map or spy glass from the highway that ran through the valley. "And it's all paid for. My treat."

"And my nightmare?" Elena dared to say.

"Look, you spoiled Socialist idealist head in the clouds brat!" Carlata blasted back. "Thank your lucky stars that you're still alive! And that there IS a place with twice the acreage and half of the headaches where you can start another Animal Farm on the other side of Kelowna! And that you still have your animals! And your health! And if you have your health, you have everything."

"Or the potential to do everything that matters," Elena growled back.

"Retirement from saving the world is not so bad," Carlata said. "With my various investments, that I've been saving for you, and can cash in at any time, I can keep both of us going," Carlata continued, as she fondled the wedding ring from her latest failed marriage that she now wore on her right hand. "Trust me. I can fund my business and your literary FICTIONAL fantasies in a way that they both serve rather than conflict with each other."

"By cashing in that diamond on your finger?" Elena inquired of the 14 carat rock on her sister's finger.

"It's just a rock. Lots of rocks under the ground. And lots more suckers, schleps and saints who, well, give women like us these rings because they WANT to, not because they have to, right?"

"And you're going to live long enough to land a sucker, schlep or saint to grow old with, I hope."

“The new medicine I got from this American expatriate Harvard Doc in Juarez. U-Guard 92 It’s helped me a lot,” Carlata said with conviction of a lost soul who found religion, scientific miracles and Jesus, all wrapped into one. She showed Elena the label on the bottle , displaying a very Caucasian face with a Jewish honker nose framed by a Yaqui Indian headband and beads. “It’s helped you too, even if you didn’t believe in it.”

Elena couldn’t deny the truth of that statement. She did feel empowered, more able to breath easily and somehow purged of toxins every time she let Carlata to the cooking. Or maybe it was Carlata’s company that was the magic ingredient in the stew, cookies and tea Carlata and her animals somehow got. Maybe that ingredient was love. Delivered in yet another cupcake Carlata pulled out of her bag, helping herself to the smallest one, offering it to a very healthy and happy Promethius, then finally to her sister. “Protects you from really bad shit, which was and will be all around us. No matter where we go on this planet, or any other one.”

It was, as stated in the Godfather, an offer a very broke, lonely and betrayed Elena couldn’t refuse.

CHAPTER 13

It was a song Elena had heard sung to her every Fall for as long as she could remember. The tune was simplistic, boring, hokey and the lyrics were generally mouthed rather than sung by most of the chorus assigned to perform it. But on this year, hearing ‘Happy Birthday’ had a special meaning. In an acreage where there was room for all 5 of her horses to eat ample grass, shit to their heart’s delight, run around at a gallop for half a mile rather than having to do such in circles to avoid hitting fences, and play territorial games with the four additional members of the herd that found their way to her. Ode de molde behind the walls was replaced by well kept wood and asbestos-less concrete posts. The roof was intact, the floors level and the toilet worked every time you flushed it. As for the people at the event, Elena knew a handful from having moved into the neighborhood three weeks earlier. The rest seemed to be friends of Carlata, and wanted to be even better friends with her. Especially after they read Elena’s fictional stories that wound up being presented at the September Literary Festival in Kelowna , published under the name of ‘Helen G. Black’. Yes, it was easily traceable to Elena Gonzales-Schwarz, and would be soon enough.

In the meantime Helen Black was the recipient of offers for publication by three publication houses. And unlike the other times she was invited into the literary castle, these publishers stated very clearly that they required no money up front to ‘help with printing costs’ and promised that whatever Helen wrote would be read, with minimal suggestions rather than demands from the editors.

As the congregation got to ‘Happy Birthday dear Helen’, Elena gazed upon the cake bearing 66 candles which shone as brightly as the optimism in her eyes. “Make a wish,” yelled someone from the crowd which was bigger than any other birthday gathering Elena ever had, or for that matter her sister did either, as a kid. Elena looked at her sister, saying with her eyes, that Carlata live long, that her businesses prosper, and that she finally meet a man, or maybe a woman, who is worthy of her. And that there would be no more secrets or grudged between herself and her sister. A sister who seemed to be very much on the road to recovery from the cancer she insisted on no one knowing about, even her three kids South of the 49th who turned out to be bigger bastards and self-absorbed assholes than fathers.

After taking a big breath in, Elena blew out the candles. All of them. She cut the cake, distributed it to all of the human AND canine guests, then before taking a bite of the giant Bavarian Forest chocolate cake baked just the way Hans’ wife Lisa did, heard the doorbell.

“I’ll get it!” Carlata exclaimed. Her first steps towards delivering on that gift, claim and task were stopped by a Great Dane who was owned by one of Elena’s new neighbors, Tom Erikson, seasoned horse whisperer, classical Latino-Baroque musician and dead ringer for her own father as well as three man friends that got away many moons, life-experiences and writings ago. Carlata stumbled gingerly onto the ground, her face licked dry by the loving canine.

“He likes you, Carlata,” Tom noted.

“He wants to lick off the chocolate cake from my face,” Carlata informed the six foot gorgeous hunk of senior who had aged even slower than Elena did . “Or the cologne that I...Nice doggie, Luther. I have to---“

“---Make friends with my new son while I get the door,” Elena self observed herself saying. A glance at Tom revealed a smiling and approving face that said ‘yes’ to the prediction, and wish.

With potential new mate furthering Carlata’s still deficient knowledge and appreciation of four legged souls, Elena answered the doorbell, bringing with her a piece of birthday cake of course.

Upon offering the Bavarian delight to the delivery mensch outside, Elena noted that under the oversized trousers, mismatched sleeves and visored hat was a woman. One who normally would not be caught dead clad in such disarray, and commonality. “Package for occupant, who is...”

“Me. Still me,” Elena said to Rita Tomkins, otherwise known as ‘River Bitch’ to those who worked under her iron hand at the newspaper in Freshwater.

“You have to sign for this, officially,” Rita said as she presented her with a plain brown package the size of a shoe box and several smaller packages, requesting signatures on both paper and her tablet.

Elena had the good sense, and courtesy, to not ask Rita why she was delivering packages, a job the former Queen and, so Elena thought anyway, owner of the Tomkins River News said was ‘beneath cleaning the shit off the anuses of cockroaches’. Still, Rita insisted on giving her some answers.

“Karma’s a bitch, and when it turns on a bitch, it makes for some big changes in occupations, and some interesting coincidental accidental reunions,” she related, and confessed. “And when karma turns on someone who deserves something better, it offers opportunity.” With that, Rita looked around her, noting that no one had seen her. Yet she seemed to be seeing a ghost who said ‘the coast is clear’. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a large envelope. A letter without a stamp on it, and no return address, but a name. “From Glen Holz who, is with you in spirit but can never be with you, or anyone else, in body.”

“What happened?” Elena inquired as she read the scribbling on the envelope, in words sprawled out and poorly penmanshiped reading ‘Fur nur deine offen Augen. “I need to know what happened!” she insisted.

“An occupational accident, officially,” the reply from the deposed, and ashamed ex-Philosopher Queen. She snuck an envelope from her left front commoner trouser pocket under Elena’s classily Indian and Cowboy jean jacket. “And from me, unofficially. Open this in private, and do with it what I don’t have the courage to do, and maybe never did.”

With that, Rita lowered the visor on her hat and slumped her way back to the delivery truck. Leaving the new Queen of the Literary Hill with serious doubts as to why her new subjects were showing gifts on her, and the ghost of an old friend somehow found his way to give her the most important birthday opportunity of a lifetime.

CHAPTER 14

How and why Glen Holz decided to deliver a birthday package to Elena from the other side of the veil was a haunting question indeed. But what was more pressing---the message on the envelope. When inverted into English it meant ‘for your open eyes only.’ Honoring Glen’s wish, Elena followed his request, but with one violation which he knew he would understand.

“Okay guys, close your eyes as I read this,” she said to the three cats, four dogs and two horses peering over the fence in the pasture as she slowly opened the envelope. The sun decided to move around the clouds that had been hiding it. “You too!” she said to the big ball of fire up in the sky whose whims and bursts of PMS could fry the planet or turn it into a sheet of ice. And to the satellites hovering around which, according to Glen anyway, could read the health warning on a carton of smokes more clearly than the addicted victim or curious teen who’s poisoning his lungs with the contents of such.

While unfolding the legal sized piece of paper containing scribbling Elena’s mind found its way to remembering something her mother said, just before she decided to go to the other side of the veil on what was left of her own steam rather than waiting for the boatman to finally get around to taking her there. “At the time of departing the room is the only real time you say what you really think and feel about the people in it,” she recalled being whispered into her ear in German, a tongue that Elena’s mind seemed to grasp as a young child faster than English. On that fateful day in the Ward when all of her mental faculties were declared ‘going and just about gone’, according to the smug attending Doc and the under-spoken head nurse.

Then there was something else from her mother’s voice that Elena always knew, but never fully realized. “We are born alone, we die alone and never really know anyone else other than our own selves in between.” It fit the souls around her, as Elena was constantly trying to figure out what her four legged comrades, who never let her feel alone, were really thinking and feeling. They all moved away from her when she read the contents of Glen Holz’s birthday card. Within it, ID of the source of the eight new ‘confidential’ reports to the SPCA reporting Elena’s abuse and neglect to animals, focusing on the number of felines the ‘crazy cat lady’ had in her house along with claiming the horses were malnourished as well as beaten into submission to be put under saddle. And the reports to the new wave of veterinary association of her practicing medicine without a license and CHARGING clients for such services. Followed by a perusal of Rita’s letter, identifying, with some cyber-help from an anonymous friend, the source the complaints from highly influential citizens sent to the Thompson River News that Elena’s writing was ‘offensive’, ‘subversive’, ‘inaccurate’, ‘slandorous’ and, circled TWICE in red ink, ‘contraindicated to the economic growth and harmonic development of the region’.

They were all linked to an mail e mail account, ‘BlackGon’, password ‘cemyapiervy’, retrieved by Holz with ‘methods I’m not supposed to tell anyone we law enforcement officers have access to’. A quick dart into the house, where Carlata was not present, to

the computer table Elena shared with her sister revealed that indeed it was Carlata who sent out all the complaints, lies and reports on Elena, cleverly pre-dating enough of them to be convincing, posing as responsible citizens, many of them Elena's trusted neighbors, with links to several websites which verified those identities. Using another trick that Holz said 'is necessary for you to have now' led Elena into an even darker road which illuminated what and who Carlata was really about. Her financial statements indicated payments from Family First Enterprises, and even bigger ones from Cemyapiervy from the branch in St. Petersburg, with 75% of the money paid to her funneled into a Swiss Bank account.

A quick Google translation check revealed that the name of that company was indeed 'Family First'. A company that also had subsidiaries in the real estate business, very much including the company that posted and charged 'bargain rates' for the classy and very expensive acreage where Elena and her animals were now finally very comfortably fed, watered, sheltered and entertained. Family First, that entity which had 'Professor' F. Michael Carlson on their payroll, also had connections to three literary publishing companies. Thankfully, for Elena, she got offers from six publishers, the most inviting yet economically non-profitable one from Atlantian Visions. She hoped, and prayed, that the rep from that publishing house, who claimed that Atlantian 'shared her real Visions and struggles in and beyond her lifetime' publisher, was 'into' Revolution of the Collective Human Soul for the nobility of it rather than the economic profit and professional profile.

Also on Carlata's e mail were links to a Pharmaceutical Company whose highlighted product was her wonder drug U-Sheild 92, wondering how useless or toxic it was relative to U-Sheid 1 through 91. A look into the research done by independent labs, done in universities NOT taught or owned by F. Michael Carlson, indicated that it had a protective effect against radiation associated with cancer. The medication that she insist be shared with her non-cancerous, so far anyway, sister. And which Carlata was selling as a representative of the company in a pyramid scheme to 'selected users' on lists she never shared with Elena.

The number 92 and letter 'U' somehow stimulated a connection once Elena let those two pieces of data fit into their Natural slots of their brain, rather than those she had pre-labeled. That 'Universal Perspective' aspect of learning that made her seem like an odd ball when taking exams at school but allowed her to retain more of what was taught at the lecturn than any of her classmates, or even what the 'teachers' imparted in the first place.

"Uranium, atomic number 92, toxic to unprotected and maybe even protected schleps splitting open and moving rocks containing it," Elena said to Prometheus after he jumped on her lap, bright and vibrant representative of his species. "Or people and animals who drink from underground streams passing around them," came out of her mouth. "Which I really didn't know about, but maybe shouldn't, Trotsky," she continued, apologetically to the old well before his time Rotweiller-Lab cross nuzzling around her leg. "But as for Carlata's cancer, which she maybe deserved to get, well." Another thought occurred to Elena, given what she saw medically in her sister and had 'smelled' in Dan and Hans.

“Maybe she doesn’t have cancer at all?” With that Elena, typed in the links for access to special cybertricks given to her by Glen Holz, which diverted her to a whole other set of special documents. Literary and investigative ones bearing Elena’s name as the author.

The latter involved surprisingly well written articles about discovering a ‘Cop-Sel-Le-Ars’, a deadly deposit of Elena-discovered and university study-confirmed Copper, Selenium, Lead and Arsenic in the underground streams in Freshwater that fed both the back to basics eccentrics living up on the mountains, and in the piped in water the urbanites, or wannabe-urbanites, who drank when they went to the tap for water to brush their teeth or a shower. Articles linking the mixture of toxins to deaths of the Old Germans on top of the hill and the multiple neo-plastic and to-become-cancerous diseases the younger residents of the pristine, nearly broke community encountered in visits to the clinic in town, and confirmed by larger clinics five major centers around it after medical records at the Freshwater Medical clinic somehow disappeared in a fire and deadly cybervirus. Brilliant journalistic work that used Elena’s vocabulary and idioms, but a rhythm and sentence structure that was definitely Carlata’s. Then a novel, ‘based on fact’, bearing Carlata’s name as the author, dedicated to the memory of ‘a noble, brilliant and unappreciated sister’. With format and font that was uniquely “Atlantian”, no doubt prepared and perhaps pre-approved by the Atlantian Visions Press.

But, it was Carlata NOW who the still not ‘disappeared’ Elena was concerned with, somehow and for reasons that were very...mixed. Just as she was one legal hack away from getting access to Carlata’s REAL medical records....a car pulled up in the driveway.

The dogs barked, the cats hid. “It’s just auntie Carlata,” she informed her protectors whom she had rescued from various kinds of attackers and abusers. “It’s alright,” she affirmed, realizing how much of a lie such really was. “Autie Carlata just finally bought a pair cowgirl boots, county cunt designer label of course but” the appendum as Elena heard the footsteps.

Elena’s head knew that it was smart to turn the computer off, and play dumb. But every muscle, including her now activated and churning gut, below the neck said otherwise. Keeping the computer on, and turning the screen towards the door, bringing to it Carlata’s shady and lucrative financial records. Elena slithered to the wall behind that opening port to that dream castle which now bore her name as the co-owner. She checked to see if the door was locked, which it was. A key opened the door from the outside, more slowly than usual. Elena reached for the antique made in Chicago Bowie knife hanging on the wall, pulling it out of its authentic crafted on the Indian Reserve sheath. She visualized the blade on Carlata’s throat, demanding to be told the real truth about why she came up to Canada, what she had done here, and what she was planning to do. Or better yet, the knife would be used to cut off Carlata’s extensions and real hair if she didn’t talk with straight tongue, shaving a for-real cancer bald spot for every lie she tried to pass on as a fact.

Finally, the door opened. The first thing Elena's oscillating eyeballs saw was the blackness of dark brown leather jacket, as the wearer of such looked at the computer screen and nodded. "Nice digs," the short haired intruder commented. "And sexy look there, Warrior Princess," the appendum as Elena felt eyes of a powerful soul wanting to conquer another territory by praising it as the best kingdom in the world first. "But if you want to take someone by surprise, you grab knife like this, and prey like this," Sergei Bogdonovich said with a thick Russian accent.

Before Elena could process why and how Carlata's most hated ex, a hard core Moscow born, Brighton Beach Brooklyn urbanite who never went west of the Meadowlands in New Jersey, 'danced' his way into putting the knife onto Elena's throat with his left hand while lovingly caressing her waist with his bear like right paw.

"Sergei, Carlata's not here, she's...eh"

"Gone to Vancouver to go on a cruise to Alaska? Or to Seattle to her grandson's birthday party?" the handsome, 6 foot tall Putin look alike with twice the charm and, according to Carlata, three times the ability to turn it into cruelty said as he musically danced Elena out of the strangle 'love' hold, placing the knife back into its sheath, and that sheath under his belt. "Or the most creative lie you were asked to tell me about her," he chuckled as he inspected the living room. "That she shaved her head and joined a Buddhist monastery. The best one yet because you know that I hate bald women more than Italian wannabe mobsters or Nigger Black Panthers, and that Carlata's favorite pastime is arguing with anyone, including me. But..." His rant about the 'good old days' stopped when he noticed the computer screen. "I see that she's been very busy, carrying on the family business." He helped himself to a seat in front of the computer, scrolling into the back history behind Carlata's financial page. "Carrying it very much forward," he said with pride, and appreciation. "With---"

"---Me," Elena self observed herself saying. With a plan in her brain that short circuited every hard wired instinct to hide, or courageous aspiration to fight back. "She came up so we could work together, in everyone's interest. Very much including yours of course, Sergei," she said, with the same smile she gave him 14 year ago at Carlata's wedding. When she looked into the big, tall, handsome blue eyed, Russian and saw a young Leo Tolstoy in his eyes instead of Stalin, wishing and dreaming for a magical 4 minutes that it was she, Elena, who was marrying him.

"Yes, I remember that dance we had at Carlata's wedding, and regret to this day that it wasn't you who I carried over threshold of the cottage upstate for honeymoon," Sergei said, dropping his articles as is natural for Russians to do in their own language. "Tell me, what YOU have been doing up here," he said, picking up one a vial of U-Sheild 92 from the newly arrived box delivered by now courier schlep Rita. "Getting yourself healthy, like Carlata said she was going to do when she left home."

"And getting ourselves rich, at the expense of the poor, because someone has to keep them happily subservient of course," Elena's reply with an Carlata upturned nose, a

Queen Rita-before-the fall stride in her step and pretending to kick Trotsy out of her way like he was a defective piece of meat rather than an all heart and not much brains canine on the way to the bar. She flipped off the lid of a fresh bottle of Carlata's favorite wine, took out two glasses, and poured only one out, which she helped herself to. "Like the 11th Commandment says, and science is still unable to explain, act like an asshole, get treated like a saint."

Sergei seemed to enjoy having to pour his own wine, after of course grabbing the bottle from Elena's seductively genuflecting fingers. He tasted it, then looked at the label. "Carlata's favorite."

"And only one bottle of it left," Elena boasted as she poured herself a generous portion of the vintage elixir, then refilled Sergei's glass.

While Elena sipped slowly, Sergei gulped heartily.

"So, tell me what you've been up to," the Russian Art Dealer who Elena found out years later was a Mobster, and before that, a KBG agent asked, and demanded, to know.

"Your original plan, with some adjustments which, I'm sure Carlata told you about," Elena's reply.

"Such as what adjustments?" the 'master interrogator', according to Elena's niece and nephew, asked in a calm, calculating tone as he poured himself another glass of wine, apparently able to hold his liquor better than Carlata said he could.

"Well, starting out. I'll be discovering, with forged government documentation of course, I'll discover in a week or two, toxic material in the ground in Freshwater that no one knows about. Because of what it did to wildlife, which I of course autopsied, along with some domestic animals which are expendable," Elena explained with a very profession brand of frigidity and fascination as she sat down on Carla's chair, crossing her legs 'big corporate' style, helping herself to more of Carlata's favorite wine of course. "This toxin causes more problems is linked to problems in people far more than lead in ancient Roman aqua-ducts. Or uranium enriched pitch-blend in the bodies of working class stiff who get their dream \$45 an hour job working at the new uranium mine. So, the booming real estate market in Freshwater goes down the tubes faster than you can say Chernovo. Including the present owners of the mine. And their operators. F. Michael Carlson very much included. The F standing of course for..."

"Fuckface failure who doesn't even know he lost the game the moment he started to play it against us," Sergei interjected. "Go on, please.," he said with an approving and congratulatory tone to Elena, gazing vengefully at a photo of the 'new' Carlata on the mantle of the fireplace.

Maybe it was karma finally putting currency into Elena's bank, rather than the other way around, or perhaps Elena really was a natural born 'figure out the real facts by

considering the best kind of fiction' writer. But every scenario she envisioned Sergei seemed to verify as true. Particularly when Elena considered at each decision fork, taking the road that was the cruelest, most selfish, and, in the short term anyway, easiest.

“And after we buy the uranium mine, for dirt wages, we dig a little deeper, where there are rocks that are even more valuable, and fenceable,” Elena postulated, based solely on how Carlata commented on her highly valuable diamond ring could easily be replaced by another. And another map from Carlson's stolen briefcase about what may have been under the very radioactive pitchblend just below the surface.

“Da,” Sergei nodded in affirmation. “bolye gavoreets , pashalista.”

Elena knew as much Russian as Carlata knew about how to ride a horse. Still, she could figure out that ‘yes, go on, please,’ was Sergei's request. She thanked him with “Spaceba,” the only word other than da, nyet and ‘cemyapievy’ that Elena knew in Russian. It was enough to continue the conversation with her former Ruskie brother in law, and perhaps business partner.

Elena went on to explain how ‘the family’ could make big money not only from the diamonds, but side ventures such as U-Guard 92, with a change of name of course so the radiation protection miracle medicine, according to the animal data anyway and the preliminary trials on unsuspecting Freshwater human guinea pigs done previously, could be taken by selective uranium miners and of course all of their bosses, and the animals, children and wives owned by those bosses who could and would move anywhere, especially the newly gentrified and urbanized community. Everyone involved, minus of course the expendable intermediate pawns such as Fuckface Failure Michael Carlson, Ph.D., R.I.P, would get what they want now, and need later. And perhaps Carlata, after she paid appropriate back dues to Sergei, and of course the family. “Expense money that he shuffled into an untouchable and untraceable account, because I suppose she was holding on it in case the Family business needed it, maybe to fulfill her wish of buying YOU out with the help of another family?” the hypothesis delivered calmly, coldly, and with utmost confidence that felt more true after the words came out than when they were formulated. ”And finally, on the wish list is...” Elena concluded.

“---For me to strangle Carlata with my bare hands!” Sergei blasted out, the volcanic rage behind his always in control Putinesce demeanor giving way to being a common street thug. Or worse, a Guinea Mafia hit man or Black Pimp ranting on about what he would do with his cheating wife, girlfriend and well-paid for property. “But before I kill her, I'll rip those smart ass vocal cords out of her lying mouth! Then rip out those fake breasts that I paid for and stick them up her ass! Then cut open her face, pushing it into a mirror till I finally tear out her eyes, one by one! Then, after she begs for death, if I and you, who she's probably stealing from too, are in a good mood, rip her eyes out with...this!” Sergei grabbed hold of the Bowie knife, determined more than ever to put it to effective use.

“Or,” Elena offered softly, gently caressing Sergei’s clenched fingers, then easing the knife out of his sweat-soaked palm. “I have a much, much better idea. For you, me and everyone else, living and dead.

CHAPTER 15

“I didn’t know you had it in you, El, putting me in here,” Carlata said to her sister with a sense of pride in her, somehow. “Knowing the right people to call, and who not call of course. And sticking to you convictions. While I’m a hmmm, now a convict of sorts.” Having liberated her mind from being confined with an attempt at gallows humor, Carlata tried yet again to pull her arm loose from the shackles attached to the bars. Then looked again at the plain grey walls around her, and the narrow window which allowed only the lawfully required amount of light to get in. Then at her new ID, a long number. “And making me be whatever this number is,” she continued, unable to read the fine print due to the medications she just had been given to restrain her. “AKA nuthouse inmate numero...whatever. But there’s one thing I would like to know. Why?”

“Karma,” Elena replied, coldly as she stood smugly above the bed Carlata was confined to.

“For what you thought I did to you, Elena?” Carlata sneered back, restraining her anger, as well as the pain of being betrayed by the only person of her own blood who was still talking to her.

“And what you did do, and would do, and what we both know you did to, though you maybe thought it was for, someone else,” Carlata’s now transformed sister shot back, clad in her clothes. Her shoes. Her jewelry. And who know whose ID in her money loaded purse.

“For what you did to Mom,” Elena replied, with a turned back, as she moved to the window and looked up at the sky through a slit in the doctor ordered closed blinds. “Putting her in a place like this. Where she....hmmm...”

Carlata, fighting to overcome the medications given by Nurse Cratchet et al., patiently waited for Elena’s next words. What metaphors she would use. And what quips would be added to the usual bland, overly humanistic gruel the ‘nice’ rather than ‘Alive’ Elena called ‘experimental literature’. Quips that Carlata put into the articles bearing her name, for her own good, and reputation of course. Finally, after the fourth ‘hmmm’, the words came out of Elena’s mouth, delivered face to face.

“Where Mom killed herself,” Elena stated.

“Or maybe was killed by someone else.” With all the strength arms loaded with haloperidol in their veins she could muster, Carlata pushed her back up she could continue the talk she had held to herself for so long. The new and maybe improved Elena seemed to consider that claim as being true this time. “Killed by someone who was not me,” she blurted out of her mouth, anticipating the next question.

“Then fucking who!” Elena screamed, after which she grabbed hold of Carlata by the collar of her new plain white *chez hospitale* gown, shaking out whatever life was in her. “Tell me the fucking truth this time!”

“You can’t handle the truth!” Carlata blasted back at Elena, not caring if it was a plagiarized statement. Taking in stride that it was the first time that Elena’s bottled up rage against her took the form of yelling and a fist. But terrified that no one in the hallway outside the cracked open door bothered to step in to stop the fight. That fear escalated five shakes of the collar and ‘tell me the goddamn fucking truth’s now’ when she smelled Sergei’s aftershave on Elena’s neck, which bore a hickey. Then went further up a notch when someone outside the door closed it shut, with a click that sounded like a lock.

“We have to get out of here, both of us, now!” Carlata whispered to a still ranting Elena

“BOTH of us?” Elena said after a sardonic chuckle. She pulled Carlata’s face so she could look at the ceiling get a clear view of the ceiling. “Do you hear that, Mom? Daughter fearest here wants me and her to escape this lovely holding cell and still leave you behind?” Elena then got into Carlata’s face, in a way that no one else ever had. “What do you, Carlata, say to that?”

“That Sergei makes love to his prey before he kills it,” Carlata asserted, calmly. “And both of us are now top on his hit list, Elena.” She turned to the ceiling. “Tell her, Mom.”

Carlata waited for Elena to grunt back something like ‘you can’t see ghosts, because you’re dead yourself, so don’t try to humor me’. Instead, Elena withdrew her clenched fists, then looked up to the ceiling. “Go on, Mom. We’re both listening.”

It was ironic, that Elena, because she could see, feel and hear imaginary beings, was on the ‘leavable’ list of people in the nuthouse, while Carlata, who always accepted and dealt with hard reality as it was, had been deemed crazy. Able to leave only when the shrink said she could, which was maybe sometime this lifetime, or maybe not. Back in the Old Country in Russia, as well as in the new one in Brooklyn, Sergei was an expert in giving his ‘special’ enemies, and business partners who got too smart for their own good, a lifetime stay in the most comfortable, sheltered and clandestine loony bins imaginable. The most terrifying thought hit Carlata when her eyes could finally see the name on her un-removable bracelet. She wondered if Thema Jackson would ever get out of this ‘pleasure palace.’ Such was what Sergei had threatened to do to Carlata so many times before. And, by the look of the hickey on Elena’s neck, the smell of his cologne under her chin, and the cocky ‘light’ in her overconfident eyes, Elena would suffer the same fate soon. No matter what scheme she thought she was working on.

There was so much to say with regard to the particulars about the pitfalls in whatever plan was brewing in Elena’s still well meaning head, but no doubt, they would be recorded. And listened to by Sergei, as well as a whole army of powerful ‘others’ were listening. Clearly, Elena’s ears were closed to what Carlata needed to say to her now.

About so many things. Including why Carlata faked a story about having terminal cancer, and somehow now felt symptoms a lot worse than those she had looked up and paid top dollar to be inserted into her medical files back home.

“Mom,” Carlata said as she looked up to the ceiling, gently putting her palm on Elena’s wrist. “Please tell Elena that she’s in way over her head. That Sergei probably thinks that both of us are plotting against him. And that both of us stole from him. And that whatever Cops Elena or her country bumpkin RCMP squeeze, Glen Holz is thinking about getting the goods on Sergei to, Sergei has their bosses in his pocket. And that...that...” Something came over Carlata. She could feel a presence in the room. Maybe it was the spirit of the mother she really did love, but could so best by being away from home. Or maybe Carlata was dying herself.

“That what?” Elena asked both her chronically estranged sibling and yearned for mother.

“That...I really do love Elena, and want her to listen to what I have to tell her, about why and how I’ve been, well, dealing with the demons and devils for us, and her animals, that I’m still allergic to, and scared of,” Carlata continued, in a conversation involving no less than three souls in the room. “Which I’ll tell her with this,” he said, in Spanish, pulling out a pen from Elena’s purse, grabbing one of the print outs of ‘evidence’ in her bag, and scribbling down the details.

Elena read and absorbed every word. Put down in the secret code language she and Carlata invented when they were kids. During that one magic year when they were together in mind, and soul. Which was hard to remember, but now oh so necessary.

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CHAPTER 16

Sergei looked over the new dinner menu at the Flying Saucer Café, noting some changes in it. “Authentic Mexican Chili?” he mused to his high level guests at the table. “In Canada, where hot spice is catsup and a spiced drink is warm water,” he continued with a Russo-New York confidant arrogance which would make both Putin and Trump seem like an ‘everyone’s a winner in the harmony house’ PBS kids show host.

“We’ve survived these Kanuks’ cooking before, especially here,” Texan big mouth and fat ass R. Willy Bentley bellowed out while glancing over the menu, and eyeing his picture on the latest ‘Country RoundUp’ poster as the lead act this time. “Gotta be patient and understanding with the citizens of this fifty first state.”

“Indeed, it’s bad form to be impolite to the subjects you’re colonizing,” Sir Sigfried Wentworth added with an Oxfordian accent. “Isn’t that right, Professor Carlson?”

The Canadian born, Canadian stuck and but still Canadian proud F. Michael Carlson collected his comeback behind a tense smile, and fearful eyes, finally offering, “if it weren’t for Canadian Lumber supplying treeless Britain, the Royal Naval fleet would have been three barges. And without Canadian aluminum, and other products, the American energy industries are doomed to be gas and coal dependent, with gas tanks that are hitting empty real fast. And as for who’s really calling the economic shots these days---“

“---It is not us,” Beijing mogul and fellow ‘Art Collector’ Frank Ping Lin intervened as he turned the page on the menu. “But if you palefaced, round eyes keep eating food loaded with more fat than fiber, and consider cheese as the essential part of every meal, on everything, including ‘organic fried potatoes’, we Chinks will make a killing taking over the mortuary businesses here, with all of you in shallow coffins.”

Sergei chuckled, signaling the ok for his associates to do the same. Meanwhile, the new waitress at The Saucer kept standing at her post, her chin-length brunette bob framing her big, wide ‘welcome’ smile, a requirement for anyone who wanted to please the money loaded tourists who kept Freshwater from being flushed down the economic tubes. “If you’re still undecided, I can make some suggestions, gentlemen,” she offered the entourage who had overpaid her in tips for the past week. “I can recommend, most highly—“

“---You?” Sergei interjected. “Who look, somehow very familiar.”

“We all do,” Rita Tomkins said in a Qeubequa accent. As she felt the bangs on her wig on her forehead which was as fake as her exotic new identity. But not as fake as the stories Sergei told about his experiences in Montreal, ‘the best cross section between New York and Moscow’.

“Yes, but...you do look very familiar, ‘Monika’,” Sergei continued, addressing the food server who was known by her first name and had no real need for a surname of her own anyway. This time looking at her eyes instead of the hair, fake breasts and overly tanned legs which fooled the horny old Russian into thinking she was someone else, and not the editor of the newspaper who he had fired, after he planted stories with her sugar papa hubby that said she was cheating on him, resulting in her being thrown out of his businesses, life and bedroom. “And I don’t think it’s this flu that I picked up which is telling me that,” he continued rubbing his belly, then his chest.

“Yeah, this bloody flu,” ‘Lord’ Wentworth added through a cough.

“Which here we all have,” Rita said, purposely inverting the English words to make herself sound more French-Canadian. “Minor nuisance that passes,” she explained, noting that the ‘five kings’, as they seemed to call themselves with every minimal action they did with their hands requesting that the commoners around them go into hyperkinetic mode to get things done for them. “But, like philosophers from all of our countries said, that which does not kill me makes me stronger, yes?”

“And more in need of a shrink once we do,” Carlson added, hiding a plethora of truths about his own condition from his pathologically self-assured colleagues.

“But when God loves you, he sends demons your way,” Rita informed Carlson. “Which make you, hmmm...more interesting, and creative, n’ect pas?”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” Carlson conceded, hiding another set of fears and facts from his fellow diners, and maybe himself.

“But in the meantime, what do you recommend to make Western Canadian flu fly away faster, my Doctor Monika?” he asked Rita.

“Mexican chili,” the proud reply. “Manufique! Particularly tonight. New special spices in. And, between us,; she continued, bending over closer to Sergei, allowing ass man Lin to see her padded derriere, breast mensch Wentworth to have a closer look at her artificially inflated cleavage, and Christian Bubba Good Ole Boy Bently a gander at henna Pagan tat on her lower thy that said ‘the gods WANT us to enjoy each other’ in Celtic erotica. “More flavorful and opening for the senses than the pie hole fillers the Anglophones Canadians here call food. Tu voule?”

Everyone of the gentlemen at the table said ‘yes, we want’ with eagerness and trust, even the preoccupied and very much under the weather young king in training, ‘Professor’ Carlson. With that, ‘Monika’ offered the diners at the special table that had been reserved for them for the past week a smile, look at the wiggling ass, and a listen to of a feel GREAT French Canadian tune, whose lyrics really meant ‘he or SHE who fucks someone last fucks best.’ The locals who knew Monika, or a little bit of French, who always had to wait ten minutes longer for their grub when the five kings came to stuff their fat faces shared the joke between them.

The chili was a big hit, particularly at the kings' table. Each had a heaping bowl as ordered, and at least one more on the house. "The best chili my admittedly bland English taste buds have been challenged with, Monika," Wentworth noted when Rita came by to clear the completely cleaned up plates.

"Very authentically Mexican ta boot, reminds me of home," South Texan born, bred and imprinted Bently added with fond reminiscence of times past, and futures imagined added.

"Most exquisite," Lin said. "The mixture of very expressive sweet Yin and bitter Yang flavors are very much in harmony."

"Da!" Lord Sergei added. "Oshun Horosho!"

"That means very good, Monika," Carlson informed commoner Rita.

"Which means that I demand to meet the cook! No, the chef!" Sergei declared, rising to his feet. "And get his recipe."

"Her recipe, you mean?" Rita said, noting that her Monika voice was slipping. "Which I can bring to you now."

"Or 'she' can bring to me now!" Sergei bellowed out, as he pulled out a fist full of American dollars, waving it at the door to the kitchen. "Hey, you. Master Chef! I want to hire you to work in my restaurant. In New York. Big Apple. Big pay. Big benefits. Big Opportunity. Big---"

Before Sergei could continue to promise favors and opps that he knew he could deliver, and always did, his jaw dropped when he saw the Chef's face as she confidently walked out of the kitchen.

"Elena," he exclaimed with shaking lips. "I thought you were---"

"---On a plane to Chicago to meet with your publishers?" she said. "Who specialize in publishing books about authors who work themselves to death, or who are dead? Or who dies in tragic accidents long before their time?"

Lin, Bently and Wentworth all looked at Sergei as if he was a failed monarch, rather than an up and coming Philosopher King. Carlson gazed at the very much alive Elena, decked out in a short order cook apron, torn jeans and shit-stained cowboy boots like she was a ghost. Rita took off her wig, her fake boobs, and the pads that made her thin, 'Injun honky' ass so voluptuous. The local husbands who had lusting after Monika's ass for the past week couldn't believe their eyes. Their wives and girlfriends gave Rita a 'thanks for showing me who my man really thinks is drop dead gorgeous' thank you.

Kelci Farnsworth, the still owner of the Flying Saucer came out of the kitchen, asking everyone to leave, as there was “A private conversation that needs to happen.”

All but the five gentlemen, Rita and Elena exited the building, gossiping and speculating amongst themselves about matters that, Kelci decided would be bad for business now and the town later if discussed in public.

“The ingredients of the chili, as requested, gentlemen,” Elena stated as she whipped out a list from her pocket, giving the honor of reading it to her former bitchy boss, and ideological enemy, Rita.

“Aside from the beans, beef, tomatoes, peppers, chili powder, etc. Alfatoxin B1,” Rita read.

“Derived from that finest and most potent locally grown fungus, *Aspergillus Flavus*, rapidly acting carcinogen that any C level germ warfare chemist can make in his government funded basement,” Elena said. “Whether it be in Brooklyn, Jersey City or Siberia,” she continued looking straight at and into ex-KGB operative and maybe still Russian agent Sergei.

“And dioxin, most particularly, 2,3,7, 8 tetrachloridebenzo-p-dioxin,” Rita read, with a single stall or mispronunciation, no doubt due to practicing earlier.

“Found in Agent Orange,” Elena related. “Which of course has nothing to do with the cancers lingering in Vietnam, or in brave Americans who served, and were unable to die there,” she informed Bently with a hokey but still expressive wink.

“And a dash of benzene, EDB and asbestos,” Rita read.

“And given that you’ve been ingesting these for the past week, that there’s a whole range of cancers you are probably harboring now,” Elena added in two part harmony.

“Which, unlike the ‘Canadian flu’ you think you have, is not something you get stronger with, if you survive it,” Rita appended to the tune.

While the rest of his fellow diners felt aches, pains and lumps in the process of becoming big masses inside them, Sergei fired an angry, volcanic stare at Rita and Elena. “You are both dead, or worse than dead,” he said as he reached for his phone.

“Or not?” Elena said confidently. She alleviating Rita’s unexpected terror with the laying of her steady left palm on the former newspaper owner’s shaking shoulders, while pointing Sergei’s attention outside the window.

Sergei’s anger turned into concern, then terror when he beheld what was there.

“I know they’re only local yokals, and that you think the only thing we handgun hating Kanuk Mounties are armed with is a riding crop and good manners, but sometimes we do...” she said as the goons in three of the cars escorting the non-armed gentlemen inside were relieved of their weapons, and dignity, by a mixture of Uniformed RCMP officers assisted by a host of citizen deputies commoners, some of the latter yelling curses at them in German as they were put into a paddywagon taking them to Kamloops.

While Sergei’s angry jaw dropped, Elena grabbed hold of his phone. “Slow reflexes, weak attack muscles. Means that the drugs we gave you are already working,” she noted.

“Or it’s you, my dear and now even more respected Elena, whose reflexes are getting sharper and whose ability attack is getting stronger?” the Russo-American mogul stated, pulling out the ‘charm’ card from his sleeve. “I can use strong members on our team.” he said with an all is well grin. “Rather than academic, manipulative, cowardly weaklings,” he sneered at Carlson, who barfed up a portion of his dinner, then coughed up red-tinged phlegm. “Who, because of what HE did to Officer Holz, and Dan Renshaw, deserves to die.”

“Or maybe,” Elena offered, pulling a bottle of U-Guard 92 from her apron pocket, handing it to the vomit and mucous covered hipster dream boat turned academic elitist. “The cure for what ails you, according to big Chief Healer on bottle and partial data on...” Before Elena could finish, Carlson grabbed hold of the bottle.

Carlson wolfed down a handful of pills like a stoned pothead threw down his gullet a box full of twinkies in the middle of a munchies attack. The other gentlemen at the table fought over the remainder of pills in bottle like starving wolves who happened upon road-kill, or horny groupies at a rock concert who could live without grabbing a touch of their idol as he passed by them.

Sergei held out from the grab and stab festival. He seemed resolved to something. Either it was because he knew that U-Guard 92 wasn’t the miracle drug protecting cancer patients from disease, or exposed workers to carcinogens, that is was made out to be. Or, maybe it was something else. That ‘I would rather you see me die rather than beg’ macho thing that, to the old Russian’s credit, maybe he did have. After all, there was always something in anyone that you liked, respected, and admired. Hitler was a vegetarian who refused to let people hunt on his estate or be mean to any animal, and any child presented to him who didn’t know anything about his politics fell in love with the madman ‘housepainter’ instantly. Stalin wrote great romantic poetry and had a singing voice that made Sinatra sound like a drunk with strep throat waking up from a hangover. And though Pancho Villa cut off the breasts of woman who told his enemies his whereabouts, he lamented every act of necessary cruelty needed to break the backs of the oppressors who had been keeping 95 % of the Mexican population enslaved for centuries.

“There is one question I do have to ask, which I would like you to answer, my dear and surprisingly admirable Elena,” Sergei asked.

“If it’s ‘what’s your favorite wine or way to pleasure you under the sheets’, I’ll cut off your manhood right now!” Rita blasted at him, grabbing hold of a knife with one hand, and his collar with the other.

“Carlata!” Sergei grunted. “Where is she in all of this?”

“Somewhere very private, and secluded,” Elena replied as she requested that Rita let go of the Russian mobster’s collar, then put down the knife about to relieve him of his manhood. Rita complied with the request, for the moment anyway. “And somewhere hurting,” Elena continued.

Sergei smiled in delight hearing such. Elena took in a deep breath, grabbed hold of the very sharp steak knife with one hand, then Sergei’s mane of hair that he always wore long, and proud. Before his smirk could turn into a sadistic chuckle, he was eating his own hair, then the scalp holding it in place.

CHAPTER 17

The drive to the cabin in the woods was made more difficult by an early snowfall which made the road difficult for cars not yet equipped with snow-tires, but a delight for a horse and rider. Finally, Elena arrived at the hideout where her father set up shop as a painter and musician struggling joyously to find a way to merge sound with sight, and her political activist mother staked out as the Capital building for a new politically-independent country that could be legally formed by and for thinking as well as caring anarchists who could.

“I got something stuff for you,” Elena said as she shook the snow from her boots, opening the green and red sac over her head. “Early Christmas presents from Santa Elena.”

“Because you know I won’t be around till December 25th?” the present inhabitant of the cabin replied with a ghostly voice which echoed around the room, and into the inner ear inside Elena’s head. “But that’s alright,” Carlata continued in a more earthly voice, coughing up a wad of phlegm into the bedpan next to her cot. Next to which was the best equipment available in any hospital in Freshwater, and maybe Kamloops. “And even the best wonder cure to prevent and eliminate cancers in rats doesn’t quite work in our ‘advanced’ species,” Carlata continued, gazing fondly at the supply of U-Guard 92 on the table next to her. “But there is one thing I do want to know, Elena, and need you to tell me the truth about.”

“The details about how and why Sergei and the four Demonos left town?” Elena smirked. “And promise to not fuck up any other small towns as long as they get that still hiding out in the Sonoran Mountains Harvard expatriate scientist’s newest and most potent preparation of U Guard 92 which if you take it in time, keeps you in the land of the non-cancerous living?” she continued, glancing at the assuring face of the Paleface made to look like a heap big real Injun healer chief on the bottle of the medicinal which, for sure, was proven to do no harm in clinical trials, so far anyway. “And how the finding of uranium up on the hill is being kept secret till we can test the new protection suits and drugs on rats and mice BEFORE people? And how the diamonds under the uranium, which we LOCALS will dig up first will pay for fixing our broken down houses, feeding our hungry animals and not for paying for too many vanities so that we can develop a U-Guard 92 that really does work, for all people? Maybe with some spill over money to fund a University study to find a drug that cures cruelty? And---“

“El!” Carlata grunted out of a mouth lined with cancerous lumps, through a lung that expired more rattle than air. “There are two things I REALLY need to know, starting with if my ‘above all do no harm’ pacifist sister really did feed carcinogens to Sergei and his ‘colleagues’, or if you fed them a concoction that simulates the big C, or what?”

Elena lowered her eyes.

“I know, if you tell me, you’ll have to kill me,” Carlata mused, somehow finding something humorous about and within the White Light that she had almost gone to three times that week. “But there is something else.” Carlata looked outside the window, to the other visitor who now looked in on her.. “Pancho!” she called out as loud as she could to the horse which had tossed her off three times, then gave her ‘love nudges’ afterwards, inviting her to get on board for another joy ride.

Though Carlata’s voice was barely more than a whisper, the steed ceased eating his early Christmas grain, looked into the window and nickered to Carlata. “You take care of Elena. And let her new man, horse whisper Tom Erikson, think he’s your master. Things will go better between him and Elena that way.”

Pancho vibrated his tongue, expressively rolling his ‘equine r’s’, which Carlata now knew more than ever meant ‘you got it, boss, friend, comrade and student’.

Meanwhile, Elena was at a loss for words. “Is there anything I can do?” she found herself asking Carlata, feeling as helpless, vulnerable and fearful of being alone as the last day she was with Hans, the Old German. And her father. And her mother. “Whatever you want me to get, or do, tell me. Please.”

“And you’ll do it this time, really?” the reply.

Elena knew all too well what that ‘it’ was. Confirming such, with whatever strength she could summon from her emaciated and shaking right arm, Carlata pointed to the morphine in Elena’s Santa bag, embedded between her favorite brand of chocolate that still could be tasted by her tongue, and her favorite cologne, which perhaps would cover up the aroma of accidentally-ejected feces and urine as well as the smell of fresh blood coming out of both her anal, urinary and oral orifice now. “You rode all the way up here to bring it to me, El. And you and me both know it’s time.”

“Time to fight another day!” Elena grunted back.

“In another body, or dimension, which I’ll get to safely and without too much bad baggage from this lifetime,” replied the first time believer in something beyond the veil other than a Christian heaven, or an agnostic black hole. In the resolved and heroic manner of the Hans, his wife Lisa and, Elena hoped, herself when the time would come. “But I need some musical accompaniment to this, which I see you’ve brought also.” She slowly, painfully yet very deliberately raised her arm. pointing to the CD in Elena’s bag.

“I Will Survive” Elena said with a sardonic smile as she put the CD bearing that title into the player. “And the rest of Donna Summer’s greatest hits. And ABBA. And---”

“---I am the dancing queen, young and sweet only seventeen,” whisper sang the 60 year old woman whose body now expressed the most repulsive appearance of ‘ugly’, from her nearly bald head to her enlarged belly, to legs which were more fragile sticks than solid

bones. Who she was singing to when she looked up at and beyond the ceiling which Elena always felt as 'inhabited' by spirits of her departed parents. And now by someone else, somehow. A someone who implanted into Elena's soul the ability to calculate the right dose of morphine to numb all of the pain, but not take away Carlata's ability to think her way into the White Light, or the Disco ball which she would be dancing under soon enough as a disembodied 17 year old beauty queen, or perhaps that of a real girl who, if it was at all possible, would be as attractive as she was at 17, or perhaps as Elena was at that age of innocence, possibilities and yet to be inflicted accountabilities.

The passing was fast after Elena had injected the calculated dose of 'travelling cocktail' into the her sister's veins. At the moment of final liberation, Carlata's eyes were wide open, her mouth fixed in smile. Elena seemed to feel the ABBA songs between her ears, louder than the Silence of the woods. Somehow her fear of death vanished. Yet she knew that there was much to do before it was her time to pass over to the other side of 'whatever'. An arrangement that she finally accepted as she kissed Carlata goodbye on her cold, lifeless cheek. Then heard Pancho nicker at her as he shook his head around. "I know, we have miles to go before we both sleep," she said, too tired to re-write American Poet Laureate Robert Frost's immortal lines, but knowing she's have to find her own words to express that and so much more in print, and the world of the illiterate, soon enough.