

MONA: Do Not Judge Lest...
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CHAPTER 1

Jesus, a life, idea and dude who, one way or another, inspires our hearts or fuels our fears. Despite the fact that no one ever took a picture of him or sketched out a drawing with charcoal on papyrus, and the fact that he said 'I am not what you see before you' to all of his followers, we all have an image of him in our image-requiring brain boxes. To those of us with Caucasian biology, he's a handsome-looking White guy with brown hair, blue eyes, an Aryan face. To the Bros in the hood, he's a Black dude with an Afro that ain't gonna be straightened out by any Whitey wearing a Roman toga or an Armani suit. To Yaqui Indians on the peyote express to something beyond and within themselves, he's a red-skinned dude who made several trips to what's now Mexico through astral projection 1500 years before Columbus, and burrows the bodies of animals to do so now. To those who appreciate the love that happens between members of the same gender, he's a champion of that expression of compassion who maybe has male and female parts under his robes. To those who serve their country by joining Armies that clobber the hell out of people in other countries, he's that guy on the lead horse that's always White, leading blood-thirsty Crusaders who are also always White.

But some of us remember what Jesus said. Like 'let he who is free of sin throw the first stone', which applies to everyone who ever pontificated from a pulpit. 'Treat others as you'd like to be treated yourself', which works for everyone in the congregation, except for workaholic masochists. And, 'Do not judge, lest you be judged...or a lot worse'. Okay, Jesus didn't say the 'a lot worse' part, but he inferred it. Especially to the 'cool kids' who grew up becoming popular and influential adults, gods and goddesses themselves by the time they hit their 30th birthday.

Two of them, Jennifer Selkirk and Brad Crane, were the top stars in the art exhibit where my official investigation ended, and where the real test of the oath I took as a Cop to Protect and Serve was to begin. The featured work was a life-sized statue of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Adam was making love to Eve, every muscle in their bodies fully engaged in the task and Passion of it. Below them were real plants, Communis Ricinus, to be exact, the aromatic extract of the leaves penetrating from their skin, mixed with very human olfactory emissions from the bodies of forerunners of our sometimes magnificent species. Bodies that, at the core of the work, were sculpted with the best clay the gods of Olympus could get, molded into place by the combined hands of DaVinci, Michalangelo and Hippocrates. Bodies that, at the core of it, displayed the best elements of being both cool and hot, as well as the model of perfect health. Bodies whose faces had been seen around the world on television, movie and computer pop-up screens by hundreds of millions of commoners at least three times a week. Bodies that a few hours ago belonged to Jennifer and Brad themselves, before the merciful delivery of death turned their mutilated and tortured bodies finally into corpses. Corpses that succumbed to not only the ricin in the Cummunis 'garden' in which they were making love, but to a multitude of other punishments inflicted upon them by someone far more clever than the devil below, and compassionate than the Heavenly Father above. Punishments which resulted in disfigurements of their faces with pustules and warts. Breasts, testicles and penis torn apart from their attachments to the body trunk, kept in place by pins and plates. Their magnificent, thick and long locks nothing more than short scrub grass which was barely holding onto a scalp, that scalp was more blood than skin. And beneath that scalp, cranial vaults filled with a brown ooze that

emanated out of the loose plates on the crown of the head, and around the orbits of the eyes which showed fear and regret, both at the same time. The aroma of the ooze was unmistakable.

“Hmm...Shit coming out of shitheads,” I related to Liz as I smelled the odor on the tip of my examining glove as I allowed my lips to turn upward and let out an ironic, and justified, chuckle.

“This isn’t funny, Detective Vogel,” Captain Elizabeth Thorverson shot back at me through her angry steel blue eyes. She had a body as strong and Herclean as any of her male Viking ancestors, and gentle female features which would be the rival of any Walkurie. But she seemed very ‘mortal’ that day. As scared as Brad and Jennifer were before they became exhibits. As scared as I secretly was as well. But like her Nordic Ancestors of old, the five-foot-ten, blonde, chisel-chinned model of unconquerability knew that the best way to control fear inside yourself is to inflict it upon others. And when combined with justification of that infliction, it made for a powerful weapon. “This was supposed to be YOUR case!” Captain Liz blasted at me. “An easy assignment that you screwed up. Not me. And I’m not taking responsibility for these ‘accidents’ happening, or any of the others on your shift. You killed them as much as whoever you’re protecting who did.”

“You’re right,” I told her as a horde of Crane and Selkirk fans rushed in past the first perimeter of security guards, called to the Gallery on that day by an announcement on the net that Brad and Jen were giving away free roles in movies, cars, kisses and fucks to anyone who came to their art exhibit. Most of them were horrified to see what had happened to the movie stars who, two months ago, they wanted to be or be liked by. And who a few short weeks ago had acquired...other reputations.

“So,” Liz asked me, keeping, for the moment anyway, what I told her to herself. “Who’s next to be displayed as ‘art’ for the tourists here in the museum, the rats in the Bowery or the fish in the East River?”

I thought long and hard about giving Liz the answer. The REAL answer. The no bullshit one. The one she could handle, and maybe even understand.

“Well?” she pressed, folding her arms this time. She tapped her right foot while preparing to kick the answer out of me in three more beats of the Fireball Symphonia raging in her head.

“Me,” I replied, only to her. Holding back as long as I could. “Me,” I told myself as I looked in the mirror. “Yes, me,” I repeated to another painting on the wall. An abstract work of a woman with a face that was evil and vindictive on one side, merciful and kind on the other. And hoping that Liz would not notice my obsession with that unsigned painting. Or the ones of Jesus on the walls by perhaps the same artist, or perhaps not. With writing in blood reading ‘Don’t Judge Lest You Be Judged, or worse.’

“You and her, you have a history, Sean?” I could feel Liz saying as I felt her investigating me more than the woman in the painting. Or the purp who immortalized Brad Crane and Jennifer Selkirk in waxed-formaldehyde. For the rest of my plan to work, so that SOME kind of justice

could be done, and my real connection with all of these victims could be justified and rectified, I needed time.

“Everyone in this room, living and dead, on canvas and in three dimensions, has a history with me that’s still in the making,” I told Liz, knowing that we had history between us as well. History that if I told anyone else about, would wind up with Liz being converted into a corpse, or a blob of paint splattered against a wall.

While I let Liz stew over what she would do with the investigation, and me, I reconsidered what had happened when it all began. When some of it began anyway. Such is the way of investigators. By looking over old data, again and again, some kind of solution to the problem at hand would happen. In a world where everyone was part of both the problem, and the solution.

Three long months and two successful careers ago, the emergency room of Long Island General Hospital was turned into an operating room. As the drama unfolded itself, Kirk O’Neil, whose body type and voice out Bonded any of the James Bonds, had many talents included being both a Cop and a Doctor. He was really good at both of course. Evidence of such of course came from the other doctor on staff, Linda Westmoreland, a 29 year old woman with a whole lot of clever between her ears, a body Barbie would sell Ken to a Chinese snakehead for, and a mane of long blonde hair that flowed down to her ass. I remember the conversation they had over a young Jamaican cab driver semi-legally living in Oceanside who wound up on his operating table after a massive accident at the LIRR station in Lynbrook. A very real conversation the reflected a whole lot of realities.

“Two more stitches and another accident victim brought back to the land of the living,” Kirk proclaimed, as he completed the most difficult task on the most difficult surgery in the overcrowded room. “So he can get another DWI and wind up back here,” he mused with an arrogance which his current role and social status not only rewarded, but seemed to require.

“Without DWI’s both of us would be out of work,” very attractively-able-bodied ‘Doc Linda’ reminded him as another wave of victims were brought into the standing room only ER from the two car accident that resulted in a lot more vehicular and body damage after the drunk drivers of the first two cars started shooting at each other.

“True enough, true enough,” Kirk replied, whipping off his gloves, tearing off his mask, and tossing them both towards, but not into, the waste bucket after giving the street rapper a shot at seeing his 20th birthday. “Anyone else I can resurrect from the dead?” he requested of the blue-shirted Paramedics and nurses behind him.

“Me,” Linda smiled at Kirk with an alluring smile, knowing all too well that the Jamaican rapper was not quite ready to go back to the streets yet. “After we get this puppy back to his dawgs in the hood,” she continued, appending it with a sexy wag of her tongue.

“Hmm...me,” O’Neil considered with a hard-to-get facade while waiting for his next ‘impossible’ medical case which he would rescue from the dead. “I suppose it’s appropriate,” he conceded while Linda awaited his answer. “After all, it is my job to protect, and serve.”

“And please,” Linda added, taking in a very deep breath, arching her back and giving her medical collaborator an ample view of her sized ‘perfect’ cleavage. “I’d expect nothing less from a full time Doc.”

“And I’d expect nothing less from a full time Doc who in her spare time is engaged in activities I’d have to arrest you for,” he smiled back at her, discretely drawing her attention to the gun, badge and handcuffs strapped to his overloaded Police utility belt.

With their eyes, lips and tongues, Officer-Doctor O’Neal and Doctor Westmoreland had a private conversation regarding what would transpire between them once their badges, name tags and surgical greens would come off. Behind them, the worker bees of the OR frenetically tried to stay ahead of the human carnage presented to them by a wave of other patients coming in. Most, as I observed it anyway, knew less about medical procedure than Kirk knew humility and Linda knew about celibacy. Directing traffic and perspective behind them was Kate Yolinski, an attractive nurse of no more than thirty years of age whose assigned role was to see that the docs got what they wanted and the patients got what they needed. Though everyone around her was panicking, she was cool as a cucumber. But hot as hell under the collar when she saw how Doctors O’Neil and Westmoreland seemed to be more concerned with each other’s anatomy than repairing the broken parts of the patients who needed them most.

Just as Kirk and Linda were about to dive into the blissful, bucolic abyss between their romantically-enamored eyes, Kate pushed them back onto separate ledges. “GSW with elevated CRT. HBC with escalating HR and dropping BP,” she said to Linda as she presented one of the worst patients in front of her.

“And this one, one of your favorite kind of cases,” she continued, as she pushed another patient in a wheelchair into Kirk’s angry face. “He’s next in line,” Kate added. “MY line,” she asserted then ran over to assist Linda.

According to the ‘bible’ upon which this absurd drama was built, what Kate said went. What she said in the OR, ER and every room in between was law. And Kirk knew that if Kate revealed what happened between him and Doctor Linda in those other rooms, his ass would be grass.

“So, Sammy,” Kirk said to the odorous, unwashed and shaking thirty-going-on-fifty man in the wheelchair with mismatched shoes garbed in clothing that was more holes and stain than cloth. “What fart wind or accidental misfortune brings you here to my---?”

Before Sammy could say anything, a projective of vomit came out of his mouth. This time he vomited a bit faster than Kirk could duck, adding a fine layer of ‘granola brown’ specs onto Kirk’s Dockers just below the knee.

Kate smiled with vengeful delight as Kirk tried to shake it off, wishing that the stain on his pants occurred between the legs, a portion of his anatomy which Kate knew very well from recent times that he yearned to get back in her weaker moments, and lamented ever having in her stronger ones. But Kirk was with Doctor Linda now. A fresh romance that Kate vowed to stop. Maybe for Kirk's own good. And certainly for her own personal satisfaction.

But the script at hand called for something more procedural and practical than Kate's lingering karmic bond with Kirk. "Howletzer retractors...and metzanbaums," Linda barked out at Kate, her hands extended out impatiently for the instruments. "Now would be nice," Doctor Linda added sarcastically, a mode of communication which Linda was best at. Along with of course being a bitch who looked like a beauty. A beauty with long, blonde hair that flowed down to her ass. Hair which Linda 'accidentally' whipped into Kate's face as Kate tried to look back at Kirk to see how much he used to or still could love her. Nurse Kate handed the instruments to Doctor Linda as commanded, after which the former nurse who became a doctor went into Commandress mode, impatient with the hired staff who didn't move with as much speed or flair as she did. "Come on peons," Linda said to the staff who she was told could keep up with her. "We have a patient here. This isn't a drill."

"No, it isn't," shoulder-length haired brunette Kate said softly as she pushed Linda's three foot blonde mane away from her face, noting a pair of scissors on the instrument tray that wasn't doing anything. And Linda's back turned to her. And Linda gazing with blissful lust back at Kirk through mirrors between medical motions which were more theatrical than practical.

It was not in the written plan for the day, but it would make for an interesting, and perhaps deserving beginning for another drama. Kate took the pair of scissors in hand and subtly edged it closer to the twist tie at the base of Linda's mega-sized pony-tail. It's being chopped off would of course be an 'accident', as Doctor Linda was moving faster than everyone else, in ever bigger motions, moving to a beat of her own personal drummer, not giving a shit about anyone else's. Linda's hair meeting Kate's sharp metal cutting edge would embellish the day, and the recording of the events of such. Most importantly, it would be 'cool' as well as cruel, and as everyone, except perhaps Sammy, knew, it was cool to be cruel. And colorful. But just as Kate edged in to make the day, and the 'scene' at hand, she heard from behind her---"Hold it!"

"Hold it right there!" Kirk continued as he held Sammy's arm up, motioning for a nurse to put a third surgical mask over his face to hold back the homeless man's body odor.

"I'm clean, Doc," Sammy said with an Okie drawl straight out 'Grapes of Wrath', as sincere as it was hoaky. "I ain't used them tracks for months."

"Ain't wershed there neither," Kirk replied mockingly as he completed the basic requirements for a physical exam. "Or changed them 'designer grunge' duds of yers."

"But, Doc," Sammy continued, his arms shaking, his skin pale green. "My stomach. I ate somethin when I was dumpster diving that---"

“---Kate, darling. Angel of mercy, grace and hot loving for those in need of affection and companionship,” Kirk said in a loud voice.

“What is it, Kirk,” Kate replied, remembering the times when that description of her applied to what happened between her and Kirk, and not her and most of the other Cops or Docs who frequented the ER on those interesting nights when the moon was full and the common sense bank was empty. Thinking about the best of possibilities, for everyone, Kate let go of Linda’s hair just before the almost sheared doc turned around to see what was going on behind her

“I told you not to bring any more SHPOS’s into my ER,” Kirk proclaimed regarding the in house acronym for sub human piece of shit.

The clammer of noise in the ER diminished as all eyes, including those of the upscale suburban patients, gradually turned to Doctor Officer O’Neil. “No more fucking SHPOS’s!”

Kate and Linda both smiled, thinking the same thought, feeling with the same mind.

A nurse carrying another bucket walked by Kirk. While he was using his right hand to flash a light into Sammy’s eyes, looking ‘medical’, he pulled on her blouse just at the bra strap, stopping her. He pointed to the bucket, then to Sammy, then put out three fingers. On the count of ‘three’ he jumped away from ‘smelly Sammy’ while the bucket of cold water splashed all over his body.

Kate and Linda’s grins got wider as Sammy went from the shivers to the shakes. As did those of most of the staff and some of the patients. “Heelllpp meee doc?” he pleaded.

A nurse passed by him with a bucket of water. Kirk instructed her with a nod of his head and flick of his hand to pour it over Sammy’s unwashed body. to “Ifff I ddddooo, hellpppp yooouuu ‘Hound Dough’” Kirk said as he observed the disfigured writing on the hobo’s fading tatoo under the now-removed dirt and grime. “Then it’s YOYOMOFO. You DO know what that means, don’t’ you? YOYOMOFO?”

“Huh?” Sammy replied, dumbfounded.

“Everybody!” Kirk proclaimed in a loud, regal voice. “On the count of three. YOYOMOFO means...”

“You’re on your own mother fucker,” everyone else in the room yelled out in unison. With big superior smiles on their faces. Followed by chuckles converted to laughs as Kirk pushed the starving, shaking and still smelly hobo towards the door, then kicked his ass out the door.

“And that’s a cut!” came out from the person in charge of the madness, drama, ‘comedy’ and everything in between. “Great energy guys!” Taylor Olsen said as she got her, calling it as it really was, fat ass out of the director’s chair and stomped to the actors in front of camera. Actors who were all better looking than she was. From Brad Crane as Cop-Doc O’Neil. To Krystal O’Shane as former-nurse-now-Doctor Linda Westmoreland, Brad’s in-front-of-camera main squeeze. To Jennifer Selkirk, who was Brad’s main squeeze after the Hollywood ‘work’ day

was done, whose jealousy of Krystal and her desire to see her with far less hair than she had was not acting. To Eddy Westin, who under all the hoaky Okie hobo make up was a blue blood rich fuck who spit on the homeless every time he could, and on some occasions got a kick out of throwing into their collection cups dried up terds with pieces of broken glass in them.

“I really liked the way you honored the writing, too!” Taylor exclaimed regarding the script she personally wrote and felt very personal about. “You got into the sensitivity of it all, and the grit!” she continued. She then gave the Assistant Director a ‘peace sign’, a cool gesture for someone of 28 hip years of living.

“Two minutes, then back to one’s,” the effeminate, short and thin-boned Assistant Director who Taylor never called by name, but used as a lap dog announced to the congregation in Napoleonic fashion.

The hungry crew and background actors threw two day old donuts down their gullets, watered their parched throats with no-name coolaid or stepped outside the archway of the open exit door of the spare ER room of the hospital the studio had rented for a quick smoke. Brad, Jennifer, Krystal and Eddy availed themselves of more upscale and fresher gustatory snacks from their own private table, along with recreational pharmaceuticals forbidden to anyone else on set.

Taylor turned around to me, and asked me, humanoid to humanoid, “How was it for you?”

I was wearing my badge at the time, in a Columbo overcoat to look ‘Cop like’, and convincing. My service revolver was strapped to my belt, as always. As required whenever I was on duty as a Cop. A duty which my bosses, for reasons I never understood but was always suspicious about, put me here on set as a technical advisor and head of security. An easy gig with people I grew up with...or maybe outgrew.

“So, how was it?” Taylor asked me again, needing a real answer. Maybe wanting one as well.

“Well, Cops, like the O’Neil character would do things a little differently,” I said to Taylor, giving her the part of the truth that I know she could handle. I could feel her thinking rather than fuming behind those green eyes of hers framed by a good looking but not overly attractive face. “And some of the interaction between the medical team and the patients...In MY experience in ER’s anyway...Somehow didn’t make logical sense.”

I realized two short beats later that maybe lying to Taylor would have been kinder than being truthful, or constructive. “In the world that I created, in print, and that’s materializing in front of the camera, it makes INTRINSIC sense,” she said, in the same way that she did when she was a 17 year old hot babe, at least relative to what I remember I was during those ‘golden cool’ times at Brooklyn Arts Academy. “It does make intrinsic sense, doesn’t it, Sean?” she continued, the seed of self-doubt I saw in her then having germinated into a full-grown set of weeds strangling her brain that she showed to no one. And, as I assessed it anyway, hid from everyone else on set, particularly the ‘Artsie Posse’, Brad, Jen, Krystal and Eddy, all reunited to do a film that was funded by a sugar daddy whose identity wasn’t known, and was irrelevant to everyone’s agendas anyway. Even mine, at the time anyway.

“So,” Taylor pressed, demanding an answer and afraid she would get one. “It makes intrinsic sense, doesn’t it Sean?”

“Suppose it does,” I said. “I’m just a Cop now. You’re the artist.” It was the truth. The best I could offer.

“But did it move you, here?” Taylor asked, pointing to my heart.

“And here?” Brad interjected, pointing to his penile organ.

Everyone in the room laughed, the cool Posse as well as its peasant servants. They all seemed to have heard the private conversation between me and Taylor. Perhaps because of a microphone ‘accidentally’ being put on, or the Assistant Director’s request for quiet between takes finally being heeded.

Taylor seemed caught. Found out. Or about to be found out. She was never one who could handle the truth. Telling her lies made things easier. For everyone. She looked to me for the critique of it all, as did the Posse, and the servants.

“Well?” Taylor inquired of me. “How was, and is, all of this for you, Sean?”

“It made me...think,” I replied, choosing my words very carefully, allowing everyone to derive their own conclusion. As it made me think as well about...a lot. Much of which was not what Taylor was thinking, or anyone else who backed this film that celebrated cruelty and manipulation, two elements which were becoming increasingly popular in the world in front of the camera, and behind it.

“I knew it!” Taylor proclaimed from her most powerful and comfortable place. “This film is making you think! I fucking knew it! We have a goddamn winner here, people!”

Everyone seemed to agree. From the royalty on top to the schleps on the bottom. Hell, even I was agreeing with her. Yeah, it was a ‘winner’ film. In a world where there was being number one or number nothing, with no numbers in between except imaginary ones.

“Let’s get set up again,” Taylor said with renewed enthusiasm, vigor and, in her own artistic way, intelligence. She grabbed hold of her script like it was a newly discovered Beethovenian manuscript of a symphony the world wanted, needed and deserved to be played. “Moving on to--“

“---repeating the scene. With a few medical prop and medical treatment suggestions,” a soft, sincere woman’s voice said from the back of the room with a Serbian accent. “Suggestions I wrote down that you please to will read?” Doctor Mona Kelosevic stood up on her good leg and hobbled her small framed five-four body over towards Taylor and gave her the list.

“And, ‘Comradski Doctor,’” Taylor said with a mocking Serbian accent, being sure to let her eyes display a culturally superior roll of the brows to the group before letting them look at list handed to her by the always-dark-mood, dark haired Doc hired as the medical consultant on the film by the studio . “I should to incorporate these linear suggestions into this intuitive, multi-tracked artistic Vision, because...?”

“...Someone in real world will try to save lives by imitating what the actor do, and kill people instead?” the good Doctor said with an Old World civility and gentle assertiveness that I hardly saw in the New World, or for that matter, in the Old World in the 21st Century as well.

“An affirmation stated as question?” Taylor replied in a mocking accent with a tinge of hip-cool Valley Girl Mall-Rat mixed into the diction, this time directed at Mona rather than at Doctor Kelosevic.

The congregation under Taylor’s iron thumb and always on-the-ready-for insult third finger burst into a mixture of smirks, chuckles and laughter. I snuck in a good look at the list of Mona’s suggestions regarding medical procedures and protocols, and she was very right. As a Cop in the real world for the last decade not a week went by when I saw someone do more harm than good by imitating what cool-looking-Docs did on screen in medical dramas, and even medical ‘reality’ shows which, of course, everyone with OPEN eyes knows are scripted.

But Taylor was interested in another reality. A reality where she was ‘Philosopher Queen’, the director of the film, though she secretly wished she had the body, voice and ‘presence’ to be an actor in it as well. In a world where she was on top, at the expense of everyone on the bottom in a world where, to be accurate and understanding of her situation, if you weren’t number one, you were number nothing. Glancing over Doctor Mona’s list, after having carefully read her audience, Taylor went on, in her own diction, a mixture of Upper East Side New York and Beverly Hills, in keeping with her pedigree. “These suggestions are interesting? From someone who washed out of Art School and had to become a doctor?”

Mona had nothing to say, lowering her head, guilty as charged. Made to feel even more guilty by the smirks from Brad, Jennifer, Eddy and Krystal. Smirks that, I hope, Mona didn’t see.

But Taylor was a sensitive artist who was well overpaid to portray the human condition on screen. She continued in an understanding tone that sounded sincere, even to me. “But...we do need you keeping our bodies going, Doctor Mona. So we can be creatively expressive with them. Not that your life is worthless. And that you aren’t part of the creative process. Even Creative people need doctors, just like we need mechanics, plumbers, carpenters and---“

Taylor’s maternal monolog was interrupted by a ring on Mona’s pager. Awakened into a world she could control, and cared about, Doc Mona looked at the message. An emergency call, by the look in her eyes. “---You will take into consideration. What I put on the list? I have emergency call on third floor.”

Mona walked out of the room as assertively and quickly as she could. The laughter in the room stopped, the smirky faces turning serious as everyone on set was at one time the observer or

victim of a real medical emergency. As Mona hobbled out the door, determination and Purpose in her eyes, she reminded me of Mileva Einstein, Albert's first wife who was far smarter, wiser and caring than her husband was before he hit his thirtieth birthday. An old and time tested soul amongst slow thinking, fast-talking, self-absorbed immature souls who, in time, like Albert, would be educated into being Higher Beings.

But, that would be then, and this was now. "What the fuck is up with her?" Taylor voiced no more than two seconds after the always civil and never back-talking Mona slammed the door behind her. "We aren't paying her enough fucking money?" she continued, looking at the accountant on set who answered to the executive producer whose identity was kept secret from everyone.

"We all aren't paying her with enough RESPECT," I wanted to say, but didn't. Taylor looked at me with her Philosopher Queen stare, demanding that I take care of what needed to be done. Something that I, some of the time, did when we were teenaged kids. And something that as a presumably grown up man with a badge, I had to do all of the time now. "I'll get her back," I pledged, self-observing that I was very good at delivering words that meant different things to different people, the real truth behind them known only to me.

I walked towards the exit door with that 'professional' gait which said to all who were watching 'relax, I got it all under control...show's over'. "I'll get her back," I pledged.

"Or get me a doctor as a technical advisor who knows his or her place!" Taylor barked out at me. "Mona was always a sore loser anyway." Empowered by smirks of superiority from Brad, Jennifer, Krystal and even Eddy, director Taylor Olsen indulged in being an expressive comic actor, a killer combo of Don Rickles, Joan Rivers and Denis Miller. "'Moaning Mona', ladies, gentlemen and everyone in between. Hobbling back home to Mama. Who gave her, like, too many dull out virus infected dolmathes and dumplings when she was a kid, ya know? Then convinced her, like, gotta-pump-out-as-many Christians, virgin, baby-making machine daughter that she actually had artistic talent beyond finger-painting Easter eggs for her imaginary friends. Then sent Polyanna Korinina out into the world with a thin skin, making Mona unable to shoot back insulting, colorful or creative digs at anyone."

"Or willing to," I said to myself as I opened the door and left the room, feeling divided between two worlds, realities and moralities.

CHAPTER 2

I'm not sure if Mona heard what went on inside the make believe OR from the real hallway in the real hospital, but I am sure that she felt it. She sat on a chair next to an instrument tray, her back against one wall, her blank stare fixed on the opposite one. Her foot was tapping at a regular cadance, as if her mind was trying to recall a song from better days, or find one from the present that she could use to get through the day. In her right hand was her pager. In her left, a shiver of indecision.

“So,” I said to break the ice and perhaps the hold the demons behind her eyes had on her. I edged my way to the a chair next to her and sat down on it. “Faking an emergency with your pager. A back door escape hatch that Cops and Doc get as part of fringe benefit package when we...”

The shiver in Mona's left hand was replaced a sharp instrument from the instrument tray, a scalpel by the looks of it, which found its way into the palm of her right. The blade found its way to the left wrist, making practice strokes in time to the tapping of her foot, both escalating in intensity.

“Doctor Kelosevic,” I said to Mona as I gently laid my hand on the wrist about to be slashed in a way that no hospital emergency staff could stitch up. “Mona,” I continued as I laid my other hand on the wrist that was holding the scalpel.

Maybe it was the way my fingers met the cold sweat on her wrists, or the way I said her name. But, for the moment, the Requiem in her head ceased, replaced by a window of reason, or so I hoped. And prayed. “You became a surgeon,” I told her. “A BRAIN surgeon. That's something.”

“It's nothing, to them,” Mona said, looking angrily towards the movie set run by the cool kids who now became elitist adults. Who found their way into her hospital, and once again, into her life.

“Maybe so,” I said, knowing how dangerous and ineffective it is to lie to people who value the truth and could handle it. “But when they say doing this or that is easy, they say ‘It ain’t brain surgery’. Not ‘it ain’t movie making’”.

“Or...those ‘expressive things’ I use to do...” Mona added, reason and perspective entering her brain stem, working its way up to both cerebral cortices.

“Painting, and writing,” I replied, memories of the past coming back to me more vividly than I could handle.

“Which I don’t do anymore,” she replied, with the most painful of emotions---regret.

“Because those assholes and shitheads in there said you sucked at it?” I pressed.

“And...others,” she replied. She turned her head to me, since she sensed that I knew exactly what and who she was talking about.

“That was...a long time ago,” I replied, turning my head from her glance, feeling as guilty as any perp in the witness chair facing his accuser. Maybe because I was guilty, or maybe because whoever designed the universe made those of us who wanted to do good things feel guilty for things that others did so we could set them right.

Mona drifted back into the past, seeing some kind of movie in her mind projected against the white wall in front of her. A very black and dark movie, which did have some high points to it..

“You can get back to who you used to be,” I informed Mona with my mouth. “And deserve to be,” I added, with my heart.

Mona seemed to be thinking about her past as painter, a writer and a poet. The golden times when we were both in High School. Before the not-so-golden experiences made a Paradise of Creative Passion a living hell. If left alone by the world, Mona would have been good as a painter and writer. If the world was filled with more good than bad people, she would have been great. But that was then, and this was now.

Mona took in a deep breath and looked around her. She pointed my attention to patients in the hospital whose minds and bodies were hurting far more than hers, and of course mine. “Other people need me to be someone else now,” she informed me as my attention was drawn to one patient in crutches, another in a wheelchair and another laid out in a bed in the hallway, her mind alive but locked into a body that couldn’t move. “Yes,” she said as she reminded me of the misery Mother Nature inflicts on its two legged inhabitants, referring my attention to five of them with little or no control of any of their limbs. “I need to be Creative for them,” Mona continued as a Philipino Nurse came by with charts for Mona to look at, evaluate and sign, pointing to each of the patients to which they referred.

Mona sprung back into being Doctor Kelosevic, all circuits on the job, full throttle. That emergency mode gear that keeps Cops doing their job, putting off all the 'why' questions till after the crisis is over. Just in time for the next crisis to keep the engines from shutting down.

Mona seemed to be not only a good doc, but a great one. But one who was doing medicine because she had to, not because she wanted to. A course which would drive her one day to the same place that my first patrol Sergeant wound up in as well as the detective whose desk I now occupied. I refused to let a third colleague take an early retirement from career and life at their own hand. And, besides, the package I had prepared for Mona was long overdue. But I also knew that it had to be delivered with the appropriate words and language.

I took the gift-wrapped package out of my inside trench-coat pocket and placed it in front of her face, even though her eyes remained fixed on the medicaleze on the charts presented to her by the Nurse. "An investment," I said to Mona in the Serbian I had been practicing for the last week, ever since we were both assigned to baby sit and advise the same film set. "To become more Creative, for them. And their healthy relatives back home," I continued. At least that is what I hope I said.

Apparently my Serbian was more accurate than I thought. Mona put down her medical charts and looked at me. There was a smile on her face, and a spark of life in her eyes. Maybe more than just a spark, as I remember it. With her mouth she replied to me in Serbian, none of the words of which I understood.

"Huh?" I said, finding myself uttering the North American battlecry which was becoming painfully common.

"She said 'You practiced that line for me, for all of these years'," the Nurse said.

"You understand Serbian?" I asked of the Philipino 'Angel of Mercy'.

"Not a word," she replied. "But I do understand that you two have some reconnection to do," She took away the charts from Mona. "And that you, Doctor Kelosevic. Medico cures. Nurse's orders."

As the Nurse walked away, I found myself smiling, recalling having heard that phrase from Miguel Gonzales, seasoned desk Sergeant who knew more than any Leutenant, Captain, Commissioner or Psychological Specialist in the Force. "Physician, heal thyself." I said.

Mona nodded, and said the phrase the way it was supposed to be pronounced. A different way than I thought I said it anyway. I motioned for her to open the package I had specially gift wrapped for her. But she chose instead to stare at the wall again, at the movie in her past which seemed to be haunting her every day in her present. "In the school newspaper, it said my poetry, stories and paintings were 'A hundred years behind everyone else's.'"

"And a thousand years ahead," I added. "As I know now," my heart forced up through my chocking throat. "And want to see...confirmed," I continued, placing the large cigar-like

package with two bulges at the base of it into her shaking hands. “A long time coming,” I concluded, looking into her eyes, hoping she would see what was behind mine.

Mona stared into my Soul and seemed ok with what she saw. She smiled, cautiously but sincerely. Then she looked at the shape of the gift, assessing that it was very phallic,

“Sometimes a cigar isn’t just a cigar,” I said to her, in English, having forgotten the Serbian words I had memorized.

She got the joke, and allowed herself a trusting smile. I asked her with my hands to open the package slowly. Reluctantly she did, her small, frail fingers happening upon a one dollar bill, the inscription on the back reading ‘In Enlightenment We Trust’, the face of Gerry Garcia over it. Her smile widened. The next bill was a fiver, Groucho Marx the featured founding father on it. She chuckled. The Jackson under it was had the determined and irrelevant mug of Frank Zappa over the In Enlightenment We Trust Inscription. It made her laugh. The Benjamin bill under the Zappa currency note bore the likeness of Nicola Tesla, the light emanating from the pyramid projecting from a Telsa coil. Tears of joy came down Mona’s face.

I asked Mona to open the final wrapping. She started with the penile end of the cigar shaped liberation package, discovering a set of paint brushes and two pens. Upon opening up the testicular side of it, she found paints and ink. Along with a gift certificate to Michealangelo’s Art Supply Shop for a few hundred dollars worth of paper, canvas and additional dyes to imprint her Visions upon them.

Mona’s reaction to it all was...contemplative as she picked up one of the paintbrushes, gazing into its tufts at a future that both empowered and scared her. “You want me to do more paintings so others can say I am a THOUSAND years behind what is cool today?”

“And TEN thousand years ahead,” I smiled at her. “A dirty job, and a lonely one, putting those people back on the movie set in their place, and making everyone else look into a mirror, but someone has to do it...But.... you won’t,” I said as I saw a wall emerge between the brushes and pens in Mona’s hand and the Mind-Soul that would be uniquely qualified to use them. ‘Why?’ I asked, as baffled by her refusal to be resurrected from her medical coffin as I had been with any suspect in any case.

Mona brought my attention to the people in the hallway who Mother Nature had sadistically turned into patients, their Souls held captive one way or another by their tortured bodies. “Mister Smith, stage 3 irreversible astrocytoma that I think I can dissolve with interleuken 2 pellets I sneak under the skull while hospital administrator and his spies on nursing staff not looking,” she said regarding a forty-five year old man in a cowboy hat whose partially shaved head looked like it had been bashed in by a horde of angry bulls. “Uma Jewakski, ballet and free-form jazz dancer,” she continued regarding a 30-something woman in a wheelchair with a determined look in her grimacing face who was struggling to keep her hands and feet from trembling. “Beginning stages of Parkinsonism that I think I can stop with fetal transplant tissue I collect from rats that I feed with my own salary money. And Eylsia Reed,” she continued with an even faster and louder voice, pointing me to a teen-aged girl wearing an Olympic Team teeshirt

bearing her name, everything below her neck as motionless and paralyzed as the breath in my throat. “Broken spinal cord that I KNOW I can fix with unapproved but effective electrical DC current delivering implant device so she can give third digit salute and kick in the ass to her bastard drunk boyfriend who pushed her down stairs....And...”

Mona could say no more, having exhausted herself. She handed the brushes, pens, paints and gift certificate back into my cold, sweat-soaked palm. “But, I thank you,” she said by way of explanation with a voice now brought into practical and procedural reality. “For being what you have become now. Policeman who protect good people from bad ones. In a country that I know has more bad policemen than good ones. Like all countries everywhere, I suppose.”

“Not unless I change it,” I found myself pledging with as much commitment as Mona had to her patients. “Or WE change it,” I proposed. “With every tool possible,” I continued, placing the brushes and paints in her hand, then putting my hand gently over hers. Sensing that it was pushing too much that neither of us were prepared for, I withdrew my hand, letting Mona make her next move. I said something in Serbian which I intended to be ‘Be yourself and don’t let anyone else shit on you, including them.’

Mona apparently understood the words or the meaning behind my bastardization of her native tongue. She looked at the implements of artistic expression in her hand, thinking about something. Something scary, and big. To her anyway.

Maybe it was something easier said than done, in Serbian or English. “Be yourself and don’t let anyone else shit on you, including them.”

CHAPTER 3

In front of me lay the book of ‘thems’, which was me. Portrayed in inglorious black and white in the Brooklyn Arts High School yearbook. With a lot more hair on my head and a lot less conscience, or wisdom, under it. Along with...

“The rest of us,” Taylor said as she sat down next to me in the posh hotel room the mystery sugar daddy, or mommy, behind ‘Medico’ rented for her as she walked up behind me having just taken a shower, me with my ass pulled in deep into a comfy couch. “Me, Brad, Jennifer and Eddy,” Taylor said as she laid her chin on my shoulder, gleefully thumbing through the yearbook in my sweat-soaked hands. “And Krystal before she got ballistic at anyone who didn’t spell her name with a K and a Y. And Carl Weinburg, master businessman in training who managed everyone, and made them like being managed. And you, as the real brains behind the Vanguard.”

“I was just a writer,” I replied.

“Writer my fucking ass,” Taylor answered. “No one could manipulate fucked up copy into fucking fantastic copy better than you could. And when you, as the editor of the school paper, took on an assignment yourself...NO one could write better than you could then, even me. Like when you wrote, after the un-juried talent show, “‘Moaning Mona’s indy paintings and prose that went with it were a hundred years behind anyone or any genre, going all the way back to the stone age.’”

Taylor’s quote was painfully accurate. The most clever, witty critique ever written in the Vanguard was signed ‘Everybody’. I turned around to talk to her about how wrong I was then to write it, even though at the time I believed it to be an accurate assessment of her Work, big W. Like I had any idea what Work big W was all about anyway. The art of being a cool writer and performer coming all too easily to me at that time. But Taylor had other agendas in mind.

She was clad in the Japanese Kimono that her Producer father got from the Tokyo International Media at the Cannes Film Festival. A blinding red background that portrayed all sorts mythological reptilian creatures with assertive faces and sexually cool curved bodies. The same robe that she came out the shower wearing so many times when we were kids when she invited me to shower again with her. A garment that wrapped a body that had at that time small tits in proportion to the chest they fit onto, but a body that was easy on the eyes to look at, and looked even better once it got moving when the lights went out. But that body now pushed the elastic stretch of the kimono nearly to its limits, particularly around the hips, which hadn’t seen any newborn humans coming through them, at least none that Taylor talked about with Barbara Walters or Entertainment Tonight, or me.

“Can I sit down next to you?” Taylor asked with a smile on a face made even less attractive than it was now by the gobs of make-up on it.

“Sure,” I replied, knowing that Taylor could handle a ‘no’. And that the e mail send by the First AD that she wanted to talk with me about Police protocol for the script and security on the set had nothing to do with her real wants, and needs. To go back to the days when we were all cook kids. A break from being a hot-commodity as an A-line up and coming director, writer and, if she could ever fake any talent as such or buy the crowd, actor.

I closed up the Yearbook that Taylor had ‘accidentally’ left open on the coffee table while she was in the shower, but she insisted on keeping it open. “Come on. It’ll be, like, fun. Ya know? And part of our Creative Process of building a future based on but not forced upon us by the fuck ups in the past. Denying the past or ignoring it makes us fuck things up even more in the future.”

Those weren’t new concepts, but Taylor probably twisted some words in them so she could claim the ideas as her own. With of course adding a few ‘fucks’ to it, the easiest way to make a hoaky statement edgy. Add a few ‘like, ya knows, totallys, and awesomes’ to it and you make it ‘accessible’ and ‘cool’. But, she was right. To ignore the past is to repeat it, and to repeat the bad stuff most. As I looked at the pages put in front of me, in the yearbook that I, behind the scenes, orchestrated, Taylor reminded me of lots of bad stuff.

Like “Man Reading Newspaper In Front of Campfire”, a painting/prose multimedia exhibit by Mona, which she proudly posed for. As I, Brad and Eddy stood on a platform above her with buckets of paint. Which were released down upon Mona’s thick, long hair, which we put bugs from the biology lab into when she wasn’t looking. And covered with paint when signalled to by the female member of the ‘Posse, Krystal, Taylor and Jennifer. Paint that no shampoo could get out.

“We did her a favor,” Taylor explained to me as the guilt of who I was and what I did in those happy days came over me again. “She looked better in short hair. See?”

Taylor turned the page, revealing a picture of Mona with a short, curly bob, and a defeated pair of down-turned eyes, receiving an award for excellence in Biology from ‘Mmmmmister Eddsssoonn,’ the science teacher whose stutter we imitated to each other when he back was turned, and to him when he triedddd tooooo geetttt ussss tooo liissten to him. I have to admit that I did enjoy seeing him struggle to educate us, but he didn’t know that the only real success was effortless success. God help and bless him.

“Mona was better off in science,” Taylor explained to me. “She couldn’t cut it in the arts.”

“Because she didn’t have any talent?” I asked.

“Talent is what the world says you have, and we were the world then, and are the world now,” Taylor continued. “All these plaques for overachievement we got then and the resumes we have now prove that. In the Arts. The only place where talent really matters. A world that you could have been a part of instead of---“

“---Why did you really call me in here?” I interjected, blasting it into Taylor’s face as gently as I could. “And without the other people you said would be at this production meeting?”

“Because I missed you,” she said with lips that turned inward in a vulnerable smile, and fingers extending to my shaking arms as she edged her way closer to me. “After you disappeared a week before graduation,” she inquired in that ‘I will not leave this room without a real answer’ way that every trained cop, lawyer or lover gets better at with age. “After that trouble that we could have gotten you out of but you insisted on taking the rap for.”

She looked into my eyes, seeing everything. A few more invitations to open myself up later, I would have spilt the beans on everything. But thankfully, present day crisis put off dealing with past day karma. From the other side of Taylor’s exposed window, which I advised her to keep covered, I saw a black sedan pass by and grind to a halt. Then a larger vehicle from the other side pulled in. A horn from one of the vehicles blasted out ‘Deutschland Uber Alles’ in a friendly tone, followed by harsh voices in German with a dialect I didn’t recognize but a tone that sounded very un-friendly and threatening.

I pushed Taylor’s head down, not letting her see that, yes, my penile process was about to go into full salute for a blow job. But I pulled out another gun, my service revolver, working my way to the window. Prepared to shoot first and ask questions later, I pushed the window open and aimed the revolver down to the parking lot below.

“Fucking hell!” I said to myself as I saw, then heard, a busload of German tourists being greeted by Eddy, Jennifer, Brad and Krystal. Having their pictures taken with their idols, thinking they were now their best friends. Friends who really looked down at them with disdain behind their exaggerated smiles. “What the hell is going on?” I said to Taylor. “I told you that this should be a closed set. One where a nut job with a grudge or a need to make a name for himself with a REAL gun can’t get in. Who authorized this fucking publicity shoot?”

“I don’t know, but it’s a happy coincidence that our public did find us,” Taylor said, stroking the piles of flowers on the coffee table that had been sent to her by admirers, fans and perhaps supplemental investors.

“‘Happy coincidences’ like me being called in by my bosses to be advisor and guard dog on this film that ‘miraculously’ brought all us all together again,” I said. “There are two rules about being a Cop. One is that there are no coincidences. The second is that there isn’t anything happy about them when they happen.”

“And the fucking first rule about happy, and fucking sane, is to accept coincidences when they happen to you. And for you. Like these,” Taylor replied, as she closed the curtain on the window and opened up her kimono, giving me a full view of what was under it.

“Twin Peaks,” she deemed the sized perfect mammary glands on her chest as she took my left hand and laid my fingers upon their summits. “Rebuilt. And you’re the first driver. Beep. Beep?” Knowing my penis was getting hard, she stroked it harder. “Rev. Rev,” she continued.

It was a road trip I couldn't resist. One that no one with any brains or balls would turn down. One of those offers that you couldn't refuse. And legal. With no parents around demanding to know what you would do if she got pregnant. And requiring me as the cool clique's favorite Gentile to convert to Judaism 'for the sake of the child', or the guests coming in from California and Israel for the shotgun wedding.

Taylor stroked the resistance out of my body, then sneaked the gun out of my hand, then the holster off my chill-axed shoulders. I asked God to look the other way, or understand that if we had reproductive pleasure organs, it was to use them.

Then co-incidence reared its ugly, and needed, head. Two soft then one loud knocks on the door, followed by "Room Service."

"Which I didn't order," Taylor said softly, worried, and showing it on her face. To me anyway.

"And I didn't either," I added, terrified, no daring to show it on mine. Particularly because the see-through porthole in the door was clogged with dirt, or blocked by someone with dirty intentions.

As the door opened up on its own from the outside, I instructed Taylor to hide behind a closet door while I leaned on the wall next to the archway. A tray of food covered with elaborately-decorated metal tops was pushed in by a young man wearing a 'so-yesterday' 1970's waiter suit with a straggly hair, lip rings and a stubbled beard.

"What the fuck are you doing. man!" the waiter said to me as I held his chest against the wall, keeping him there with point of my gun aimed at his head.

"Who let you in?" I asked him as I locked him into the room, and bolt-locked whoever wanted in out.

"The door was open. And this was, like, on the fucking door, ya know?" the young waiter gasped out of his mouth through a pierced tongue made bone dry by his rapid breathing. "And this," he continued, as he presented me with a note. "Taped to the door. It says 'come in'. Signed by---"

"---You," I said to Taylor, presenting her with the note.

"Not in my fucking hand writing," she asserted, handing the 'welcome' note to me for further assessment. "Not in my fucking handwriting," she repeated again and again.

While Taylor ranted on with anger, and the young waiter shook with fear, I considered the penmanship myself. The dots over the I's. The sharp slants on the r's. The sharpened s's. Written by a very determined, arrogant and self absorbed person, who could have been Taylor herself, or perhaps---

“---Krystal! The vindictive, manipulative bitch,” Taylor spat out of her mouth as she pulled out the latest continuity Medico shots of the blonde bombshell in serious Medico surgical greens. “Who sent me---“

Before Taylor could uncover the lids from the plates of food, I asked her to move aside, a request he dismissed with rolling eyebrows. But when I flashed my badge in his face, he obeyed instantly. Something that most people in the real world really do when confronted by Cops. That crap about every witness or suspect being a smart ass is crap. But you didn't hear that from me. I wouldn't want to put directors like Taylor out business and make you start hating the shows you used to like. Not just yet anyway.

But getting back to the matter at hand, so don't rant on---When the skateboarder waiter opened the lids on the unexpected special delivery package, it was what I smelled rather than what I saw that was most interesting. “Cheezy potatoes, bread sticks, chocolate cake,” he said of the definitely-not-Walmart-brand side dishes that had classier names that he could pronounce. “Larry the lobster,” he boasted. “Freshly boiled today. Diced and sliced and put into this fish plate-thing,” he said of the best fish platter I ever saw, which didn't smell like fish at all.

“Which I fucking love,” Taylor said as she rushed to the pre-crushed shell and claws and dipped Larry's left claw into butter. “Fucking great,” she said, offering some to me. “Here, taste. It's fucking fantastic! Good for your head, heart, bones and the really fun body parts,” she smiled, seductively.

“And for the salaries of the Paramedics who'll have to bring me into the Emergency room, like that weekend in the Hamptons that ended early,” I said, remembering the camping trip the whole Posse went on in the front yard of her father's beach-house. “For me anyway.”

“That's right,” Taylor considered as she gobbled more of the fish platter, her most primary addiction being to food, rather than sex, dope or even ‘the process of artistic creation, as she claimed so colorfully to any audience that would listen. “Jennifer knew that. And so did Brad,” she continued, going into Sherlock Holmes, Law and Order:SVU mode. “Jennifer's husband. And Soul mate. And...hmmm...bff. Best fuck forever.”

“He'd try to get in the middle of something between you and me, because?” I offered to Taylor as bait to see if she would bite at the fabricated worm, which she did.

Taylor was always one to look for the most convoluted way from point A to point B rather than intuiting the best connection between them. I have to admit I did enjoy seeing my old part-time squeeze squirm as a worm and slither as a snake as she became the lead actress in her own movie, pacing around with even Larry the lobster, Fiona the flounder and Callie crabcakes in her mouth. Pinning pictures of all suspects and witnesses from the publicity folder on the walls, starting with the one with Brad and Jennifer surrounded by their adopted third world kids who were all better cared for by their underpaid Philipino and Mexican nannies than them. “Yes. Jennifer has the hots for you, and thinks that there's something between us. You and me. She gets you sick while with me so you blame me. Or, even better. Brad wants to make it look like Jennifer poisoned you, so I'll get blamed for it. But behind it all, maybe Eddy and Krystal, who

are jealous of how good Brad and Jen have it. Or say they have it. And both of them working a deal to become stars of this film rather than supporting actors, which would happen if Brad and/or Jen get accused of intentionally making you sick, which would happen if you eat this lobster.”

Taylor went on and on with more colorful and convoluted speculations about who almost made lobster go into me, while of course she ate most of the evidence herself. It kept her busy and gave her a chance to exercise her literary imaginations. But as she muttered out recollections about past times about her best buds, her beloved Artsy Posse, they became speculations, then paranoia-fueled accusations.

Meanwhile, I silently pondered the real reasons why there were so many coincidences going on, the latest one being Taylor coming up with potentially very real conspiracy theories involving most of the companies she had worked for and all of her friends. For the first time I realized that those friendly smiles at the Award Ceremonies and Film ‘Festivals’ were just fronts for backstabbing that made Game of Thrones and the War of the Roses look like a kids game of ‘tag’. I suspected when hired for this job that for every person dedicated to seeing that ‘Medico’ got made, there was one who didn’t want it to be made, one of those being powerful enough to make that mandate happen.

The waiter seemed hungry, and after two bites of the fish platter, I warned him to feed his pie hole somewhere else. After he complied with my request, we both looked at Taylor, caught up in her own world.

“All that plotting to fuck up other people,” the skateboarder-waiter said with awe as he continued to listen to Taylor’s theatrical ranting, which was very real to her. “That’s, like, ya know...”

“The way screenplay writing works. People doing things to other people,” I commented by way of explanation and apology for the craft I passed up taking on, despite the Myer’s Briggs tests that said I was a natural at.

“People doing things to other people instead of for them. Is that the way it works in the real world?” the skateboarder trying to pay for his new tattoo by trying to pass himself off as a waiter asked me.

“Sometimes yes, sometimes no,” I replied, turning to the fish platter containing what was left of Larry the Lobster. “And sometimes a cigar is just a cigar,” I continued, more concerned with whoever wrote the ‘enter without knocking’ not than anything on the waiter’s mind or Taylor’s new ‘who dun it’ police board. She continued to stuff her face and rant on about her closest and perhaps only ‘friends’. I had a quezy feeling in my gut, without having eaten anything. Sensing that there was a movie around ‘Medico’ that was being directed by someone other than Taylor. Which became ‘coincidentally’ evident in a few very short hours .

CHAPTER 4

“Cool! Awesome! Totally mega fucking, like, ‘there and everywhere.’” the dude with the mini-camera on the set of Medico said regarding what he was shooting, the subject in front of the lens not aware of being shot, or for that matter, very much of anything. “Ultra, tres cool,” he continued with a big, fat smile as she doubled over in pain.

“Not so cool,” I informed him as assertively and discretely as I could. But I seemed to be outvoted by most everyone else on the crew who were laughing at the Taylor’s physical pain and psychological humiliation, barfing her guts and brains out, being assisted by a REAL doctor and nursing staff on the set which was supposed to be only occupied by make believe medical people. “Please turn off the camera,” I asked him.

He answered me with an upturned third finger, voicing the opinion and conviction of most everyone else, very much including Brad, Jennifer, Krystal and even Eddy. Dedicated to and possessed by the motto that it is cool to be cruel, they held back none of their laughter at ‘Queen

Director' Taylor as she vomited out whatever she had eaten in the hotel room with me a few hours earlier, mockingly imitating her gestures of pain and expletives.

Just as I was about to step in to be of medical assistance, Krystal gently laid her slender, long fingers on my elbow. Fingertips that sent out the same warm, electric 'juice' that made me forget all of my own worries under the sheets in her own bed as well as Eddy's bungalow when he was away from home. "Come on, Sean. Director gets hangover. Shows that the Queen of Cool is human. Big sales to fans who think they're cool."

"It's inconsiderate," I informed her, and the camera operator who now seemed to be taking direction from her. "And illegal."

"Why, Herr Inspector Vogel?" she asked me in a Punk-German accent with a condescending eye-roll.

"She didn't sign a release form," I said, turning legalese. I put my left fist in front of the self-assigned cameraman's lens, then flashed my badge at his sour-looking face, giving him a discrete view of the gun on my waist. Krystal gave him permission to follow the path of least resistance, allowing me to seize his camera, and the tape inside. But from the corner of my eye I saw other members of the crew put away their phones, many of which no doubt had been used as cameras.

"They were just, like, watching, Sean," Krystal said, inviting me into her world, and perhaps life, again. "And you're taking this advisor and security job the studio gave you way too seriously,."

"'Professionally' is the word you're looking for, Krystal," I replied, feeling the need to explain myself and reach a part of Krystal that was warm rather than cool. "Part of being responsible for my actions, and the actions of others."

'A dirty job, but someone's gotta do it,' she replied with a mocking stagger and voice that was part John Wayne, and more me. "A man's word is his bond. The most important thing is always the right thing," she ranted on in act outs which mocked every movie I once believed in, and every writer who put those words on the page with commitment to them.

Again, I was outvoted by the congregation as an audience gathered around Krystal, laughing at her act outs, or perhaps me. Yeah, getting laughed at. Something that I never experienced as a kid. And had to learn how to adjust to as a responsible adult. As the guard dog put in charge of protecting bitch Taylor. Feeling the need to help the hurting rather than put my fist into those doing the hurting, I walked over to where the REAL drama was happening.

"You still feeling faint?" I heard Mona ask Taylor. "It still hurts here? Here? Here?" she continued, being allowed access to touch every part of Taylor, the Queen of Cool was able to only respond with grunts of pain or slight 'yes' or 'no' movement of her aching and faint head. Her eyes were distant, her pupils constricting and dilating with a terrifying oscillating rhythm.

Taylor seemed appreciative. I don't think it was an act. Neither was Mona's concern for the woman who never had any concern for her. In all of my years as a Cop, I never saw a Doctor

more skillful at his or her craft, and so empathetic to the recipients of such. If ever a film was done about how doctors should be, it would be a documentary based on Mona's life, or a drama written by her. That is IF she took out time from helping real life patients lined up outside her door to put her experiences and perspectives into print. "Good," Mona said as Taylor prepared for another bolus to come out of her pale, green around the gills mouth and trembling body. "Better it come out than stay in." Mona did another 3 second once over on Taylor and took a syringe out of her pocket, injecting it into the IV line the nurses had inserted into her arm. "This make you feel better. Soon. Promise. You hold on to let it work, yes?"

Taylor nodded a very appreciative and desperate 'yes'. I could hear her praying with Hebrew phrases mixed into her ongoing death rattle.

"Did she eat anything to make her sick?" Mona asked me, as Taylor's mouth was still busy expelling puek rather than words.

Taylor pointed to a piece of lobster that came out three vomits ago. Mona gathered that and all of the other emitted material from Taylor's drained out gut and placed them in her own plastic baggies, along with all of the vomited material on the floor. "I submit it my lab in hospital."

"Let me help," I asked her as I gathered helped her gather the foul smelling, blood tinged barf on the floor.

"Thank you," Mona said, taking what I gathered and putting it into her bag. "I analyse this now."

"I can get quicker results," I said, reaching for one of the collected samples.

"Police labs don't have as good equipment as I do," she said, pulling the bag back, placing it into her lab coat pocket. "Work slower. And workers there not always as reliable and objective as here."

I knew that Mona was right. And the last thing Taylor needed as she was miraculously coming out of the land of the dead was to hear Mona give voice to her suspicion that the moles in the Police Department had her worst interest at heart. And that I agreed with her.

The first words out of Taylor's mouth were to the First AD, the faithful emasculated Mench who never left her side who she always treated like a dog. "Fifteen minutes," a revived Taylor said from a mouth that was reconnected to her brain, a brain that was re-connected to a body that was not undergoing convulsions. A body that had feet which allowed her to stand up. And arms that pulled the IV line out of her vein and informed the nurses to not put in another one. She put her hand up high in the air. The murmuring laughter in the room turned to gasps, then into applause by a stern look from the First AD to the confounded congregation.

By the time Taylor looked up, she was Queen Cool again. "Hangover over, peasants. The Queen is back on the throne with her boot-heel in your ass if we don't get this done my way, and in my time."

Brad and Eddy put on fake 'glad she's back' smiles, nudging Krystal and Jennifer to do the same.

"Fifteen minute dope, toké or smoke break people," the First AD announced. "Then back to ones, sober and ready to go, scene 25 B."

"Maybe you should let us take care of you," Mona said to her resurrected patient, referring to herself as well as the Pilipino and Latino nurses. "You almost died."

"But I didn't," Taylor barked back at Mona. "Time for me to get back to do something important here. And for all of you to do...whatever it is you do to justify your pedestrian existences."

"'Pedestrian' means what?" the Pilipino nurse asked Mona.

"'Unimportant'!" Taylor interjected. "If you learned English when you came to this country, you would know that. Now, go fuck off."

The nurses became angry, their healing hands clenched into fists. Mona became deeply contemplative. I became practical, the best thing I was maybe ever at I suppose. Maybe the only thing I was ever good at.

I pulled Mona aside, and opened the door. Best that we talk outside. But she was more concerned as to what was going on inside the room. As the cast and crew got into back into the business of creating illusion that contradicted reality, Mona pointed my attention very discretely to a tray of food being wheeled into the back door. Two big tables. Common food for the common folk. And gourmet food for the stars. Wheeling in the latter was a staff of well dressed caterers, amongst them the skateboarder waiter who brought in room service. "You take food from those trays to your lab. This bag of barf from Taylor I take to mine, yes?" Mona said. She pulled out a credit card, and placed it into my, yes I have to admit, sweat-soaked, shaking hand. "And in meantime, you buy lunch for everyone here on hospital descretionary account, yes?"

Before I could answer yes, no, or 'let's renegotiate whose really in charge here', she was gone, down the hall. I was left with a crew of commoners who had honestly worked up an appetite and a clique of cool kids-turned-adults who were about to feed their weed-induced munchies with grub that I had to discretely get away from them before any other potential harm was done. And without letting anyone know that this set was not only cursed with arrogant ignorance, but probably sabotaged by the hand of someone very powerful who would had everyone's worst interest at heart, and in mind.

CHAPTER 5

The food that the Studio delivered to the ‘Medico’ set was shuttled out by me personally before anyone got their hands on it not because I requested it not be eaten, but because the cuisine that I ordered in with Mona’s credit hospital credit card was far better, and accessible to everyone. The hospital administrator, M. Jameson Bedford, WASP blue blood with more academic letters after his name than letters in it, would get the bill later. And he would no doubt be calling renegade researcher and ‘lucky in diagnosis’ Doc Mona back into his office for another ‘professor to irresponsible student’ talk. But to be fair, Bedford and his hospital would be spared the cost of having to pump out the stomachs of more people as well as having to stomach law suits from every one of their families.

I called in most of the favors I had with the administrators at the Police toxicology lab, insisting that the analysis of the Studio-delivered food be done by the staff members I knew, and when everyone else had finished their shift.

As I predicted, and Mona feared, there were toxic chemicals in the food the cast and crew of Medico were about to imbibe. Silicon dioxide, disodium guanylate, tricalcium-phosphate, aluminum silicate, and theobromine, linked in established medical studies to seizures, cardiac arrest, liver necrosis and rapidly-growing cancer. Found in concentrations and quantities that were identical to that seen in any grocery store in America, Canada or for that matter, the rest of the world.

“I can feed more of it to the rats to see if they get sick if you like, but every machine here says this food is as harmless as anything kids would eat at a Coney Island birthday party, or their father would stuff his face with at a conference banquet with his very private secretary,” Leona Wikofski smiled back at me through her half-inch-thick, black rimmed glasses.

“A father and secretary who I still haven’t gotten any new dirt on,” I told Leona, knowing that if anyone deserved justice in matters familial delivered by illegal means, it was her. “I see that the bruises on your face have mostly healed up. And at least you can walk on that left leg now.”

“My kids,” she said with fearful, downturned eyes. “At least I know they’re safe.”

“How old are they by now?” I asked.

“Old enough to know that their father is the son of a bitch who I told them he was,” she blasted out of a mouth of recently-reconstructed teeth. “And that even the best judge can be bought, or talked out of giving a just ruling by a clever lawyer. Or a lawyer who knows how to threaten the judge’s family through his biker buds. But…” she continued, tapping a foot shod with genuine Blackfoot moccasins that had worn down soles and cracks on the sides repaired with glue for the second time. “I suppose that happens when you try to marry your way out of the Rez to the first Paleface with a sincere smile on his face.”

“Yeah,” I said, reminded of the actor and director buds who used to be my world. “Sincerity. If you can fake that.”

There wasn’t anything more I could say to Leona to make things better. She knew better than anyone else how little good an honest person with a badge could do, and how much a dishonest shithead with a badge could do. Particularly a shithead like her father, a Tribal Cop in North Dakota who smuggled everything from tax free cigarettes to sex-slaves back and forth to Canada for fly-in clients from exotic lands that were not so exotic once you got stranded there working for the wrong people. It was a miracle that she got out of the Rez alive, a tragedy that she wound up with someone who was a spitting image of her father, in body and personality. Another one of those ‘coincidences’ in my world.

Mona didn’t report any toxins in the lobster barf from Taylor, nor in the lobster bits in her pocket. But a new kind of poison was infiltrating the set of Medico, which I observed from a distance after I got back there. And listened into via one of the microphones I planted in places that I told no one else about, even Mona.

“Did you see this?” Jennifer ranted from the other side of the set like a raving lunatic as she read a copy of Variety while being made up for the tear-jerker sensitive scene in which her Nursing character just got back from heartbreaking one way argument with her newly-pregnant daughter at home to a hospital filled with kids with even bigger problems. “Enlightenment Entertainment is make a movie just like the one we are. Different city, and a bitch as the villain instead of a bastard. Trying to beat us to the box goddamn box office! And the Film Festivals!” A short hunchbacked assistant wardrobe wench limped over to get a fitting on a blue coat with large golden buttons, a humble request generously granted by Princess Jen. “Who the fucking hell do the cunts at Enlightenment Entertainment they think they fucking are!!!?”

“The competition,” Brad offered from the make up chair propped up next to her while glancing at his phone, ” calmly, for reasons he seemed to keep to himself. “Who’s paying their talent 30

percent less than what we've been paid, whether this movie we're making gets to the editing room or not."

As proof of his claim, he presented Jennifer with a view of the e mail, along with a print out he discretely removed from his pocket.

"The real figures my agent said the competition is getting paid," Brad said by way of explanation as the peasants tending to his wardrobe and make up adjustments did their job. "And what Enlightenment wants to pay us---you and me that is---as a bonus, if this production we're on gets delayed, due to circumstances beyond our control."

Jennifer took off the coat the wardrobe wench had put on her, dismissing her with a wave of her hand. After she and everyone else tending to her external needs was out of the way, she continued. "And what about Taylor?" she asked Brad, filled with what I actually perceived as concern. "Our director, and friend."

Brad dismissed those tending to his external presentations, and answered Jennifer with naked, and unashamed honesty. "If Taylor can't see the knife coming behind her back, she doesn't deserve to be in the business of making sensitive, sharing and caring films," he said with a calm 'it is what it is' voice.

"And the rest of us?" Jennifer challenged, pointing to Eddy and Krystal running lines as as their supporting characters between with the First AD in between them timing it on his stopwatch.

"It's everyone for his, or her self, in the end, Jen," he lamented.

"And what about us, Brad?" she replied with doubt and suspicion.

Brad answered his beloved's heartfelt concern with a peck on her cheek. Very real, as I saw it. At least in the light afforded by the vantage point from which I observed it.

She let her head go limp, letting it rest under his chin upon the curvature of his neck and firm shoulders.

"Doctor Brad kiss beautiful head and make it better?" Brad whispered.

"Yeah, but I like, ya know, worry," she replied.

"About Enlightenment?" he asked, looking at the article in Variety.

"Yeah, Enlightenment," Jennifer replied, her attention at the sky and, by the way she was stroking the fake Catholic cross around her Jewish neck, the Director of all Life Movies beyond the clouds. "Yeah, Enlightenment," she repeated in a soft and very private tone.

"Like who's really in charge of Enlightenment?" Brad replied, his attention on corporate entities.

“An interesting question, and, like, dilemma,” Jennifer answered.

“And who’s in charge of this circus,” Brad replied, looking at the set.

“And us,” Jennifer said, staring intensely into her heart, and hopefully Brad’s as well. And the hearts of others as well. “You, me, Eddy, Krystal, Taylor. Us. And all of the other ‘them’s’.”

From where I saw and felt it, Brad was at the top of his game, wanted and needed by two sides warring for something that he didn’t give a shit about. Jennifer was at peace, in a way I never saw her. But her inner victory, or revelation was short lived. Just as the light of Pure Reason came to her eyes, those ocular portholes started to dilate and constrict with deadly rhythm, the ‘song’ taking her dancing feet into intense and painful seizures. So strong that even Brad’s gym-conditioned arms couldn’t keep them contained. She dropped out of his arms, shaking like a dying insect on the hard ground.

“Help!” bad-assed Brad yelled out, desperate for anyone’s help. “Help, somebody!” he cried out again, tears of terror running down his pale white face.

CHAPTER 6

Normally valium is the drug of choice to stop seizures, but Mona had something better. Something that Doctor Bedford and the board no doubt didn't know about, which was good for their legal situations, and even better for Jennifer. She was too exhausted to say thank you to Mona after the shaking stopped, but Mona could read it in her eyes, and feel it in her hand with a gentle stroke. Then Jennifer gave Mona a 'thank you kiss' on her hand, much like that which Mother Teresa or the Pope would get. After thanking her Savoir in the white lab coat, Jennifer slipped into what seemed like a restful sleep.

Mona checked Jennifer's vitals, BP, Heart rate, respiration, etc., with the usual equipment and then made some calls to Rayana, Nurse of Nurses. Soon after a homemade EEG and portable CT scanner were wheeled into ward. The calculations Mona was making regarding their readouts were both linear and logical, with a brand of mathematics that would make me rethink everything. Some people did that, which is why they were hated, feared and exiled. But there were matters of the real world that had to be addressed.

"So...something Jennifer toked, snorted or smoked? Or ate?" I asked Mona.

"Or maybe inherited," she replied, circling some things on the EEG readout which seemed to explain the weird values in the blood work. "Abnormal activities in Brocha areas 45, 56 and 90," she shot out with a voice that defined 'compulsive'.

"The part of the brain that makes Jennifer a defective puppy everywhere in the real world, a beautiful bitch in Los Angeles?" I offered, trying to activate the other side of Mona's intense medical brain.

"With an accompanying infection, infarction or perhaps worse," she replied with dedicated and deadly seriousness. "A brain tumor." Mona did a quick look-see of the blood chart, the EEG readout, the CT scan, and finally the patient whom they were taken from. "I've seen this condition before. It'll turn her into a zombie that doesn't wake up from the land of the dead. A syndrome that doesn't have a name yet. But one that I've treated before."

"And cured?" I asked, hoping that Jennifer was not hearing our conversation.

"So far, yes," Mona replied, connecting both of her own hemispheres for the evaluation, then drawing a syringe from her pocket, injecting it into the IV line when she was sure the duty nurse

wasn't looking. "I have good collaborative relationship with Mother Nature and Father Biology, thank God."

"God listens to you?" I pressed. "You talk to Him?"

"I had to talk to someone in High School when I ate my lunch," she said with a whimsical smile. "Alone," she continued, hiding her inner pain then diverting it. "God didn't want to go with me to the Prom though. He had other engagements," she mused. "As did, others," she continued, throwing an accusing stare into my eyes, and soul.

"Ah...about that," I said, trying to weasel my way out of a conversation that I was not yet ready for. I turned around, looking out the window, trying to get enough courage from the sky and the Big Man beyond it as to what to say next. "What really happened that night, that I didn't tell ANYone---"

When I turned around to voice what my mind and heart decided to relate mutually, I saw the back of Mona's head. "I take these to my lab," she said regarding the latest blood drawn from Jennifer. "You take Jennifer here, and Brad, who is waiting outside, back to movie set in..." She looked at her watch and muttered some calculations in Serbian. "Forty-three minutes." She reached into her other pocket, took out a vial and did some more muttering. Then she handed me the pills. "Give one of these every 5 hours. And if News Reporters ask, none of what we just did and where she was happened. Bad publicity for her, the hospital and you."

With that, Mona left the Intensive Care Unit, whistling Flight of the Walkurie. She motioned for Brad that he was now allowed to come in. He rushed over to Jennifer, gazing into her eyes with tears running down his own. "Is she gonna be...?"

"Fine," I assured him with my voice, and a firm laying of my hand on his shivering shoulder. "Everything's under control."

It was one of the biggest lies I ever said. And the most necessary.

CHAPTER 7

“First positions, please,” The Assistant Director announced with a loud but friendly voice to everyone on the set.

“Take TEN! And take LAST, unless someone wants to be fired before fucking making me do take eleven!” Taylor blasted out. “Comprende? Capishe? Verstehen Sie shitheads?”

Taylor’s glance panned the room, affirming her conviction with the heads of every techie and actor, skipping of course Krystal and Eddy, who blamed their inability to complete the scene on everyone but themselves. While Brad and Jennifer were in ICU with no defined return time or day, Taylor decided that the secondary characters played by Krystal and Eddy should get center stage, and perhaps move into the lead.

“Alrighty then,” Taylor said with her best Jim Carrey act out. “On the count of five, four, three...”

“Two,” she heard from Brad behind her as he walked on set.

“One.” Followed from Jennifer, walking on her two feet as if she never fell off them.

Applause for Jennifer followed from everyone, loud and enthusiastic. Eddy and Krystal pretended to be glad she was in the land of the functional, but anyone with an open set of eyes and a non-programmed mind could see that. Which means that only I was aware of the charade as King Brad and Queen Jen took their seats in-between-set make-up chairs that had been occupied by Prince Eddy and Baroness Krystal. Taylor was clueless to all of it. As long as SOMEONE said the words she wrote in the script, she was happy. And as long as it got filmed in time to meet the distributors’ deadlines.

Such is how I remembered it as I stood in the Art Gallery in front of Brad and Jen’s corpses, immortalized in formaldehyde as Adam and Eve, the most dysfunctional and perhaps interesting lovers in history. Maybe even the ones who passed on their ‘interestingness’ to the rest of the unfortunate members of my species.

“So, how does this scene end?” I heard from a familiar voice behind me. “The script I mean,” Liz Thorversen said as the CSI’s finished gathering the evidence they needed, enough to satisfy their bosses anyway. “The script that was delivered to YOUR desk, Sean, marked Confidential,” she continued.

“Which you naturally opened and read,” I said to her, moving my visual attention to myself, or more accurately, the reflection in the mirror of the body my pathetic soul was renting.

“I tried to read it,” Liz said, thumbing through the pages written in a mixture of hard black and blood red ink, in Old World Bavarian font. “But it’s in---”

“---German,” I said, feeling my back going upright in an arch, proud of most of my own ancestry, ashamed of some of my ancestors. “The language of Beethoven, Goethe and hmmm...others. A special dialect.”

“So, I’ll look for a translator,” Liz replied.

“No need,” I replied, feeling something overcome me, pulling me into a world that she would not understand, and had every justification to fear. “I know how the story starts, and what’s going to happen at the end. And I think I even know WHY it’s going to happen.” An image of some of those others, and perhaps myself, appeared to me in the mirror. There I was, in an SS Officer’s uniform, complete with hip boots and a visor that made me look both empowered and cool, proudly doing a ‘Sieg Heil’. Hearing the music of Nazi marching songs that could inspire most any kid to join the Movement to become a Supermench.

I self-observed myself going into an ironic chuckle, then mad laughter. Liz felt genuine concern for me, the kind that I could trust. It seemed to me that she could be open to whatever was opening up in me, and I had to trust someone if the ending to the story on the script and in my mind was to reach the right people, once it played out. But it was something I had to relate to Liz alone. The CSIs and the other colleagues of mine on the Force had that ‘ok, we’ll talk about this after you’ve been appropriately medicated’ look on their faces after they gazed at me.

“You all go!” I announced to them. “But Captain Liz, she stays here, Verstehen Sie? Gehen Sie. Schnell!!!! That means FAST!!!”

As I sensed it would happen, all of the ‘citizen Cops’ looked to Liz as to the soundness of that request. She nodded approval of such, and as everyone in the room with a badge, including me, was officially lower in rank than her, most of them obeyed. A second affirmative nod to an overly concerned Sergeant and two rookies from Liz cleared the room out.

“So, Detective Vogel,” Liz said to me turning into Captain Thorverson. “What’s so important and confidential that it’s for my ears only? It’s just you, me, and whoever that woman with two faces in the abstract painting really is.”

Yeah, I was right to trust Liz. Even though I gave her a hint by staring into the unsigned abstract painting of the woman with two faces, whose eyes revealed many faces and identities, if you dared to look into them.

“So, she DOES have something to do with all of this,” Captain Thorverson said.

I laughed, reflected, then turned to her. “Nothing can be further from the truth,” I explained with deadly seriousness, and accuracy. “It was all about Enlightenment. Enlightenment. Enlightenment!!!!” I found myself pulled into that other world. Some other world anyway. In which ‘Enlightenment’ meant far more than it did in the ‘real’ world that I knew I could never go back to. For better AND worse.

CHAPTER 8

I recall that it was a Wednesday afternoon just after seeing Brad and Jennifer back on the set in their roles as leads, Eddy and Krystal demoted to supporting roles in 'Medico'. I decided to investigate Enlightenment Entertainment myself. I know, 'Enlightenment' and 'Entertainment' are contraction in terms these daze.

By the looks of the new posters over the old furniture in a building that had been home for three different businesses in the last year, the 'hottest and coolest' new production company on the East or West Coasts smelled suspicious. Nothing looked right either. The lobby was filled with worker bees at all levels, all of them in designer clothing, none of them wearing a tie or a skirt, the obligatory garb for 'grown up' business folk.

But making movies for 16 year olds to overspend their money on required a 'no one over 25 need apply' with regard to the people in charge. Odd that at the age of 31, I felt old, maybe because I never trusted any city where I couldn't see the garbage, and never trusted any smile unless I saw the tears, grunts or agonies behind it. Particularly when I approached a 24 year old dude with a Greenpeace tee shirt behind the most central and biggest desk at the reception counter, speaking to someone on the phone with a 'we're all in this organic world together' voice. "Yeah...thanks for waiting. I'm sorry I wasn't able to the script submissions department. Which did receive your material. And yes, as soon as our Development Team gets back from the location, we will be getting back to you on your most interesting concept." He hung up the phone, the neo-hippie smile on his face turning into Capitalist Pig elitist. "Loser, fucking moron," he said with a snide remark, which I heard from a distance due to my exceptionally good hearing, an ability which is more valuable to a Cop than even a thinking brain.

I approached the Receptionist, wearing my worn out jeans and my 'professor' jacket with sort of matching holes patched up at the elbows. I adjusted the fake glasses that made me look 'scholarly', as well as old, and received a civil greeting from the Receptionist. "And you are here to see?" he asked with a tight smile, demanding a 'connected' explanation before I moved any further.

"The boss," I said, unapologetically.

"With regard to that script under you arm?" he asked me, gazing at the novel I wrote in college that yielded me an 'A' with my literature Professor at Dartmouth but a D minus once I sent it out into the world outside the Ivy Towers. "A spec script?" he continued snobbishly. "With a cool looking badge underneath it," he noted, as I intentionally allowed him access to see it. "And a bang bang strapped to your belt," he went on as I allowed him private access to my service revolver. "The best fucking cop prop I've seen since..." he said as he grabbed hold of it, the shot coming of the barrel frightening everyone around him into ducking for cover.

"What do you want?" the Receptionist asked, still in control of his senses, and bladder.

"Take me to your leader," I said, showing him my badge again and taking back my gun. "This gun, and badge are real. As is the reason for needing to see your boss. Now. Alone."

“Of course, Sir. Right away, Sir,” the Receptionist replied, probably having never said ‘Sir’ to anyone in his life, and when he did, not really meaning it.

Two Production Assistants near the window picked up their phones, attempting to make a call to someone. I motioned for them to close their phone, using my badge to insure that they not call either their bosses, or mine. By the compliant looks on their faces as they put the phones away, they were convinced of my Police affiliation, and the requirement for confidentiality. The receptionist picked up his phone.

I was led by the Receptionist to an exclusive elevator. En route, I asked him his name, “James Procter” he answered.

“Who everyone calls Justin?” I asked, looking at the print out of a memo sticking out of his pocket.

“Yeah. Justin,” he replied as he pressed the buttons leading to the appropriate floor, feeling subservient.

There was no last name on the memo. Nothing unusual, as Justin was enough of a term of address in a world where no one uses the title of Mr. Mrs., Miss or even Ms. Such terms of address were so, like, ya know, yesterday anyway. And besides, the use of them indicated that you actually respected the person at the other end of it. Either that, or Justin was one of those middle level employees who was important enough to not have to wear a name tag, but not quite accomplished enough to be called ‘Mister’.

But the office he took me to when we got to whatever floor it was, definitely belonged to a ‘Mister’, or ‘Ms’, or even a ‘Lord’ or ‘Lordess’. “Someone to see you,” Justin announced to a mogul of some sort with longish blonde hair, seated in a large comfy chair, back to me.

A hand emerged from the other side of the chair indicating with a small motion that I should proceed onward, and that ‘just Justin’ should leave. He did, closing a large door behind me.

The Man, or Woman, in the big chair that overlooked the commoners below the window didn’t say anything. A finely manicured hand motioned for me to sit in a chair in front of the large desk, a chair which when I arrived at it seemed low relative to the desk. As I sat down and felt my ass sink further into the seat, a whiff of the boss’ cologne, or perfume penetrated into my nostrils, a peppermint smell mixed with the aroma of rotting flesh and formaldehyde. Maybe it was Dick Clark, preserved with extra-duty Botox, or some other old school Hollywood big wig who sought to smell and look young forever.

In any case, I got down to business with the mogul who was still too preoccupied with whatever manuscript was in his or her hands to face me. “I’m Sean Vogel. First Class Detective with the NYPD,” I said. “On special assignment as technical advisor and security consultant for

‘Medico’. A film that, rumors say, is competing with a film you’re trying to get to the marketplace first. Rumors also say that someone in this company is actively trying to sabotage ‘Medico’ and the production company making it. I’m not saying I believe those rumors, but if any of them are true, and anyone below you is doing something illegal, it’s my job to...”

I went with the ‘it’s not you who’s the bad guy, it’s them, and I’m on your side’ speech while pretending to tie my shoelace, using it as an opportunity to use the mirrors in the office to see the reaction of the elusive, or ‘creatively preoccupied’ mogul behind the chair. When I did, I saw an expressionless face. One that not remorse. No guilt. No concern. And no flesh on it either, at least flesh that was alive.

It was the most life-like robot I had ever seen, or the most cleverly robotized corpse. Before I could ascertain which, security goons rushed into the room and pulled me away. Someone blindfolded me, restrained my hands, and poured two shots of two hundred dollars a bottle Scotch down my throat. The next thing I knew, I woke up in a drunk tank, in my own Precinct, along with other roommates from various other walks of life who stumbled into bad habits or the wrong Police Officers.

“Cops are supposed to put people into jail, not wind up in them,” I heard from outside the bars.

When I looked up to see where it was coming from, it was thankfully not my boss Liz, or any of the Rookies who I had taken my wing. “What happened?” Taylor continued, genuinely concerned, maybe for herself, maybe for me, but concerned nonetheless.

“I heard that what was bad for your production company was good for Enlightenment Entertainment,” I said. “And that they wanted to sink your movie at all costs.”

“OUR company,” Eddy said as he came in behind Taylor.

“A collaborative production,” Brad added as he joined them.

“Between the coolest students Brooklyn Arts Academy High ever graduated,” Jennifer noted.

“Or ever created,” Krystal offered, joining the group.

While I looked at my old buds from High School, smiling at me like we were still there, cohesively cool with each other, my roommates in the cell gawked at the collection of celebs in front of the bars. Every one of them woke up out of their stupors, hangovers or clouds of despair with wide open eyes, asking for their autograph. And, when the first AD of Medico came in with a photographer, a picture.

“I think we can make this work, for everyone,” Taylor said. “A group picture?”

With that, Taylor orchestrated the shot. Me with my new buds in the cell behind bars. The Stars that everyone wanted to be with or be like in front of it. Big smiles all around. Perhaps the Cool Posse's joke was on me, my smile said I was okay with it. I had to pretend to be, anyway. Their safety, and my career depended on maintaining many illusions till I found out what the reality behind all of this was.

"Yeah, illusions," I thought as I saw Brad read the next issue of Variety in the fourth and most gory disaster set in 'Medico', his white, WASP face redder than any of the imitation-blood on any of the other actors, or their dead bodies. "I'll fucking kill that limey bastard, 'his lordship', Sir Collin Woodworth!" He ranted, swatting aside both the make up assistant working on his chest as well as and the goffer who he returned a third cup of coffee, with the RIGHT mixture of sugar, cream and whiskey. "After all we did for Collin's fucking career!"

"The important thing is that we're alive," Jennifer reminded him. "Which means WE'RE alive. And the baby that we may have finally made between us last night still is," she continued, gently taking his angrily-tense non-reading forearm, laying his fingers against her belly.

"That piece of shit!" Brad roared out, pushing Jennifer and whatever new life that was inside of her away, towards the hard ground. He tossed the paper up into the air, hoping the wind would take it someplace else. "Who the fuck does that idiot, asshole, moron Woodworth think is, saying that my, and your performances in our last ten films were----"
"-----Pedantic, lame and pedestrian, at best," Eddy said as he read his copy of Woodworth's Variety article, in a colorfully over the top English accent.

"Which translated into American English means," Krystal added with as Southern an accent as she could pull out of her big, wide smirk.

"...Lacking any kind of edge, humor, warmth, or intelligence," the First AD read as he walked by from his complimentary copy of the universally read and, for better or worse, respected trade journal. "But with no shortage of being..."

"...boring, lifeless," an extra playing a corpse read from the paper Brad had tossed into the air which landed on his chest.

"Psychologically simplistic," read the extra's buddy, playing a homeless dude who was snuffed in his sleep under his newspaper blanket. "And.."

"Hoaky," Taylor read, to herself, with a hushed grunt that I could both feel and hear, regarding the usually praised beyond all words Crane and Selkirk team. "Brad LAME and Jennifer SelJERK are honor bound to share the blame for their lame performances with their director, Taylor Olson, who should be redubbed..."

"Old as sin," I read over her shoulder, but didn't say. In the mirror reflection of Taylor on the opposite wall I could see someone who was not only hurt, but angered. And if hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, it hadn't seen anything until it ran into a Jewish American Primadonna Princess who finally got a dose of her own toxic medicine, as well as a whole lot of truth.

“From now on, this is a CLOSED fucking set!” Taylor said as her eye panned a set of people who were more entertained by digs thrown at their boss than their kids would ever be entertained by the movie they were all supposed to be making together. “A closed set!” Taylor ranted on. No tv, no radio, no newspapers and...” she grabbed hold of the First AD’s smart phone. “No fucking Internet! And that means fucking everyone!”

Taylor stuck to her guns, and gave two loaded firearms to the wimpy first AD in the form of ‘the two bears’, security goons burrowed from the Russian mob. Or so they seemed to be in their matching dark brown leather jackets, Putin buzz cuts and combat boots under their jeans. Maybe they were actors, but whoever they were, everyone surrendered their phones the First AD as he did the rounds, starting with the lowest people on the totem pole. A convenient thing as two of the people at the top of that pole held on to their devices just in time to get an ominously-important messages.

“Yeah,” Eddy said to the caller. “I’ll be there. With Krystal,” he said. “Yeah, BOTH of us,” he asserted with a friendly down-home Mid Western lilt to his voice. “Sure as a bear...”

The First AD’s hand was stretched out to Eddy, demanding his phone. Taylor appended it with the most authoritative stare I ever observed in her. “...deficates in the forest. Said forest being located...” Eddy said into the phone, after which he hung up. But not before looking at phone and memorizing the address.

CHAPTER 9

Eddy and Krystal somehow maneuvered production schedules so that they both would have the next day off, or maybe it was Brad and Jen’s idea to purposely request a redo of the scenes they had done the day before. But as I put together, well after the fact, Eddy and Krystal’s clandestine excursion to the East Hampton did not quite go as planned.

They were greeted at the door by a black-as-spades Butler with an Oxford accent, who instructed them to make themselves comfortable, as the man they were supposed to meet was still indisposed.

“Indisposed, my ass,” Eddy spat back as he laid his ass into the most comfortable chair in the living room, helping himself to the most expensive scotch on the open bar. “He isn’t finished getting laid or still has a hangover from this overpriced paint thinner,” he continued. He looked

at his phone again, noting the time and checking the location. “Yeah, this is the right place,” he said to Krystal. “According to the sign on the door, the instructions given to me on my dominatrix voiced GPS, and the text sent to us both by the mark.”

“They’re called investors, Eddy,” Krystal reminded him as she looked with admiration and awe at the paintings on the wall, while pointing Eddy’s attention on what looked like cameras hidden within the sculptured ceiling aimed straight at both of them.

“I know,” Eddy replied, looking at one of the devices that looked ‘camera-ish’. “Who we respect by making jokes about him. Like we make jokes about ourselves with every new comedy we do, for them.”

“A ‘them’ who has interesting taste in art,” Krystal replied. “Art that looks...familiar,” she continued, trying to direct Eddy’s attention on the painting on the wall rather than the carvings of nude women with bigger breasts than she had on the wall.

“Oh, the pictures on the wall,” Eddy said, with active disinterest.

“Paintings, moron. Done by someone who is not a moron,” she shot back. “Someone who didn’t sign them. Paintings that make me feel...hmmm...”

“Jealous?” Eddy smirked, convinced that the bulge between the legs of the nymph carved in the ceiling above him was a black hole and not a camera. “Because your best days as a talented painter were at Brooklyn Academy High? And ended when you stopped fucking that Art Critic who wrote for the Village Voice?”

“And if it weren’t for your guilty-out Uncle being a silent partner at MGM, you’d be doing summer-stock fucking musicals in the goddamn Catskills,” she shot back.

The bullet hit Eddy in the middle of his chest, knocking the wind out of him. Krystal shot out another round, aimed directly at his heart, or whatever other organ he valued most, aided by, coincidentally, ammunition directly in front of her eyes. “Or you’d be doing what this guy is doing,” she continued, pointing his attention to another masterfully human portrait of a street-cleaner, whose humiliated face looked much like Eddy’s would in a decade or so. “Sweep man. Shit Schlep. Sweating his balls off because he has no balls. The balls he never used to be himself, until he shared them with his lover-boy who...”

As Eddy saw himself in that painting, Krystal chuckled. But before she could let out a well-deserved belly-laugh, her voice was held hostage by Eddy’s clenched fist on her throat, discretely pressing it against the wall. “No one laughs at me,” he grunted while pretending to be kissing her. “No one fucking laughs at me!!! You hear me!?”

“Yeah,” Krystal pushed out of her choking throat. “So did they,” she continued pointing behind Eddy.

When Eddy turned around, he saw two large bikers in full regalia, with long, unkempt beards and hair, and threatening looks on their faces. Between them was a Semitic-looking businessman in a brown suit whose grooming was impeccable, his eyes stern.

“We’re eh...rehearsing a scene for our next film,” Eddy said with a smile that always seemed to make others believe the fabricated lies and self-deceptions that came out of it. “Keeping in character, like, ya know?”

“Yes I do know...” the gentleman in the brown suit said with an accent that was partly Arabic and partly Eastern European, in keeping with the olive-complexion of his skin. “Just like I know that the best protection in this country comes from those who live outside the law,” he continued pointing to the bikers.

“And because they live outside the law, they have to be honest,” Eddy added, while Krystal shivered in her stiletto booties.

“A line that you have just so cleverly stolen from...who was it?” the Gentleman said.

“Bob Dylan?” Krystal offered. “Mister Rashad?” she continued, hoping she got the name right after reading the text that had been sent to Eddy.

“Or Tom Waits”, I believe, Miss Bernbaum,” the gentleman replied, addressing Krystal by her given name at birth, one which even Eddy did not know. Rashad, or whatever his real name was, looked at the to a painting of the multi-media master done by the artist who saw fit to not put a signature on the work. “Yes, Tom Waits.”

“Who’s portrayed brilliantly there, in that brilliant painting,” Eddy said of the retro musician and actor whose work Eddy always considered too raw to be cool. “A brilliant dude indeed.”

“Yes, he is,” Rasham replied. “As are these two leather clad gentlemen beside me, in their way. And you and your female co-creator, in your own way.”

“Of course,” Krystal said, trying to hold back her disgust at the sweat and garage oil odor emanating from biker number 1, and not let biker number 2 smell her fear of everyone in the room.

“Sure,” Eddy added with a big, assured grin.

“But, as I read in your eyes,” Rashim continued, pacing around the museum he had created in his abode. “Some people are more brilliant than others?” he posed to his two invited guests.

“Please, answer this honestly. Without stating your answer as a question that you are not sure of or want approval for?” He stared directly at Krystal, assertively inviting her answer first.

“There are some, like, people who are more talented than others, yeah,” she stated. And seemed to believe as well.

“The way of the world,” Eddy added after Rashim gave the talking stick to him with his eyes.
“A world where---“

“---connections between talented people make for brilliant people, yes?” ‘Professor’ Rashim interjected with an aristocratic, cultured Socratic tone, turning to his students.

“Yeah,” Krystal replied.

“Totally,” Eddy added.

Rashim allowed a gentle smile to overcome his face. One which felt both assuring and kind. He walked towards a Steinway piano, pulled out the stool, and laid his fingers on the keyboard, with the demeanor of Rachmaninoff, the humility of Bach and the passion of Liszt. The music coming out of the ivories, however, was not consistent with those masters. “Some people paint, some people sculpt, some people act,” he said as he produced sounds that were music only on every fifth note. Out of tune as well as out of tempo. But to his ears, they were something else. “Me, I play music,” he continued, rocking back and forth with a rhythm that was only in his head. “Music that you like?”

“Totally,” Krystal said, with the same kind of smile a girl gives a date who picks her up in the kind of car she could never afford herself.

“Yeah,” Eddy added with a ‘the customer is always right, particularly if he can give me ten million bucks to make my own movie my own way’ grin. “That music is, like, awesome.”

“Music for your next...hmmm...twenty million dollar movie, yes?”

“OUR next movie,” Eddy said, pleased with himself for wooing the prey stepping into his trap without him having to wasting any money or energy on bait. “Yes, Mister Rasham. Our movie.”

“And theirs,” Rashim added, looking at two photographs sitting in a primary place on the table next to the piano. “My son and daughter.”

The three dimensional manifestations of those two most valued souls entered the room from a side door, their presence converting their father’s noise into an actual melody, then a song. A beautiful one with a tender yet driving waltz beat. “Manuel is a fantastic dancer. Marina is even better,” Mister Rashim said of the two twenty year olds who displayed the best of his own features.

Eddy thought he was in the presence of a goddess with Marina. Krystal gawked at how picture perfect Manuel was. “For this dance, a rehearsal for our movie, I ask that my two children do the leading. Acceptable?”

“Sure,” Krystal said, imagining herself in the strong arms of Manuel, a superstud who made Antonio Bandaras look like Cheech Marin.

“Oh yeah,” Eddy said, feeling melted into Passionate Bliss by Marina’s coral-green eyes, her waist long hair framing her exposed shoulders and low cut peasant blouse.

“They both look very talented,” Krystal said as the duo approached at a slow stroll that was more of a dance than a walk.

“And dedicated to their Craft, and specialty,” Rashim added.

Krystal and Eddy prepared for the most enjoyable ‘have to’ dance with someone of power and influence within their collective memories. “A dirty job, but someone has to do it,” Eddy whispered to Krystal as both celebs opened their arms to receive the commoners with uncommon bodies, and lineage. Then, just as the music turned into a deeper and more driving rhythm, Marina and Manuel changed places, throwing themselves into the arms of celebs of their own gender.

“Consider it an experimental film,” Rashim explained to a confused Krystal and a very uncomfortable Eddy. “Where you are the rats. Doing what you have to so you get the cheese. Lots of cheese. That will be yours, because, as you know, he or she who has the most cheese controls the laboratory, and the university.”

The bikers took their position as arm-folded guards at both exit doors, flicked some switches in their pocket, and resurrected motion-detecting cameras in all corners of the room, aimed at Eddy and Krystal. Meanwhile, Manuel ripped off his tie and wrapped it around Eddy’s neck, pulling him in for a kiss on the lips, a prelude for a kinky dance in which he was the Alpha Queen and Eddy was the bitch. Marina whipped off her sash and used it to pull Krystal close to her, giving her a well-filmed French kiss with her tongue before Krystal could close her lips, leading the celeb into a tango with no exit step. Both dances involved stripping off of clothing from Manuel and Marina, as well as exposing the private parts of the celebs to their partners’ hands, mouths and genitals.

As the music got more intense, and the cameras kept rolling, the dance of love got rougher, landing Eddy and Krystal against the wall, falling down to the floor. The bikers put collars around their necks, the lettering reading ‘loser’, ‘moron’ and ‘dumbo’ in glowing rhinestones. Meanwhile, Marina and Manuel squatted on the ground, pulled down their undergarments, and laid two mounds of fresh manure on the floor into sterling silver plates. They approached their partners as dancing waiters, offering them a generous helping of shit on a spoon.

“Eat it..for the art of it. Please,” Rashim requested.

Eddy and Krystal shook their head ‘no’ as hard as they could.

“Then for the money,” Rashim continued. “Which I wired into your account. And I can take away at any time unless BOTH of you accept my...”

Eddy considered the deal. Krystal wanted no part of it. She turned around, trying to make a getaway, but she was pulled back by the collar around her neck by Biker number 1. Biker 2 held onto Eddy's leash, instructing him to sit and be a 'good dog'.

The two celebrity hounds were approached by Marina and Manuel and presented with a loving spoonful of excremental brownies. They both closed their mouths.

"Fair enough," Rashim said. "It would be inhumane to force anyone to eat brownies without sugar topping."

Manuel and Marina flavored the spoonfuls of manure with powder from a patch retrieved from the coffee table drawer. They put the spoons into their partner's hands, pointing the sharp end of knives at their crotch.

"Eat up, now," Rashim said, as the cameras kept rolling. "And if you vomit it up, I'll have to give you more. Eat it with a smile, and I'll take off those collars and give you as much money as you want. Or think you need."

Eddy opened his mouth and ate the snack provided to him, faking a smile while he tried to not upchuck. Krystal did the same. I'm not sure whether it was to save their lives or the chance to buy better ones.

By the third spoonful, Rashim stopped playing. "You know what I would like to hear?" he said. "A song. I'm sure you know how it goes, because you made so many other people sing it. The lyrics..." he said as he played another tune, a playful Germanic children's song. "I am garbage, I'm a piece of shit. I am worthless, I should die'. With big harmonic smiles. Singing with your hands. And dancing feet. Now, please. So it is believable. So I can let you out of here. Before I have to use this on you," he continued, instructing the bikers to pull out electric clippers from under their black leather jackets.

Eddy and Krystal, masters of making others feel like shit, sang the garbage song with enthusiasm and joy for the cameras as well as their live audience. Amidst mad laughter from the Rashims and their biker buds, they slither-danced their way to a door which was partially open, their car within quick jump from it. The shit-eating celebs finally did make it through the open door, then made a go for it. But not without stumbling, and having to pay for their exit visa with patches of their hair to the main gatekeeper.

CHAPTER 10

Krystal always fought everyone on line to get the best hair products available at the mall. Now, she was fighting for her life in a hospital bed, muttering the garbage song while oscillating in and out of a coma, her nearly hairless head hooked up to an EEG. Mona read the erratic bumps and spikes laid onto paper with the printer like an Ancient Greek scholar who whose eyes were offered recently uncovered plays by Aristophanes or manuscripts from Plato that revealed what his Mentor Socrates was really said about the Hellenic experiment of democracy. I had just finished questioning Eddy about what happened in the Hampton Mansion before the ambulance picked them up after their car hit a tree on the LIE, assuring him that the demons floating around the ceiling above his rotating eyeballs would not tell Rashim where he and Krystal were.

A nurse handed Mona the most recent blood work from Krystal and Eddy. “Thanks,” she said as she looked at it. “You’re sure that there was no one else in the lab when you ran this?”

“As sure as you saved these pathetic egotistical assholes from dying,” the nurse replied. “And as sure that as long as you respect us nurses more than any of the other docs in this hospital, you and your patients will get whatever you want, whenever you want it.”

I looked over Mona's shoulder to see what crap other than detritus was forced into Eddy and Krystal's mouth. It was a long name, with a whole bunch of 'hydroxy's' in it. Nothing I recognized from my time working with Leona in the Police lab. Or any other forensic lab. "So, that's what nearly killed them." I said.

"That, and something else that the screener didn't pick up, and can't," she replied. "By the smell of their stomach contents, one of those compounds that destroys some organ systems now, and more later. Unless---"

"Hey, we just heard!" I heard from Brad and Jen, both in prime condition as they entered the room with fresh flowers, aromatic candy, and wigs tailor made to look like the hair that Eddy and Krystal had just lost.

One question I asked myself was how Brad and Jennifer found their way to the hospital room in the converted janitor closet that was not supposed to be public knowledge, to anyone. Another was why Brad and Jen were so genuinely sympathetic towards the rivals who would do anything to push them out of their starring roles in Medico, and for that matter, the biz itself. But for the moment, I treated myself to the sight of humanity in front of me, thankful to whoever orchestrated it.

"There," Jennifer said to Krystal as she placed the wig on her head, just as she woke up from the realm of the unconscious and was about to see herself in the mirror. "You look better than ever," Jennifer continued, as Krystal insisted on looking at herself in the mirror. "A little make up over the bruises on your face from the accident, you keep this bandage on top of your head till everything under it heals up. And it will, before you know it. Doc Mona make me okay."

Brad placed an NFL hat on top of Eddy's shaven and bruised head, put a beer in his hand, and ranted on about how the Giants kicked ass against the Redskins the night before. It helped keep Eddy's mind off the demons circling above his aching head and still shaking body.

Taylor came in next, showing me a tape of the 'garbage and crap dance' the night before, delivered to her by a courier in a package with a fake return address. "They want 20 million for the original tapes, and the pledge that it won't go onto youtube. And that the 20 mill comes out of Medico's budget. The production coffers only have 3 million left in them, and everyone I know who's still talking to me, or any of the rest of us, is down to their last two million. Or less. And...." Taylor held onto her head. "Fuck that hurts. Mother fucking headache!" While trying to wipe away the sweat and grime from her aching head, she pulled off a clump full of her own hair. "What the fuck is happening to me!" she screamed.

"Nothing we can't fix, together" Mona said, assuring her with a gentle touch on her shaking shoulders. Taylor seemed convinced that Mona's heart was in the right place. And when combined with Mona's brilliant medical mind, if anyone could put together what a toxin wielding saboteur had put in motion, it was Mona. Her resume of published papers showed that whatever chemicals or trauma could schmuck up, she could fix. Add to it the list of unpublished studies she let me have a look at, and one was forced to come to the inevitable conclusion that in all matters medical, Mona was the master. A master dedicated to healing everyone. Give her a

year or two, and she could probably find a cure for old age, regret and perhaps even cruelty and its first cousin, ignorance.

CHAPTER 11

I had to admit, that Mona's brilliance fascinated me. To the best of my knowledge, it all stemmed from her laboratory, located in an undisclosed room where no one entered except Carlos the Janitor one night a week, and the Promethian gods and goddesses who wanted to channel cures for an ailing humanity that they were still somehow responsible for. Finally, Mona allowed me access to the secret temple. But not as an observer but as a subject in one of her most important experimental investigations.

"Don't move! And please to keep your eyes looking out the window," she said within ten seconds of leading me into the disheveled sacred chamber that was more home to her than any place was ever home to me.

"Come on, Mona," I replied, trying to stay in the 'godlike' position to which was assigned and remained for what seemed like a half an hour. I tried to sneak a view of my watch to verify just how much time had passed. "It's been over---"

"---Shh!" she bolted out from behind the canvas I had bought her, putting yet another layer of paint on it with the brushes I thought she had given away to the kids' arts and crafts coordinator of the hospital. "No looking at watch, please. Takes away from what is behind your eyes. Is first time I paint in a long time. And you say I should paint again, so---"

"---But. I gotta take a piss!" I said, feeling the breeze coming in from the window on my naked chest, leather leggings over my thighs and knees, and thick imitation fur boot on my feet, so that Mona could paint me in my 'ancestral Aryan Nordic glory'. "Please to keep eyes looking at

window, like you see new world over Western horizon. Right hand holding up sword, left hand holding rein of horse, that I put in latter.”

“But me and my horse, really have to---“

“---piss,” she said, undoing the buttons on my fly, guiding my penis with the tips of her fingers and aiming the contents flowing from it into a large laboratory beaker with a narrow opening.

“Feels good, yes?” she asked.

“Yeah, thanks,” I said, having been relieved of what felt like a gallon or fluid from my bladder, my penile process still limp.

“Feels better?” Mona asked as she enveloped the symbol of my manhood with all of her fingers, letting its shaft rest in the palm of her hand.

“Oh yeah,” I replied, my head struggling to keep control of my body. “Much better. But you don’t have to...”

“I want to,” she whispered, opening up her mouth and kneeling on the ground, moving in closer to me. “As you look up out at sky, into bigness of Western horizon,” she continued as I could feel wetness on my very erect third leg, her hair wrapping around my sweat-soaked waist.

With eyes that I didn’t know I had, I could see undiscovered lands amidst and beyond the soot-covered clouds outside the 5th story building overlooking the East River. The hooting horns of barges carrying garbage seemed to be like Nordic horns. The smell of street exhaust transformed itself into a North Sea wind, blowing on my chest. Then knife of thunder cut into my flesh, which had a blade very much of the material world on its tip, into my very real flesh.

“What are you doing?” I said as I pulled away, looking downward, feeling my male accessory organs drenched in a red fluid, or maybe gone.

“Practicing,” Mona said by way of explanation as she pulled herself away, allowing me to see the handiwork of something that drew lots of blood, perhaps a knife, or perhaps her teeth, or for all I knew, a razor blade she has manipulated with her mouth.

“Practicing what?” I said, pulling away, feeling numbness at the shaft of my penis and testicles, those organs, if indeed they were still there, stuck in a jar of red fluid beneath it. “Walmart special sex change operation?” I observed myself asking.

“Is only a little bit of color,” Mona said, turning the jar around, showing me the label on the paint jar saying ‘sanguineous red’. “And some lidocaine on tip to make for interesting non-feeling,” she continued, allowing me to see the ring of topical anesthetic she put around the shaft of my penis and testicals. “Which you will feel again, soon,” she said, pulling away the jar completely, revealing that indeed my balls and cannon were still very much attached to my body. Just as I realized it was a muse, she laughed.

“What are you doing?” I said, trying to get feeling back into my private parts by shaking my own blood back into them.

“Being colorful?” she said, something clogged inside of herself having been liberated.

“And cruel?” I replied.

“Is cool to be colorful and cruel, yes?” she explained.

“For some people,” I said. “But not for you. You suck at being cruel, or bad. You’re only good at being good, God help and bless you.”

Mona’s laugh turned into a somber smile. Her phone rang, converting whatever fun was left in her into something else. Maybe concern, maybe something else. She let it ring, not bothering to look at the display as she buttoned my fly, placed me back into Explorer Viking position on my ‘horse’ and boldly strode back to her side of the canvas to continue painting.

“Want me to get it?” I asked as the phone kept ringing.

“They can wait,” Mona said. “They leave message if important.” After 12 rings, the phone finally stopped ringing.

After a few more brush strokes, the phone rang again. Mona looked at the display this time, then pushed the phone aside. “Still no one important,” she said, continuing to paint. Giving me a smile of confidence, and affection, and somehow putting the victory that was emerging between us on the canvas.

The caller tried again. This time, Mona stuck the phone into the mouth of the skeleton next to her. “Stephan,” she said to the skull. “Tell caller we are in middle of something important.”

I smiled, as did Mona, with warmth, intelligence and humor. All combined into an emotion that felt like harmony. A Viking symphony which was rudely interrupted by my phone ringing, the caller clearly identifying himself.

“Detective Vogel!” the First AD said. “I tried reaching Doctor Mona, but she isn’t answering her phone. We need both of you guys on the set, like, now. Something really fucking scary just happened.”

Mona put down her paints, and slipped on her lab coat. I reached for my clothes, hanging next to Stephan. I turned around to treat myself to a look at the portrait of the real me that Mona was painting. The ‘me’ I wanted to be, anyway. All I saw was a cloth placed over it, by its stern painter. “You look at it when it is done,” Mona said. “When it is ready.”

CHAPTER 12

“I don’t know what happened,” the First AD muttered through a series of shallow yet painful coughs with shaking hands. “Just before the prop fog bombs were supposed to let out a bang and blue smoke, loud thuds and real smoke came out of the lens of camera one 2 and the back of camera 3, over there I think,” he continued, pointing in the direction where his eyes could now barely see nothing but blur. Everything a well-educated and perhaps well-meaning WASP-looking Doc was doing to help him just seemed to make things worse.

“You and your eyes will be alright,” Mona assured the First AD, pushing her superior aside as she pulled out medicinals of her own choosing from the crash cart, and those of her own formulation from the emergency medical bag she had with her everywhere. She sprayed another round of saline onto his pulsating bloodshot ocular portholes and put another pill of something into his mouth that made eased the coughing and shaking, and somehow kept the eyes from rotating out of their sockets.

“Where the fuck were you?” the First AD blasted out, at me.

“The text I got said you weren’t shooting or setting up till this tonight,” I said. “A text I got from HIM” I thought, but did not say, wondering why the First AD seemed to be, all things considered, in better shape than the lead actors and their director, and anyone else who in their vicinity.

I looked at the other side of the smoke-filled room as the toxic fog was being sucked up by a series of high power vacuum cleaners that had not been used since the tests done over the first few weeks after 9/11. On the other side of the chemical warfare bomb blast site which was now all too realistic. Brad, Eddy, Krystal and Jennifer were coughing their guts out, unable to see anything except maybe the floor, upon which they were shaking uncontrollably, like fish just pulled out of the water, struggling to breath air with their aquatic-requiring gills. Along with those unfortunate to have been in their vicinity when the blast that blew up equipment as well as blew in toxic gas went off. By some kind of coincidence, or blind luck, Taylor was nowhere to be found. At least to my eyes.

“Where the hell were you, Detective?” the First AD pressed.

I had to answer him, or maybe I just wanted to. Maybe once the words came out of my mouth they would tell him what he wanted to know and also be true. “I conferring on---”

“---Safety measures?” I heard barked into my other ear. “Former Detective Vogel?” Liz continued, very much as Captain Thorverson.

She reached for my detective shield, like she was ready to snatch it for real this time. Mona put her hand between Liz’s clenched fist and my pounding chest. “He was doing his job. As was I,” Mona explained, with one of those voices that invited the listener to read as many layers of depth into the words as they could, or dared to.

Mona and Liz engaged in a battle of wits and wills between their eyes, or so it felt anyway. At the point of a truce, or at least an agreement, Liz asked her Mona a direct, and practical question as she looked at the smoke, sickness and confusion around her. “So, who did this, Doc?”

“His job to figure out the ‘who’,” Mona replied, referring to me, proudly. “And to stop them,” she continued with confidence.

“Which I will,” I pledged to both of them. “On the eyes of my mother,” I continued.

Liz rolled her eyes, knowing fully well that the woman who gave birth to me was very low on my list of most favored human being.

“And father,” I added, Mona realizing that ‘dear old dad’ to me was even a less valued soul than mom was, Liz picking up on it somehow.

“And on the eyes of my dog,” I asserted, and pledged, to the depths of my soul.

Mona and Liz seemed convinced of my commitment, and perhaps even my ability to carry through with the pledge to get to the bottom of the ‘who’ behind the series of sabotages that was not only holding up production of Medico, but endangering the lives of everyone who still had the courage, or economic requirement, to work on it. After this incident, it was certain that key crew members were ready to walk, and very possible that their Union would demand ‘combat pay’ for whoever chose to stay.

Meanwhile, Mona dialed up her eyes and ears to full assessment mode. I could see her medical mind operating at top speed, assessing what was wrong with every patient, designing cures in her head for each of them, trying to figure out the central ‘what’ behind this latest disaster, that hit Cool elite and common schlep alike. She did a quick perusal of three of the afflicted as they were being evacuated to a hospital room with REAL medical equipment and medical staff that was as terrified of what was happening as their patients.

“We have to get to work fast on figuring out the ‘what’ behind all of this,” Liz said, stating the obvious.

“Which I already had,” Mona replied, calmly. “Organophosphate inhibitors. Constricted pupils, dry eyes and mouth, labored breathing.” She held the progress of one of the patients with her hand, the sickest one, demanding that the Intern and two Nurses who always took orders from Sir Doctor Bedford and his very administrative staff not advance any further. The patient was doubled over, her face covered by her hair, drenched in a mixture of vomit, blood and phlegm, her body going into flat out seizure. “The immediate treatment is...” Mona said as she grabbed hold of a vial on a crash cart on the way out of the room. “Atropine,” she said, injecting it into the woman’s arm. “With a touch of something we won’t tell Lord Bedford about,” she continued, putting a special mixture of her own under her bone dry, vibrating tongue.

Before chauvinistic Intern and his two ‘by the numbers’ Nurses could say anything, the patient opened her mouth, in clear words, shutting them up instantly. “That you,” Taylor said, taking Mona’s hand and holding it with sincere gratitude. Then kissing it in a really ‘uncool way’. “I owe you so much. We all do,” she continued. “We all do!!!” Taylor exclaimed to everyone in the room. To the Nurses who diverted their patients from their assigned Docs to Mona. To the Docs who looked at each other with confusion or anger. To Brad, Jen, Eddy and Krystal, who stumbled their way into the line waiting to see Doctor Mona. And to me, as I watched Doc Mona do the kind of medical healing that Doc Jesus must have done back in times of old, with methods that seemed old and new. After Taylor was sufficiently resurrected from the dead, Mona directed Rayana, one of her most trusted nurses to divert her to a room down the hall, and then invited the next of the afflicted to come up to step up for a chance at remaining alive.

“Great work, Doc,” Liz said to Mona, hiding the real intentions behind the most literal meaning of the words. “A real life Doctor House in the House. How did you know what to do?”

“Applied observation? Medical instinct? Common sense? God and Mother Nature allowing my best guess to be right?” Mona mused, appreciating the chuckles and smiles of various onlookers who could afford to show their real emotions. Then she revealed some of her own. “I also learn about such things surviving attacks like this back home in Serbia. When I was younger, smaller and...” The rest of the dark memory she kept to herself. But those converted to her Cause demanded to hear something. “Mostly, I do what I do because it is the right thing to do,” she continued, as she invited the worse to come up the line first, which included Brad, Jen, Eddy and Krystal.

“And the right thing to do is what?” Nurse Rayana asked Mona, on behalf of all the medical staff in the room, including the Docs.

“Thirty milligrams per 70 kilos Pyruvostain, from my lab, in my secondary crash kit,” Mona said to Rayana, after which pulled out a pad of paper and scribbled some other things. “And these, in the fourth drawer, cabinet by window. Medications that I haven’t named yet. Key to cabinet is in Stephan’s ass. Just please to wipe hands after you get it from him.” she continued, folding the paper up as an airplane and flying it into Rayana’s trusted hands. “If these people don’t get exactly what I KNOW they need, they will get delayed neuropathy that no one can fix. Go!!!”

Armed with a magic key and formula, Nurse Rayana ran out of the room, rushing up the stairs. I stood in awe watching Mona in her full glory. She looked at me like I had accomplished something too. Maybe we both had. We seemed to be activating each others' minds and souls, both flying upwards towards the stars.

Gravity reared its inevitable head, at least to me, very quickly. "You and her..some kind of history?" Captain Thorverson asked me, as Liz.

"History...in the making," I said.

"If you say so," Liz replied, putting on her Captain's hat. "But if you want to keep your job, Detective Vogel...Sean," she continued.

"---I should get more help doing it, Captain Thorverson!" I barked back as discretely as possible. "Like a warrant when I ask for it to search---"

"Enlightenment Entertainment?" my boss, and once again friend, said, pulling a warrant out of her breast pocket and handing it to me. "Weird," she said, looking at the name of the company I was now, finally, going to be able to search with no restraints. "Entertainment and Enlightenment. Didn't think they went together these days."

"They don't," I said, fully realizing what 'show biz', my first love as a teenager, was really about. "As I'm finding out, now," I continued, drifting into teenaged memories which I never shared with anyone in my adult life, most particularly Liz.

"We need you to stay in the world of today, Sean," she ordered and begged me. "Not the past one that maybe got expunged from your record. Capiche?"

"Ich verstehe," I said, answering her flowing Italian with my guttural German, wondering what Liz really knew about my past beyond her own speculations, or perhaps very private investigations.

CHAPTER 13

I don't know how Captain Thorveson, aka Liz on a day when we were on the same page professionally, personally and otherwise, got a warrant to go through everything at the newest and most powerful studio in the city, but she did. And when the army of goons wearing badges under my command invaded Enlightenment Entertainment, the posters as well as the walls came tumbling down. The whole world was watching when they brought out the best dope in town, the most colorful dopers, and computers which probably had as many irregularities in them as the accounting books that I finally saw. The half-corpse/half robot 'big boss' on the 14th floor was also amongst the evacuated staff, providing a real life reality show for the commoners in the street who had been hooked on the fantasies Enlightenment had created, or stolen from REAL indy producers.

Most of the faces of those in cuffs were confused, except for a middle-age Eastern-Slavic gentleman who presented the arresting officer with his diplomatic immunity papers. Then there was the receptionist who delivered me into the hands of the robotic boss upstairs.

We found out from his driver's licence that he went by the name of Leroy Patel, but there was less Black or East Indian in his diction, mannerisms or biology than there was in any schlep or manager of a Jersey City Italian Pizzeria. But he had more important secrets than I, and we, needed to figure out first. He answered my first question for the fifth time while 'dining' on a soda and chips in the interrogation suite, giving Liz and I the same answer.

"I don't know where my boss lives, or even who he is," the 100 percent and zero percent East Indian Leroy claimed, scared of something. Maybe of us, or maybe of his boss.

"You said 'he' when referring to your boss," I noted, calmly.

Liz nodded 'yes' to Patel like those anchor women on regional news shows and infomercials do when they are coaxing their audience to believe what 'the man' beside them just said.

"I just assumed that he's a he because that's what everyone around me said when talking about him," Leroy replied.

"A 'he' who's always 'on location'?" I pressed.

"While you pretend to be an idiot on the bottom of the totem pole as a receptionist?" Liz inquired.

"Who the fuck told you that?" Patel shot back, with a mixture of guilt and defensiveness.

“Everyone on the totem pole under you,” I said, my suspicions confirmed. “Including him.” I presented him with a picture of the skateboard waiter who delivered toxic-infused lobster to Taylor’s hotel room, and a PA on the Medico set most of the time afterwards.

“A film school grad who’s trying to squirm his way up everyone’s ladder, and pants,” Patel shot back with as much snobbery as any of my old Brooklyn Academy Posse. “Stoner, Tarentino wannabe bottom feeder,” he continued, losing no opportunity to use hip put-down descriptors to make himself look cool.

I then proceeded to lay down pictures of the Semitic-Slavic looking middle-aged gentlemen who was amongst the staff at Enlightenment, along with two twenty-something Middle Eastern Ken and Barbies who looked like they were related to him. By the way they carried themselves in their PA, techie teeshirts, they clearly were in higher positions than the schleps around them during the raid. And by the lack of fear or surprise in their calm faces, I sensed they were involved with something a lot more important than making that blackmail and/or career-breaking tape of Eddy and Krystal eating shit and singing the garbage song.

“Techies who I’ve seen hanging around the office,” Patel said. “Beyond that, I don’t know who the fuck any of them are.”

“Like the other schleps you say you don’t know,” I pressed. “Who led us to the prop room and casting offices, to boxes with your name on them, where we found these.”

I motioned for my ‘subordinate’ Liz to lay out the plastic bags containing illegal dope and far more lethal substances.

“I’ve never seen these in my life,” Patel asserted. “What the fuck are they?”

“Toxins that END lives and mutilate people, particularly people who are your competitors?” I pointed out regarding at least five varieties of microbial-based agents and eight which were just death-promoting chemicals derived from plants, some labeled as they were, some labeled as Leona at the tox lab re-identified them.

“Look, dude,” he said. “I don’t know anything about that shit. Whatever that shit is.”

“But if you do, or don’t...All is fair in love, war and the entertainment biz, right?” I proposed more as a theoretical philosophy professor than a Cop. “Is that not so?”

“Yeah, so...” Patel said, casting himself as a confused student in the classroom I set up in both our minds.

“We’re living in age of cool. And competition. And therefore, there’s a competition to be cool,” I continued feeling myself actually becoming Professor Hartunian, Esq, Ph.D., who I had the honor of learning the art of ‘creative argument’ under when I was getting my Undergrad degree at Fordham. “Would you say that this is so? That we live in an age where, legally and ethically, we’ve accepted that the best person is the coolest, and the coolest is the best?”

“Yeah,” Patel said, actually feeling like he was being educated.

“And, could you not also say that it is cool to be cruel today, and since being the coolest is an accepted way to be best, to be the most cruel is to be the most cool? Logically speaking?”

“Yeah, and...”

“And, therefore, we’re living in an era when life, particularly in show biz, which is about being cool and popular, is a cut-throat winner take all competition, a contest to see who’s the most ‘sensitive and caring’ artist, who conquers and humiliates everyone else?” I offered.

“A conspiracy plot that won’t ever get produced, at least in the fucking real world,” my ‘student’ shot back, becoming his own master again, empowered to extend his domain. “In a real world where we ALL do what we have to do to survive!” he yelled back into my face, and Liz’s, desperation in his voice for the first time.

“Like keeping those close to you alive too,” Liz offered. “Wife, kids, brothers, sisters, wives...”

“Or husbands,” I proposed, hoping my gaydar was accurate. “Who eat well as long as you keep your mouth shut, and maybe don’t eat at all, or can’t pay their hospital bills if start talking, about what you know.”

Sweat poured down Patel’s face. His hands started to shake. “I don’t know anything!” he asserted, looking straight into my soul. “And I’m not telling you anything either.”

On my cue, Liz put a legal pad in front of him, and placed a pen into his trembling hands with her gentle, caring fingers. “Then write, on this unsigned pad, what you DO know as the truth,” I said.

“Or suspect might be true,” Liz added, then turned to me. “Right boss?”

“Even if it’s, ya know, like, speculation?” Patel asked me, as the dude in charge.

“We can feel more than we can see, and intuit more than we can easily confirm,” I offered, as Professor Vogel again. “Is that not so?”

“And anything I write here, doesn’t get, like, connected to me. And I get a, ya know, pass on anything I say that I did, or thought of doing?” Patel asked Liz.

“Absolutely,” she replied.

Patel then turned to me, demanding my affirmation.

“My hand to God,” I said, lifting my right palm upward, placing the left over my heart.

“Okay...that sounds, like, okay,” Patel said, regressing back into the snotty 23 year old he was rather than the assured, cultured 40 year old he was trying to pass himself off as. He abruptly put the pen down and looked at me. “But what if you’re an atheist,” he smirked, feeling cool, and in control of the situation, perhaps as a prelude for wanting not only a free pass from legal and moral transgressions while at Enlightenment Entertainment, but a share in the loot that would I know find its way into the ‘descressionary’ section of the Police evidence room.

As my face went red with indignation, Patel picked up his glass of water and sipped it, slowly. Like those offshore investors who knew the banks would never find the money, or people, they smuggled to their own private islands or kingdoms. The water reached Patel’s lips, but didn’t go past it.

My hand grabbed hold of the glass, threw it on the floor, then picked up the sharpest piece available. I held to Patel’s throat.

“I didn’t do anything!” he asserted, again and again, as Liz futilely tries to pull me away from him. “I didn’t do anything!!!”

“But you know who did. Or who can lead us to who did,” I grunted back.

I threw Patel back on his chair, and placed the pad in front of him. Liz gave me an angry stare, pushed me into the wall, and wrapped Patel’s bloody hand with the handkerchief she pulled out of my pocket. He started writing, then stopped, as soon as I looked over his shoulder.

“It’s alright,” Liz said to Patel. “He was just leaving.” She then turned to me. “Right boss?”

“Screw this one up like the last times, and I’ll have you demoted to dog catcher,” I grunted at Liz. “Verstehen Sie!!!!?”

“Yeah,” Liz replied, with utmost civility and servitude.

I waited outside the interrogation room, looking through the one-way mirror at Patel writing on his third pad, while reading the first as Liz handed it to me. “We got enough in here to find and, if we play our cards right, convict lots of shitheads.”

“No shit,” I said, glancing over the scribbling that then became clear and revealing writing. “And the Wizard behind the curtain at Enlightenment Entertainment is...”

“Carl Weinburg,” Liz said, pulling my attention to one of the back pages she had folded down, pulling up his picture on her phone from the net. “A public figure who went private a while ago,” she continued, regarding the photo of Weinburg on the cover of Entrepreneur Enterprising magazine. A balding fat-cat with a buttoned-down hip-retro 80s disco shirt, hairy chest, Jewish medallions around his fat neck, and two of the hottest looking cheerleaders I ever saw as ornaments hanging on both of his overweight, over-tanned and muscular arms. I observed my eyes becoming fixed on his face, pulled into his confidant and omnipotent eyes.

“Yeah, he looks familiar,” I said to Liz anticipating the question written all over her face.

“Like I did,” she said, with an agenda that had nothing to do with the case. “A long time ago. And still do, Sean?” she continued, gently stroking my cheek with her tender, loving fingers, requiring me to look into the eyes and give her an honest answer.

I said nothing, not because I had nothing to say, but because I had too much to say and couldn’t find the right words to begin it all.

“I’m sorry,” she said, withdrawing her hands from my face, putting them into her pockets. She adjusted the wrinkles in her face and skirt so they would all be straight and uneventful. “Me asking you if we’re still together, or could be, and you answering are professionally inappropriate and...”

“...Welcomed,” I found myself saying with my mouth, eyes and heart. “And needed,” I confessed, taking her hand into mine, hoping the digits on it could speak my thoughts and feelings more accurately than my quivering tongue could.

I could sense eyes looking at us in the viewing hallway outside the interrogation room. Liz confirmed that I was right. John Papadapoulus, the oldest, most seasoned, and most trustable Patrolman in the Precinct, pretended that he didn’t see us as he passed through the corridor. Liz and me put on our best ‘professional’ faces and pretended to look at the legal pads. But when Papadapoulus was gone, we had to face each other.

“If it weren’t because of the job, the rules about co-workers, ya know,” I said to Liz.

“I know,” Liz replied. “We love our jobs more than each other?”

“But not as much as we loveD each other,” I said, compelled to say it was it was back then, and had become now. “Yes, as much as we loveD each other.”

“And maybe still do?” Liz asked.

I didn’t answer that question, because I wasn’t sure of the answer. It, like all of the other events around us, were still evolving in directions that we could not control.

CHAPTER 14

I named the pup I picked up from the abandoned crackhouse when I first got my shield “Goethe” because I thought that he would grow up to be a creature of culture and refinement. Maybe he was. And maybe it was me who missed the subtle complexities of ‘Jersey Shore’. But when Goethe turned his back on Charlie Rose and Masterpiece Theatre and leaned into the screen focusing with intense concentration on junk and trash tv, I had to yield to him. Besides, I was

focused enough on the pictures in front of my own eyes, my ass plunged down in the food-stained single occupancy comfy couch in my very bachelor apartment.

There he was, in my High School yearbook, in living black and white. Carl Weinburg, in most every shot of me and the rest of the cool Posse. He looked 5 years older than the rest of us and 50 years more 'economically responsible'. And it wasn't only because his hair was starting to go thin and his cheeks began to puff. There was something in his eyes even back then that said 'fat cat', 'mogul' and 'boss of bosses'. The kind of boss who was so smart, and clever, that he could be found only when you wanted to find him.

As I perused the rest of Carl's pics in the yearbook, I paid particular attention to who he was with, and in what capacity. There was Jennifer, the girl Carl swore to me that he could convert into his favorite wife. Krystal, the bitch who he wanted to make into his favorite mistress. Brad, the dude Carl said he would set the world with. Eddy, the bro he'd party down with harder than anyone else. Taylor, mind-mate who fed his head, and of course gave him a blow job afterwards. Then there was me...in a picture of just him and me, doing nothing special, but saying to the camera that some day we'd be the ones who are really in control of the madness around us, and that we'd split the booty 60-40, or maybe 40-60, or perhaps 30-70. The specific terms would depend on what and who the booty would be.

As I stared at the page captivated by thoughts brewing through my head about the thens and nows of it all, Goethe pawed at my arm. He then nudged the phone on the couch next to me. Then the hound looked at me, and barked something in dog talk that felt very profound.

"Yeah, I know," I said to Goethe as I stroked the side of his neck and felt myself becoming lost behind HIS seemingly clairvoyant and I know very human eyes. "I did the research on locating Carl, and overused a lot of other people to help find him. Would be waste of good police work to not follow up on it." I looked at the piece of paper with the five possible phone numbers for his sort of direct line. Difficult to get, considering that Carl dropped out of public radar five years ago after making his fifth million, and standard police detection in the last 18 months.

I don't know why I hesitated to pick up the phone, but Goethe wasn't going to let me give into my sloth or fear. He nudged the phone, forcing it up into my hand. Such allowed him to find and claim a teebone from a steak I had half-eaten two nights ago just before falling asleep after an exhausting day.

So much for Goethe being a clairvoyant dog who can read human thoughts and aspirations, though I still held out that such attributes were within his, and other animals', capabilities. Meanwhile, I focused on my own capabilities. I dialed the first number on the list, and forced my mouth into a big smile, as faking 'happy' was required if I was going to be a convincing Bollywood director from Dehli offering Carl an even share of the subcontinent's entertainment that he didn't own already. "Hello. This is Raj Patel, head of Himilayan Studios. I am trying to reach Carl Weinburg," I said with my best East Indian accent, as learned by listening to seven eleven clerks and talking to tech support people on the 1-800 numbers provided by most of the American companies in my roladex.

Whoever it was at the other end recognized my voice. “Sean, is that you?” she asked.

“And if it is?” I pressed, as Patel.

“Then I have some bad news to share with you about a mutual friend, and more...” she said, with real tears that I could hear and feel over the phone.

CHAPTER 15

“I can’t face the music, or buy my way out of this one. See you all on the other side, eventually,” I read from the note my one time friend and partner in high school slime left on his desk while Mona continued doing the the autopsy on Carl’s body in a basement room of the hospital nestled in a fungus-reeking wing that was officially closed for renovation. She never told me how she was able to get the body out of the morgue without the Hospital Coroner noticing it, but then again, I didn’t tell her how I knew how to reach Carl Weinberg’s trusted secretary-mistress by phone, and how I convinced her to keep the news of his demise from becoming any more public.

“I wonder which ‘other side’ he’ll meet us all on,” I said, the illogical part of my brain still held hostage by those stories of heaven and hell whipped into me by the Nuns, and sealed into my imagination by watching too many horror films the forbid us to watch. “Is Carl Weinberg in hell

because he was an asshole in life, or heaven because he confessed to a Priest at the time of his death?”

“People who commit suicide linger in purgatory,” Mona said as she continued to examine every organ in the lump of flesh that was once the invisible Carl Weinburg.

“And you think it was suicide?” I replied, smelling something wrong about all of it.

“Sometimes what you see is what is,” Mona related to me. “This was not his first attempt at suicide,” she continued. “Recent superficial lacerations on the wrists. More recent petichial hemorrhages around the neck and palms of the hands. And most recently, toxic residues of Socratic Disempowering juice,” she said, sniffing the body parts and fluid contents from such. “Hemlock. Which smells like dead mice. On the right hand and surfactant-containing lung exudate mixed with gastric and intestinal secretions.”

Mona went on, using medical terminology to confuse to convince me that the only person responsible for Carl Weinburg’s death was himself, by his own hand. But I knew that she was lying. So was I when I sniffed the flesh and body fluids and pretended to identify dead mouse-like odors in my nostrils. As she continued to go on to over-prove her hypothesis that Carl put an extra dose of hemlock into his martini to exit life stage left the way Socrates did in ancient Greece, I drifted off into another world of the past. Specifically the events that happened the week before I was supposed to graduate from the ultra-cool high school that groomed me to be the coolest of the cool.

I could feel, see, hear and smell the twelve year old memory even more intensely than when it happened. *It was a cool summer night at the Hamptons. Carl’s father was with his mistress for the weekend in Manhattan and his mother was still away ‘on business’ in Cannes working a distribution deal with a promising and very much younger French producer. We set up a campfire on the beach and looked into the flames in the fire that burst up and moved back to their source on their own terms, and beyond any calculations I or physics nerd could come up with. That’s what I was doing anyway. Carl, Brad, Eddy, Jennifer, Krystal and Taylor were in a universe of their own, taken to that realm by the genie inside the doobie they were passing around. But they still had things to do on Planet Earth, which required a consensus from everyone in our ‘members only need apply’ tribe.*

“So, we all cool with this?” Carl said as took a good sized hit from the power-packed super joint the size of a Cuban cigar. “Brad my man?” he continued, as he passed the cannabis loaded ‘talking stick’ to his usual second in command, and sometimes equal partner.

“It’ll be...interesting,” Brad said with a slow moving tongue and glassed over eyes. He took in a moderate drag from the doobie and passed it on to Eddy.

“Fucking fun,” Eddy said, then breathed in as much magic smoke as he could. He held it in, then let it out with a satisfying shit eating grin that matched any he had when in orgasm, with anyone.

“Necessary,” Jennifer noted, holding the doobie in her cold hand, then drawing its voluptuous vapors. “Yeah, necessary,” she continued as the mother hen, sharing the booty of magic worms with the chick who she was most responsible for.

“Justified,” Krystal said, with no small measure of lingering doubts. With all of her might, she inhaled as much smoke as her usually-allergic lungs could handle, holding it in as long as she could, then breathing it out. “Yeah, justified,” she said, her words now matching her visceral convictions. She handed the talking stick to Taylor.

Taylor held on to the talking stick, as well as memories that were bothering her a lot. “Yeah. It’s justified,” she asserted. “After we paid her to write those term papers for us. Top fucking dollar, too.” Taylor took in a small puff, then passed the reefer back to Krystal, rather than back to the guys.

“That got us all C’s or worse,” Krystal asserted, with anger in her now glassed over eyes. “Fucked up my chance for a 4.0 average to get into Cornell!” The extra puff of weed, or whatever else was in the doobie, brought out a growl from her mouth. She passed the doobie to Jennifer.

“And me to get into UCLA!!!” Jennifer grunted.

“And me to get a Volvo for my graduation instead of the Jag I was supposed to get,” Taylor ranted. As the girls talked, they kept the doobie to themselves, which pissed off Eddy and Brad, though Carl seemed very okay with it.

“What the fuck did we do to her?” Jennifer added. “Whatever we did to her we did FOR her. To make her, like, ya know, stronger. Like Nitchce in that Shakespear play said. ‘That which doesn’t fucking kill me, make me fucking stronger.’”

“And like Jaylo said to that sappy Injun loser on American Idol who was all heart and no edge, ‘get a thick skin or stay inside your teepee.’” Krystal offered. “Or maybe it was a Survivor episode that---

“’----If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen,’” our tribe’s scholar Taylor said. “What Harry Truman said after Kennedy was shot.”

“So,” Carl said, noting that the reefer was all gone. He stuck out his hand to Jennifer, asking for another one. She pulled it out of the deep valley between her well-developed breasts, nearly put it in his hand, then pulled it back. Taylor motioned ‘give us money’ to Carl and his two male companions. Brad and Eddy coughed up the bucks and gave them to Carl, who passed it on to Taylor. The talking stick circle continued again, beginning with Carl.

“So, we’re all agreed that Mona needs to be put in her place. For her own good?” Carl said, raising his left hand, using his right to pass the doobie on to Brad.

“And our own good,” Brad asserted, raising his hand up high, passing the talking stick onward.

“Like, totally, dude,” Eddy said.

“Fuck yeah,” Jennifer said, raising her hand high, as she felt it sway in a wind that was only blowing in her empowered imagination.

“Why not?” Krystal added.

“A dirty fucking job, but someone’s gotta fucking do it,” Taylor concluded. “Sean?” She passed the doobie to me. Her eyes and the attention of everyone else in the circle was now directed to me.

I sat there with the doobie in my hand for what seemed like hours. Declining to smoke it, though on most occasions I’d be the one to hog down most of the communal dope that went around. Keeping my inner thoughts, ideas along with a new set of dangerous and uncool ideals to myself.

“It’s good for us, and good for her,” Carl said to me, as if it was just him and me talking. “The last chance we have to educate Moaning Mona.”

I don’t know why I said yes to the plan, maybe because I was the one who suggested the first draft of it, not knowing what my co-writers had in mind for the final version. The setting was the beachfront resort café my uncle kept as a money-losing business so he could keep his other businesses going without having to report any of the real profits to the IRS. Mona showed up dressed in a jean skirt and peasant blouse that made her look both traditionally Serbian and contemporary American, for lunch, unaware that the place was only open for dinner. She believed me when I told her that I bought out the place so the two of us could talk, alone, and from the heart, and that the Greek violin player I hired to play Serbian folk songs cost every drachma I had saved up for the last two months. She also believed that the bottle of wine the waiter left on our table before I gave him the day off was from her home country, and that the glasses I poured it into were from my grandfather who dies fighting the Nazis so my grandmother could get out of the Germany with my mother still kicking in her womb.

“I always knew that you aren’t like ‘them’,” she said after I confided another set of tall tales to her, along with some true stories about me and my family. “Not now anyway,” she continued as the Greek fiddle player bowed to me and left us alone with the ‘best dessert in the house’ delivered to us by the waiter, who had to leave with the rest of the restaurant staff to go to a funeral for a lifetime, regular customer who ate his last piece of apple raison strudel less than a week ago.

“I know it was hard for you to tell them all to fuck off,” Mona continued as she looked with complete trust into my face. I felt caught between the forces of good and the allure of evil. Not sure myself when I was lying or telling the truth. “And for you to give me this,” she continued, pointing to a ring I had put on the fourth finger of her left hand, a matching ring on mine. “I promise to not tell anyone about it until after graduation. Especially my uncle, who promised my father and mother that I would marry someone whose roots were in Serbia. Or Greece. Or Russia. Or Ukraine. The only ‘honest’ countries, as he calls them.”

“I could forge some ancestry papers,” I said. “And convert to be whoever he or you need me to be. Honestly.”

It was a lame joke, but she chuckled at it anyway. Then after a few sips of wine, she laughed at a few other ‘humanistically humorous’ remarks about her, me, and us. Then it was her turn to ask me something.

“What do you want from life, right now?” Mona she asked.

“To hear a song,” I said. “Right here on this café patio by the beach. Under this sky that protects us and invites us to be bigger than ourselves, both at the same time. A song that unloosens the chains of mediocrity, lifelessness and helplessness which holds our souls hostage with even more comfortable shackles every day.”

She smiled, warmly, believing that what I said was something I actually wrote. Not realizing that I stole the ideas and most of the words from other writers, most notably, her, then made them my own. Maybe those ideas belonged to everyone, something I’d maybe put in a short story someday myself as I started to believe them. In any case, it was something to toast to, as I poured another glass of wine for both of us, adding some special flavoring to Mona’s drink that was formulated by Carl with the aid of his father’s favorite pharmacist.

“Sing for me, Mona. Sing for...us,” I asked my very mortal ‘beloved’, taking her hand and smiling into her eyes.

“You give me hard audience to sing to,” she replied, shyly.

“Then sing to them,” I said, pointing to the seagulls flying above us, and a group of those birds who had perched themselves on the sand in front of the café steps leading rhythmic surf, whose beat I hummed something to. A Serbian love song I downloaded from the internet after bypassing the page that required me to pay for it.

Mona’s tight face started to loosen, her usually-hunched over shoulders relaxing. Still, there was ‘responsible’ left in her eyes, and behind them.

I poured more wine into Mona’s glass, along with an extra pinch of ‘special flavoring’ from the vial that Carl gave me at the campfire the night before. In rhythm with the song, I locked arms with Mona and invited her to do one of those corny ‘romantic’ drinks that every guy hates doing but every woman I knew, or have known since, loves him for doing it. At the second sip, Mona was humming along with me. By the third she was singing the word. By the fourth, she soloed, belting out the lyrics out like it was a blues tune, holding nothing back. Expressing the pain and pleasure of her soul, and maybe even mine. She got up from the table and sang to the birds, the sky, the cockroaches crawling out of the kitchen, then to me.

Mona’s singing drowned out everything else. The seagulls feeding on crumbs of strudel she threw in front of them. The surf that swelled up and now crashed rather than caressed the

shoreline. Five times she sang the song, with elevating passion and decreasing skill. Then at the crescendo, or what felt like it, just as she was about to belt out the last note, the song slipped into a zombie-like hum that had no melody left in it. Her limp body fell into my arms. Arms that trembled when I heard a car approach me from behind, then heard a single man with black boots and an even darker suit get out of it, his shadow bigger than mine. A shadow more European than American. Perhaps more Serbian than European.

I prepared myself to meet my maker at the hands of an angry uncle who finally tracked down his niece after figuring out that she lied to him about going to the library that morning. I dared not turn around, but knew I had to. The shadowed figure finally spoke, with an Eastern European accent. "What is this woman doing in your arms in this condition?"

"Following orders," I said back to Carl, having recognized his voice, tone, and smell. "And your plan."

"OUR plan," Carl said to me, looking me straight into my face with 'I'm not going to take no for an answer' eyes. "Which is...hmmm," he said as he looked at his watch. "Moving along just as scheduled. With a small change in location. For everyone's good, including hers."

When my Mother left me the key to what used to be, in more economically modest economic times, the family beachfront bungalow to use whenever she was away on business, I thought it was because she trusted me. Actually, she mistrusted my father more, hoping I'd catch him in the act of doing illegal shit with his girl, or boy, friends that would enable her to milk him past dry in the divorce settlement which was still in active negotiation. How Carl got the key to the place, I don't know. But then again Mom was elusive with me about who her boy or girlfriends were as my father was. And both said very little about why I was born ten years after my two brothers, who were always 'overseas' somewhere. And everyone in the family told me even less when I asked what we Vogels did while we were in Germany during WWI, and when they were in America during WWII. After each half-truth I was told, I'd be given something of economic worth to divert my attention to something else. I even learned the art of asking a whole lot of questions so that I'd get paid off with better and bigger bribes to become temporarily non-inquisitive. It seemed to work at the time, for everyone, including me.

When we arrived, Carl and I carried Mona into the quaint hut in back of the bungalow that had been converted to a bedroom for guests who wanted privacy. I spent many a night in that spaceship traveling to universes undreamed of and unwritten about with my faithful canine companion, Luther, an eighty pound Laborator retriever who still thought himself to be a ten pound puppy.

Mona was still muttering her Serbian songs, her mind in another continent,. Certainly another universe, as the only response her body gave to being in the 'real' world was here pupils constricting when we shone light into her glazed over eyes. We put her on the king-sized cot that had been converted into a bed. A smile came over face as I gently laid her head on the pillow. A dog barked in 'appreciable discomfort' from under the bed. Carl loosened its leash and placed the mutt, which looked ominously like Luther did when he was a puppy, into Mona's arms. Her smile widened.

“See,” Carl said to me as he retreated to the back of the hut and started taking off his coat. “She says ‘yes’ to the next stage in her education. Moaning Mona isn’t moaning anymore.”

“And I’m going to keep it that way,” I asserted as I looked at her. “This stops here, and now,” I continued, turning to Carl. My jaw dropped when I saw what was under his no frills, oversized, European businessman’s trenchcoat..

“Sie sind ready, Mein Freund?!” Carl said to me with pride. The Jewish-born and Jewish raised pride of Longgg Isslanddtee high society clicked his heels while fitting perfectly into an SS uniform with regard to his body size, and demon-possessed mind. He pulled a whip from the back of his belt and snapped it inches away from Mona, hitting the puppy in the rump. It yelped and then tried to get away through the dog door built into the wall, but Carl grabbed hold of the leash, preventing his escape. Mona remained in Dreamland, as the nightmare in front of me escalated. “Du bist ready,” Carl continued, using the familiar form of address in broken German with a Prussian accent which was very authentic.

“No, I’m NOT ready,” I barked back to Carl very American English as he lit up a cigarette that most certainly contained at least five ingredients that were illegal now, and probably illegal back in the 40s in the Fatherland.

“Sie ist ready,” he said regarding Mona, his eyes becoming even more possessed, or maybe it was just me who was seeing that possession now. “Und wir sind ready,” he continued as the doors to the hut opened, an entourage of strangely dressed two legged creatures from ten different cultures came in, all wearing masks that didn’t match their costumes. They sang ‘We all live in a Yellow Submarine’ with the off key melody voices required for such for the chorus, and artistically-harmonized stanzas between the chorus, some of them in what seemed to be a mixture of made up languages, which they all seemed to understand very well as they toked on one of the reefers from Carl’s authentic Nazi silver cigarette case, washed down with ‘Nordic ale’ they brought in on their backpacks.

One of them approached me, offering me his dragon slaying sword, a joint, and a bottle of ‘pirate rum’. “No, to all of it,” I told Eddy, whose drugged out eyes I’d recognize anywhere, along with the stench of his breath. The masked Pirate-Viking looked at his fellow crusader-bandits, confused by it all. Then to Fuhrer Carl, who nodded a slight but very affirmative ‘yes’ to it all while Princess-Wenches Krystal, Jennifer and Taylor set up lights, ‘Duke’ Brad setting up video cameras on two tripods, equipment that Mona and her ‘gypsy’ family were accused of stealing just before summer vacation.

When I turned around to Mona and the pup, the only two real innocent people in the hut, Eddy ran his finger over the blade of the dragon slayer short-sword, tasting the real blood from his finger which after making a real cut into his flesh with the very real blade. He put his bleeding finger into Mona’s mouth, wiping it off on her tongue. Then with his other hand he pulled up her dress, preparing to slice it open ‘from stem to stern, me matey’.

“No, to all of this!” I asserted, to every one of Carl’s minions who took off their masks, revealing faces even more possessed by demon rum and devil dope than ever. then finally to Carl, whose evil was far more dangerous, as he was completely sober.

“Do it,” Carl said to Eddy, looking at his watch. “Schnell!”

Eddy sliced open Mona’s skirt and blouse, and ever garment under them. A smile was still on her face. The dog yelped, trying to make its getaway, but was pulled back by Furher Carl, then Captain Eddy. The Pirate of the slovenly seas placed a probe into the dogs anal cavity, put it on the top setting, and smiled as the painfully uncomfortable hound’s penis emerged at full salute. At director Carl’s instructions, Taylor rolled on camera one with the wide shots, Brad moving in for the closes shots of the ‘bonding event’ between a girl and his dog, while the three girls sang, in Charles Mansonian beautiful harmony, ‘How Much is that Doggie in the Window.’”

As the camera saw it, Mona and the dog were both in Paradise.

“It’s what the marketplace wants. A film festival hit, for all of us.” Carl said to me in a voice that was clear and accurate. “And after the dog gets what he wants, we all get what we want.” Carl pointed my attention to Brad and Eddy, who had unzipped their flies, their penile processes getting harder and bigger by the second. Carl’s fly was down as well, sporting an even bigger boner than his buds.

My first attempts to stop the filming were met by polite pushes aside. My next attempts by pushes to the ground, from every member of the now physically-empowered crew, especially the princess-wenches, which knocked the wind out of me. Just as I had lost control of what was left of my senses, I saw a familiar object in the crevice behind one of the bedpost. It was still there! The 22 caliber pistol that still, as I recall, had real bullets in it. The toy that I used to shoot cans when I was a clean and sober kid, then squirrels when I was a not-so-clean and sober tween-ager. Thankfully for the squirrels, I was a bad shot, But as one of my majors was in drama, it would be a waste of an education to not use it.

In the perhaps only heroic moment in my thus far cowardly life, I’d slice the pup’s leash and push it out the dog door. Then grab the gun and fire a warning shot as close as I could to the lens of the camera. Then at the heads of the director and crew. I gave myself the five second countdown, and as I came to two, Carl came up behind me and tapped me on the shoulder.

“Looking for this?” Carl said in a calm, reason-based voice unheard and unnoticed by his crew, the canine and certainly Mona. He dropped six shells from my prized and I thought privately owned boyhood bang-bang onto the floor in front of me. Then he turned my attention to the firearm strapped to his belt, a very real Lugar, with my grandfather’s initials on it next to the swastika.

“Why?” I asked Carl, demanding an answer.

“Es ist khul sein bosen,” he replied.

“Cool to be cruel,” I replied, translating his ominously-accurately accented but poorly-grammared German. He pulled out his revolver, finding the handle, then aimed it at the hound who was about to be drugged as well as electrostimulated into being Mona’s love mate. “The script calls for us to shoot the dog after he dumps his load,” Carl said. “Then for each of our fantasy characters, with masks on, to give Mona a private fantasy. Fantasies she won’t remember.”

“But that I’ll remember,” I protested regarding the plan that was supposed to get Mona hammered but not unconscious, filming her ‘loosening up’, and then seeing what happens. Selling the film if we she was good, maybe sharing the profits with her if we were feeling generous. “This drama has to stop.”

“Or rewritten to be more practical for the winners, and humane for the losers,” Carl said. “Scene 2!” he yelled out. “He cut the dog’s leash with his dagger, allowing the canine to make a getaway to the partially closed flapped door.

“What the fuck!” Eddy the dog handler said as the mutt slipped out of his grasp, emitting a fart and a bolus of shit into his face. “Get the fuck back here!” he said with a grunt and growl, leaping to catch the dog with a the electric prod in his left hand, a clenched fist in his right. Just as the dog pushed his way it through the door, Eddy leaped at it, falling flat on his face and his erect penis, the electric prod landing on Mona’s left cheek, burning her flesh without her feeling anything as she mind remained firmly somewhere else.

“An interesting improve on both of our scripts,” Commander Weinburg said, thumbing through his script, as I looked at Mona, spread out, naked. And as the prod fell off her face, scarred. The crew passed around a jug of happy juice that pulled them even further from the realms of conscience and reason. Carl continued, sounding both somber and sane. “Now, let’s see what character comes in next. In the version where Mona gets raped and injured by drug crazed idiots who think they’re going to grow up someday to be big shits, or...maybe someone else who’ll make love to her first.”

As the door locked behind me, he turned to me, giving me the option, as I assessed my options, and perhaps opportunities. Still part of Carl’s world more than I imagined I was. A matter of conditioning and genetics, as I was pulled back to the matter of the here and now.

Mona pulled out the fifth readout from the dinosaur surplus assets sales at the University hospital that she had converted into functional beasts, able to ID any toxin, microbe or chemical the 21 century could throw at her. “Yeah,” she said as she gave the numbers a quick look-see while I looked long and hard at Carl’s face, the man and/or monster whose body the analyzed samples came from. “Without a doubt, he died from suicide. Caused by hemlock, washed down with Johnny Walker Red and Newfoundland Screech. And a variety of other medications that---“

“---But the note,” I interjected, noticing something very obvious that I missed, or maybe wanted to miss, the first time around. “Written in a handwriting that wasn’t his own.”

“Cerebral infarction,” Mona shot back as her retort. “Some toxin induced, some that maybe happened on its own that led to taking the hemlock and the other goodies that turned into baddies.” She directed my attention to the brain extracted from Carl’s head. “You see this, in the prefrontal lobe, and patches in association cortex? More pink than white?”

I agreed, seeing what I thought she was showing me. “Whoever he was in life, he was someone else after he got this stroke. That made brain not work, mind defective, and soul go destructive. He wrote like someone else because he became someone else.”

“Someone who Mona never referred to by name,” I thought but did not say. Who became gone from the land of the living even faster when Mona pulled a plastic sheet over his head, saying ‘case closed, world better off without him’ with her relieved eyes.

And maybe such was the case. Given how Carl Weinburg turned his family fortune into an empire of his own after he graduated, and how he kept that empire going with every vicious Machevellian trick known to the Roman Empire and the Third Reich, showing no mercy or respect for his competitors, it was better that he ‘killed himself’. An example to assholes-in-training who wanted to follow in his footsteps, as well as common courtesy to whoever killed him.

CHAPTER 16

Within days after Fuhrer Weinburg's 'suicide', Enlightenment Entertainment tumbled with him into the grave of the undeserving and the forgotten. The 'Coolest of the cool' company that was listed on the Stock Exchange for a three hundred and forty dollars a share now listed each unit of ownership at a penny, and it was NOT a prelude to one of those commercial hit movies that sold the movie-going consumers whatever they wanted, irrespective of what the world really needed. Whoever was still in control of the sinking ship, Leroy Patel or some of his very non-Black and non-Indian relatives, I suspect, declared bankruptcy.

Despite my best efforts to keep them private, along with Krystal and Eddy paying out most of the money they were saving for their retirement account as ransom for the tapes, 'The Garbage Song' went viral, plummeting them up the charts as the most viewed celebs in America, escalating them up the Hall of Shame by satirists on the Right and the Left. Taylor's 'Barfacolypse Now' video showing her peaking her guts out while cursing everything her fans valued also made it to the most popular cybercharts. The bad review by Sir Collin Woodworth in Variety about Brad, Jennifer and Taylor became more popular than the trio of ultra-cool celebs ever were. 'Medico' was still being produced, but each day the cuts in the budget from the invisible investors resulted in cutting down the salaries of the stars and the director until they were earning half as much as the Union protected baseline wages of the lowest Production Assistant on the totem pole. As the J-man said a long time ago, and maybe two millennia prematurely, the first were becoming last and the last were becoming first.

My most favorite 'first' spent an hour each day painting, realizing that it would enrich her spiritual health and as a result, make her a better doctor for those requiring better medical health only accessible through innovative medical thinking and even bolder biomedical research discoveries. "A painting a day keeps the demons away," she said to me as she completed yet another masterpiece. This time, a landscape featuring the faces of my dog, her uncle, her favorite and most trusted nurse, her lab rats, ten of her patients, Nicola Tesla and Mileva Einstein framed by leaves, branches and pools of water that made them feel very wise and human. Like the other ten paintings Mona had done with subjects ranging from still fruit to factories that put it into cans, Mona knew how to tell jokes with the images, and in a way that made you laugh without being able to understand why or how you got the jokes. I think I got most of the jokes in the ten paintings that Mona had done after resurrecting her Calling as an artist. But there was one painting that aroused my curiosity more than any of the others. The one of me as the Cowboy-Frontiersman-Viking riding the imaginary horse between my legs. It was still covered, the request on cover reading 'Do not open till finished' in English, a language using the Russian alphabet and what looked like Chinese.

I never did like, or trust, surprises. While Mona's hands were occupied with the paintbrush, her eyes fixed on the escalating image behind them, and her voice engaged in a Serbian song of

Passion, I gently lifted up the cloth over the painting she was saving for me. I found another cloth under it, with another message. “‘To live is to want surprises’,” I translated from the German she wrote with poor grammar but par excellence calligraphy.

“And to love is to need them,” she said to me in my ancestor’s tongue sounding more fluent than I ever was in it. It was a line she rehearsed no doubt many times. But what we said to each other with our eyes when we dared to look into each other’s eyes was not. “Ich denke das liebe ich dich,” she said to me, finally breaking the silence. “Und du? I think that means that I think I love you, and want to know if you love me.”

I answered ‘yes’ to in Serbian. She extended her left hand out to me, the fourth finger having a rubber band around it. She offered me another rubber band with her right hand. I didn’t take it. Something in me said that it was my turn to be sincere and creative, two of the most powerful allies we humans have but which are so often kept separate when it comes to working with people. Just as she started to take the ultra-cheap engagement ring off her finger I put my left hand over it. With my trembling right hand I reached behind her neck and removed the elastic band holding her long hair in a thick pony tail. As her hair flowed down her shoulders, I put it the band on my finger. A finger that bled, as I didn’t see that there was a sharp piece of metal attached to it.

She smiled as I said a silent ‘ouch’ with a grimace. “Yes, commitment to a man always hurts. Is biological.” In a gesture beyond biology, Mona licked the blood off my finger. She smiled again, even wider. She loosened the top button on her blouse, pointing to my neck, then nodded ‘your turn’.

I whipped the tie off my neck and undid the first two buttons, exposing my sweaty chest and, yeah, calling it as it was without sounding like a fucking Hallmark calling card, the heart underneath it. Mona took my hand and instructed me to loosen the next two buttons on her blouse. With heart pounding and, telling it as it is, my weiner NOT getting a hard on, I did her bidding. Then I asked her to undo the next two buttons on my shirt. She ripped them off, followed by removing the shirt to which they were attached. She invited me to do the same for, and to, her.

The foreplay took at least ten volleys, by which time I was naked, but she still had some clothing left on her. Maybe because she dressed in layers, or because I wanted to unpeel the onion slowly, imagining what was at its alluring Core before seeing it.

Mona put an extra lock on the door, put a dart gun containing a loaded syringe into faithful lab assistant Stephan’s hands, placed a cowboy hat on the skeleton’s skull, and pointed his ever watchful eyes towards the door. “Shoot to kill anyone who disturbs us,” she said.

I smiled, then laughed at the joke. The first time in a long time I laughed at woman’s jokes and really meant it. Mona took off what was left of her clothing and hung it on Stephan’s non-shooting hand, then pushed me down onto the cot which she used to get some zzz’s between late night lab experiments and all night treatments on difficult patient cases. She was on top, and I was on the bottom. Which was fine, since she didn’t make me feel inferior. Somehow I felt that

we were meeting each other as new people, everything about our pasts, individually and collectively, forgotten. It was as if all the bad stuff that happened between me and Mona had never happened, for me and, most importantly, for her.

I could go on in alluring language that would raise a boner for guys and make women wet their panties, but suffice it to say, it was...special, for me anyway. And I think for her. Until one too many rolls on the cot and the lab bench made me fall into a garden. A garden of Eden, so it felt like. To be exact, a series of large plants which felt more like a thicket of bushes that had been barricaded off from the rest of the lab. Bushes with leaves that smelled fresh, new and exciting. One of the leaves fell between my lips. I sucked in my tongue, eager to taste more of it, inviting Mona to share the 'snack' with me.

It was then that things turned...different. Mona quickly pulled the leaf out of my mouth, then dragged me out of the garden, landing me on the hard floor, butt naked, on my butt. She grabbed hold of a water bottle and squirted my mouth with something that tasted like peroxide, because it was peroxide. I vomited out whatever leaf was still in my mouth. After that, she washed my mouth out with something that tasted worse than soap. Before I could ask the why and wherefore of it all, Mona's cell rang. The one she said was for special emergencies that had to be answered, no matter what other emergency she was engaged in.

"Yeah," she grunted, grabbing her clothing from Stephan's left arm. "You're sure?" she said, getting dressed faster than any fireman, or woman, I ever saw while doing my interning duties at the Fire Department. "Be right there," she continued, grabbing her stethoscope, lab coat and oversized first aid kit. "Be back in less than an hour," she promised me with a warm smile. "Three hours tops."

I stared at Stephen asking him if he ever had days like this while he had flesh and muscles attached to his bones, but he didn't say anything. Still, I could feel him looking at me like I was the one who had no clue as to what was really going on. The lab rats stared at me as well, perhaps confused as to what a humanoid male really looked like underneath the clothing that species put over their hairless bodies as I reached for my pants.

"Interesting," I heard from behind me in a voice that was very deep, English and authoritative.

"Recreational," I said to the intruder who I suspected by his military bearing and perfectly pressed civilian suit was a law enforcement officer above not only me, but Liz. "I'm off duty," I explained to him as I sneaked my left leg my pants, seeing that it was in slot where my right leg was supposed to go.

"I'm afraid I can't say the same," he continued as I felt him turn his back to me.

After correcting my sense of right and left, I slipped into my trousers then threw on my shirt. While doing so, I quickly rehearsed several explanations for what happened that would allow me to keep my detective shield, and maybe my badge. But my biggest defense was that since I didn't see his face, maybe he didn't see mine. The kind of thing a kid would do. Which I did as a kid anyway.

The intruder who was visible to me only from the waist down continued to walk around the room, hitting every site that Mona and me consecrated, or almost consecrated anyway. “Interesting,” he said again and again, till I realized what he was really looking at, and most interested in. “I must say these paintings are...extraordinary,” he stated, finally planting his spit-shine polished Oxfords on the floor while inserting his perfectly manicured the fingers around his immaculately trimmed goatee. “Brilliant actually,” he said in a voice that could not sound more scholarly. “Very different than anything I have ever seen,” Collin Woodworth concluded, holding back further comment in his voice or face.

“You really think so?” I asked the reviewer who could make or break any career in Hollywood by using a single adverb, or a cleverly-constructed double negative in his syndicated column.

“I do,” he said as he took a closer look at Mona’s masterpeices. “Are they yours?”

“No,” I said, wishing I could say ‘yes’. “A friend of mine did them. One who speaks her mind with visual images. Tells it as is. Like when you wrote...” I picked up a copy of Variety containing Woodworth’s witty attack and bold exposure of Brad, Jennifer and Taylor’s work, sitting next to the rat cage, next on line to be used to collect feces and urine droppings. “Someone had to tell the world that it didn’t have to worship Brad, Jen and Taylor because the big buck investors wanted it to.

Woodworth looked over at the review that went viral and beyond, recognizing it with fondness. “Yes, that,” he said. “A brilliant work of satirically-flavored truth that had to be told. That I didn’t write, I’m afraid. Though I wish I did.”

“Huh” I observed coming out of my dropped jaw.

“‘Huh’...The North American battle cry, which you Colonials always seem to rally around,” Woodworth said with a turned up nose and upper class English sense of superiority that induces feeling of inferiority in every American, AND Canadian, I know.

“So, you didn’t write this?” I asked him.

“God no,” he said. “But I think I know who did,” he continued.

“Carl Weinburg,” I said, losing no time to let my mouth say what my head had just stumbled upon. “The brains and balls behind Enlightenment Entertainment.”

“Hardly,” Woodworth mused, answering a text coming into his phone while he granted me the privilege of hearing what he had to say. “Carl Weinburg had as much control over Enlightenment Entertainment as you do,...Or any nurse of patient in this hospital could.”

“Or doctor?” I flashed upon, and said. I put my hand in front of Woodworth’s phone and made him look into my face. “What made you come in here?”

“Medical business,” the Englishman who the media had elected to position of Governor General of the Arts in America and its 51st state, Canada. “To see if Taylor, Brad and Jennifer are alright. And to tell them that I didn’t write those reviews about them. Though my new boss insists that I keep that confession highly confidential.” He seemed to be honest about that. “You wouldn’t know where they are, would you?” he inquired, noticing my badge as well as ID to get into the now very closed sets for Medico. “Brad, Taylor and Jennifer I mean,” he over-explained.

“I think I do. As told to me in confidence,” I said, writing down an address on one of my non NYPD business cards. Neglecting to tell him how well I really knew each of them, and for how long. “A hospital room away from whatever fans they have left. Or the ex-fans who want their money back that they spent on movie tickets for the last ten years.” I held on to the card before giving it to him, needing to know what he had to say about what he saw in Mona’s paintings as he took another glance at them.

“Yes, interesting. And brilliant,” he said with what I seemed to feel was an open soul. “In their own way of course,” he concluded, with condescending smile.

I added some particulars regarding the whereabouts of my high school classmates with an assuring smile of my own. Woodworth left Mona’s lab with as effortless a gait as possible, as it was inappropriate for him to sweat. Those who were brilliant never had to, after all, as the most respected kind of success was effortless success. But, as the J-man said two thousand years ago, the last will be first and the first will get fucked over. And, as he found out a few days after his last meal with the 12 Jewish agents who would promote the hell out of Christianity, no good deed goes unpunished.

After finally gathering all of clothes and putting them back on in the lab where they came off, I imagined a lot of things. An imagination which I enjoyed more than I should have. An imagination which was not about Mona, but Collin Woodworth. By this time would be at the special high-security hospital where he thought he would be seeing his old friends Brad, Taylor and Jennifer, so he could explain to them that it was another hand that wrote the review about him while he was away on vacation. I imagined what would happen to Sir Collins’ Rolls, Bentley or Mercedes when he parked in front of the always-for-rent warehouse in Hunt’s Point where the Black Revolutionary Brotherhood held its weekly meetings at the address I wrote down for him. How he would give a snide remark to the homeless ‘colonials’ of color on the way to the door where he would have to provide a secret password to get in to see Brad, Jen and Taylor. And how, after the door was open to him, the super-White, ultra-right wing Brit would ‘eminate’ some kind of superior attitude remark about himself or his reputation in a room filled with BRB radicals who all had relatives back in Africa or down in Mississippi who had been fucked one way or the other by Whitey. And how he would excuse himself somehow, slithering out to make a getaway in his car, finding that it had been stripped down to the frame while his wallet was lifted from his back pocket.

All of that and more materialized in my head as I looked at the picture of ‘Sir Woodworth’ in the scathing review that all but destroyed Brad, Jennifer and Taylor’s chances of ever winning an Oscar in Los Angeles, or even doing summer stock theatre in bumfuck anywhere. But it was the real writer of the article who I was interested in most. The Mind that used facts that were

mostly public, along with some private ones, so convincingly to reveal the naked truth about the beloved-assholes who rule the world, making Thomas Paine, Mark Twain and John Stewart look like rank amateurs at social satire. After I read the review for the fifth time, I sensed Mona's finally-awakened wit within the words. By the tenth reading, I could smell her true-to-the-Core messages to the world between the lines. But how could she have gotten it printed, and distributed? And in *Variety*? Perhaps Mona was more than just a loner, hermit practitioner-researcher. She had to know a lot of people, or a lot about people, to pull it off. But first, I had to find out about Mona. What she was really doing, and why.

The first lesson you get in my chosen profession of gathering dirt on people is that if you want to find out where they make the most dirt, that place being home, or work, and as this workplace seemed to be more home to Mona than anywhere else, I opened another set of eyes to see what was around me. I wished I would have kept them closed.

CHAPTER 17

My eyes were held hostage by a coat in Mona's lab that I saw before. Blue and grey in different places, depending on how the light hit it, with gold buttons that picked up whatever light was around. A coat that I saw once before on Jennifer, put onto her by a make-up assistant whose face was hidden by her bowed head and a hoodie just before she went into a seizure. A garment whose lining contained baggies containing a powder I didn't recognize mixed with a solvent that I did.

“DMSO,” I said to Stephen the skeleton, noting on his watch that it was still at least another 25 minutes before Mona would come back. “An old friend. Mix it up with anything, put it on your skin, and wait exactly 4 seconds till it gets into your blood.”

“The coward’s way to get high without using a needle, Sean?” I heard from behind me.

“In...different times,” I replied to my new collaborator in this investigation, not sure if I should address her as Liz or Captain Thorverson. Seeing as Liz and/or Captain T was looking at and through me, I was required to continue the conversation. “Put this coat on anyone, puncture one or two mini-plastic baggies of DMSO and toxins, and you have instant ready to order seizures. Miraculously cured, on your timetable by---“

“---Antidotes?” Thorverson added, noting that for every vial on Mona’s shelves containing unlabeled material, there was a color with a plus on it and number followed by ‘mg/kg’. Each vial had a cousin jar or bag of something on another shelf with the same color, and a minus sign on it, along with another number in front of an ‘mg/kg’. “But antidotes to what?” Liz said, looking to me for an answer, or at least a clue.

“Toxins that mimic neurological diseases,” I replied, remembering what Mona told me and putting it together with the stacks of research reports in front of my eyes she had written and was trying to have published, and/or believed. “To come up with cost-effective cures, innovative remedies and other biological tricks.”

“And other tricks,” Liz said, examining X-ray and CT-scans that were placed very symmetrically into garbage cans that ‘fell out’ after I helped her pick the lock on the cupboard labeled ‘waste materials’. “Like these medical images with the original name and date changed. Which even to me show big, whopping tumors in Jennifer Selkirk, aka ‘Seljerks’ head. And the name of four more ‘cool kids’ on post-dated scans that look even worse.”

“Including mine?” I asked, having gone through only half of the scans myself before I called Liz in.

Liz put down the scans and looked through me. “How are Doctor Mona’s favorite five patients now? Her old school chums, as I had to find out myself. Because you thought it was irrelevant. How are the rest of the cool kids doing now?”

“Without great career prospects,” I said, stating the obvious. “But the last time I saw them, they were in reasonably good health. Thankful to their Doctor for saving their lives and being so...brilliant.”

“Yeah, she is brilliant. For being able to create diseases and to cure them, and creating these paintings which are, in MANY ways, brilliant,” Liz replied. She reached a book inside the right hand drawer of her desk which, by its folded pages and faded cover, looked well read. “But brilliance and compassion are not the same thing, Sean.” Liz threw the book into my face, making me look into not only a mirror myself.

“As we all know, or should have learned, from Uncle Adolf,” I said as I once again let my stare be pulled in by the cover of “Mein Kampf”. “But all these research papers,” I said, pointing Liz’s and my attention to the large stack of published, to be published and too-insightful-to-be published research reports that took on no less than ten neurological diseases head on and challenged the notion that once a neuron within the CNS was injured, it could never grow back. “Look at all the people she’s saved, is saving and will save from both diseases and trauma that would turn them into corpses, or worse!”

“Hitler got everyone back to work,” Liz replied. “He got the trains running on time,” she added. “And,” she continued, looking at Mona’s paintings. “He was an aspiring, and not too bad, artist before he was ridiculed out of it by the cool kids on the Art School admissions committee. All Jews... Who pushed him into a career in politics where he was in charge of life and death, the first delivery of death delivered to---“

“---No,” I said to Liz as she got to the last painting in the row, the one Mona was doing of me, about to fold open the cloth covering over it. “She requested that no one looks at this one till she’s finished.”

“Finished with what?” Liz asked me, as scared as she was angry.

Before I could answer, Mona came back, with a smile on her face and a happy Serbian song coming out of it. Both ended when she saw the ‘redecorating’ that we had done on her lab.

“What’s going on!?” Mona asked regarding the room, scared. “And who the hell are you?” Mona inquired, her eyes falling upon Liz.

Liz flashed her badge, defining herself only as Captain Thorverson.

“What’s she doing here?” Mona asked me.

“There was a break in,” Liz explained with a sincere, caring, professional voice that even I found myself believing. “Kids looking for dope. I got the call.”

“I stepped out for ten minutes to get something to eat,” I explained as to my part in it all. “Then--“

“---Did they take anything?” Mona interjected more concerned with things than people, commencing an inventory of what was still around.

“I don’t think so,” Thorverson said. “Probably the three junkies from the psych floor who were contained and we got back to their Ward.”

“Door was locked?” Mona inquired, continuing the mental counting of everything, putting all that ‘fell’ out of the cabinets in the robbery back into place.

Liz looked to me for an answer. “No,” she said picking up on my slight and discrete shaking head. “It was.”

“I asked him!” Mona blasted at me.

“It was locked when I left,” I replied as apologetically as I could. “For a piss break that turned into a longer time on the crapper than I thought it would be. But the kids must have broken in with---“

Mona halted by babbling tall tale with a raising of her hand. Her worry about the robbery was put off by a ring of her cell. She looked at the message, then smiled a bit, to herself, when she thought I wasn’t looking. “No time to argue,” she said trying to fake being pushed into another emergency by something of someone else’s making. “Act now, talk later,” she continued, putting into her largest emergency bag most of the items she had put away, very much including the X-rays and Cat scans bearing the cool kids’ names, and tox reports on them as well.

“You,” she said to Liz on her way out the door. “Thank you for help in stopping robbery. Please to go back to work where you are needed. I go where I am needed.”

“You need any help?” I asked Mona.

She stopped dead in her tracks and turned to me. “Depends on how strong stomach you have,” she informed, and warned, me.

I motioned to Liz with a nod of my head that she should leave. She did, collecting everything of hers that she brought in. “If you need anything else, Detective Vogel,” she said en route to the door very professionally.

“He doesn’t,” Mona interjected, very personally.

Once Liz was out the door, Mona turned around to me, asking with her eyes about the real history between me and Liz, and where it was still going. Thankfully, another beep came in from her pager putting off the inevitable crisis of the heart as we both attended to crisis of the body. Five bodies, to be exact.

CHAPTER 18

The paint on the walls was chipping away, and the walls behind it were three more rains away from falling down, but the room in the chronically-to-be-renovated wing of the hospital was secure, private and unfindable to anyone other than Mona and her circle of trusted nurses. A row of 5 beds filled one side of the sheet-rock enclosed fifth floor chamber on its North half, ‘missing’ equipment from the respectable wing of the hospital and rebuilt medical devises rescued from several university Surplus Access auctions cluttered the Southern ‘hemisphere’. In each of the beds lay the patients, Jennifer, Krystal, Taylor, Eddy and, after he was convinced that he really did have to be there, Brad. Each had a mixed bag of ailments, including varying

degrees and mixtures of vomiting, thinning hair, green-yellowish complexion, 'the shakes' and loss of control/use of at least one of their limbs or sensory faculties. Welts also appeared on their once beautiful bodies, the biggest being one on Taylor's face which, by coincidence, was on the same side and of the same size as the one she had accidentally put onto Mona's face during her 'education' at the beachhouse.

Before I could discern anything else in front of my eyes, my ears were blasted from the side. "Maybe it was something they all ate?" said the biologically-male First AD who was not worthy of being called anything except 'Head Schlep', 'Kid', 'Lucky number one' or 'Nancy' by once-Primadonna director Taylor. "Or breathed in...or something like..." the rest of his words were pushed back down into his throat by 'barf-cough' containing blood-tinged phlegm and bits of white specs. "Something that we all have?" he continued, as he looked at the sputem that emerged out of his hoarse and hurting mouth.

"That you'll all get over if you take ALL the medications I gave you," Mona told him.

"But, what is it Doc?" 'Schlep-Nancy' asked, worried about a lot more than a blood stained designer shirt and matching handkerchief. "My partner and me are going to get married next month, legislation voting in the state assembly permitting."

"You'll be ok," Mona assured him. "With medication!" she continued, grabbing one of the prepared medical packages from her bag, and placing them into his trembling hands.

"And them?" the First AD said, pointing to his ailing Masters like a faithful dog terrified of being left without an owner. Or a child fearing that his mother's being late for supper means he'll have to be eating dinners as an orphan the rest of his life. "I know they're not talented, smart or virtuous," he said, tears streaming down his face. "But..."

"They're human beings," Mona said, with a sincerity that he believed, giving him a warm and loving hug, that I believed was real. "Who I will save." she assured him. "Just like the medication I gave you last week, saved you from dying and the ones I gave you now will save you from--

"---Save from what?" The First AD said, pulling away from Mona's maternal embrace. "Save from WHAT, goddamn it, Doc!" Nancy-Schlep's fear led to rage, as he grabbed Mona by the collar and tried to shake the truth out of her. I put my hand, then arm, then chest in between them, but the First AD's thin, poorly muscled, hairless arms were able to push me away. Okay, maybe it was because I let him.

While faking being hurt, but not sick, I watched the Nurses pulled the First AD away from Mona, just in time for him to go into a grand mal seizure. He was immediately strapped into a spare bed which was wheeled out from one of the hidden wings in the room. Head nurse and most trusted medical practitioner FILL IN NAME put up three pieces of paper that seemed to be three different regimens, all in Mona's handwriting. Before I could say 'hickory dickory doc', INSERT NAME, had the medications drawn up from a non-medical standard vial with a color code on it and infused into patient number 6s' veins. He was stable, and by the look in his eyes

and the way he was breathing, maybe even 4/5ths out of the woods, half slumbering on a gurney converted into a bed.

I faked the best limp I could, trying to remember which leg was hurt, and made my way to the can. En route I faked a stumble, protecting myself from another fall by leaning on the table on which Nurse INSERT NAME lay the syringe that had contained one of Mona's anti-epileptic miracle cures, one of many drugs that could do what the universal seizure-stopping medication valium could not, at least in this hospital.

Once inside the little Mench's room, I pulled out a pad from the 'on-the-road' drug screening kit Liz dropped in my pocket after leaving Mona's lab. A kit made especially for me by lust interest super-forensic tech Leona, snuck into my pocket by love-starved Liz. A kit that I left in my locker at the Precinct and apparently forgot to take with me to Mona's lab. I rubbed the inside of the syringe that had contained 2 ccs' of Mona's magic juice, finding enough to test with a few drops of reagent. As predicted, and feared, whatever Mona was using as a miracle cure against seizures was not valium. Or phenobarb. Or, as I surmised, any other standard 'one drug cures all' remedy against diseases caused by Mother Nature or Father Trauma.

Mona knocked on the door to see if I was okay. She seemed to mean it. "I'm okay," I said to her as my first official lie to her, and myself. That claim became even more untrue when I emerged from the can after doing my obligatory three time fake flushes, and saw Nurse IIIIII strap the First AD onto the gurney with shackles, and locks. Then injecting a sedative into him, wheeling the ever-loyal 'pup' next to his Mastress Taylor. "Collateral damage," I said to myself. "The price of doing karmic or dharmic business, I suppose," I continued in a very loud voice that still remained between my ears, thinking about how many times I justified fucking up the life of a more innocent than guilty small fry thug to nab a vicious shark.

Taking it all into consideration, Mona was entitled to teach the shithead director and asshole actors in "Medico" about the real world works, and her role in Carl's suicide could be argued by a good lawyer as self-defense. Hell, perhaps Mona was one of those 'angels of necessity' who a Higher Paw uses to inactivate, re-educate or eliminate no-goodnicks, particularly 'beautiful people' who rose up the ladder by making everyone else feel ugly.

I know, I should have called Liz when I saw even more fake lab reports that Mona printed up herself or programmed the analyzers to spit out came across her eyes as fresh data, along with the 'newest' brain scans, requiring that three surgeries be done now! Or more accurately, "Schnell!!!!" And in OR's that the head hospital administrators thought had been shut down. But, as the expression goes, you don't change dicks in the middle of a screw. And given the way the five cool kids, and soon their gay lap dog, were doing, pulling the plug on Mona's medical plans now would result in all of them dying very painfully, as no other doc could fix what she had so Creatively broken. Or Creatively...built.

CHAPTER 19

The first part of the required brain surgery was a head-shave, most particularly for Jennifer, whose long hair was her strength and trademark. Underneath it, from where I was observing it anyway, there really was a lump, which actually bigger than the tumor Mona had faked so that she would be justified in doing the surgery. After removing the lump of tissue that made Jennifer who she was, or at least part of who she was, Mona inserted her ‘nerve grow back’ electricity delivery implants, in the brain so she would “regain her ability to creatively agonize” and in the spinal cord so Jennifer could “get up off her ass and do something about it”. It made the nurses chuckle behind their masks, and made me...think harder. As for Jennifer’s tumor-infected breasts, according to the scans anyway, “she could get an even better set of boobs after she finds a man who really loves her without any.”

While Nurse III sewed up Jennifer’s hairless head and de-feminized body, I observed Mona in OR 2. Eddy’s pathology was in his head, left jaw and testicular tissue. I wasn’t sure if the lumps of tissue taken out of both of them were pathological, or I was the one who was pathological as I smiled with karmic delight at the new ‘life challenges’ my former ‘cool to be

cruel' and 'cool' looking dude would face at the bottom of the totem pole, and without the ability to infect the genetic pool with more shitheads like him.

By the time Mona got to the Krystal in OR 3, one of Nurse III's underlings said something to one of the interns, who reported it to his boss, Professor Doctor Hartunian, who stormed in wearing a thousand dollar tuxedo on his back and a hot babe half his age on his left arm. He and his 'niece' watched as Mona skillfully removed lumps of defective tissue from Krystal, and inserted devices and tissue-culture cells into the holes that she had created. "Unorthodox, unapproved, but...brilliant," he said after inspecting what had been removed, and implanted. "Carry on," he said as he walked out the door, being nudged to do so by his impatient, bored and perhaps beloved companion.

As for Bad Ass Brad and Tyranisorus Rexina Taylor, in OR 1 and 2, respectively, Mona's skill was nothing less than brilliant, and twice as fast. Never had I seen hands remove, replace and displace tissue with more speed and grace. And never had the audience either, which now included every doc in the hospital, even those who were protégées and lap dogs of the now absent Doctor Hartunian. At the end of the first surgery Mona got a round of applause, which she seemed to need, and want. By the end of the second surgery, she accepted the applause without needing it. But when she looked at me, she seemed to need me. I confess to feeling the same dynamic. Maybe because she and I knew that Mother Nature, the bitch who allows diseases, traumas and toxicities to both happen and progress, is not always a gracious loser.

CHAPTER 20

After all the sponges were tossed into the scrub buckets and those buckets tossed into the incinerator, Mona's patients were wheeled up to a private recovery room that they all shared. Krystal was dead, the results of complications due to a brain tumor that Mona had nothing to do with, and couldn't cure. A sheet was pulled over her head and the star of stage, screen and boob tube lay under it, without fanfare, applause or even a close up.

Jennifer wanted to be dead, after a mirror was 'accidentally' put in front of her eyes, on a face that lacked not only hair, but even muscular on both sides, and a chest that was as flat as a pancake, the skin over all of it contracted into wrinkles that seemed to go down all the way to the bone. With whatever strength she had in her only non-deformed arm, she reached for a glass, broke it, and used the sliver to try to slit the wrist on the other forelimb. Thankfully, depending on one's perspective of course, Nurse Rayana intervened and strapped both wrists down to the railings of the bed.

Taylor stared into space, not as scarred as Jennifer but crippled in the part of the brain she valued most. The queen of satirical sting was unable to follow or even formulate a knock-knock joke, that portion of her brain being removed because of the 'overgrowth' of tissue there. Her now-elderly face contained eyes that were not on the same horizontal plane, but at least she could see

out of them. A 'blessing', one of the Philipino Nurses who Taylor had dissed on more than one occasion said to Taylor as she lingered in that grey zone between life and death, faced with the prospect of living out the rest of her days on the planet as a ticket-buyer rather than a creator of anything artistic.

Aside from being unable to breed or pee standing up, Eddy had no major visible blemishes below the neck or between the ears after he came out of the OR, but the demons he saw on the wall above him ordered him to scratch open his face and nearly tear one of his eyes out to a point where there was no doctor who could put it back together, though I was sure that Mona had some extra tricks up her sleeve. Perhaps converting Eddy into Edweena, a visual fantasy she had put on canvas in one of those paintings she did in the lab with supplies I gave to her.

As for Brad, his shaking hands were folded in prayer as he was being given last rights by a Catholic Priest. "Bless me Father, for I have sinned," he said again and again as his BP kept dropping, his shakes escalated into tremors, and the drool from his mouth became tinged with blood.

There was a lot I could say about the situation as I stood next to Mona after every attempt she made to rescue him from the grave had failed. But, what came out was... "I didn't know Brad was Catholic?"

"EX-Catholic," Mona replied, one eye looking under the microscope at a freshly delivered slide, the other on Brad, or perhaps me. "Yeah. Ex-Catholics never stop being Catholic. No matter how Jewish his step-daddy was."

"And after he confesses his sins to the Padre, he gets a free pass into Heaven with Saint Pete?" I mused, and speculated.

"Depends on the Priest and Saint Peter, I suppose," she said, looking up at her patient, who she very much needed and wanted to save from the abyss. "Which he'll find out...hmm." She hesitated, looking again at the slide with that 'I guess I put too much spice in the soup and we'll have to throw it out' expression on her face. "Yeah...which he'll find out, sooner than planned...eh... projected."

"You mean sooner than you thought," I proposed.

"Yeah...sure," Mona answered trying to keep her eyes open and her brain attentive, perhaps an act, but I thought not. "Brain is tired," she said with a sincere smile pointing to her head. "Sometimes does not communciate with mouth."

"Yeah, I know," I said, thinking about what to say next. But before I could, Krystal's body was wheeled to Mona by Nurse III. She listened to the heart, confirmed that it had stopped, and signed some papers.

"So, Doc, where do I take the---"

Mona answered in print, with a location apparently known only to her and Nurse III. Mona's most reliable assistant obeyed her instructions. Meanwhile, the First AD grunted something from his bed. The grunts became expletives, with everyone of the five most bleepable words in the English language, those expletives being directed at his legs which after intense effort, were able to withstand the weight of his body and take him to the can, where he took a big dump, pushing all of the nurses aside. The medical staff and their head Captain Mona smiled with delight as the First AD emitted a 'yes, yes, yes' of victory from atop the porcelain throne. Upon his exit from the can, he was walking rather than limping, and after rediscovering his feet, sashaying with delight at finding that his shaved legs would be able to find their way into high heels once again, and perhaps the arms of a life partner who understood the spirit of the 'man' whose feet were in them.

The overworked medical staff congratulated each other on at least one victory with no complications. And if anyone deserved to be pulled out of the soup, it was the First AD, who I discovered when I looked at his chart, did have a name. 'Hermann von Humiltee', translatable from the combined German-French in its original form into 'Herman the Humble', who danced into the hallway to celebrate his newly found feet, hands and not-too-off-tune musical voice.

But what goes up has to come tumbling down. The Priest approached Mona, requesting something of her in a whisper. "Mister Crane wants to confess something to you, and only you," I read from his lips.

"I'm not God," Mona said in a voice loud enough for me to hear, after which she looked at Brad, from her innermost core. "But I AM a doctor. Closest thing to it."

Some of the nurses appreciated the joke. The Priest definitely didn't, maybe because Mona really did mean it as a statement of personal fact rather than a satirical dig directed at her over-rated male colleagues.

Mona listened while Brad said things into her ear as loud as he could. She replied with various remarks of explanation and absolution which she meant and Brad believed. "You were young." "You didn't know any better." "You did the best you could with what you knew at the time." There were a few others, but those three were the ones that seemed to ease his Soul best as his body drew closer to death. And by the look on Mona's face, the offenses Brad confessed to seemed to be nothing more than misdemeanors in her judgement, at least at this point in his death, and in her life.

I felt bonded to Mona in even a deeper way than ever before. I felt myself on my way to marrying not only a genius doctor, a brilliant painter, but an awesome Priestess who could double as a defense attorney for criminal offenders with the Heavenly Court above. Until Badass Brad confessed one more 'oops' to her that turned the warm smiles Mona was throwing my way into a sour, bitter than angry stare, directed at ME! Mona patted his hand, wetted his lips with some water and God knows what else, and he was able to lift his hand up, then his head. The words seemed to come out of his mouth easier, as long as Mona was listening of course.

The Priest walked over to Mona while Brad took his first swallow of water since he went under the knife. She took a few steps away from the bed, gazing at his chart and the readouts of the vitals, which were all getting stronger.

“So,” the Priest said to Mona, out of range of Brad’s hearing, as I read his lips, wishing the hell I could have read Brad Crane’s as well. “You really can raise the dead.”

“Confession,” she replied. “Very healing. And empowering, for everyone.”

She threw another angry stare my way, followed ‘coincidentally’ by a ring on her pager. “Emergency call on fourth floor,” she said to the Priest. “Mister Crane is in your hands again, Father.”

“No, His,” the Priest said pointing to the sky.

“Yes, indeed,” Mona smiled, after which she grabbed her medical gear, threw another angry stare my way, and snuck out the door. I briskly walked after her but my progress was halted by the arm of death, or perhaps life. Biologically, it was the limb belonging to Brad, rescued from the clinches of a painful death. “Hey, man,” he said to me, speaking from a part of him I never knew, and always hoped was there. “It was bad then, But it’ll all be better now,” he continued, with what seemed to be a halo over his head. “Good. Maybe even---“

Before Brad could continue his thought, or Vision, he went into convulsions, the most painful I had ever seen. The medical team rushed in to do what they could, led by Nurse YYY. Everything they tried to do made it worse.

“I call Doctor Mona,” Pilipino Nurse number 2 said, dialing up her cell.

I looked out the window and saw Mona, on her way to the ‘fourth floor’ walking to her car, tossing her cell into the garbage bin after seeing what was on the display. Tears of anger and betrayal streamed down her face. The kind that always happens before something bad gets a lot worse. Yeah, she was processing something alright. Something that I thought she never knew about, and would be buried with Brad, but had been resurrected by whatever demon seemed to be possessing the Hospital, and now the most brilliant doctor in it. Mona got in her car and just sat there as more desperate calls went out to her. She looked up towards the window. I turned my head so she would not see me, but it only make things worse, for me anyway, as I saw my own reflection in a mirror, reminding me of what I thought was forgotten, or not known at all.

“With the dope YOU gave her, she’s not gonna remember anything any of us for her, or to her tonight, ” Field Marshall Carl Weinburg whispered to me between Gestapo puffs of legal cigarettes while the rest of my buds doped themselves up cocaine, E, Special K and good old fashion firewater. I had no idea what Mona was doped down with, but whatever Carl’s father’s pharmacist came up with, it was a super rufie that I didn’t know about and certainly wouldn’t have used, at least on days when I wasn’t hammered, gorked or stoned. I gazed at Mona on the cot, wearing nothing but a new scar on her cheek courtesy of Taylor’s accidentally spilling the wrong jar of make up on her face while trying to make her look like a diva. Then I looked at

Brad and Eddy, getting primed up to jump her bones and fuck the guts out of her, their female dates strapping on penile processes of their own that had electro-shock metal on their tips, the shanks lubricated with a mixture of motor oil and flesh-burning powder that melted the 'test tubes' of paper into confetti.

"Do you want to go first like the superman who you are, or last like an inferior Untermench?" Carl asked me with an accent and smirk that reminded me of my Grandfather during a weekend when I was ten and he took me into the woods for a hunting lesson.

"You are a terrible shot with cans," my Grandfather said regarding the vintage Nazi-issue rifle he gave me for my birthday. "But maybe you are a better shot with moving objects, which we will eat as food because we are the Master species," he said regarding a deer walking through the woods nibbling its way through a mini-pasture of flowers. "Which I will slow down by wounding it for you," he said, pulling out his gun and aiming it at the creature. For reasons I didn't know, or maybe did, I beat him to the punch, firing out one round that hit the deer in the head, another that went into his heart. The deer didn't remember anything. I remember my grandfather patting me with more pride than any other adult had up till that time, and giving me the honor of carving the venison roast that was the featurepeice of our day-after-Thanksgiving dinner that year at the Upstate family cabin at the lake. A meal I remembered with delight, at the first dinner I shared with men, as a man.

"So," Carl said again, waking me out of what had been, up till that time, a fond memory. "You first, or 'them' first?" He started to count to five on his fingers. By the time he reached three, I lowered my zipper. Two seconds later I was on top of Mona, doing my best to pretend that I was liking it. Carl seemed to believe that I did, and seemed proud of me. Particularly when I got Mona to 'move' with me, not that her body was connected to her mind. I looked into her eyes and sensed that she was someplace else. A place of simple and happy pleasure sometime in her past. A past where being nice, kind and happy was all that was demanded or required of anyone. A past where cleverness, cruelty and manipulation were as unknown as Shaespearian poetic discourse on an episode of Keeping Up With The Kardashians or Duck Dynasty.

I took my time making love to Mona, using all of the acting skills at my disposal, getting an 'atta man' smile from Carl and various 'way-to-go-dude's from the peanut gallery behind him as I was being put on camera via their phones and the cameras. Thankfully, the operators were having problems finding the 'on' buttons and keeping the lens focused in one direction at a time. But time was running out. Very soon, Brad and Eddy would demand their turn at educating Mona, along with Mastresses Taylor, Jennifer and Krystal. And very soon, by the way Mona's eyes seemed to look at more than just the 'stars' on the roof of the converted hut, Mona would feel everything that had been done to her. Technology allowed me to beat 'soon' with something even faster. When I reached into my pocket, I discovered that Carl had taken away my cell phone, but no one thought to take away Mona's. It lay amidst her now ripped clothing alongside the cot. As discretely as I could, I reached down to it and pressed whatever bottons were available. I had not idea who I called, but within two minutes, I heard sirens. Then the loud explatives of my buds as they rushed out the door, leaving me inside with Mona, alone, the exit door shut so hard I couldn't open it. Then, as the sirens approached even closer, Mona moaning, with her eyes still shut, something in Serbian which, as I translated later means, 'What

the fuck is going on'. Before she opened her eyes, I crawled like the snake that I was out the dog door.

“Maybe I should have stayed and faced the music, but I didn’t,” I said to Thorverson, hoping she would listen as Liz, as we both stood in the Art Gallery that Mona had rented to display the ‘real-death’ statue of Brad and Jennifer as Adam and Eve, their formalin-fixed faces fixed in smiles that revealed just how painfully they died.

The air felt tense as well as possessed by the ghosts of the classmates who attended the graduation ceremony I skipped out on. But more frightening, to me anyway, was the painting of me that Mona requested that I not look at before it was ready, the cover still over it carrying that request, in fresh ink. “Yeah, I should have stayed and faced the music,” I repeated.

“Which you didn’t compose or play,” Liz said to me in a voice that was intended to assure me. “You did what you could.”

“That’s what the private therapists I overpaid to tell me the truth said,” I replied. “And that I hope still Catholic Priest who said that though they don’t understand all of it, God would.”

Liz’s cell phone rang, a confidential text coming in. Though she didn’t show me the text, she did reveal what was in her heart. “You’re a good man, Sean.”

“Hired by ‘coincidence’ to protect fuckheads who were always sadistic assholes when stoned. Celebrated Social capitalists stars when sober,” I said as I saw from the corner of my eye Liz’s horrified face after downloading the most recent ‘for top brass eyes only’ news. “Yeah, I know. They’re ALL dead now. As of an hour ago.”

“How did you know?” Liz asked me, as Captain Thorverson.

“Eddy and Krystal’s ghosts came into the room half an hour ago,” I said, hiding some of the earthly facts behind how I knew about their impending deaths, as well as feeling something beyond ‘earthly’. “Their ghosts want to take a final look at themselves before going to...well, wherever ...” I said, referring Liz’s attention to two very unflattering paintings of the stars who were featured in the ‘sensitive’ love stories that always cleaned up in the Film Festivals. Done with thick oil paint that contained bits of what looked like flesh and hair if one examined them closely enough. Maybe derived from them, maybe from Carl, or maybe from spare parts taken from Brad and Jen.

But that didn’t matter. As did what legally and morally would be my just punishment for being a key instrument in Mona becoming ‘expressive’. I chucked, reflecting on how Light the Dark really was, or could be, gazing into the still-covered portrait of myself.

“It’s time I see what you seem to be looking at,” Liz grunted, reaching for the cloth asking, requesting then commanding me, or anyone else, to look on the other side of it.

I gently put my hand in front of Liz’s. “It’s not finished yet. Please.”

“Fuck you, and fuck her, and fuck all of this crap!” Liz grunted out, pushing me aside, then onto the ground with the kind of force I didn’t think was in her. Perhaps made more powerful by a very real biological weakness inside of me that was about to get worse.

Liz’s beet-red face turned pale when it was overtaken by horror with the first glance of what Mona had painted on the canvas. A closer examination was stopped by a dart that landed into her back, causing her to fall into my arms, her face showing no expression at all.

“What the hell did you do that for!!!” I screamed out.

“She will wake up soon,” Mona pledged as she strolled into the gallery, loading another round into her dart-gun from an oversized ammo belt containing various mixtures of color-coated chemicals that could kill, or cure, depending on her inclination. “IF I judge it appropriate for her to,” she asserted, her intellect possessed by jealous rage. “I asked you and her to not open this painting before it was ready,” she said regarding the multiple requests on the cloth in many languages. “But I suppose that vicious, dumb bitch is too stupid to be able to read English, German, Latin, Greek, Chinese, Finish and even Norse,” Mona mused with a smile.

I didn’t smile back. Mona pointed the reloaded business end of her gun at me. I held my ground, refusing to budge. Out of respect, friendship or perhaps love, she redirected the barrel of the pistol to the cloth covering the painting, pushing it aside. “You broke your word, uncovering this before it was done...But now that you did...”

The words came out of my mouth the instant I saw it. “Very...prophetic,” I said regarding the painting that showed me dying painfully, with my breath choked by the plants in Mona’s ‘Garden of Eden’ in the lab where we made blissful Passionate love, till she pulled those leaves out of my mouth, while we were still...connected to each other. “Interesting portrayal of my anatomy,” I said regarding the deteriorating organs painted below my pustule-loaded skin. “Necrotic liver. Collapsed lungs. Intestines turning into sausage links. Mushy cerebral cortex. Jaundiced eyes, confusion and regret behind them. In a garden filled with---”

Mona stopped my rambling with a kiss from her lips, onto mine. “---In a garden filled with nothing you need to concern yourself with very much longer, my love,” she continued, stroking my cheeks with the deepest and most sincere feelings. Feelings which could not be described adequately by the ‘I’ word, that I saw in the left side of her face. When she turned to the right, it was another expression that came from her facial muscles and ocular porthole. With the tip of her fingernails, she carefully whipped off a covering over her lips and tossed the wrapping into a garbage pail. “Now...So you know what just happened,” she continued as she wiped the tips of her fingers off. What was on that wrapping on my lips will turn this real body of yours into something like what that body on the canvas is. In...three and a half hours,” she said. “Five, MAYBE, assuming that you find a hospital that has what they THINK is an antidote,” she smirked.

I replied to her smirk with a solemn smile, followed by taking the protective wrapping off of MY lips, tossing it into the recycle bin, then taking a leaf out of my pocket. The kind of leaf that was

in the “Magic Garden” I accidentally fell into in Mona’s laboratory garden. Along with an extract from that leaf in a vial that I kept carefully sealed, obtained from a bust we made on ex-KGB officer, now mobster Ivan Federoff’s flower shop that was going to be used to kill off the Italian, Columbian and Chinese mobsters who wanted to move into his Brighton Beach territory. “It’s just a little ricin,” I said to Mona regarding the leaf and the extract taken from it. “Extracted from Communis plants that you put around me here in this portrait, and which you slipped onto Carl Wienburg’s skin somewhere, sometime.”

“And what lab report tells you that from!” Mona said with a confident and condescending eyeroll.

“This one,” I said, pulling out a script I found in Mona’s desk. Identical to the one that was sent, somehow, to me at the precinct for ‘my eyes only’, in German that only I could read. “In THIS script, no this Manifesto, which has a brilliant plotline and depth of character far better than Medico, the no-goodnicks die from ‘Ricin Kripsies’. Poured down the throat of the devil incarnate after he was restrained, just like Carl Weinburg. Then, the heroine in your story, AKA, you, went on to---“

“---Do what I had to do!” Mona grunted. “What life and honor required that I...” she continued, looking inside herself at the ‘why’s’ of it all, doing some perhaps last-chance moral arithmetic. “That we...” she said, the angel of introspection and love inside of her turning into the demoness of revenge and passion.

Meanwhile, Liz’s breathing was getting shallower and less frequent. Before it stopped entirely, I pulled out my service revolver, pointing it at Mona’s head. “Wake her up now, with the right antidote, NOW.”

“Only if you fuck her first,” Mona proposed. “Or I do,” she smirked. “Or he does,” she continued, looking over my right shoulder.

Through a mirror I saw a middle aged expressionless gentleman in a dark brown carrying a large briefcase walk into the gallery from one of the exit doors, his echoing footsteps in perfect cadence stopping three feet behind me.

“My Uncle Iliya,” Mona said regarding the man she talked about when she was a kid, but who I never set eyes on. The man who posed as Mister Rashim, the investor who made Eddy and Crystal degrade themselves at his house when he visited them. The man who was arrested on the raid of Enlightenment Entertainment but never was booked. And the man who pointed a gun at the back of my head, aiming it at Liz’ when I didn’t obey his request to hand over my firearm.

“Yes, my Uncle Iliya,” Mona said, but this time with joy, fondness and a sense of ‘family. “My Uncle who---“

Mona’s next words were silenced forever by two shots from Uncle Iliya’s pistol. She fell into my arms, bleeding from the inside someplace I couldn’t see and couldn’t stop, her eyes fluttering

between being closes and open. “Come on, don’t die on me!” I pleaded. “You have too much to live for. We both, together, have too much to live for, like...”

Mona smiled, waiting for what I was going to say next, but I couldn’t come up with the words.

“So, you really do love her,” Uncle Iliya stated. “So do I,” he affirmed. “Which is why I have to do this,” he continued, shooting another round into Mona’s head, ending her life while her lips were still smiling. “And because of what you did for, and to, Mona, I’m obliged to do this.” Iliya pulled out a dart from Mona’s medical ‘gunbelt’ and jabbed it into Liz’s thigh. Her breathing became deeper and more frequent, and life seemed to come back to her face. “A one-time offer,” Iliya said, looking at his watch. “Which she is to not know about. One Cop to another.”

“Why?” I asked as I lay Mona gently on a bench, focusing my attention on the living.

“Why did she want to die fighting?” Iliya asked. “Like her hero?”

“Adolf Hitler?” I said, pulling out the copy of Mein Kampf Mona had hidden in her desk.

“Ah yes, Adolf,” Uncle Iliya noted, gently stuffing Mona’s lifeless corpse into a body bag which he retrieved from his briefcase. “Fellow victim. ‘The Housepainter’. Who, if he was admitted into Art School by the cool Jews in charge of that Institution, would not have tire his fist at a career in politics. Like Washington. If he was allowed to get a commission in the British Army instead of it being denied to him because he was a colonial in 1771 he wouldn’t destroyed the British Army in 1781, and---“

“---She wrote this,” I said as I handed Mona’s movie script to the man who I feared every day as a kid but now seemed to respect as a man. “In German. And some Serbian. Some other languages I don’t recognize as well. I can make out most of it, but not all of it... Her Manifesto?”

“I’ll have it translated,” he pledged. “See what my people can do about getting it produced.”

“And your people are?” I asked.

“Employed in an Honor Enforcement Organization that no Law Enforcement Organization will, or should, ever know about,” he said, putting a set of rollers under the body bag containing Mona’s corpse.

“Specializing in?” I pressed, determined to get an answer.

“There is an expression, known and understood by people who have too much heart, too many brains, but too few effective guns.” Uncle Iliya smiled. “He who asks too many questions gets too many answers.”

“Huh?” I heard, from Liz.

I bent down and confirmed with my own two grateful eyes that she was indeed waking up from her nearly irreversible plunge into the abyss. When I looked back up again to ask more questions of Iliya, ready for any answer he could give me, he was gone.

“What just happened?” Liz asked me as she opened her eyes, then lifted up her aching head.
“What the fuck is going on?”

“It loses everything in translation,” I said, my eyes focused on Mona’s paintings, and the memories I would always have of her.

CHAPTER 21

There was so much I wanted to share with Liz, and Detective Thorverson, that I only could explain when she stopped being Liz or Captain Thorverson. And when I finally became...me, thanks to Mona. Who I still owed something to for everything that happened. And to pay that debt, I took a leave of absence that led to a resignation, and a move to the West Coast. The civilized portion of such, meaning anything NORTH of Los Angeles or San Francisco. Portland seemed like a forgotten enough place to start over again, and a place not trying to be anything other than what it was. Liz remained in New York, moving her way up the department ladder to Major. Then two weeks later fulfilling her off time with a Neurosurgeon from Boston whose career was ONLY about making what's wrong with his patient's brain boxes better. Within a month, they were married, and Liz became pregnant. The day after all of those monumentous events, I got a post card from Serbia saying 'glad to be of service' and 'hoping you are well' in that tongue.

Inspired by the movie 'Max', about an idealistic one-armed Jewish art dealer in 1920s Germany who wanted to help Adolf Hitler advance himself as an artist, I took on the responsibility of distributing as many of Mona's paintings, poems and stories as possible.

Most of my clients had to work for whatever money, love or respect they got, but such was always Mona's demographic. Few of them understood very much about what Mona was really saying with her images and poetic verse, but then again, she didn't either. Such is the fate, and blessing, of those who channel the Greatness of the gods and the Goodness of the Creator. And the true worth of Great Artists always happens after they are gone. From Van Gough, the chronically-life-tortured and Life-serving painter who sold only one painting while he was alive. To Bach, who wrote a plethora of masterpieces that were never heard in his lifetime by anyone but him till he was discovered nearly a century and a half after his death. To Melville, whose masterwork Moby Dick, containing many 'thinking' words like 'plethera', lay undiscovered by the public until 20 years after he died. To....perhaps, with enough persistence and sincerity, whoever is reading this right now.
