

Right Washed
MJ Politis
mjpolitis@yahoo.com
copyrighted, Dec, 2015
All rights reserved.

CHAPTER 1

It was a long overdue change in City Hall, as the Big Apple was getting sour to the taste and rotten to the Core in ways that the world could not handle, and which scared the shit and the crap out of even the most independent New Yorkers. It disturbed the Democrats and Republicans equally, but pleased the people, for the moment anyway. Until of course they would discover that the Iowa-born and Nebraska-raised Indy Mayor John W. White was as inappropriate to rule New York as former Mayor Ed Koch was suitable to rule the roost in Des Moines or Lincoln. But there is was, in indisputable Black and White, rather than its usual color. A picture on the front page of the Post. The tight-skinned, perfectly groomed, blonde, blue-eyed Evangelist Real Estate mogul moving into Gracey Mansion, with his four year old son, seven year old daughter, and loving wife of 10 years.

“Looks like they haven’t been hitched for more than 5 years at most,” Detective Isaac Rastovic commented as he looked at the all-smiles photo. “And those kids,” the Serbian-born, Montreal-raised veteran Cop who was always overqualified for the position the bosses assigned him continued as he laid down a fistful of change for the paper to the street vendor and two bucks for the ‘special morning coffee’ only obtainable at his stand. “The best family one can rent, Hector?”

“And own,” the sixty year old Cuban refugee replied with a wry smile. “You know what they say about J.W. White. He’ll talk at you with a smile till you say he’s right.”

“And believe the shit he says is shinola, Mister Ortega,” Rastovic replied as he stroked his mustache, then wiped the crumbs of his third morning donut from his oversized belly, which really was far more muscle than fat. On a torso that had more than its share of injuries in line of duty. “But, Mayor White has the money, and power, to clean up this city.”

“You mean sterilize it,” Ortega replied. “Which means that I will not be allowed to put my grandmother’s special rum into your winter coffee, Detective Rastovic. Or play my trumpet, even if it is for the glory of God, anywhere except a sound proof booth in my apartment.”

“THAT will never happen as long as I’m wearing a badge!” Rastovic assured him, pulling out one of Ortega’s Cuban cigars from his pocket with his left hand, igniting it with his grandfather’s lighter with his right. “This is a free country! Not like the Communist State my father smuggled me out of, at the cost of his own life!”

“Tell that to the satellite up there looking at us right now, and the civilian patrolmen with the military haircuts who are about to arrest you for smoking that cigar,” Ortega said, pointing his favorite client, and most valued protector to a patrol car pulling up in front of them. Two swaggering blue-clad GI Joe cops identical from head to toe exited the vehicle, bearing the newly issued 'happy face' decals on their lapel.

“Sir,” the fresh-from-Iraq ex-MP on the right said to Rastovic. “There is a city ordinance against toxic second hand smoke within city limits. New Mayor, new rules. Rules that, the official record shows, have decreased violent crime in this city. Rules that we all have to abide by.”

“I prefer to obey an Ordinance from a Higher Place that says I can, and should be, expressive,” Rastovic said as he took a puff from the cigar and blew it up into the air, hiding his badge. “It’ll join the smog from the smokestacks of factories across the river in Jersey.”

“This is not New Jersey, Sir,” the patrolman on the left replied as he took out his pad and started writing. “I’m going to have to give you a summons.”

“And I’m going to have to blow the next puff from this cigar, which is giving SPICE to this sterile city air, into your face, or up your ass,” Rastovic growled back at the officers. “Who’s first?” The third generation Serbian freedom fighter inhaled an inch worth of cigar, keeping the smoke in his lungs while he looked into the GI Joe 1’s featureless mug, then GI Joe 2’s pathetically generic face.

One of the officers in the blue uniform with the newly added smiling faces on their lapels reached for his tazer. The other, his radio.

Rastovic moved his finger back and forth, to both of them, deciding with his eyes who would be the lucky recipient of cigar smoke amplified by his own inner Fire. Just when he decided to let loose, he was hit on the back, the smoke from his mouth pushed over his lips through an unexpected cough.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Rastovic barked back at the man. “I was giving these soul-dead gentlemen a lesson!”

“Which they aren’t ready to get, and you aren’t ready to give,” Detective Yannis Dabaris replied, showing his badge to the patrolmen, then opening Rastovic’s coat and showing his badge to the two patrolmen. “And we have more important things to do than to start an ideological pissing match,” the all-muscle, six-foot three, short-bearded ancestor of Herculean Spartan stock continued. He showed Rastovic a picture from his phone, then sharing it with uni’s.

“Another one?” GI Joe 1 said, sounding more like a newbie, squeamish Jackie after seeing the mutilated body.

“His face looks, like, familiar, ya know?” GI Joe 2 added, looking up to Dabaris for answers as to what to do and how to do it.

“He, like, knows, you should know,” Rastavic said regarding Dabaras, the oldest 35 year old Cop he ever knew. And the most educated with regard to the way things really were. And smart enough to keep those views to himself. Or was it cowardess? Only the third generation Greek who snuck into the Police Academy with an IQ of 140 and rose up the ranks discretely and effectively knew for sure. A man who took on being a Cop not because he wanted to, but because he had to, for reasons that were never revealed. Not to the shrink who ‘Old Man’ Rastavic paid off to tell him what his younger partner said during the therapy eval sessions which were now required for everyone. Not to the hooker the over-experienced Serbian-American had hired to open up the pathologically-celebrate Yannis’ heart and mind under the sheets. And not to anyone in the bar on the night when Rastavic snuck 150 proof vodka into his partner’s 3 percent beer, along with some other tongue-loosening extracts they illegally snuck into the coffee of tight lipped suspects that sometimes actually made them tell the truth. The sixty-years-defiant Rastovic was determined to figure out what Dabaras was about. Unfortunately, it would have to wait till Yannis figured out who he was himself. And after they both figured out why the third celeb in a week vanished into oblivion, with the kind of visuals that would never be shown on Hollywood Tonight.

CHAPTER 2

“Why the fuck should I care about an over-rated actor whose only talent is to make you feel like shit,” Yannis said to himself as he looked at the mutilated corpse of All American star of stage, screen and sarcasm Kal Macon on the white carpet of his loft. Below the picture of his WASP wife Jennifer and their multi-racial children, who no one dared called ‘kids’, for fear of being crucified by the PBS Police. “And why do I have to give a shit about his girlfriend, the only one in his life who really cared about him, who’s so stupid that she’s still kind to animals, old folks and adults who haven’t grown out of being spoiled bratty kids?” Dabaris continued inside his head in a dialog he hid from the woman who found the body. A body that only hours ago belonged to the ‘soul’ of a slim hunk who had put on thirty pounds. Whose last movie was panned as a ‘flat, lifeless disappointment’, according to the Times and the Voice. “We can see he meant a lot to you, Diana, just like he did to his fans,” Yannis said to the woman who crying over Macon’s dead corpse from his mouth with a forced smile that so many bought as real.

Yannis observed his arms on Diana’s shoulder, then allowed her to be sheltered by a hug of his strong arms, then noticed her 32-years-young tear-covered head below his strong, chiseled chin. “Yeah, he’s in a better place now,” he said to the naturally blonde, blue-eyed model of Nebraska Polyanna fashioned into Soho chic. He felt her hold on to him for dear life, as he also felt more detached from life with every ‘entrustment’ she gave him. “Kal gave what he could to God and God is taking care of him now, and he’s with Jesus,” he continued, remembering the betrayals in his own life from God and Jesus, and

everyone in between. “But the worst you can say about God, and maybe everyone else created by that most desperate illusion or ultimate Reality is that He, She or It is an underachiever,” Yannis said to himself. Yeah, it was a line from Woody Allan, but morally stealable. It kept Yannis sane, and Woody immortalized. As fair enough a deal as one could get in the Big Crab Apple.

As for fairness of deals, Kal Macon definitely got the short end of the stick at this last act of his life opera. “You’re gonna find out who did this to him, right!” Diana demanded to know after the tears of grief dried up, making way for the fire of anger.

“With every fiber of our being,” Yannis promised Diana with a fatherly smile as he looked at the corpse again, double checking every detail. From Macon’s sliced femoral artery to the needlemarks in his arm, to the rope burns around his neck. “You finally did the world a solid by taking yourself out, ‘Cool Kal’,” he said in the silent voice inside his head that never stopped, thankfully. “Everything you did was about making yourself look hip and cool and everyone else look like untalented, lifeless shit, unless of course you allowed them into your in crowd club,” he continued between his ears.

The Macon doorbell rang, heralding the arrival of a middle-aged woman in a plain dress, minimal make up and a gold crucifix around her neck. Diana’s mother hugged her daughter, assuring her that Jesus would take care of everything, including giving His forgiveness. Forgiveness for Kal for all of the unchristian things he did while making his Christian-friendly movies. Forgiveness of Diana for leaving Kal alone in a depressive state that morning so she could go shopping with the money he gave her after staring into his uneaten breakfast. And forgiveness of Diana for being with a man whose divorce from his wife was still not public, or legal.

Feeling drawn back to the world outside his head, and the ongoing obligation to be someone who he was not, a task he was all too good at, Yannis looked into Macon’s eyes. There it was, ‘Cool Kal’s’ final statement and perhaps underlying pathology all along. “Fear, yeah, that’s what you were feeling at the end,” Yannis said to himself. “Maybe fear that made you solidify your cool status by making the ‘in crowd’ around you more exclusive, and putting up more clever and stronger walls around it that prevented anyone to join. Fear that you yourself were as ‘common’ as the fans around you. Fans whose admiration and worship you needed to make yourself feel valid,” Yannis continued.

But there was something that didn’t make sense about this third rash of ‘home invasions’ of celebs within the last week that was still being held back from the Press, at the new Mayor’s insistence. “Hey, Macon, you piece of untalented pretentious shit! Whose comedy was based on making everyone else feel like shit and you like shinola!” Yannis said to himself, after assuring himself that no one else was listening. “You were a coward in life. A coward who was afraid to do anything Real. And to kill yourself takes courage that you didn’t have. And a humility that I know you couldn’t fake. No, something made you kill yourself. But, no, we’ll tell the Press, when we get around to contacting them, that this was a murder. Which it probably was, you pathetic piece of

shit. But it's my job, which I accept because I have to not because I want to, to figure out who, or WHAT made you kill yourself."

Yannis could feel the world outside his ears heralding him back to reality, a dimension which was making less and less sense every day, but an illusory plane that still had to be incorporated into whatever Solution there was for the world and the creatures doomed, and blessed, be in it.

"You or me as primary on this one?" Rastovic asked Yannis, willing to accept whatever answer Dabaris said, with his eyes or his mouth.

"You know how much I hate paperwork," Yannis replied.

"And I know how much you enjoy, and need, to put your opinions about the world between the facts in every report you have to write," Rastovic shot back. "Until of course you find a publisher who wants to print what you need to write, and the world needs to read."

As usual, Rastovic was right. Though he couldn't connect to Yannis' soul, the old Serb was able to pick up on his thoughts. But, so far anyway, not his real aspirations. An okay arrangement for Yannis.

While deciding who would be officially responsible for this case, the doorbell rang. The expressionless Officer at the very guarded door letting in the even more expressionless Coroner. Doctor Rush Moore was no more than 30, but his balding head made him look more like a man in his mid forties. His fair skin, green eyes and slender small framed body made him look very contemporary, attractive to gay man, non-threatening to straight women. The pale-complexioned vegan who lived to see films about cannibal zombies took off his trench coat, unpacked his kit, and started taking pictures. Each predicated with a 'Hmm', 'interesting' and then 'cool'. Five 'cools', with escalating fascination for the mutilation of flesh, and a puzzle-solver's compulsion to figure out how they got there with complete disregard to the Soul upon which it was inflicted. A Kal Macon fan if there ever was one, who now cared less about Macon than even Yannis ever did.

"Maybe I'm the only one who really gives a shit about anyone anymore, at least in the ways that work," Yannis thought to himself. "An old reflex as useful as teats on a bull but necessary for something I suppose." As for what that 'something' was Yannis looked at the faces of those around him. The techies, the lookie-loos, and a few stray 'commoner' relatives of Macon who wandered in to shed a tear for their benefactor and torturer. All of them were distant. Dead behind the eyes, ignorant between the ears, speaking to each other in a language with Yannis understood but could no longer feel. He looked to Rastovic, seeking an answer from the Old Serb as to what was happening to him. But no answer came from the partner who became an older brother, and a friend. The only message Yannis got from Rastovic's life-tired face was "I got it too, and I'm tired of trying to fight it."

As for what 'it' was---there was no medical definition for it and certainly no NIH funded study as to its etiology, nature or cure. Lack of affect. Decreased intensity of thought. Or, as Yannis envisioned one day, from a biological perspective, the inability to evoke, embrace or respond to the endorphin of Creative Discovery, as he recalled from his ongoing struggle to be a READ as well as prolific novelist. And if this 'Dull Out Disease' hit readers, it created a world where no one read. And if it infected enough readers, writers who would give up the passion-infused endeavor of writing. Then writers who would stop thinking of new ideas. Then writers who would stop thinking entirely. "Impossible," Yannis yelled to himself as the cascade downward progressed yet again, catapulting him into the abyss of learned helplessness. "As long as there is the possibility to Create, there would be creators and those who they could share their creations with," he rationalized as he looked at the collection of leatherbound books on Macon's shelf written by Plato, Socrates, Aristophanes, Chaucer et al. Books that survived the Dark Ages in Europe where Monks laboriously copied books from antiquity so that reading would not be lost. Behind those books lay the recently published but under-appreciated novel, '999 AD' about a monk who was one of the only copiers of books in the Monastery who could read them, or write his own. "Yeah, as long as one person dares to innovate, Innovation will not die," Yannis said to himself as he looked at the books, and the smiling face of a scholar-monk on a Fresco behind them.

Yannis approached them to get a closer look and feel, but got exactly what he was NOT looking for when his hand touched the leatherbound classics, finding that they were plastic covers wrapped around plastic blocks. The insightful and very human '999 AD' novel was marked 'rejected for production, but useful for asswipe' by Macon's hand. And the fresco was a revised imitation, the figures behind the monk indulged in sexual deviations that started with golden showers and catapulted downward.

Yannis could feel himself going into his head, not able to come out again. Either climbing up to the stars or falling into the hole. Maybe they were the same thing? He didn't know. But he did know that he had to respond to the next visitor to the room, who rang the doorbell, twice, not four times like the pre-selected individuals who were supposed to be allowed entry. The sound of clanking metal was heard from the hallway, perhaps one gun being braced for firing. Then another three clanks. Then another ring of the bell, after which the visitor turned his head, revealing to the peep hole nothing but a black cloth soaked with blood.

Yannis led the team to the door, motioning for them to take positions on either side of the door with guns drawn, prepared to disarm whoever was on the other side. He nodded to Rastovic to use the talents in the career that enabled him to work his way through college, and perhaps he could use for pocket change for his retirement in two months. "Who is it?" the Old Serb asked in a voice that sounded exactly like Kal Macon in 'The Forgiven', except that it had a quality of heart to it.

"Special delivery from Santa, Mister Macon," the visitor said in a young, arrogant tone. "Just in time for your---"

Before the black-clad intruder could finish his sentence, he was pulled into the room, pushed to the floor, and everything from his hand taken from him. “Santa Pharmacia,” Yannis read aloud on the brown bag taken from the bicycle delivery dude with a black shirt stained with tomato sauce, who was armed with nothing except an ipod and smart phone. He opened up the bag, retrieving from it two large vials, filled to the brim.

“That weed is legal,” the Afro-American delivery man said with a very White voice regarding the one labeled ‘Cannabis extract, for pain and glaucoma;’ with Macon’s name on it. “Nothing unusual,” Yannis thought as he sniffed it, finding it to be exactly what it said it was. But in the other vial, there was something else. A drug the seasoned Detective didn’t recognize by name, color or smell. “Hydrooxydi...whatever. It’s for his high blood pressure,” the delivery dude whose BP had hit nearly 200 by now said. “Like the label says.”

True enough, the label on the delivery from the seemingly very valid pharmacist said ‘for hypertension’. And the ID for the delivery man seemed valid as well, to the touch and according to the pictures. But as for the name....

“Irving Rabinowitz?” Detective Isaac Rastovic barked out, raising his overly bushy left eyebrow.

“My mother named me Irving so I could gain easier entrance into Harvard,” the delivery bro replied. “And my father was a Jew who underwent several cultural and theological experiments,” he continued in an even more generic upper-caste White Academicese. “And Master Macon!” he yelled to the other room, in Plantation Nigger diction. “Tell these Blue Coated Yankee Policemen dat Black folk do matter. And that ya’ll always give me a generous tip if’n I get yer medicinal to ya’s on time.”

“Tell him yourself,” Rastovic smirked as he proceeded towards the door blocking the living room, opened it, and gave Irving a full view of ‘Master Macon’s’ lifeless body.

“What the fuck happened?” Rabinowitz muttered from shaking lips, his black face taking on a pale shade of shock.

“It will be your honor and privilage to help us find out, discretely and completely,” Yannis said with a gentlemanly bow, cutting off his partner from saying something a lot more crude, and direct.

“Whatever you wanna know,” Rabinowitz replied. “Kal Macon was my best customer,” he continued. “And a friend. Who promised to pass along my spec script to his contacts in LA.”

“And the title of the spec script is?” Yannis inquired, feeling drawn to the question by an instinct that was thankfully still not confined by logic.

“Murder on Third Avenue’,” Black as Spades Irving mumbled with an ironic sigh, still shocked at seeing a dead body in real life. And no doubt having to re-write that fictional story with some real facts, and painfully real human emotions.

Through the ethers, Yannis could hear, between his ears, music accompanying the visual of Isaac’s investigative face and awakening, though painful, soul. Brilliant music that was beyond any notes that could be written by any of the masters. Brilliant not because of its gimmicks or even structural novelties, but because of its sincerity, and heart, and Fire underneath it. Channeled by Uma Olin, the most intelligent player in any orchestra she had the misfortune of being confined by.

“Rap-soda in E minor,” Yannis recalled regarding the name of the tune the still-long-haired 30 year old busker played on her violin at the same time every day in front of the Brooklyn Brownstone coffin Yannis called home. Uma was not owned by anyone or anything except her music, and that music was beyond description, mixing genres in ways that made them all seem to be coming from the same Source. A Source that had ‘Alive’ in every note, which made you not only feel, but think.

Yannis had put whatever he could into her open violin case, but she refused to accept anything more than a five dollar bill. Last year, she did accept his gift of a turkey on thanksgiving and a ham for Christmas. She seldom spoke more than four words at a time to Yannis, answering his questions about life, death and everything in between with music. It got the Life-tired Cop’s brain to think, and got his soul to feel. And it opened his eyes to people who were bad for him, very much including three girlfriends who hated Uma’s music, who turned out to be women who hated what Yannis really was as well.

Yannis self-observed himself smiling, recalling what Uma would play at a time like this. And in a city where her sharing music on the open street was becoming as illegal as selling crack in at the bus station. On two occasions in the last month, Yannis had her summons for ‘disturbing the peace’ torn up. On the third, he paid off the judge with cash on the barrelhead to insure her release.

He looked out of Macon's window at the sky, and the music-less traffic that hummed along with a monotonous, soul-killing undulating ‘note’. He wondered where Uma would be tonight. The next phone call informed him of such, all too clearly.

CHAPTER 2

There are many ways of dying, the worse of which is to be still breathing while it happens, for the rest of your life. Such was what Uma was experiencing while under sedation in the psych ward at Belveiw. Her eyes dead, defeated and hopeless. Her dry lips muttered ‘I am garbage, I am shit, I should die’, in a melody which was as catchy to the ear as deadly to the Spirit. Her left forearm was badly bruised and bloodied, the inner portions of her thighs swollen, three lines of sutures across her neck.

“How did it happen?” Yannis asked Anna Tomaseli, the most trusted newby detective on the Police Force next to Rastovic, and one of the only woman under or for than matter over 35 the forty-five going-on-ninety Yannis felt was worthy of bringing kids into a world already overpopulated by idiots or assholes.

“Uma was in a patch of woods in Central Park, playing her fiddle to the squirrels gathering under her shivering toothpick legs, and two very elderly couples on benches 30 feet away from her, when Mayor White’s new ‘Harmony Patrol’ Cops came over and remaindered her that she was in violation of the new ‘Acoustical Pollution’ Act,” Tomaseli replied as she loosened the collar botton on her blouse, not caring how many demerits she would get for revealing the skin top of the sternum or the hard-earned sweat on it. “The boars in blue asked her to stop playing, which she didn’t. Then, according to the old folks tapping their feet and swaying their hands together on the nearby bench, and a homeless hobo who ran away before I could get his full statement.” Anna lamented with a volcano of anger behind her own eyes, taking out her notepad from her pocket and a pen from under her flaming red, sloppily-combed hair. “One of the Harmony Patrol goons told her that she was an untalented piece of shit because she wasn’t being paid to play her violin with the symphony, and the other said that what she was playing was simplistic, hoaky, childish and, above all ‘uncool’.”

“A critique Uma fended off many times with some of the most brilliant, edgy, vitality-infused and HUMOUS music I ever heard,” Yannis said with lips locked into a vicariously-proud smile.

“Not this time,” Anna replied, reaching into an evidence bag, and showing Yannis the remnants of her violin. The frame broken, the strings hanging on the blood-soaked stem of the instrument.

“The Harmony Patrol used Uma’s violin as a battering ram against her!” Yannis grunted.

“Worse,” Anna answered. “She used it on herself, then tried to strangle herself with the strings.” She looked at the suture lines on Uma’s neck, loosening up with each desperate breath the young violinist took. “I don’t know how deep the cuts went into her muscles and spine,” the childless Cop said with the compassion of a mother and detachment of a surgeon. “Maybe a self-imposed mercy killing that...well...sometimes IS necessary?” Anna continued, stopping herself yet again before assessing euthanasia by one's own hand, or by another.

“The question is, how deep did those cuts in Uma's skin go into her Soul?” Yannis thought, but didn’t say, noticing two blue-coated members of the Mayor’s new Harmony Patrol behind him. In the same outfit as the goons who tried to take away Isaac Rastovic’s hard earned right to smoke a cigar in the City he had given his life to serve, and protect. But such remarks were considered not only unprofessional, but dangerous. “If I say what I really think and feel, it could land me in a bed next to you,” Yannis said

to Uma with his eyes. “You never learned how to hide what you are and to forfeit your God Given Calling for a comfortable slot with responsible citizens.”

“No, I didn’t,” Uma said with her eyes to Yannis, the music behind her eyes silenced, thanks to another injection of ‘anti-anxiety’ drug that as soon it was administered, made her painfully aware of the agony she was in. And completely unable to do anything about it.

“What can I do?” Yannis asked Uma, taking hold of her hand, lifting up the wrists which were now covered with bandages, and chained to the bed with hard, unbreakable metal chains. “What can I do to help?”

“Sing me a song,” Uma replied, in Greek. One of the only phrases in Yannis’ parent’s language that she ever could remember, or pronounce so that it could be understood.

“What kind of song?” Yannis asked, in Greek, then in English after realizing that Uma’s knowledge of any tongue other than her own, and of course the language of music, was severely limited.

“A death song,” she replied, in perfectly pronounced Greek. “While you,” she continued, exerting all of her strength to point her index finger to Yannis’ service revolver.

Yannis was no stranger to being instrumental in discretely administering the 'final solution' in hospital cases where it was the only humane option. And in the line of duty, he had put more than his share of sick dogs and hit by car deer to sleep. But something in Yannis said that it was not Uma's time yet. She still had a Purpose to serve, which was connected to music. Maybe the music in him? A selfish thought, but one which felt valid, and sound.

Yannis’ musical abilities were as developed as Uma’s skill using a smart phone or finding someone worthy of her Life Aspirations on social media. But he did his best, with his tone-deaf voice, to sing a song he remembered from his childhood from his Spartan grandfather. The lyrics were heroic and defiant, promising Uma that she would die a glorious death that would make an impact in the world that would live forever. The music was framed as an assuring ‘all is well with the world and with us’ song from a father to a daughter, using a melody Yannis recalled from one of the many ‘street concerts’ she played for free. For him, her inner Soul and any other Soul who had the courage or intelligence to join in.

Uma understood the music, and the words, and just as she was about to believe them, another demon took her over. A deadness took over her face. The kind of dull affect that afflicted the crowds of people going to and from work who passed by her daily, not noticing or caring that she was playing for them. Then, worse of all, a smile came to her face. The ‘happiness’ of stress-free submission.

Yannis tried to break through that wall of lifelessness with song, then word describing the song. “Feel something, Feel the music.”

“The music is just sound now,” Uma slurred out from her dry lips and pale cheeks.

“So, the medication seems to be working,” a George Clooney clone said as he popped his head into the doorway of the room. Clad in his clean, pressed white lab coat, the doctor examined all of Uma’s vitals. “Heart, lungs, neuro-reflexes, all normal. Blood pressure finally within normal limits, 120 over 80,” he said with pride and an ‘all is well’ smile that made him look a lot like Mayor White. With an optimistic, stressless voice inflection that was identical to the new Mayor who was bringing Sin City back to its moral roots. “I’ll have to keep your daughter here for another few days, of course,” he said as he turned to Yannis. “Regulations and precautions,” he said, after which his lips became glued in a happy, country smile. “And I have to get your signature on some documents,” he continued, handing over a clipboard to Yannis.

“Regulations and precautions, yeah,” Yannis replied, sounding as official as he could, while looking at Anna as to what he should do about it all.

Anna threw a pen in his direction, nodding ‘yes’ to all of the questions he was asking her. Yannis looked over the legalese writing regarding admitting his daughter into the hospital, assigning Uma a new last name, on paper as well as within his heart.

“Does her mother get to visit as well?” Yannis asked, regarding Anna.

Anna's lips tightened after hearing the 'm' word. Like they did every time she gathered info from a witness who saw the way the way Anna looked at her kids with a wide smile, then got tight lipped and official when said witness asked Anna if she had any kids of her own.

Knowing that silence was the last thing this doctor should hear, particularly from Anna, he filled in the gaps for her.

“Yeah, Doc. Me and my wife want to see that our daughter gets the best of everything, most particularly assurances that we love her, no matter what she does, or did,” Yannis said.

“Assuming no other medical complications occur, Mister Dabaris,” the Doctor assured Yannis after looking at his signature.

“Detective Dabaris,” Yannis asserted, pointing to his badge as two orderlies came in and escorted Uma out of the room. An Uma who was converted by something that had gotten into her, or someone who had gotten to her, into being one of the walking dead. Whose misery Yannis vowed to stop, by means of finding a medical or 45 calibre cure. But not without awakening her from the slumber that had been imposed upon her first.

CHAPTER 3

There was one thing that die-hard New Yorker Yannis wished he could do with his naturally well-muscled body which required nothing except intense exercise of his brain to keep in condition. And it wasn't to pound through a wall of Washington Redskin behemiths guarding the quarterback who is about to throw a touchdown pass that will cost the NY Giants the Eastern Conference championship. Nor was it to barge into a terrorist cell operated by coked-up wannabe ragheads and pound them into the dirt, three by three. No, his most formidable enemies were half a foot shorter than him, with low Iqs and big egos who wielded political power because everyone under them let them do so. The personification of such stood before him at the first in a long string of Christmas office parties after the Manhattan College production of 'Scrooged'. "So, tell me what you think about my kid Saul playing the lead. He really nailed it, didn't he? Made you laugh, cry and think about life death and everything in between, right?" Captain Irving Horowitz said from behind a big, fat, smoking cigar.

"Saul is his father's son," Yannis said with a smile that made born-to-administrate-but-never-do Captain Irving smile with pride. "Your ultra-cool, super-hip kid's performance made me want to barf, turned my stomach inside out and made me think about where you could hire a metaphysical neurosurgeon to take out his ego and put some sincerity into his fat, pretentious head," the burnt-out forty-year 'doer' thought behind a tight smile. "He was playing to himself, for himself, and fake as hell. Starting with that English accent which was as artificial as the plastic boobs on Saul's Goy golddigger girlfriend."

"He's getting written up in the Times tomorrow," Captain Irving said with an even prouder smile, pointing to the up and coming 25 year old scribe of that journalistic commentary. "Oliver Wendell showed it to me. A great, real writer writing raving reviews about a great actor! A great day for the art of writing and the craft of performance, right?"

"One hand feeds the other," Yannis replied through a smile, after which as he took another sip of the watered down punch, turning it into a gulp while he thought, "Oliver Wendell is a pothead who's being supplied with dope stolen from your evidence room after your 'say no to drugs' son Saul got entry into it while doing 'research' for his new novel, which he never wrote and never intends to, and if he does, you, Captain Irving, are going to be cast in the role of baffon, idiot and asshole and won't even know it."

Yannis looked at the proud father of his 'cool to be cruel and better to be manipulative' son with pity. How little did Captain Irving know about his own family, or himself. And it wasn't as if there were any Rouge Scholars in the collection of those happy holidayers who were experts in assessing the human condition. Just after Captain Irving was called away, the urchins crawled over to him one by one like chlymidia climbing up the vagina tracts of a ten-John-a-night lower East Side hooker. Starting with the Queen clam.

“So, how are you doing after the breakup with Amy?” Vikkee Weller, with two k’s, two ee’s, said as she laid her jewelry-overloaded, slender, never-lifted-a-dish-in-her life left hand on Yannis’ solid shoulder.

“Things happen, we move on, better for her, me and the kids,” he smiled. “The bitch stole my heart, then money, and for kicks and giggles brainwashed the only good things that came out of whatever was between us,” he growled inside his re-twisted gut.

“If you ever want to come by my shop, for a free haircut,” she said looking at his overgrown crew cut. “Getting a little fussy around the ears there,” she continued as she stroked the tufts of hair hanging on the tips of his ears.

“I’m growing it out in case I have to get assigned to duty Upstate, where it snows cold white instead of mushy grey,” he mused as he discretely pulled his head away from her hand. “Why should I let the bitch who ‘gossiped’ about me to Amy have access to any sharp metal objects she could use on me,” he thought. “What do I look like, an idiot? Yeah, probably I do, to you, you ignorant asshole.”

“You look...good,” Vikkee said, eyeing him his un-shined shoes to his still-no-receding hairline.

“Yeah, you do too,” Yannis replied, looking straight into her eyes. “Especially with that ‘for rent or lease to the highest bidder’ sign on your forehead,” he thought. “But I understand. All that work you did to get that ‘natural blonde’ hair color must have fried your brain. But be sure to keep those bangs long and luscious, since they probably hide the lobotomy scars.”

Vikkee looked past Yannis’ head to his right, then his left. “I have to say hello to some people I have to make nice to. You know how it is,” she said by way of explanation.

“Yeah, I do,” Yannis said, thankful that she, and everyone else in the room, had no idea what he was really thinking behind the painfully accurate words.

“Well, take care of yourself,” Vikkee said as she patted Yannis on the shoulder and sauntered behind his back to a group of better dressed gentlemen.

“Take care of everyone else by not breeding with those assholes,” Yannis thought. “Then again, stupid people have nothing to do but fuck each other and themselves, resulting in more babies. Who grow up to be kids, that I have to take care of because their sperm and egg donors don’t, and can’t,” he heard from the voice inside his head. A voice that kept getting louder and louder as the sounds of the crowd became more distanced. Then faded into irrelevant oblivion when they started to laugh at each other’s jokes, and their own.

A mirror caught Yannis’ eye. “So, what are you looking at?” he silently said to the reflection. “If you’re such a winner, what are you doing being ruled by and hanging

around all of these losers who invent games they think matter, which make them feel like winners, till they have to look at the Real scoreboard?"

The reflection answered with the same reply it always had.

"Yeah, I know," Yannis said to himself, focusing on his muscular arms and still strong legs, then the sport-jacket that thankfully was not accompanied by a tie. "I'm guiltier than any of them are. Not because I've done any harm to anyone, but because I've done so little with all the tools between the ears and below the neck that I've been blessed with. Or no, cursed with. Cursed because I haven't had a good laugh in months, and see the futility and meaninglessness of every joke that's around me. And every joker," he continued, treating himself to a glance of the inferior species of humanoids around him. And reflecting on how rare his own species was. A species that didn't include his three kids, at least not after they got old enough for their Bible-thumping 'sensible' mother Amy to brainwash them. But a species that, so far anyway, still included his partner in dealing with slime, Isaac Rastovic. And, if he could spring her from the nuthouse, his new 'legal' daughter Uma. And if he could bash through the walls that modern psychiatry had built which separated Uma's Soul from her brain. Walls that he could feel in everyone around him at the party, and, as he painfully recalled, most every face he encountered on the street on the way there. And walls that he felt most painfully inside his own aching head.

He looked at the glass of punch in his hand, then the enlarged pockets of the Cops, Clergyfolk and Politicians around him which no doubt contained more powerful mind-altering substances than the ethanol mixed with cool-aid. "If only that was the answer," he said to himself, feeling that the words would mean far more than he was able to know now.

CHAPTER 4

The mechanic left the decision as to what to do about his car after it wouldn't start for the third time that week to its owner, who stood outside the oil-stained Astoria garage bay considering his options while dining on a complimentary fresh donut from the shop, which was at least a day old. It wasn't so much that he needed a car to get around, but being able to have one to do so gave Yannis a sense of freedom. "Yeah, freedom to get stuck in a traffic jam during rush hour, which is now between 6 AM and 11, then again at 4 to ten, or on a sports event night, midnight," Rastovic said as Yannis looked at the list of things wrong with his Taurus station wagon, a loyal blue beast which was well used when he was still with Amy, living in New Rochelle. A beast that was supposed to last forever, or at least a decade beyond its birth. "Did a computer say that all this was wrong with it, or an actual human being?" Rastovic said as he looked over the list of problems, extending from the top of page to the bottom, revealing a five figure repair bill, if such were to be attempted.

“I miss the days when the laws of physics and the mother nature governed what happened under the hood instead of a computer,” Yannis said to Rastovic. “But, we’re married to those cyber companions now. From the pacemaker in your chest to the micro-stimulator someone’s now developing to insert into my anus to tell me when I have to take a fart in my old age.”

“All by necessity,” Rastovic said, patting his chest, confirming that the ticker under it was still working. “We can live forever if we replace all of our own body parts with computer-controlled gizmos, ya know.”

“Yeah, at a price a lot higher than this car bill,” Yannis smirked. “And even if we do live forever, with artificial hearts, artificial rectums and artificial stomachs, that probably means we’ll only be able to eat artificial foods.”

“Not as long as I’m still alive,” Rastovic barked out, having been brought back to his senses. Those senses were aroused by a shift of the wind which blew a whiff of fresh chili from the ‘Greasy Spoonful’ across the street, one of the few eating establishments in Astoria that were not chains owned by a central office in Chicago or a Greek Godfather Upstate somewhere. Its owner, a portly twenty-nine year old with a round, clean shaven mid-face opened the door and put a big, fat, impossible not to notice sign on the sidewalk. “Carl’s Chile wake up breakfast burito. If it doesn’t wake up your soul, your money back.”

“Carl Ellisman,” Yannis said of the Saskatchewan-born, Winterpeg trained Kanuk who offered samples to passers by, inviting them in to experience the newest item on the ever-changing and hopefully evolving menu. “His still thinking that the way to World Enlightenment is through its stomach,” Yannis smiled.

“I hope he’s given up trying to find that magic dish that turns an asshole into a saint,” Rastovic said.

“It’s still possible to eat what you want to become,” Yannis said. “For instance, Salmon is a powerful aphrodisiac, especially the way Carl cooks it.”

“It was what Kristina was wearing, or more accurately, what she wasn’t wearing that night that you set me up with her that made me go back to her place for coffee and talk about the Neighborhood Watch for Seniors that you were all pumped up about setting up,” Rastovic shot back.

“Who you made the unofficial grandma to your grandkids, Isaac.” After three more dinners that Carl cooked. “With very legal ingredients.”

“Yeah, ‘legal’ ingredients,” Rastovic said as he looked at the pharmacy to his left, pointing Yannis’ attention to the lifeless pharmacists behind the counter looking so procedural.. “I don’t know any drug that passes over those counters that makes you smarter, more compassionate, or wiser. Do you?”

“If I did, we would be having this conversation in my castle in Crete, with twenty functioning limos in the garage behind me,” Yannis smiled.

“I’m fucking serious,” the always thinking but seldom heard Serbian born detective grunted. “Bad drugs make people more effective, but not smart. Not really smart.”

“What do you mean by that?” Yannis inquired.

“It’s like this, Weedhopper,” hunch-backed five foot seven Isaac replied, putting his hand on Yannis’ shoulder towering shoulder. “Any crack, horse or weed addict can figure out ways to bring in two to three C notes a day to supply their habit, and still pay rent, utilities and their mistress’s shopping bills, is that not so?”

“Yeah, that is so,” Yannis replied, feeling like the dumb-ass student in Plato’s Republic, honoring the ancient Greek Philosopher as well as the contemporary Serbian Professor. “Addicts have to be smarter than non-addicts to get what they need.”

“And as you point out, need creates ability. Without feeling cold, and yearning to be warm, you are less motivated to find a way to build a fire. Is that not so?”

“Yeah, it is so, but” Yannis said, then stopped himself. “So, what’s your point? What’s your current life agenda given these questions you’re asking me, and yourself?”

Rastovic pondered the question for a ten seconds, then just when his student felt like he stumped the professor, the old Serb replied with absolute confirmation. “To stuff my face with Carl’s chili and if you want to join me, great. I’m buying. But no matter how much I fart later, no bum fucking my ass, loverboy. Okay?”

“Very okay,” Yannis smiled.

With that, Rastovic marched across the street with his mind on food, and to take his partner’s mind away from the dilemma about his prematurely dying Taurus as well as the obsession with figuring out who, or what, was behind Macon’s suicide and Uma’s attempt to do so. “Maybe Canadian spiced chile would give me the smarts to figure out how to fix a city gone stupid,” Yannis said to himself.

The cynic in him began to start in on Canadian digs, like that salt and pepper were exotic spices in Canada. And that you could tell who the Canadians were at the dance clubs because they were the ones whose feet weren’t moving. And the suckers who apologize for your drink spilling on their chest or and their girlfriend's boobs after YOU rammed into both of THEM. “Maybe I can give the cynic inside of me the morning off,” Yannis told himself. “Experience what life is like from Carl’s perspective. A chef who wants to give his patrons a meal that will make them smile, and who seeks to create a magic meal that will bring together. Yeah, like the Coca Cola commercials that make you think that

if the whole world drinks a glass of that still-secret-formula soft drink together, the world will come together 'in perfect harmony'."

The chili burritos gave pleasure to the tongue that was well beyond what the nose could have ever imagined. Yannis expressed his appreciation to the chef with a big smile. Isaac expressed his with a thumbs up and musically fortissimo fart from his ass. Carl turned on the radio, to the station HE liked. "Conspiracy AI" had one of those voices that made anyone think, and offended everyone who didn't, no matter what conspiracy he was talking about.

Carl wasn't surprised when most of his diners finished their meal quickly, or put them into folded napkin. Some of them left leaving whatever they owed for the check on the table, most of them didn't.

"That's alright. The minute we think that the most important thing we do during the work day is to make money, we're done for, aye?" the barely-legal Canuk said to his two favorite diners as he delivered to them the excess food not touched by the vacated customers to Isaac and Yannis' table. "Conspiracy AI knows that."

"And he's getting paid three times more an hour than you ever got, Carl," Yannis thought to himself, but didn't say.

Meanwhile, Conspiracy AI ranted on about survivalists, to the backdrop of 'This is the End'. Very much with sense of finality in his voice that Yannis had not heard before. But maybe it was just the music that gave AI's usually defiant voice an Existentialist doom flavor. The Doors anthem, This is the End, reminded Yannis about watching Apocalypse Now when he turned 13, with his first real girlfriend. To Isaac, it seemed to bring back memories of being a voluntary recruit in Vietnam when he was not much older than that.

"Survivalists, are always paranoid about something," AI proposed, more like a lecturer than a DJ. "Every month, they say that the end is a few weeks around the corner. These American Patriots rush to the grocery store and buy up another case of canned 'Made in China' baked beans and fruit cocktail. Fill another corner of their basement and bedroom with jugs of water, throwing away still-unread books that are taking up space. And of course, drive down to Virginia to buy another automatic weapon that can handle a magazine of fifty rounds of bullets that they claim they need for hunting, in keeping with of course their second amendment right to bear arms, along with their God given right to get drunk, hammered and stoned before going out into the woods," he said. "Then they go on about how few real heroes there are in America. Heroes being, of course, ONLY people who enlist in the Army, Police Force or Vigilante Neighborhood Watches and intentionally put themselves into places where it's kill or be killed. And anyone who hasn't taken up arms, fists or knives against anyone else is a coward. Especially the sheltered eggheads who use their brains to get educated, or to figure out ways to resolve differences between people using peaceful and mutually beneficial arrangements, aye?"

“Spoken as a true Canadian,” Carl said with pride. “Yes, Canada. A country that has an Army that keeps the Peace, and where everyone gets health care depending on need, not want, or the ability to pay for it. And a country that’s years ahead of the US in education, with prisons filled ONLY with people who deserve to be there, for REAL crimes.”

Isaac Rastovic’s face turned beet red, preparing himself to re-educate Carl about how ‘Canadian Justice’ was far different for Indians, aka ‘First Nations Aboriginals’, brutally administered by Mounties who used and sold more dope than any of their American counterparts. But before the self-made Serbian-American could come to the defense of his adopted country, something Al said brought his attention to the radio speaker.

“Before we talk about how to defend ourselves, we should talk about what we are defending. Are we defending people, civilization, the creative products of civilization? And is fighting to the end to defend ourselves merely a biological instinct that sadistically keeps us living lives we endure rather than enjoy, or derive fulfillment from?” the once popular AM radio DJ now exiled to internet-access radio proposed.

“He’s got a point,” Yannis said as Al let the extended instrumental of ‘This is the End’ continue.

“We do what we have to do,” Rastovic said. “And where there’s life there’s always hope,” he asserted. “And something to pass on to the next generation.”

“Like you, when your father fought the Communists, then pretended to sell out to them, so you could come to America?” Yannis replied.

“And my grandfather died fighting the Kaiser!” Rastovic proclaimed, with pride, completely devoid of sorrow.

“So that Hitler could rise up from the ashes,” Yannis found himself thinking, but not saying. European politics was always more complicated than any American could really understand, and Yannis’ parents were born in America, the only thing Greek about him being his name. Truth be told, any Black Latino working in the kitchen of a Greek diner knew more of the Hellenic tongue than Yannis ever comprehended. And being an American, there was something in Yannis’ environmentally-inflicted DNA that made him unable to learn any language other than American English. A price to be paid for living in the most powerful country in the world, perhaps.

But there was something that made Yannis think deeper than he wanted to, or was prepared to. It was the mention of the most misunderstood word in any language. “Courage,” Yannis said to himself inside his head as he looked at a dark-skinned, elderly Latino man with bleeding and blistering fingers polishing one of new ‘White’s Right’ trash cans outside the window. Most probably one of the ‘allowable illegals’ who put eighty cents out of every dollar he over-earned to send back to his family in Mexico. “Courage. The thing that heroes have. The thing that I never had to see if I have because

I was always smart enough to avoid a fight, or armed enough to not have anyone start one with me.”

Yet again, the issue of all issues was unresolved. Though Yannis was the best marksman in the Precinct and one of the top ten one hand-to-hand combatants in the gym, he never had to use any of those skills on the street. A curse and a blessing. As was his ability to hear Conspiracy AI speak from a place the fearless Conspiracy Guru never accessed, or shared anyway.

“We talk about fighting bad guys to preserve life, but are we really alive these days?” Conspiracy and no doubt now mad AI offered whatever listeners he still had. There’s less violent crime on the streets and more money in average Joe’s pockets in this City than ever, but less life. As if our bodies are saved, and well fed, but our Souls have been sterilized. Sanitized and pulverized by---”

The discourse ended with a gunshot, and Jim Morrison’s voice singing ‘This is the End’. It ended with the known but seldom understood or appreciated, ‘music is your only friend, until the end.’ Then---silence.

“Interesting dramatic schtick,” Rastovic commented.

“And ominously timed call,” Yannis said, looking at the display on his phone. It was Anna, reporting another celebrity taking his own exit from life. This time, Conspiracy AI, shot and hung, outside the window of the apartment which was the base of his pirate radio station.

“Something wrong?” Rastovic asked Yannis. “Besides an illegal DJ who’s making everyone paranoid about what interests him, and not telling people what and who they should REALLY be scared shitless of?”

The voice in Yannis’ head had no reply. He had never formulated a clever and satirical dig aimed at Isaac Rastovic. The American’s American who considered himself a Serb before anything else was always right, in his own way of course. Always somehow part of the solution rather than any problem. But there was another problem at hand that Yannis had to deal with now, and for the first time in his professional life, he had do it alone. Particularly when Anna texted him ‘come alone, please!’.

CHAPTER 5

The very well-fed body had hung out of the 14th story window, ignored by the traffic of people on their way to work, play and endeavors in between. But to be fair, unless one was looking up at the sky, and could see through the trees recently planted into the concrete of Flushing, your weren’t able to see it. “So, why and how did you get the call?” Yannis asked Anna.

“A groupie hanging out on the street,” the 140 IQ red-haired Italian bombshell who looked more like a hooker than a Cop replied as she sipped her coffee from inside the apartment. “Who who was sending signals up to the sky out on her phone for instructions about how to save the planet, trying to reach the Mothership as it was passing by.”

“Mamacraft, that’s always there, for those who need it,” Yannis said from the side of his mouth to Anna, noting from the corner of his eye an ammonia-smelling forty-something woman at the other side of the room, promising the two cats licking the fresh blood on the floor that they would be very happy in her place with forty other feline roommates. “Did the crazy cat lady see anyone suspicious entering Conspiracy Al’s building?” Yanni whispered to Anna.

“Some close lipped Greys, a few snarky Whites and a few orbs with gender neutral auras,” Anna replied in a loud voice. “But from this planet and dimension, no one unusual.”

The cat lady continued her own dialog with the felines, slipping down or perhaps up into a language Yannis that sounded very otherworldly.

“And how long was she waiting for the Mother Ship outside of his window?” Yannis asked Anna.

“An hour or so, in earth time that is,” the only woman and Cop whose intelligence synched up with Yannis said. He threw another sip of coffee down her throat, and took another generous chomp from a cinnamon-apple donut retrieved from a complimentary bag intended to bring back to the Squad Room.

Anna offered a glazed chocolate to Yannis, which he accepted with gratitude, but didn’t take a bite from until he turned to her and asked, “And why how is it that YOU got a call from this crazy cat lady before anyone else did?”

“I helped her deal with some domestic situations with her ex’s,” she related with clenched teeth, and down-turned eyes. “Certain things needed to be communicated to him. And when he threatened to call the Humane Society and make her give up her cats, she...”

“...did what she had to do to defend herself, and her feline kids?” Yannis interjected. “And you did to protect yourself and what you valued from that ex-boyfriend who---”

“---is ancient history, and gone from my life!” Anna barked back. “And who NO one has to know about except me, in my nightmares!” she asserted. “Capische?” she continued regarding the story she half-told to Yannis in the car on the way home from doing very assigned guard duty at John White’s Election party after someone slipped

something into Anna's obligatory glass of champagne delivered to her in the hallway outside the ballroom.

Yannis recalled the 'law vs. justice' dilemma that he encountered years ago with Amy. An attempt to make what was wrong right that backfired. And could land him in jail. Then again, everyone was guilty of committing a misdemeanor or felony every day if the letter of the law was applied to their situations. Particularly to people like himself and Anna.

"Whose gonna take care of the funeral arrangements?" the crazy cat lady with the mismatched, fecal stained, and urine-smelling Annie Hall outfit said with wide open eyes. "I know that Al wanted a Viking's funeral. On City Island. A boat going out into the water while everyone listens to Sigfried's Funeral Music at full volume."

"Or 'This is the End' played on his radio show?" Yannis suggested.

"It takes courage to commit suicide, you know," the cat lady said with a schoolteacher's nod. "And he's in a better place now."

"Or wandering around as someone with a hyperactive cranium who's not understood by anyone, not knowing he's a ghost," Yannis dared to consider, but did not say. A short story idea that he thought about writing up, fearing that if he did, it would be true. Most particularly about himself. But just as Yannis was about to feel his inner eyes fixed upon imaginary realms, he focused those ocular portholes on the world of forms. Most particularly the desk from which Conspiracy Al had done his final broadcast.

The notes he made for himself were barely readable, one in ten words being decipherable, those words giving no hint as to what the others meant. His 'to do or you are not allowed to eat, shit or breath' lists beyond today were empty. But there was something else that caught Yannis' attention that felt relevant. Next to Al's desk were DVDs of his favorite movies, Goodfellas, Jeramiah Johnson, Last Temptation of Christ, Blazing Saddles and Howard the Duck. The always applauded but seldom really understood DJ pulled a line or image from those films to explain life as it is and should be on most of his broadcasts. But written on the covers of those no doubt overly played DVDs, with dates, were comments like "just pixels, again", "flat today", "flatter than last week" and "colors that now look black and white." The same applied to novels he had read and quotes, written by Katanzakis, Steinbeck, Tolstoy and Chekov. "Words with no relatability anymore" and other indicators that Al had lost the ability to suspend disbelief were scrawled all over the inner cover of those books, surrounded by blood stains.

"He turned into what he feared most," Yannis concluded about one of the only people on the radio who made him feel Alive. "Lifeless, procedural, simplistic and hoaky, at least to himself. No wonder he took an exit stage left before the theatre manager gave him permission to end his own misery," he thought.

But something about this didn't smell like suicide. Starting with the fact that Conspiracy Al was a die-hard Catholic, who championed living on at all costs, on more than one of his radio show. And the entry wounds of the knife to the belly and rope burns around the neck weren't consistent with a suicide. But Yannis' expertise as a forensic dude was far less than Anna's, or most anyone else's. The footsteps of those 'anyone else's' came quickly down the hallway. Yannis looked to Anna for an answer as to why they came so quickly.

She shrugged her shoulders as the cat lady opened up the door and let them in. An army of technicians in blue entered, none of whom Yannis recognized. "Who's this?" their silver-haired, blue-eyed chisel-faced supervisor in a thousand dollar suit asked regarding the cat lady.

"Maybe Conspiracy Al's only real friend," Anna replied.

"Or most dangerous enemy," Yannis added. "Give us an hour with her and we'll find out."

"After we're finished with her," the WASP-ish commander said, motioning for his second in command to whisk the crazy cat woman speaking in ET-eze away, with her feline companions. "And as for you two," he continued, handing Yannis one file, and Anna another. "You've both been reassigned. Orders from the top."

It wasn't the first time that Yannis was diverted from a case just as it was about to be solved, or really opened. But there was one thing that concerned him most, beyond this geriatric badge-bearing Kevin Bacon clone with the big ego and probably impressive DAR pedigree. Who made the call to the Feds regarding Conspiracy Al's demise, and why. And why was there something about Conspiracy Al's terror-infused eyes that said 'I want YOU to investigate this case, and nobody else' to Yannis, and him alone.

CHAPTER 6

"It's about the process, not the product," Rastovic said to Yannis back at headquarters as he looked at the aromatic herbal evidence collected thus far from the perps at new assignment. "We make it look like we're pulling out all the stops to stop the illegal weed growing coop in Long Island, confiscate whatever they have in the warehouse, then let them get away so they grow another forest of ganga in Staten Island. Keeps everyone on someone's payroll, including us," he continued. "Get the job done, and you put people out of work, small w. Which would make them have to Work, big W. And actually do something innovative that would, hey, change the world. Bad for business, changing the world. Bad for ALL businesses."

As usual, Rastovic was right. But the way he spoke this truth, and reality, bothered Yannis. It was as if the old battleaxe had traded his spear and sword for a soothing bath in a hot tub. Maybe it had something to do with his reaching retirement age in 2 months,

or maybe Rastovic was just life tired. "Fair enough," Yannis said to himself regarding the Fireball perhaps still inside the now 'luke warm' soul in front of him. "Maybe it is time for you to just...live," he continued inside his head. "To enjoy your grandchildren while they still are children. After all, they're only young once and with everything you went through in Serbia growing up under the Fascists and Communists, you probably didn't experience much of being a child either."

"You say something behind those shifty eyes of yours?" Rastovic answered with words. "Come on, if you have a problem with me, spit it out. I can take it."

"Yeah, but I can't take it if I do," Yannis thought. "I'm just thinking about...stuff," came out of his mouth.

"Stuff?" Rastovic challenged. "Who's stuff? My stuff? Your stuff? Anna's stuff, which maybe should be at the same place as your stuff?"

"I'm her mentor," Yannis replied.

"And when I retire, she'll be your partner, at work and at play. If you grow the brains and balls to get over that bitch of an ex, Amy," the old man said to the young one with wagging finger that wouldn't let up.

"Play? What's that?" Yannis smiled back, somberly.

"Something that makes you happy rather than 'fulfilled'," Rastovic replied, as he pulled a bottle out of his drawer, discretely slipping it into a bag as he opened it and poured the contents into two well-used cardboard Greek Diner coffee cups. "We drink to..happiness," he declared. "While letting everyone else around us think that we're miserable."

Yannis sipped the 80 year old Serbian brandy as if it was coffee. Such was not too hard, since the flavor of cardboard and coffee made from more sawdust than beans infiltrated into the red elixir. But still, there was enough of the Old Country in the brandy to stimulate Yannis' palate, and future memories with Anna. From the first time he saw her Yannis felt a spark in his soul and a warming in his heart.

He also remembered the first words she spoke to him, fresh out of the Academy having learned everything possible there but being indoctrinated by none of it. "Who do I see about being a plain clothes detective who puts this city back on the path UP the mountain instead of back into the gutter leading to the abyss," the babe in blue inquired of Yannis when he was negotiating with the vending machine to put out the goods after he inserted more than the right amount of coins.

To demonstrate her skill in the wee hours of a very late Tuesday night shift, Anna banged on the machine in just the right place, convincing the metal monster to release not only the bar of Trailmaster Peanut Brittle that Yannis had honestly overpaid for, but two bars,

and all of his money back. Yannis didn't remember what he had said to the young upstart but he did remember that it was the night that he started to assess Amy back at home from a higher standard. A standard his High School sweetheart could never live up to, in his eyes, or hers. Yeah, it was Anna's eyes that pulled Yannis into her, though every other guy in the Precinct seemed interested in her other body parts. All of which were all woman. Particularly the way she carried them.

"So, when are you two gonna tie the knot?" Rastovic asked. "Make what you're both thinking about, and probably are doing on the side, legal?"

"How do you know what Anna and me are doing on the side?" Yannis asked.

"I'm old, but I'm not stupid," the old Serb asserted. "And neither is Amy. If anything is going on between you and Anna, she's gonna figure it out. Like she figured out that it was YOU who set Amy up with that Bible Jock with the 7 figure bank account."

"I thought they'd get along," Yannis said. "They both believe in Hebrew and Christian fairy tales, and think that the eleventh Commandment is 'thou shalt take whatever you can from Heathens and share ten percent of it with fellow born again Christians'. Which, if I still have anything to do about it, will not include my kids! They have the right decide what they want to about what or who God is."

"And if they want to be born again Bible Thumpers?" Isaac challenged, after which he took another sip of Grandma Rastovic's famous Serbian Brandy, which neither the Nazis nor the Communists were able to replicate after they extracted the secret recipe from her estranged husband, who turned out to be 50% Croat. "Yannis my boy, no, my MAN. It's time to let Wendy and Stephen go their own way, even if that way leads them back to Amy for a little while. You planted the right seeds in them and as the old Greek expression says, 'olive trees grow up the clouds in the fertile valley only when you've moved on to plant different seeds on the rock-soiled mountains'.

"That's not an old Greek expression," Yannis asserted.

"Well, if you say it, and believe it, it will become one, won't it now?" Professor Isaac smiled, after which he took the last gulp of the brandy, then crumbling the still quarter-filled cup in his hand. With a skillfully thrown bank shot, he landed it the waste basket next to Detective Seargent Edward Jenkins' pathologically neat and tidy desk, five second before Captain Flemming walked by and smelled the alcohol on it.

"Drinking on the job again, Jenkins?" Flemming growled as he sniffed the cup.

"That's not mine!" Jenkins asserted. "It's..."

"...something the Department can help you get over. A disease that if you admit having, is the first step towards curing yourself of," Flemming said with a fatherly tone, his palm

on the shaking shoulder of the underachiever glory hound who closed every case by following the easiest leads. Or fabricating evidence if he couldn't find it.

"I've closed more cases here than anyone else, and I do it all sober!" the shorthaired-ex-narc who began snitching on his buds when a 16 year old, overly-paid informant on his dope-smoking friends in prep school insisted. "Any drug or bottle you or anyone else has found on or around me was planted!" he screamed out. "By someone in this Squad room!" he said again and again, directing his accusations at the fellow officers around him, then everyone from the street snitches coming in for their unofficial weekly salary to the Secretaries who typed up reports that they had absolutely no interest in reading, or understanding. "If and when I find out who planted this cup of wine into my basket!" he ranted, looking straight at Flemming.

"Detective, my office, please," Flemming whispered, calmly, escorting Jenkins to the glass-enclosed cubical from which he ruled the room outside of it, or thought he did anyway.

"Many ways to take out the garbage, and dispose of the dead weight," Rastovic said to Yannis. "And scum who spread around lies about you and me, claiming that we're dishonorable."

A big smirk of satisfaction grew on Rastovic's face when Jenkins was torn down by Captain Flemming. Stripped of his rank, gun, shield, then his dignity.

"He had it coming for what he did to me, and was going to do to you, Yannis," Rastovic said as he pretended to be disinterested in what was going on in the Captain's office, focusing on the files in front of him. "Now, to what our assignment is now, my friend. That's what we have to focus on now."

"Or figuring out why I, and you, got pulled off the Macon, Conspiracy A1, and Uma cases," Yannis interjected as he looked at the new assignments that he, Rastovic and Anna were now assigned to. "The real question is WHY are we, the most capable investigators in this building, assigned to chase after two bit drug dealers? Why are our hard-earned and well-paid-for abilities wasted on B and E misdemeaners in Westchester? Why, when the official stats show a 3 fold decrease in violent crime, is there a four fold increase in inmates we send Upstate? And why is 'disturbing the peace' upped to a felony?"

"He who asks too many questions gets too many answers," Rastovic said from behind his wire rimmed glasses, after another stack of 'quality of life' cases was dumped on his desk by a smiling Secretary who looked more like an Iowa Cheerleader than a Big Apple clerk. "A Serbian expression which is real, and which saved many lives."

"Including yours?" Yannis thought, accusingly, but didn't say to Rastovic. A man who he thought he knew, who apparently had more skeletons in his closet than he thought. And more 'noble flaws' than he imagined possible.

But the Serbian Rebel who perhaps had made a secret alliance with the system was right about one thing. It was time for Yannis to get tighter with Anna, for the sake of his career, the welfare of the once-colorful City that was becoming sterilized, and the survival of whatever Laughter he had buried within his self-destroyed Soul.

CHAPTER 6

“I don't want you to punish my son, but Lars does need to learn his lesson,” Senator Larson O'Keefe said to Yannis. “And if you can turn him around, as well as stop him from doing what he's doing, I'll see that you'll get to operate a chain of private diners where NO one will ever ask to see your liquor license or health department certificate, Detective Dabaris,” he continued on the phone. He abruptly hung up, texting Anna the directions to the latest B and E which was about to happen in Scarsdale.

“Greeks are useful for something other than running diners that launder money for Italian Guidos, Chink Mobsters and Ruskie KGB retirees,” Yannis said as felt the bright lights of the darkened Suburban Streets of the Rich and Shameless shine into his eyes as he whisked past them. “Unless they become burnt out cynics who are evolving into a morality beyond good and evil, that hopefully has the best elements of both within it,” he continued.

“Or Cops who are concerned with justice rather than the law, and protecting the public from the bad guys, and itself,” she smiled back at him. “In a city where law has more to do with fucked up Christian theology than justice,” she continued, after seeing a poster of Mayor John White with Bible in hand and Santa behind his shoulder on a billboard with very well fed multiracial kids with gold crosses around their necks asking whoever saw it to donate money to a 'Feed the Children' fund. “But, our job not to question, but to do or die. Or no..” she said, turning around her head, the cold ice in her veins turning warm. “To LIVE, if it's with and for the right people. Or...person?”

Yannis helped himself to an intense look at Anna's face, which as he saw and felt it, defined beauty according to every definition of that attribute he had ever learned, or experienced. In the cold winter light of the flourescent streetlight, he saw in her face the glow of a warm summer day. Her eyes were warm, inviting, and tantilizing. Around her straggly mane of red hair was an aura with hues he could not define but could feel, so painfully that it made him feel this moment as one of the magical experiences of eternity. As she smiled, he felt that he had always been with her, will always be with her, and, most importantly, was with her right now. Then, just as the Silence of that moment became deafening, she spoke.

“What are you thinking about, right now?” she asked. “And I know it's not about what you're going to do with a spoiled frat brat who wants to experiment with being a mobster.”

“Sometimes our minds and souls have to live in two different places,” he replied.

“Okay, so I'll rephrase the question,” Anna said. She took in a deep breath, then emitted a fireball intended to blast through the castle walls Yannis had so carefully constructed around him. “What are you FEELING right now?”

“Something I can't put into words, in English anyway,” he sighed, sweat running down his cold neck.

“Then in Greek,” she gently smiled. “Hellenika?”

“You won't understand the words,” he replied. “And my Greek stinks anyway.”

“Let me be the judge of that, Yannis.” She leaned back, folded her arms and offered Yannis a challenge as the light ahead of them turned yellow, then red.

“Speak to me, in Greek, or any other language you know, or can make up, the real Truth of your Soul,” she said. “Please?” she continued, as eager to hear what Yannis had to say as he was afraid to say it.

“No, I can't say the L word,” Yannis thought to himself, retreating to the haven that he knew where he could think clearly, but not feel effectively. “And there are three words for the L word in Greek. Agape for love of spirit. Philos for being the best of friends. And Eros, for 'just unbutton those pants and let's continue this conversation between the legs,’” he pondered. But from out of his mouth came barely audible mumbling. Shivering of lips that were made still, and smiling by Anna's gentle touch in the middle of his chronic 5 day old mustache. Then a stroke of his left cheek. Then she took his hand into hers, holding it gently. He tightened his grip on hers, trying to be protective but not to appear to be possessive.

“Whatever this is,” Anna said with the kind of fear she never showed or felt on the job facing down bad guys with guns, knives and powerful bosses in the NYPD that protected them. “Whatever this is, I'm ready for it.”

“So am I,” Yannis admitted, to himself as well as to Anna. “Whatever this is, it's something we can't turn back from anymore,” he said.

Yannis felt drawn to Anna, and her towards him, as if between them there was a magical Spirit that had already pronounced them far more connected than husband and wife. The ceremony was consecrated with a kiss on the lips, something that Yannis had not experienced from his almost-ex Amy in two years. The witnesses to the spur of the Eternal Moment matrimony had their say as well. From the cars on both sides of them, applause. “Maseltoff” from the Jews in the Sedan to the left. “Get a room, bro!” from

the Black gangsta wannabe in the van to the right. But from the cabbie behind them, a loud honk.

Yannis looked up at the light, which had changed from red to green. It was Anna who pulled away first, but not without gently kissing Yannis' hand first. "Business before...passion?" she proposed.

"Yeah...business before..." he said, needing to fill in the words as he put his foot back on the gas. Feeling the rumble of the street like he never did before. The lightness in his body as if something had been lifted out of him, replaced with something ethereal. Then with his well-developed ears, hearing a barely audible alarm corresponding to the location the Senator's snitch said his favorite prodigal son was out playing Russian Mobsta.

With flashers at medium brightness, and sirens off, Yannis made a hard left, putting the pedal to the metal. Three screeches, two skids and a near hit of three stoned but very skilled skateboarders later, he pulled into Pioneer Spirit Mall, a complex of stores that were all branches of one chain or another. The parking lot was empty, save for a rebuilt 1994 neo-Hippie van covered with Anarchy Art next to a freshly-waxed 'ultra-now' Jaguar that reflected the moonlight like a mirror. Inside the dimly-lit PharmaMart were four intruders covered from toe to crown in the black cat-burgler fashionwear, complete with ski-masks to hid their faces and shiny black leather gloves that had to cost at least forty bucks a paw. They busied themselves filling their sacs with bootie, not noticing the Yannis and Anna has arrived.

"Maybe we should call back up," Anna suggested as she ducked into the shadows along with Yannis, pulling out her gun.

"The Senator said that we shouldn't," Yannis replied, looking at the Jag, checking the number of soft rubber pellets in his service revolver, and the chamber in his back up gun containing real bullets. "The last time I called back up when a big shot's kid was doing a B and E, I was brought up on charges for planting evidence, excessive force and false arrest."

"Charges that didn't stick of course," Anna replied.

"Only because I had the goods on the lawyer they hired to nail me to the cross and turn me into an example to meet the Department's quota for keeping it's own crooks under control," Yannis smirked. "Irving Rabinowitz, Esquire, MBA and, as I found out from my informant who tends bar in The Dungeon, FAG."

"A condition that you said you were okay with," Anna replied.

"But his wife, son and Morman owned Law Firm weren't," Yannis asserted. "And maybe, if my own kid was of that persuasion, I wouldn't be so okay with either, even though I know I should be."

“Because...” Anna asked, demanding an answer.

Before Yannis could self-examine his own relationship with his inner manhood, or 'faghood', a passing snow removal truck shone its headlights on him and Anna, alerting the boys in black inside the dimly-lit Drug Store of their presence outside the window.

One of the black-clad, ski-masked 'ultra-late night shoppers' ducked, keeping their heads even lower than an Asian pharmacist and a Latino cleaning lady. Three stood their ground, positioning themselves to aim their guns at Yannis and Anna. One of them grabbed the cleaning lady, another the Korean pharmacist, putting guns to their head. Their leader grabbed hold of the cowardly crook, who ducked down with the hostages. The head gunman pulled him up by his collar and whipped off his mask of his disappointing comrade, as the defrocked mobsta bowed his face, hiding it from everyone. Then the head gunman aimed his revolver at the cowardly crook's head. He chuckled as his perhaps once-cool comrade wet his pants.

“Smells like the Senator's kid alright,” Yannis smirked, having had to whisk Lars out the back door from more than one frat party before the Narc Squad came in and busted the place. “All sizzle and no steak.”

“Whose bacon we have to save to keep the Senator happy and ourselves employed,” Anna replied. “On the count of three then,” she asserted, dropping her service revolver on the ground at the request of the head gunman. Then raising her hands up in the air, letting one of them fall into her oversized coat, in which she kept a Derrenger safely secured.

“On five,” Yannis whispered as he dropped his revolver, raised his hands, and noticed that the reserve, marginally-legal weapon was misaligned in Anna's coat sleeve. “Let's talk?” he yelled through the glass to the gunman inside holding the urine-soaked Lars.

The head gunman answered with a shot to the window, shattering it. Then another round to the alarm box that it set off, silencing it. He motioned to Yannis and Anna to come inside. “Inside, on the ground!” he growled in a bad imitation of a B-movie mutant zombie outlaw. But this actor had real bullets, and was very much 'in' the role.

“On three then, with the gods' help,” Yannis said to Anna in Diner kitchen Greek peppered with street Italian as they walked into the drug store, hands in the air. “With me initiating countdown, using plan B.”

“No talking!” the gunman growled in Hollywood-ese American English. “And let me see fucking your faces!” he continued, motioning for his guests to move in under one of the overhead after hours lights, next to a display from Universal Pharmaceuticals, featuring the latest and maybe greatest in medications to anxiety, high blood pressure, insomnia and sexual impotency.

Anna, her left hand hidden by her sleeve, accommodated the request, giving the gunman and his cronies a clear view of her face. “Wanna see anything else?” she said as she lowered her right hand, unbuttoning her blouse to a bra-less set of boobs that she proudly displayed. “Let him go, and the rest of the hostages and you can have this and more,” she said to the 'all business and no pleasure' head gunmen, then to each of his two armed lieutenants, who sprouted boners between their legs.

“So I see that you three stooges have balls, and cannons,” Yannis said, keeping his face in the shadows. “What say that we give a rupee to the Chink pharmacist who came in to drill the Wetback cleaning lady, let them sleep it off, clean out the cash and drugs, split it up five ways, and sell off your former employee to my friends from Istanbul as boy-toy candy. My buyer is outside now, offering top dollar that I'll share with you. Cash in your pocket now, liability out of your life forever,” Yannis said to the gunman holding Lars hostage. “It's the best deal you're gonna get, kid,” he said to the urine-smelling hood, who didn't have the nerve to show his face to anyone. Particularly when he started to cry like a baby.

But the gunman held his ground, thinking about the terms very carefully behind the ski mask hiding his face. A face that Yannis couldn't read. But whose voice seemed very familiar from somewhere, particularly when he mumbled his thoughts.

“How the fuck did you find us?” the gunman with the Asian Pharmacist whose zipper was still open said, his firing hand shaking.

“And who the hell are you?” the other gunman yelled out with the smell of fear in his breath, grabbing hold of the Latino woman's collar with a firmer grip than she had on the crucifix around her neck.

“And what the fuck do you want?” the head gunman growled, with newfound bravado. A 'possessed' kind of courage that spread to his two employees. Particularly when he pulled his own hostage's scrotum, making him scream in pain as well as cry in shame. “And how badly do you want with 'this' cowardly piece of shit?”

“Three answers to those three questions. Three.” Yannis said, stepping one foot out of the shadows his back turned to the head gunman, “One,” he said with a single finger up in the air. “The once clean world our species took over after we learned to walk upright is now littered with idiots and assholes, which includes you and me, and everyone else in and around the deep blue sea,” Yannis pontificated as he strolled around the room. “Annnndddd...” he continued, slowly.

“Two,” Anna interjected, impatiently.

“To,” Yannis said, slowly, hiding his face and thoughts from the master gunman. “To...to...to...be or not be mutually profitable allies, or dead enemies. That is the question, or is it an answer...The proposition is too...too...too...” he continued.

“Too what?” the head gunman growled, impatiently.

“Too late for you to be out playing with dangerous toys,” Yannis replied with a collected, and understanding smile, showing the head gunman his face. Two seconds later, Yannis snatched the weapon from his hand, then aimed it at the other two thugs, who still held their revolvers on their hostages. “Too...too...” Yannis continues, holding his fingers up in a V and/or Peace sign.

“Three?” Anna added, after which she pulled her snub nose special out of her coat sleeve, firing one shot at the feet of goon 1, the other wizzing past the scrotum of goon 2. Both dropped their guns and raised their hands. Anna buttoned her blouse, then whipped off their masks. She flashed her badge in their faces, then asked them to turn around. They did, as if they had been through this before. She handcuffed the dynamic duo to a shelf of pantyhose, then pulled down their pants, frisking them for weapons. One of the goons developed a hard on, which she seemed okay with.

“Immigration?” the Latino woman asked Anna as she refound her feet, blouse, undergarments and senses.

“Via con Dias, pronto,” she said pointing to the back door. “You too,” Anna repeated to the said to the pharmacist, who retrieved his wedding ring from the floor slipping it on his finger. The cleaning lady noticed him doing so, taking the ring from him and putting it on her finger. She loosened the elastic tie from her ponytail and slipped it over his wedding ring finger. They smiled at each other, sensing that whatever happened was appropriate, and right.

Anna intervened, handing the woman a home pregnancy test kit from the shelf behind her. And the pharmacist a condom from the display that had been knocked down during the robbery. As a siren echoed in the distance, she shuffled them both to the back door, then tended to the goons in question.

“It was him that made us do this,” goon one said to Anna regarding his boss.

“It was all his idea,” goon two added regarding his thus far fearless leader, whose face showed complete terror when Yannis whipped off his mask.

“So, Lars, what do we tell your father the Senator about this one?” Yannis asked the unmasked head gunman as he cuffed him.

“Let's say it was a rehearsal for an experimental film,” Lars proposed, “ Entitled.---”

“---'Cool to be Cruel?’ “ Yannis shot back, “I've seen enough of that and other morality experiments on the streets outside the movie theatres.”

“Take me home, and I'll see there's a promotion in it for you, Detective Dabaris,” Lars offered, as confident as ever as the sirens got closer. “Last chance to avoid paperwork an

another investigation on YOU. Which we both know won't be kind to you, or the people you still think you protect and serve.”

“Which unfortunately still includes you, shithead,” Anna barked out. “Who should be---”

“---An interesting proposition,” Yannis interjected. “I wipe your slate clean and I get into the club that makes things happen. Happening the way I think they should morally go, no matter what my bosses say.”

“So, it's a deal?” Lars asked.

“As long as I get his okay on it,” Yannis replied, looking at the 'employee' Lars had turned into a hostage, then a punching bag. A once confident rebel fighting the system in his own way, no doubt, who was now reduced to a catatonic peice of shaking, urine and tear-soaked flesh.

“Come on, you know it was all an act, Diesel,” Lars said to his former colleague. Say the word, and Detective Dabaris makes all of this go away, for all of us. He gave his word on it, so he has to honor it.

“Yes, I did, God help me!” Yannis said to himself, as he watched Diesel come back under the spell of Master Lars.

“Say everything's okay and it will be, for everyone, right Diesel?” Lars said. “Say Right,,Right.”

“Rrr...” came from Diesel's mouth, making Yannis drop his jaw.

Anna stormed over to Yannis, staring him in the face and the Soul. “You can't let this shithead get away, no matter what secrets they know about you. That I don't know about you. That, yeah, you never told me because you were protecting me, but--”

“---That's it, Diesel,” Lars continued, oblivious to the sirens approaching. “Say 'right' and everything will be right.”

“Rrrr...” Diesel said repeatedly with eyes fixed on multiple madnesses inside his own tortured head. “Rrrr...”

“Wrong,” Anna whispered to a pensive Yannis. “All of this is...”

“Rrrrrowng!” Diesel muttered, then realized, then asserted, then yelled as he punched the still handcuffed Lars in the belly, the head, then the balls. By the time the Blue and Whites arrived, well before Anna and Yannis' plan, Lars' 'made for and by Hollywood' face was beaten to a pulp, as was his ability to bed any of the starlettes on his father's payroll.

“Well, you kept your word, Yannis,” Anna said as the SOP robots went over the crime scene, herding a perhaps permanently-disfigured Lars and his two gunslinging buds into the paddywagon. “You taught him a lesson, which was that if you're ugly on the inside, you're gonna show it on the outside.”

“Well put, Doc Watson,” Yannis said with a Holmsian flare he allowed himself to feel, and enjoy. “But the most important lesson here,” he said as he strolled to the back of the pharmacy desk that had thus far not been sacked. “Is why Universal Pharmaceutical's newest blood pressure pill is the biggest item on the shelves,” he said. “With the name of hydroxy-di-'whatever' which was delivered to Cal Macon, and which was scheduled to be delivered to a positive influence in the Entertainment biz.” He looked at the pharmacists log, noting one name in particular. “Allan DeVries. Aka, to anyone who really knew him as---”

“---Conspiracy AI?” Anna asked.

“And Uma...hmmm...” Yannis said, thumbing through the register.

“The busker musician sevant who you adopted as a daughter in the psych ward?” Anna said. “Finding her name in there would be too much of a co-incidence.”

“No, her name isn't here,” Yannis said.

“And if what you're thinking is true, and what I'm fearing is correct, finding a Doc who admits to prescribing this 'hydroxychloro-whatever' to her would be really hard,” Anna said. She picked up the list of precautions on the blown up poster of the very legal FDA approved drug. “The only side effects I see here are...hmmm....nausea, diahrea, low blood sugar.”

“And diminished ability to suspend disbelief,” Yannis added. “Or feel and be creative, and Alive, big A, something the FDA actively DOESN'T test for. Along with the ultimate and most deadly side effect any drug can give anyone.”

“Delusions of mentation that makes you marry and still give a shit about fuckheads like Amy?” Anna smirked.

Yannis felt hit straight between the eyes, again. But whatever the cause of his Dull Out Disease, the cure for it could be to figure out who the most popular blood pressure medication on the market was going to choose as its next victim, and why.

“So, where to?” Anna asked.

“You, me and Rastovic, and nobody else.” Yannis said. “The key to all of this hydroxydi-whatever is the whatever, and the whoever who's making it.”

CHAPTER 6

“The accurate name for this biochemical beast of beauty is hydroxydiethylchlorhydron, known to its friends as HOCH,” the white-coated, blonde, blue-eyed David McCallum clone from the Man from Uncle daze said from behind wire rimmed glasses that kept him from seeing anything in front of them the way it really was. “I’ve been working for Universal Pharmaceuticals for the best part of my career, and this is the most exciting drug we have, molecularly and physiologically.”

Doctor John Smith, according to his name tag anyway, took a model of HOCH from the top layer of a multi-leveled shelf in the overlit research lab. He enthusiastically described how the molecules were put together with terms only understandable to a College Chemistry Professor, or a self taught manipulator of molecules who patterned his life after Walter White. Anna, posing as the director of the indie documentary just nodded, motioning for her old fart heavily-accented Eastern European cameraman Isaac to keep shooting. Smith then moved on to elucidate how the drug worked on receptors in the blood-regulatory portion of the brain stem, referring to a map of neural connections under the skull that was printed as if it was as solid and verifiable as the New York City subway system. Even Yannis, who barely passed High School biology, could smell out that Smith was talking biological fairy tales. But fairy tales that he wanted the camera, and whoever would see the film, to agree with, particularly because he was the one who published the papers on how HOCH worked before anyone else did.

As the 'producer' of the project, charged with being sure that no one went over budget, Yannis looked around the lab, snooping around for 'interesting shots'. Ones that were not restricted to the standard industry images of geeks in white coats and wide smiles pipetting blue fluids into red ones, and making them turn yellow. And unlike the geeks on Big Bang or Scorpion, these pathologically-contented two legged beings looked like they had never left the lab, nor questioned why they were really there.

The most interesting life forms in the lab, the ones that spoke answers to Yannis' many questions were the least evolved evolutionarily anyway, according to the evolutionary trees designed by humans. The rats in the cages given the newest versions of HOCH were all overweight. Just as Conspiracy Al, Cal Macon and perhaps Uma, underneath the hospital gown, were. The rodents honored enough to be given HOCH looked overly contented somehow, as they munched on their food, more concerned with stuffing their faces than with Yannis' mug staring at them, sticking his tongue out at them, then trying to startle them with yells, screams and laughs. Unlike the rodents in cages awaiting assignment as to the experimental groups they would be placed into, who seemed to notice and want to communicate with Yannis. And not because he had the stench of fetal cheese in his pocket.

“What's with these rats?” Yannis finally said, interrupting Smith when he was describing his post-doc work at Cambridge and his graduate training at Oxford. “The network and the distributors asked me for animal shots. Happy ones, which show that their blood

pressure is under control, and with, maybe some extra bonus side effects that make them life longer?”

“Ah yes,” Smith said proudly. “The 'happiness index', which I was able to quantify according to their increased appetite, and aversion to taking on tasks in a maze they know they can't handle.”

“Isn't taking on what you know, or are told, that you can't handle, called 'challenge'?” Yannis offered.

“Not according to the animal model of such, and I respectfully submit that what you say is neurophysiologically simplistic,” Smith said with a proud smile. One that would answer a challenge to such with either a shut down of the interview, or calling security, resulting no doubt in seizing the illegally footage obtained. “If you will allow me to explain how I arrived at the happiness index, which the HOCH rats showed a three fold increase in, verified by the most rigorous of statistics.” Smith handed Yannis the latest draft of his research paper on the subject, accepted with minor revisions to Brain Science.

“Looks, complicated as well as brilliant,” Yannis said, motioning for his non-English speaking hunch backed cameraman for hire to get a shot of the paper. Something that made Smith's smile widen, and his eyes sparkle with pride.

“Is there anything else you want to ask me?” Smith asked. “Or anything else that Discovery Channel would like to see about HOCH and its ability to control high blood pressure? Or any other pharmaceutical developments here at Universal which increases life span and makes those life spans more comfortable, and happy?”

“Music,” said the tone deaf Greek who had no rhythm in his feet even at weddings, and even less in his fingers when he dared to try to learn how to play the piano, noting the deadness of the silence in the room. “I've heard that animals respond to music.”

“You want to see if HOCH-treated rodents, dogs and cats can ascultate Mozart arias with their voices if given appropriate musical accompaniment?” Smith mused.

“It would make for some interesting footage,” Yannis said. “And maybe an interesting experiment? The first of it's kind.”

“I don't know,” the white-coated researcher said as he stroked his very meticulous, symmetrically-trimmed beard. “I wonder how we could set it up. Scientifically that is.”

“Quote from Einstein,” Anna said, referring to a photo of the old coot on the wall, grabbing hold of her ipod with Promethian intensity, and the unbridled Humanity behind Old Albert's eyes. “Without science, religion is blind. And without spiritual fire, science is lame.”

“I think the quote was,” Smith interjected with a stuck up nose and condescending roll of his eyebrow. “Without spiritualITY, science is---”

“---in need of a kick in the ass, to save it from itself,” one of the technicians said, whipping off her cap, and revealing a head of multi-colored hair, and eyes below it that were as Alive as Albert's were. “Any Beethoven on that?” she asked in a sheepish voice, terrified of the aggressively stern stare from Doctor Smith.

“Always!” Anna smiled, after which she turned on the music. The choral movement of the ninth, at full volume. The multi-colored hair technician left her station and adjusted the rat cages such that the rodents in each experimental group got equal access to the music.

Smith's WASP white face became beet red when Rastovic turned the camera on him. Yannis grabbed hold of Smith's wrist just as he was about to put his hand in front of the camera lens. Anna motioned for the multi-colored hair technician's coworkers to come and observe the rodents' reaction to the music. Some took advantage of the opportunity. Most didn't, going back to their jobs at the lab bench, their back to the real experiment that was going on.

“Ivan, get all of this on camera, objectively!” Anna yelled out to Rastovic, who faked not knowing what she was talking about. “Now, please,” she repeated in Serbian.

The rebel technician closed the door, then latched it, claiming that there should be no aberrant noise to bias the experiment.

Smith's desperate attempt charge at the rat cages to stop the experiment was halted by Yannis' very large hands hitting his small and soft chest. “I'll have you arrested for this!” Smith grunted.

“Only if I'm wrong about this, Doc,” Yannis replied. “It's important that we all do this.”

“It's important that YOU do this!” Smith growled. He barked several more insults and threats at Yannis, which he absorbed but didn't respond to. Then several academically-phrased threats at the multicolored technician with regard to her ability to work anywhere in science again, which were answered by her display of an upturned third finger. “This is highly inappropriate,” he asserted. “I'm a scientist, working in the service of---”

“---A company that's using you to do their dirty work?” Yannis said, offering Smith a view of the rodents, and himself.

Smith's jaw dropped. “They're...they're...”

“Looking towards where the music is coming from, and responding to it, with eyes that are Alive. And heads that are erect and alert. And feet that seem to be dancing.” Yannis said. “The rats that didn't get any HOCH. And the ones that did...”

“Are just sitting there, despondent,” Smith said, shocked into a universe he was not able to handle but had to face. “Dead between the ears,” he said. “Unless!” he said with perked up ears. “They have no sense of hearing.”

“A hypothesis which is testable,” Yannis said. “Applause! Applause!” he yelled out to the flabbergasted technicians. “Please.”

Smith was plummeted into the abyss of reassessment, or perhaps a mountaintop of new Vision. “The HOCH rats seem to be able to hear better than the non-drugged rodents. As if they can hear the music but...” Smith dared not say what he feared was true.

“They can't feel or connect to the music?” Yannis stated. “Just like maybe people who are taking, or who have been given, HOCH, have lowered imaginations? And inability to indulge in Creative Constructs as listeners or doers? People who see movies they used to love as just pixels on a screen. And music that used to move them experiencing that music as just unconnected sounds. Just inert sounds.”

“I'll have to investigate this further,” Smith said, as he grabbed hold of the model of the model which had given him so much pride and purpose a few minutes ago. “See if there are...adjustments we can make in---”

“---It's the 'who' behind this that we're most concerned with, not the 'what',” Yannis said, handing Smith his card.

“So, you're Cops,” Smith surmised from the phone numbers that were crossed out.

“Working for bosses who have to be ferreted out, and stopped.”

“Like I am, now?” Smith asked.

“Lies are easier to live with than the truth,” Yannis proposed.

“But Life, big L, is hard,” said the Doctor on his way to curing his own soul, and the world he thought he was serving. “What do you need me to do?”

“We'll be in touch,” Yannis promised, and threatened. Knowing that he rescued another soul from a lifetime of blissful, destructive contentment and comfort. And on his way to performing such a service for perhaps millions of others. God help and bless them.

CHAPTER 7

As quick as John Smith, Ph.D., B.S., M.D was to take all the credit for his innovative work assessing the actions of HOCH, such was now his enthusiasm for asserting that the original work regarding its molecular structure and development as a state beyond the art

blood pressure modulator was done by others. Such is what he related in private conversations with Yannis over the phone, till he was reminded that there was no such thing as a private phone anymore. As to who those others were, he sent the particulars to Yannis in a sealed envelope, which was pre-opened upon its arrival on his desk at work, having been diverted from his mailbox at home.

“S.O.P.” Rastovic said as he noticed the double layer of tape on the special delivery package, the first one having imprints of paper still on it. “Transparency. We get to check up on the bosses and the bosses get to check up on us. Checks and balances, the basis of American Democracy, right?”

Yannis was not sure if the Serbian-American refugee was developing a new kind of 'coolness' appended to his sarcasm, or if he was just life-tired. He DID know that Rastovic's health was ok, and hoped that he was not being given blood pressure regulators by his Doc Brady, who offered free medical care to all Men in Blue in the City at his clinic in exchange for the NYPD saving his daughter from being Shanghied into White Slavery by the newest 'human transport' company, Yellow Horde. And for not telling Brady's wife about his insatiable affection for under-aged Asian girls, which was still ongoing.

The always-on-alert Law Enforcement Officer then heard something very disturbing with his inner ear in the squad room around him. Yannis couldn't identify what it was, then used his outer eyes to grasp some kind of definition of it all. And it was evident from both sides of the desks around him. From his fellow Cops. From the suspected perps. From the witnesses who usually felt like perps after consenting to help find perps. Not so much what was there, but what was missing. “No panic. No sense or urgency. No arguing,” Yannis noted.

“And no problems,” Rastovic replied, looking at the latest 'Must Read' sheet placed in his mailbox. “The stats say that the VC index is at an all time low,” he noted, regarding the report on violent crimes for the month. “And as a thank you, the Department is being given an even bigger piece of the City budget this month as 'play money' for expenses at work and Christmas bonuses which didn't come with having to do any overtime.”

“Approved of and administered by shitheads who are are hiding the real statistics, and playing with everyone else's money in the Caimon Islands,” Yannis mumbled, loud enough for only Rastovic to hear, perhaps. “These numbers don't smell right.”

“Did ANY numbers from the Statistical Eval Division ever smell right?” Rastovic said, after which he gulped down another mouthful of java from the new Capacino machine. Then helping himself to a warm, aromatic piece of apple-crisp cobbler from the snack cart, which up till a week ago had never seen anything more classy than a chocolate-glazed donut. “Maybe we can turn this being over-funded and under-worked fluke into something to our advantage. And experience the thing we've been dreading our entired lives.”

“The V word?” Yannis said.

“Yeah, vacation,” Rasotovic said as he adjusted the placement of his ass on his chair, so that he could put pressure on his not-so-good hip rather than the really fucked up arthritis one. “It will catch up to us sometime, even you. And when it happens, my young and eventually old friend, remember one thing,” he continued with as 'mentorly' stare as he ever threw Yannis, appended by his raised, arthritically-twisted index finger. “Just one thing!”

“Be sure to die with your boots on, standing up for what you believe in?” Yannis replied, recalling the defiance that Rastovic acquired through his genetics and conditioning by Serbian ancestors who bent the knee to NO conquerors, unlike the sell-out Croats and chicken-shit Albanians.

“Don't waste your time with people who don't value who you are AND what you do,” Rastovic related, with an omenous sense of finality, and intense personal regret.

“If you're talking about the Amy again,” Yannis said. “I'm still responsible for her, and the kids.”

“But you love Anna,” the old Serb said. “And your kids are----”

“---Experimenting with different moral constructs!” Yannis barked back, the inner wolf him awakened from an uneasy yet deep slumber. “I remember five years ago when I was flat broke, and Stephen went out and bought me fishing rod with the three hundred bucks his mother gave him for his birthday, so me and him could go fishing on City Island like we did before the breakup.”

“And I remember two months ago when he declared himself a born again Christian on Facebook, naming you as the fucking anti-Christ,” Rastovic said. “And as for Wendy---”

“---I know, her mother's daughter,” Yannis interjected, recalling the time she reported back to Amy everything Anna said and distorted what she didn't say when Yannis was called back to duty on his father-daughter weekend, and took Wendy along for a ride to show her how irresponsibly-flirtatious gold-digger girls really DID wind up when they finally hit the streets, or were hit around by their sugar daddy's in the penthouse. “I gotta keep on doing what I do, they will grow out of this. A hundred and ten percent effort for the Right Cause always yields the Right effect.”

“A hundred and 37 percent now,” Rastovic said. “In whatever we're doing,” he said, looking over the files of 'busy work' cases assigned to him and Yannis. “Gotta find purpose in small things so that can keep Purpose in big things, my old and young small peckered friend.”

“And what about making an impact in the world?” Yannis offered. “Leaving our mark, for the purposes of good of course, while at the same time doing no harm to others.”

“TRYING to do MINIMAL harm to others,” Rastovic replied, modifying the credos that he inflicted on Yannis, but had difficulty doing himself. “Making an impact, making a difference, making our mark and doing it while being kind and honorable are not conflicting agendas.”

“And being kind and honorable,” the relatively speaking young Greek asked the rapidly aging old Serb. “Are they conflicting agendas?”

“I don't know,” Rastrovic replied, searching for the answer to the question that he seemed to have been pondering for decades. “It depends on what you call 'kind'. But, after all, we do have to live life in thirds.”

“Yeah, I know,” Yannis said, rethinking and recalculating the 'Rastovic' formula for a balanced life, which Rastovic probably stole from someone else, who stole it from someone else, who eventually got it from a hard-tested earthling way back or a Promethian ET who smuggled it to humanoids along with the ability to write, read and reason, along with the technology to construct campfires to do so when the sun went down.

“And what are those thirds?” the old Professor who earned his degree in the school of hard, and interesting, knocks, challenged.

“One third is the shit the world assigns us to do, that we go along with as long as it isn't morally wrong, though we know it's ineffective and usually unnecessary,” Yannis replied as he looked at the first three 'quality of life' cases assigned to him, all dealing with unpaid traffic and parking tickets at the core of it. “The second third is what we propose to the world and we do because we have special abilities that the suits say we're allowed to use, and get paid for,” he said regarding a case involving a College Kid not much older than Wendy who violated Probation by being found in a Strip Joint as a performer rather than a customer. “And the last third,” he pondered, looking out the Western window at the clear blue sky that was absent of Jersey smog, as well as the sounds of street musicians that hung around outside. “We do even if the world doesn't understand why and what we're doing,” he sighed, recalling Uma and her music, who had been one of the same. “And what we do even more assertively if the world doesn't allow us to do it,” he thought, and said, as he let the pieces of the puzzle involving Uma, and the others in the cases that were unofficially out of his hands, incubate in his mind. Reminded of the urgency of such by the package sent by Smith, which he had not yet opened.

“So, do you want to do the honors?” Rastovic said regarding the message confidentially delivered to Yannis.

“Yeah,” Yannis replied as he opened up the first traffic ticket file, inserting Smith's package discretely inside of it. “A lot of traffic violations and parking tickets that say that this flower delivery dude is distributing more than roses and petunias,” he continued in a loud and official voice.

“Small case that could lead to a bigger one,” Rastovic replied boisterously as he forced his painful legs to support his back back, grabbing his coat. “Our job to protect and serve the Mayor's new Vision for a city that will never again be called the Big Crab Apple. Lemme see what we got.”

“Using data that someone else wanted us to see, other than Doctor Smith,” Yannis said in the voice inside his head regarding the pre-opened package, filled with names and numbers of various investigators, and their affiliations. Yannis turned to the thirty-year veteran Cop who had seen three thousand years worth of cases, and closing more than his share of them, some by using American law and others by clandestinely putting into place Serbian justice. “So, where do we start with this flower delivery doo-doo bird?”

“At the top and keep going. Gotta go through the motions till the wheels hit the ground,” Rastovic said. “A traffic violation joke,” he chuckled.

Yannis did his best to provide a convincing laugh at Rastovic's hard earned pun, keeping the inner meaning of it all to himself of course. He retrieved his leather jacket, threw a scarf around his neck, then thumbed through the file in the envelope sent by Doc Smith, and PERHAPS replaced by material from others, into his hands. Five pages of names and specialties. But at the end of it, a 'thank you for awakening my real consciousness' card from John Smith, signed by him. With a home made, penciled sketch of a happy rat singing music and playing a guitar. With the initials of the artist not JS but DMT, with exclamation marks after it. And the initials 'TX' over the singing rodent's heart?”

“Interesting expletive this delivery dude left on his last parking ticket,” Yannis said, pointing Rastovic's head to the message left by the still-uncaught master of parking violations who thus far was able to avoid being towed away, while discretely using his wiggling fifth digit to draw his inner eye at the signature on the happy musical rodent portrait.

“Fuck yes,” Rastovic the soon-to-be-retired but not yet ready to be put to pasture Serbian said, pulled into the same suspicions as Yannis.

CHAPTER 8

As predicted, Smith's singularly written, confidential list of collaborators who developed HOCH and conspirators in something a lot bigger than anything he ever suspected was littered with fingerprints other than his own. But the thank you card inside the envelope contained one set of fingerprints, with initials that smelled like they meant something, but the exact odor from which it came was still vague. “So, what do we have here?”

Rastovic asked Anna when she finally arrived at Mount Olympia Diner, owned by Greeks who owed favors to Yannis for immigration problems related to the only blonde waitress in the place, and Rastovic for numerous health code violations.

“First, let me look up DMT,” Anna said, pulling out her computer, seeking the help of Officer Google. Keeping her bimbo sunglasses on, the rest of her face covered by a big-haired black wig.

“And TX?” Yannis asked. “Texas?”

“Or...Treatment, in medicalese,” she said with fiery intensity in her voice, a feature of her speech she could never hide, even when conversing in whispers.

“And who does Mister, but not MY Master, Computer say DMT is?” the cyberphobic Serb veteran investigator mused, noting that Anna's first few failed tries to find the meaning of those initials were met by an even fiercer attempts to make her portable notepad speak to her.

“Maybe not a 'who', but a 'what'?” Yannis suggested. “What are about cross referencing DMT with things rather than people.”

“Things physiological because Smith's a physiologist?” Rastovic suggested.

“Or things metaphysiological, or metaphysical,” Anna spouted from her bright-red lip-sticked mouth, taking the words directly out of Yannis' head. Something that happened a lot between them lately. A scary thing because it was telling Yannis that if there was a future for him in the world, it was in spaceship with Anna traveling to dimensions well beyond a suburban house in New Rochelle or a summer bungalow in the Hamptons. A thought confirmed by “Ground Control to Major Tom” popping into the musical selection made by someone in the Diner from the juke box. “Maybe an ET somewhere who's telling me that Anna is an alien, come to remind me of my ET genetics, and destiny?” Yannis thought to himself as he once again derived warmth from watching Anna exert her Fire researching DMT. And other things on her next search, her long, thin, fingers working the piano keyboard like Uma working at the her portable keyboard on the street, channeling brilliance and discovery with every movement, verified by solutions to problems that he had not yet determined. “Yeah, maybe my putting my name down at the nuthouse as Uma's father really is a prelude to her being my daughter. OUR daughter. Me, Anna and Uma. Sounds like an art film that maybe ten people in the world would appreciate, but that's enough, somehow,” Yannis thought in his head. Noting that he was ranting on between his ears about things forward and positive, rather than the usual satirical digs he formulated as a burnt out cynic about dumbshit earthlings with whom he had to share the planet with, including Rastovic. But earthlings who.---”

“---I got something!” Anna blurted out, bringing Yannis once again out of the spaceship he privately shared with her, and perhaps Uma, to the reality he publically shared with his fellow 11 million New Yorkers. “DMT . Dimethyl-tryptamine to its friends. A

serotonin receptor stimulant, particularly to 2A receptors, that heightens the senses. Makes the subject hypersensitive to everything. And able to see things that most people say aren't there to the naked eye but are obvious to the inner eye, and the imagination.”

“Inner eyes and imaginations that are shut down by people who take serotonin blockers, such as HOCH?” Yannis proposed.

“And anti-depressants,” Rastovic added. “I tried them once. After my second and thankfully very ex-wife nagged me into it. Made her screams, nags and rants feel like thuds on the head instead of knives penetrating into my gut. Made life comfortable for everyone else, sterile for me.”

“The perfect drug for a Commie leader who wants to keep his people quiet, complacent and obedient,” Yannis noted. “Maybe Tito had a chemist working for him in 1945, and the Eastern European brand of SOMA was put into every loaf of bread sold at the government stores?”

“After it was developed by the Nazi's,” Anna noted. “And probably tested on POWs. You can bet your bottom Deutchmark that if you, me or Isaac had the ability to imagine a Soul numbing drug, Uncle Adolf's scientists no doubt formulated it. Or something like it. Ever wonder why American medical science rocketed ahead 30 years in the three years after the War was over?”

“I thought it was to justify creating new drug companies, all based in suburban New Jersey, which gave the 20-something's coming out of the Army a shot at rising up the Corporate ladder at work while having 2.5 kids at home, separated by 3 point 1 years, housed in new houses which all looked alike, while thinking they were all being bold, free-thinking individuals,” Yannis added with a fond yet sorrowful smirk recalling his own upbringing. And pitying his younger brother, who still yearned for those 'happy times', recalling every memory of that time as if it was the Golden Age of Ancient Athens. “But that was then, and this is now,” he said, pulling himself into the present. He looked out the window at the horizon over the ocean. A view that once confirmed the ever-present invitation of Infinity, but which now seemed small, close and confining.

Indeed, the other side of infinity was as predefined and lifeless as the jetties thrown onto the beach to tame the wild surf into becoming small ripples. “Maybe exhaustion, or inability to perceive depth of field,” he told himself as a possible explanation, knowing that such an explanation was as real as the imitation whipped cream 6 inch topping on the half-inch thick chocolate and lemon pies in the humidor behind the counter. How Yannis yearned to be able to take one of those 'homemade' pies and smash them into the faces of everyone around him, and have the same number thrown into his face. The only route to a laugh that he remembered which was still pure, and innocent. A gift from the gods as channeled through Saint Soupy Sales and his canine companions White Fang and Black Tooth.

“You okay?” Anna asked Yannis, appended by a gentle touch on his wrist.

“Yeah, we have to be, right?” he replied.

“Yes, we do,” her no bullshit response. “And make sure we're not noticed as being odd, or anything but procedural.”

“Starting with one of us following up on these 'leads' that Doctor Smith left us,” Yannis concluded.

“And making whoever gave them to us think that we think they're worth investigating,” Rastovic said. “Going through the motions.”

“And the two-bit busywork cases, such as the flower delivery dude who's America's Top Wanted Criminal for speeding and parking tickets?” Yannis inquired.

“Maybe we could say that we think he's getting superpowers by smoking flowers, and exotic herbs,” Anna suggested.

“Like DMT,” Yannis smiled. As did Rastovic.

The young blonde waitress who Nikos, the Grecian Grey overusing middle aged Diner owner, always had his eyes on finally came to the table. With each glance she smiled back to him, or wiggled her ass. Unless of course Nikos' big-nosed, overly-fed wife came in to pick up receipts to give to the accountant upstairs, which she did just then. “What do ya'll be wantin this evening?” the young waitress asked in a Southern drawl infused with a thick Russian accent, staring at her notepad while the corner of her eye looked to see when 'Voluminous Voula' was going to go back upstairs with the receipts.

“Steak for both of these fine gentlemen, honey,” Anna replied with a far more convincing Southern accent as she quickly shut down her lap top, inserting it into her oversized hooker purse. “With all the trimmings,” she added. “These young bucks are gonna need all the strength they need to keep up with me in the pleasure paddock, which they paid top dollar for and I do take pleasing my clients very seriously,” she smiled, after which she dropped a key and a hotel card in the middle of the table. “So should you,” she smiled at the waitress.

True to character, as well as the role he was embracing in real life, Yannis stared at Anna's wiggling ass as she sashied out the door. Rastovic said something to the waitress in Russian that sounded like a joke. She faked a laugh, not completely understanding what he said, but fully appreciating Anna's advice. Nikos gave Rastovic a 'there ya go, dude' thumbs up, which was cut short by Voula's nudging elbow into her hubby's ribs. With all illusions in place, Yannis contemplated the next stage of the plan, the first step of which was on the other side of the hotel card. Again, he and Anna were thinking with the same brain. A scary and assuring coincidence given what the first step of that plan was.

CHAPTER 9

The flower delivery man who accumulated a record \$25,000 plus in parking tickets, to say nothing about the speeding, stop-sign and illegal right turn violations had a valid driver's license that was still, by some kind of cyberglitch or miracle, valid. The picture on that license was as generic as a newscaster's accent and Mayor White's blue suit and red tie against an always white shirt. The only link to a fixed address for the delivery dude was a mailbox in Queens and an address in Manhattan that put his dwelling three blocks West of the peers, somewhere in the depths of the Hudson River. He drove multiple clunkers and on occasion a car that was more metal than rust on the fenders but always used the same licence plates. It was cross-referencing of those plates with parking tickets that finally got the off-the-grid folk hero identified. He worked for multiple employers who claimed that he was the fastest deliverer in his crew, and the cheapest, who insisted on getting paid in cash.

“This flower power guy probably owes a shitful of money to the IRS, Yannis,” Anna said from beneath a super-curled shoulder-length blonde wig matching half of the other 'natural blondes' in the Paramus Mall at the outdoor table of the infra-red-heated California Organic Cafe. She looked at the duplicate license for the 'flower flyer' she had placed onto the spotless, up-to-all-codes Hummer owned by Doctor John Smith before he left home. Smith was still in Sure Saver Foods stocking up on supplies for his one person kitchen, and life. “Odd that he hasn't been caught delivering pizzas, professional women, or pharmaceuticals. And that it was you and Rastovic who got the honor of taking on the largest violator of parking tickets in the history of New York AND Jersey.”

“Yeah, life is 'honoring me' alright,” Yannis replied, from under a hipster fedora and sunglasses that made him look convincingly cool. Mechanical rather than human. Fitting right in with the other local shoppers at the New Jersey Mall who wanted above all to appear like they were really Manhattanites. He looked around him at everyone else who was, in one way or another, hiding their real human identities and attributes under various outfits. From the middle-aged housewives whose faces were caked with an inch of make up and whose legs were tightly wrapped by clothing trying desperately to look like their 15 year old daughters. To the twenty-something dudes clad in 'retro-hip' suit jackets, pointed shoes and thin ties that went out of style back in the mid 50s. “Yeah, I suppose all of you would really be freaked by seeing yourselves as you are,” he said collectively to them all, knowing they were not listening. “Which is probably why you jerk off, and finger yourself in the shower with your eyes half closed,” he continued. “And decorate the walls around the crapper with dangly doo-dats and aromatic air freshers so you can't smell your own shit, and find out that as long as you don't eat it, the odor of that excrement isn't so bad.”

“Yannis,” Anna said, waking her partner in legally-sanctioned crime from his thankfully-still-active dialog with his inner voice, the one he now could share with only her. “Two lookie-loos at two o'clock, one at four.”

Yannis looked at the prescribed locations from the corner of his eye, and took notice of them. Thankfully, his 'something not right about this person' index was still working. The mother and daughter team having lunch at Starbucks had faces which made them look more like father and son. The hipster dude on his cell phone leaning against the computer store window had regulation Oxford FBI shoes under his skin-tight, gender-neutral jeans. And the man waiting for the bus next to him in baggy, paint-stained jeans carried himself more like the CEO who owned several bus companies. All of them looked quickly to the Grocery Store when Smith emerged with his three bags of groceries. Yannis, for the moment, put aside the face that Anna spotted only one lookie-loo outside of the computer store. She was still a decade and change younger than him, and entitled to the pleasure of buying some of the illusions of life as real.

Anna discretely slipped her phone out of her pocket and took pictures of the lookie-loos. "In case we need to identify them in a line up," she said by way of explanation to Yannis.

"Unless they put us in a line up and lock up first," Yannis said.

"You worry too much, Yannis."

"It's called vigilance," he replied.

"Which I do too, including noticing that you never called me by my name, Yannis."

"I didn't know I was doing that, Anna," he said, finding it uncomfortable to refer to the only women he really connected to by name.

"Well, be vigilant about that, if you want whatever has happened between us to keep going, Yannis," she asserted. "But for the moment, time for us to watch who is watching Doctor Smith."

"And making whoever's watching us think that we're on the job tracking down the flower power delivery dude," Yannis smiled. "You are sure that you adjusted the carburetor on Smith's car for this exercise. That we're doing for his safety as well as our good."

"Sure as a bear shits in the wood and Donald Trump is in need of a long stay in a Buddhist monastery for a humility transplant," she smirked, observing Smith getting perturbed at the first attempt to start his car. Then miffed at the second try. Angered by the third. Then accomplished when the scientist conditioned by his profession to be passionless screamed a primal growl of rage, followed by the engine turning over.

Anna made her way to Yannis' reconditioned but freshly-washed clunker, she smiling with accomplishment at Yannis. Yannis plunked a large bill on the table, pretending to be in a tax bracket far above his own. Then discovered a parking ticket on his car.

They observed Smith drive out of the parking lot, uneasy at the wheel, as if he was scared of something. Veering to the right as if to go in that direction, then making a sharp left.

Anna and Yannis noted that the two cars following them lingered behind, but kept a close distance, joined by a third as Smith finally exited onto Route 17.

“More than I thought following Smith,” Anna noted from behind the driver's seat as she lingered behind the 'convoy' maintaining itself across three lanes of ominously-light traffic as the road opened up.

“And less than I thought following us,” Yannis said, discretely looking out the side view window.

“Less than you're able to notice maybe,” Anna said.

Yannis' worry mode popped back into High Alert.

“Just kidding,” she smiled. “Just because everyone's out to get us is no reason to get paranoid.”

“Yeah,” Yannis replied. “They're honoring us, Anna.”

The second mention of her name pleased Anna, and made Yannis feel good about himself as well. A condition of life he was not used to. A new experience that felt...Right, and valid.

CHAPTER 10

“So, what did you get from the list of science contacts Smith gave you, Isaac?” Yannis asked Rastovic at their still secluded booth at the Mount Olympian Diner over a freshly-reheated 'specially made pizza just for you' from the owner which both Cops knew was destined for the dumpster after the customer who ordered had it sent it back.

“What they were supposed to tell me,” Rastovic replied. “The usual discreditation of emerging whistle-blowers. That Smith was a brilliant scientist whose bad family genetics were catching up to him. Problems with the almost-wife who wasn't even a girlfriend. Problems with booze. Problems with the mind-altering chemical fumes in his lab, where he should have been working under a ventilation hood. Problems with maybe getting bitten by too many lab rats that were carrying rabies, toxoplasma or experimental viral diseases that were too difficult to pronounce. Problems with the voices in his head. And speaking of problems with the mouth. What's with this name calling you're doing?”

“What's that, Isaac?” Yannis said as he looked up from his double-toasted, soggy slice of pepperoni-garlic double cheese pie.

“You called me by my name, and not one of your colorfully-derived descriptors, Yannis.”

“Something I'm trying on with Anna, that feels...”

“...Not right with you, yet?”

“Maybe,” Yannis replied, staring into space, and the imaginations within it. Awakened by the hot topping of the pizza slipping into his hand, he retrieved the cheese and threw it onto the soggy crust. “Did Uma's doctor leave any messages at my desk?”

“Only that she was recovering uneventfully but steadily,” Rastovic said regarding his adopted grand-daughter.

“Which means that she's still dead between the ears, and in the heart,” Yannis sighed. “And her reaction to the CD of me singing, mailed in care of her Doctor? And the CD she made for me, violin and voice contata, for my birthday, Isaac?”

“He didn't get them, Yannis.”

“He didn't get them in more ways than one,” Yannis replied with a blank stare. Angry at himself and the world. His srip on the pizza replaced by a thigh fist which broke the skin on his sweat-soaked palms.

“Hey!” Rastovic said, resting his steady hand on Yannis' shaking wrist. “You know doctors. Administrators for the suits, under all of their clean, white lab coats. Healers who are dead themselves. And don't even know it.”

“Or maybe do, and are part of a conspiracy to...to...” Yannis said, then abruptly stopped. Noting that the Russian waitress, Sonya according to her name tag this week, who wanted to be a Southern Belle was looking at him from the safe side of the mirror, winking her eye and giving him a view of her breast. And that two more groups of people entered through the door with the same rhythm of body motions and stride length. Who looked more businesslike and Mid-Western plain than Nikos' usual late night customers. They picked that had newly-installed mirrors behind them which allowed them, coincidently, clear observation of himself and Rastovic.

Rastovic put his index finger up to his nose, motioning Yannis to quiet down. The old Serb reached into his breast pocket. He pulled out a pouch of tobacco, rolled around what looked like a dog whistle, featuring Serbian script around it. He blew into it, facing many different directions. Then discretely put it away. “An anti-police whistle,” Rastovic proclaimed proudly. “Delivers shrills in the ears of anyone who is listening that shuts their eardrums down for at least ten minutes. And, according to its inventor Nicola Tesla, makes a mess of their listening devises as well, according to what my grandfather told me anyway. So, now, we may and will speak freely.”

With the help of the mirrors, and his ability to see in a one second glance what normally required a five second 'study' by others, Yannis looked at the two tables occupied by the generic, plainly dressed and passionlessly-motioned diners at the two tables. None of

their depressively cheerful smiles had been altered. They were chit-chatting away as if they had not a worry in the world or about the world. “Maybe they have better listening devices in this century than Nicola Tesla designed in the last century,” Yannis said, rather than pondered. “Or maybe these milk-toast, Norman Rockwell cloned, dulled out, pathologically-happy souls are the new New York. Zombies without the blood and guts make up that make them at least LOOK interesting. Maybe they just got back from a “Wellness” visit to the doctor at the clinic, or the holistic healer at the New Age Salon, and were given a whopping dose of HOCH to lower their blood pressure from an unacceptable 129 over 85 to an acceptable and stressless 120 over eighty, with that special serotonin blocking effect on the brain that decreases stress by making you unaware of ANY crisis in the Internal or External world. Which means...”

“...I better go through the motions with these scientists who expect us to investigate Smith, while you and Anna get to the bottom of what's going on with this HOCH epidemic,” Rastovic said, calmly. Maybe too calmly, as his face turned red, and he felt himself losing his breath.

“Nitro, in my left pants pocket, under the table,” Rastovic pushed from a mouth gasping for air. “And if your pulling it out it gives me a hard on...”

“...Then it'll be some extra juice to keep you going, and you'll die with your dick hard rather than limp,” Yannis said as he reached under the table and retrieved a packet of pills. “Look at Sonya's ass,” he instructed Rastovic as he slipped the pill under his tongue. “Her thighs. Her tits....Her eyes.”

Rastovic did so, and with the help of the Nitro, and Sonya's smile from the other side of the diner, he recovered his breath, then composure. Just in time for Nikos' wife Voula to come over and stare down the two Cops. “No fag Cops or mobster homos allowed in my diner,” she proclaimed, after which she slapped a check on the table.

“He was having a heart attack!” Yannis blasted back at the old battleaxe who Nikos had the misfortune to marry and perhaps fall in love with when she was as attractive and Alive as Sonya.

“Cops lie more creatively than criminals do, but they still lie,” Voula blasted back.

“In the attempt to be honorable, and kind, but...” Yannis replied, while he picked up the check. His eyes popped out of his head when he saw the charge. He handed it over to Rastovic.

“What you owe for this meal, and the others,” she said.

“We had an arrangement with Nikos, the manager,” Rastovic said, calmly.

“New management,” she said, pointing to Sonya as she picked up the next meal, finding a

pink slip under the dish. Then asking Nikos to explain it, getting an apologetic and regretful 'I can't do anything about it' shrug of the shoulders from him.

Yannis felt the last rock solid monument in the world crumble into mud. He looked at Rastovic, whose eyes said 'there is no such thing as rock solid in any world, Comrade.' "You pay now, or I send invoice to your bosses at the Precinct?" Nikos' ball and chain proudly proclaimed.

Yannis emptied his wallet, throwing the money on the table, knowing that if word got back to the Precinct Captain that Rastovic was getting free meals, it would mean no pension, according to the new policy under Mayor White. Rastovic gave the old battleax the finger, collected his coat and boldly walked towards the door. "You coming, coward?" he asked Yannis.

"As Greek, I swear I will get my revenge on you!" the old battle ax yelled out to Rastovic.

"As a Serb, I swear to get revenge on you and your family, and you won't even know it," he shot back as he marched to the door, slamming it close behind him.

"Maybe we can talk this over," Yannis said to the old woman.

"When you pay the rest of your bill, then we talk," she asserted with a anger-infused whisper. "Or I put a curse on you, and your family, for destroying my family. By God I will."

"God beat you to it," Yannis said, after which he took back the money he paid her. He showed it to Rastovic, who fumbled with the keys as he tried to fit them into the slot on the car door on the other side of the window.

"Good, but not good enough," Rastovic screamed out, desperately trying to open the car door with a newly-cut key and a hand that would not listen to the brain and Spirit connected to it.

Yannis stared down Nikos' wife, thinking about what else he could take from her that would even the score for her dishonoring his closest friend.

"I see you or him here, and I tell your bosses everything!" she grunted from her lips as she faked a smile for new, well-dressed, customers coming through the door. Clones of the generic yet always effective Mayor White who carried with them the same smug smile. "Yes, I tell your bosses everything."

"Well," Yannis replied. "Maybe it's time for everyone to know everything about each other, and themselves." With that, he left the Diner, knowing that he had bitten off more than he ever chewed. And that the even more pages in the rulebook of life were invalid.

To be re-written by only the boldest of hands, as he observed his own paw shaking with fear he dare not show anyone.

CHAPTER 11

Days passed, then weeks. The fa-la-la of Christmas faded away into the grey slush of a warmer than usual January, along with the hangovers experienced while celebrating the New Year. Hangovers which were more intense than any celebration. For reasons that no journalist accurately put to print, but most Cops liked, the dropping of the ball at Times Square at the strike of midnight was celebrated with a round of applause rather than a loud rant of hoops and hollars. Partly because of another of the Mayor's auditory-pollution bylaws, and partially because the crowd seemed to like being sedate.

“Fuck, it's like Manhattan has become part of Switzerland,” Yannis said to Anna as he looked over the Week in Review in the Times, while on another one of their stake outs for the infamous and still-at-large parking-ticket-evasive flower deliver bandit.

“Yeah, Switzerland,” Anna replied as she looked at her watch, as Jewish heiress and buryer of three once-rich husbands 'Brenda Weinstein' at the East Side Apartment rented out for the stake out at top rate prices, since the department was now flush with money. “Ah yes, Switzerland. A country so lifeless that even the terrorists don't go there.”

“Even though that's where all the money is,” Yannis mused as he put on a monogrammed white bathrobe, then his old wedding ring, imagining what it would be like to be bonded for Life to Anna instead of being married to his own solitude. “Maybe that's what we should be thinking about here,” he considered while looking out the window at the very open parking space in front of the townhouse which now had a No Parking sign over it. “Where the money is with all of this HOCH crap. And who stands to make a buck by running a city where a father is disallowed by medical order to see his daughter in the nuthouse because of 'medical protocol', and where Uma's being moved to another facility that the Docs or Nurses are closed lipped about is 'hospital policy'.”

“Maybe it's about what the city's become on the inside,” Anna suggested, turning the page of the Week in Review, past the plethora of happy faces and upbeat stories about the New Year and the New City to an article on page 23, the headline reading 'Swear Jar Law Expected to be Approved'. “Well, it's gosh, darn, golly, geeze a hec of a good idea that City officials and citizens stop talking with potty mouths on penalty of fine or firing. A hec of a darn good idea, don't ya know,” she mused in diction and pitch that could have passed for Mayor White's loving wife. “So, what the fuck are we going to do about this goddamn shit!” she asked Yannis, very much as herself. “Maybe write a rebuttal in the editorial section that reminds people that anyone who says, hec, geeze, golly, darn, fudge, shucks, or any other polite expletives isn't telling the truth about anything to who their taking to, or themselves?”

“Only if we sign it anonymously,” Yannis replied. “You couldn't afford the kind of punishments that violating these fucking codes involve.”

“I can relocate to Jersey, get a job nabbing Guido wannabes in Newark instead of Russian gangstas in Brighton Beach. And when the new New York annexes New Jersey into its 'Politely Peaceful' Empire, and John White runs for President of this once great Republic and wins, I could put on the Red Serge and a Mountie hat, sludge my way to the Yukon in Canada and go after weed growers and meth labs that keep Oil Patch workers warped enough in the head so they'll spend ALL of the money their supposed to send home to their wives and kids on hookers, and themselves,” Anna said. “You could too.”

“Against my Spartan religion,” Yannis replied. “The central creed of which is...”

“Come back victorious behind your shield or dead over it,” Anna said, anticipating Yannis' ultimate reason to change anything about his dedication to remaining in his current profession, location, over-priced apartment, and insistence on seeing that Amy and the kids had food and shelter, despite the fact that all of them would be 'pleased as punch' if he wound up begging for nickels on the street.

Yannis self-observed his head looking at Anna. Then his stare being locked into her 'it's time to give me real answers about you, and us' eyes. Three seconds passed like they were three years, finally broken up by the doorbell ringing.

“Flower delivery,” a deep voice from the other side of the door yelled out. Yannis looked up, noting that the cameras mounted to get a picture of the seldom photographed bandit who had deprived the City of nearly thirty thousand greenbacks in 'donut' money showed nothing but sidewalk. As for the cameras mounted discretely on the no parking signs next to the only available space to pull in a car, white paper appeared in their view.

“Just a minute, hon! I'm just pulling out my tip money!” Anna yelled back, in a sexy voice that no male still bearing a penis could resist.

The flower delivery dud started to whistle a tune Yannis remembered from his Grandfather's childhood. The Internationale, the Democrat Socialist Liberation tune that every freedom loving Russian, and Greek, and sung with joy after the Czar was overthrown in 1917. The anthem that Grandpa Kostas still claimed could rally Workers to be the masters of their own fate in America, if sung in harmony, respect and with the right Capitalists. “Maybe the infamous off-the-grid anarchist flower delivery dude really is a socialist,” Yannis thought to himself. “Fighting for a country where there are 'must obey' laws, but the right ones instead of the wrong ones. Still, as long as people need laws, they haven't grasped the Passion and meaning of real justice,” Yannis pondered as he recalled Grandpa Kostas' constant struggle with trying to realistically see the world as it was, and fight for what it should be, doing it more alone with each passing year.

With the most seductive walk she could muster in the Department issued heels 2 sizes smaller than her blistered feet, Anna approached the door, opening it slowly. Yannis

could hear no footsteps leaving. “Get him to talk,” he whispered to Anna. “The powers that be want him captured alive.”

“And the minute we capture him in the line of duty, we stop being Alive, big A,” Anna whispered to Yannis. “So why are we doing this?”

“Going through the motions until the wheels hit the ground, on a case a lot bigger than his,” Yannis said to himself. Knowing that Anna felt the same, for better or worse.

Yannis hid behind the door, a camera in one hand, grabbing hold of a gun inside his bathrobe pocket with the other. He motioned with his fingers to open the door on the count of five. Anna put up three fingers, which she counted down very fast. But not fast enough. When she opened the door, the Internationale was blasting away into her ears, from a tape recorder. Left behind by a driver whose car screeched around the distant corner, disappearing into traffic. A driver who left behind a plant, and a bill.

No Blue and Whites pursued the vehicle. Yannis surmised, or hoped anyway, that this meant that he and Anna were not being 'assisted' by anyone else on this stake out.

“This bill is more than what the dispatcher said it would be,” Anna commented, looking at the invoice under the plant, with 'tip contribution' crossed out.

“Maybe because the plant isn't what we ordered, for our fifth anniversary, Dear,” Yannis said, gazing at the ferned green plant that he didn't recognize.

“No, it isn't,” Anna said, a big wide smile of satisfaction on her lips, amplified when she smelled the leaves, and found a rolled up piece of paper under it with very small writing on it. “But it's just what the Doctor's didn't order, and what Uma needs. According to Doctor Smith's hypothesis anyway.”

Yannis looked at the note, recalling his very off duty activities of the last weeks. “A recipe, sent in from our still absent chef still isn't answering his phone. Whose lab was shut down, and whose purple-haired tech was reassigned to another research facility. A once-happy, contented and upwardly moving scientist who---”

“---you saved from himself,” Anna reminded Yannis.

“If Doctor Smith's still alive,” Yannis said. “Or in the state-dangerously-ahead-of-the-art nuthouse where Uma is.”

“We'll find her!” Anna asserted. “The new leads Rastovic texted me may work this time. But one thing we have to do first, is...hmmm,” she said as she read over the note. “How do we convert this plant with the Leave it to Beaver Latin name into probably very illegal DMT without all of this stuff? I know how to fry bad guys, but don't know fuck all, or rather, 'fudge' all, about how to cook up mind altering, or in this case, mind healing, medicinals.”

Yannis closed the door behind Anna, then looked at the recipe for DMT. “Biochemistry is just like cooking. We just have to find the right chef.”

“Certainly not the short order cook in the Mount Olympian diner that you and Rastovic got tossed out of for life,” Anna replied.

“No, the dishwasher,” Yannis said, pondering a plan behind eyes that were realistically optimistic, for the first time in weeks.

“Who is...?” Anna asked, pushing her eyes into his face.

Yannis smiled back, tight lipped.

“I know, 'mi rotas',” Anna spat back. “Don't ask' in English,” she growled as she pulled away from Yannis, in more ways than one. “For my own safety, yeah, I know. Or because you made another one of your 'I promise to tell no one about you, even my closest friend' pledges, about friends who may not want to be so friendly for a while.”

“He, or she, who asks too many questions gets too many answers,” Yannis delivered back, straight between the eyes. With deadly seriousness. He appended his warning with a tender kiss, on Anna's lips. Which she accepted as a sign of his love, for now anyway. And hopefully his trust. A trust that, theoretically anyway, went both ways.

CHAPTER 12

One of the last things Rastovic's wife of three golden child-bearing years make him promise on her deathbed was that he spend at least two days a month fishing. Not because he enjoyed it, but because he was good at it, and Elena maintained that if God gave you the ability to be good at something, that meant it was your duty to Him to enjoy it. And to pass that enjoyment on to someone you value more than yourself.

“My kids all buy their fish at the grocery store, and the only fishing my grandkids know how to do is to point to the lobster in the tank they want for dinner at Red Lobster,” the old Serb said to Yannis off the newly-built pier in Rye, rod in hand an heart on sleeve. “I promised Elena that I'd go fishing with SOMEONE other than her ghost, that woman you fixed me up with from Carl's Cafe hates the smell of anything that comes out of the water, so that leaves you, my small peckered friend,” he said to Yannis. “And besides, new policy requires that all Police officers, to ensure 'balance of mind and contentment of mentation', log in at least 4 hours of recreation a week, as verified.”

Rastovic lifted up his regulation-issue camera for another time-imprinted selfie of himself at the pier in full fisherman regalia, being sure to get Yannis into the shot. “Smile, we're on Candid Camera,” he said, after which he pressed the icon on the camera issued to him by the newly established Wellness Division.

“It's hard to smile, when Uma's forgotten how to,” Yannis replied. He looked at his watch, its tick becoming louder with each second. “And we're losing time in finding her. And you said the leads you had to locate here were---”

“---put there myself,” Rastovic asserted, after which he turned back around, putting rod in hand, and motioning for Yannis to cast his out into the water as well. A family of Nebraskan tourists bearing crosses around their necks and I Heart new New York buttons on their coats took photos of them, or perhaps it was of the vast ocean behind them, or the skyscrapers across the waters. It worried Yannis.

“I won't say 'relax' because you hate that state of passive submission as much as I do, but, have faith, and if you can't do that, assume that there really is a God and that He is finally working with us,” Rastovic said to him. “The bait's in place and the fish will come to it,” he continued, sneaking a peak of the GPS camouflaged inside his tackle box. “And small fish always take special bait to bigger fish.”

Yannis reflected on the suggestion. He recalled that Rastovic's skill in fishing was not because of his agility handling a rod and reel, but because he knew what kind of bait to use to make the fish bite. Something that wasn't very relevant unto itself except that the bait this time was very human, and it could lead even the most skilled fisherman into a confrontation with the very White Whale.

“You're sure that Edward Jenkins is going to get picked up for 'disrupting urban harmony'?” Yannis asked as he looked at the GPS, the blip that still wasn't moving, then his watch. “That tea-totling shithead DID get his badge back, despite the evidence you planted with the Captain that he was drinking again. And that he's now on special assignment with the Harmony Maintenance Division. You do know that.”

“I do,” Rastovic said, disappointed and angered. “But you gave me a special dose of DMT made by that dishwasher at the Olympian, mixed with that special oil that makes it penetrate through his skin and then into his brain, after being put on Jenkins' wrist by a special hooker who owes me for some favors who accidentally bumped into him. What was the name of that dishwasher anyway?”

“Spiro Lewnes” Yannis smiled. “Named after the ex-VP who started the War on Drugs. Who did get the instructions of how turn a pleasant-looking plant a powerful hallucinogen. Who followed that protocol left by Doc Smith, to the letter.”

“That protocol including to keep Anna in the dark about this? For her own good?” Rastovic said, raising his eyebrows. “She CAN handle anything you can throw on her plate. Including an open heart.”

The last thing Yannis needed now was another argument from Rastovic about how he should take care of Anna. Rastovic's plan to find Uma was risky enough. And getting too complicated for Yannis' still-linear method of reasoning. “How do you know that

getting Jenkins' stoned on DMT will make him do something artistically-expressive and disruptive enough to make him become a legally-arrestable nuisance to the Harmony Squad, and insane enough to get taken to their special facility for holding special people?" Yannis challenged. "This whole plan of yours depends on---"

"---Faith!" Rastovic shot back into Yannis' face. "Confidence in one's abilities," he continued as he looked at his watch again. "And...hmmm."

"Luck?" Yannis challenged, after which a loud beep penetrated into his head. "Which--"

"---faith and confidence just bought us!", Rastovic said, checking the GPS, smiling with regard to where the location device planted on Jenkins was moving. Then turning it on, and hearing Jenkins sing songs of revolutionary fervor at the top of his lungs, to the accompaniment of a banging piano and loud organ, then bagpipes. At the music store that Rastovic had sent them to with a false lead. Where the beat of the song Jenkins was singing kept going with the rattling of his handcuffed fists while being taken away after the keyboard and bagpipe music stopped.

"I didn't know that Jenkins was musical?" Yannis said. "Did DMT turn him into an artist?"

"His mother tried to," Rastovic smiled as pulled back his rod. He nodded to Yannis, who pulled the plug on two blow up dolls.

Yannis took off his jacket, placing it over the shoulders of one of the dolls, while Rastovic removed his coat and laid it on the other, completing the picture with rods in both of the dummies' hands. "DMT seems to open up doors. Turns normal people into crazy ones. Dangerous ones if crazy pops up in the wrong company. Rescueable ones if we still have faith, and confidence," the Old Serb continued.

"And luck," Yannis replied, taking out the keys to the clunker he purchased from Spiros, the dishwasher who knew more about chemistry than any chef working at the diner ever knew about cooking. Whose vehicle was probably just as illegal as his name. Who probably kept his mouth shut about who he was now making probably soon-to-be-illegal mind awakening chemicals for. One probably in a long list of probablys that had to be turned into a certainty.

CHAPTER12

From the outside, Sunset Horizons looked like any other nursing home nestled into the still-wooded 'wilderness' of Northern Westchester. Guarded more by crows circling around the two story, multi-winged facility than any visible two legged guards on the ground.

“They always seem to hang out where there's death,” Yannis said from inside the Spiros' clunker parked in the visitor's parking area.

“The crows and the cameras,” Rastovic replied as he adjusted the visor on his White for Mayor baseball hat, then feeling his freshly-shaven upper lip.

“I don't see any cameras,” Yannis added, feeling his own mug, void of hair as well, for the first time in decades.

“You're not supposed to, Elder Paul,” Rastovic replied, adjusting Yannis' Mormon Missionary name tag on the black jacket over his clean, white shirt. “All you and me are supposed to know is that we're on a Mission to bring lost souls to Jesus for Heavenly Father.”

“And to pay back whatever Russian, atheist forger you paid for these ids that say we're both Elders working for the Mayor's Church,” Yannis said, looking at Rastovic's name tage. “Isn't that so, Elder Francis,” he continued with a mocking lisp.

“Which is a man's name! Depending on how you spell it!” the 'men should be men and women should be women' Serb growled back. After making Yannis take back his mocking smile, Rastovic pulled his scarf over his mouth, hiding his upper lip.

“I know it feels weird, Isaac,” Yannis assured his old friend regarding his unexpected problem facing the world naked. “It makes you look, younger. And probably will land you some points for good grooming with the brass back at the precinct.”

“Yeah, and make SOMEONE in the precinct win that bet about when or if I'd ever shave off the most visible sign of my manhood,” Rastovic shot back, afterwhich he turned to Yannis. “And if that someone is YOU, I'll fucking kill you!”

“And if it's Anna?” Yannis smiled back.

“Hmm..” Rastovic replied, allowing his fingers to make peace with the skin on his upper lip. “I'd double the money she got paid from the pool from my own pocket. And demand that she gets promoted. And speaking of Anna, you didn't tell her anything about this, did you?”

“No, I didn't,” Yannis said.

“Then who did?” Rastovic said, pointing to a familiar looking nurse in short black hair exiting the building, pushing a wheelchair in front of a plaque thanking John White and family for their contributions. Then lighting up a king size cigarette. “So, what's Anna doing here?” Rastovic challenged. “Besides showing off a new wig, or maybe a new haircut.”

“Sending out smoke signals?” Yannis replied as she blew three circles of smoke up above her head. “Or---”

Before Yannis could speculate regarding what Anna was doing there, or taken into consideration the statement that she said once that she would never cut her hair short unless it was for something really important, an alarm went off inside. Followed by Anna looking straight at Yannis, motioning for him to meet her around the back door of the facility. Then patting the seat of the wheelchair, motioning to Rastovic that such was to be his place.

“So, now Anna, and maybe you too, want me to take the the rocking chair before the worms get me?” Rastovic said, with some seriousness, as people exited the building. The doctors and nurses with eyerolls as if the engineer screwed up the alarm systems again. The suits, perhaps insurance inspectors or perhaps something else, motioning for everyone to move along with like traffic cops. The zombified patients, not all of them old, being glad to get a whiff of fresh air, of them them not knowing what universe they were in, but glad that the one the orderlies were taking them to had fresh air. Jenkins was amongst them. But not Uma.

“Maybe Uma's been taken out the back door,” Rastovic said to a very worried, then angry Yannis as he exited the vehicle. “We best work our way into this crowd, then find our way to the back door where Anna wants us to go.”

As Rastovic gathered his Church Elder's bible, black coat and thick, tinted black rim glasses, Yannis opened up his Bible, looking at the vials of DMT inserted into the pages of the Old Testament, hoping that it would awaken Uma up from the zombified state Uma was most probably medicated into by HOCH and God knows what else. A God that he hoped would not be offended by cutting apart His book to bring Soul awakening halluogenic cures to a Soul who He had not protected. “A soul I didn't protect either,” Yannis said to himself as he walked to towards the crowd with Rastovic, looking for a way to discretely manouver his way towards the back door where Anna was waiting with a wheelchair. A place where she was not supposed to be, but was now. A fact that, for the moment, Yannis was very thankful for. Particularly when three groups of sunglass bearing guards armed to the teeth came out of the front door, escorting a group of arguing doctors in surgical greens out the door, and their half-opened patients. Then locking the front entrance to the facility shut. One of the faces of the patients was painfully familiar.

“No good deed goes unpunished,” Yannis projected to the man whose head was half shaved, the markings for a lobotomy scar inserted onto them in black ink. “They should have taught you that in Research Doctor School,” he continued from the voice between his ears to soon to be ex-Doctor John Smith. Who looked up back at Yannis, knowing who he was behind the missing beard and black on white Church Elder suit. Saying 'help me, please!' from a deeper place than he ever experienced in his technology-indoctrinated soul. A plea that Yannis answered with a 'we'll be sure to get you out of this smile and a thumbs up' with his face. “Maybe it's karma that you'll become a zombie, Doc,” Yannis said well behind his eyes. “But I'll do my damndest to get you out of this, because I need

your 'born again to humanity ass', and because I think I still have some humanity in me. For now, anyway.”

CHAPTER 13

“So, how did you know about my plan, and how did you do one better on it?” Yannis asked Anna when their eyes met.

“Mi rotas,” she replied, turning to Rastovic as the possible answer to that inquiry. “Don't ask!” she insisted from underneath a pixie cut that was maybe for real, and maybe not as she motioned Yannis inside after the fire alarm turned silent.

Yannis looked to Rastovic for an answer as to what was going on, but he put on a poker face.

“I know, he who asks too many questions gets too many answers,” Yannis replied, in Serbian.

“Ne and malista,” Rastovic said with sombre eyes, hoping that the Greek word for yeah and yes would not be understood by the very armed security guards working their way around the perimeter, as if they were defending a Presidential airport against terrorists with the latest and probably greatest automatic rifles available. All of the sunglassesed bearers of happy smiley faces on their lapels.

Once inside the complex which passed to the publics as a retirement home, away from the view of the security goons, Anna threw a hospital gown over Rastovic and pushed his ass into the wheelchair, instructing him to keep his head bowed, and his eyes lifeless. She tossed Yannis a clean white lab coat with an ID badge bearing his picture but not his name. His eyes were blinded by the bright lights lining the hallway.

“So, where's Uma, Nurse Jackson,” Yannis asked Anna, noting the name on her ID tag. “I have to give her a special reading from my Bible as part of her therapy.”

“Huh?” she replied.

“Uma. You know where she is?” Rastovic translated.

“Sure, but...why does she need a reading from this Bible?” Anna inquired. “It's the Bible thumpers who rented out her soul to the devil in the first place.”

“The right answer, in more ways than one,” Yannis thought to himself. “And as for matters more immediate, Anna is in the dark about something. Which means that I'm not walking into a set up. Which would be---”

“Shhh!” Anna interjected, feeling Yannis getting lost into his head yet again. Footsteps from THIS side of the Rainbow approached them from both directions. She pulled out a set of blood-covered keys from her pocket and opened a door marked 'linen closet'.

“Great, we get to wear sheets and look like KKK yahoos,” Yannis told himself as he pushed 'Grandpa Rastovic' inside. “Or maybe Anna has some nursing uniforms in there with skirts and heels that she wants to put me in, so I get in touch with my feminine side, so I can be a more understanding father to my kid Stephen after his mother read his diary and found out that he wanted to be a Stephanie because---”

Yannis' unvoiced rant was ended by Anna pulling him into the closet. A closet that had nothing to do with being gay, bisexual or transgender. A closet which was four feet wide and at least forty feet deep. Dimly lit with LED lights lining the walls. Those walls echoing the rhythmic hum of machinery behind them that got louder with each step down the hidden corridor. Which led to another door, which Anna was unable to open.

“Damn! My map says this was supposed to be a shortcut,” Anna said, panicked.

“To Uma?” Yannis asked.

“Yeah, yeah,” Anna barked back ramming as hard as she could against the door. “To Uma and a lot more,” she continued, after which she pulled out a credit card and skillfully used it to pry the lock open. “No one and nothing tells me where I can or can't go,” Anna grunted as she did battle with hard, industrial metal with cheap plastic.

“That's our girl,” Rastovic said regarding Anna's skill using a credit card to open the locked door.

“Who saved me from myself,” Yannis said regarding the name on the credit card when Anna handed it to him. Amy Dabaris. A gift credit card he bought for his ex Amy in October to buy something for the kids and herself for Christmas. Which he thought was missing. “Thank you, Anna,” Yannis said as Anna opened the door, handing the now mangled and now useless credit card back to him.

“No problem,” she replied with a tender smile. Which left her face after she saw what was on the other side of the door.

It was an unoccupied room a room filled with equipment that made John Smith's lab look like a playroom for Downs Syndrome four year olds who could barely say 'HOCH', nor understand any of the science behind it. But it was what was on the shelves that caused Yannis' brain to go into fifth gear, his soul into another dimension of terror. A terror he dared not show Anna, as she appeared to be losing her composure as well as her eyes beheld the name on the first jar, and its contents.

“Conspiracy AI, number 346,” Rastovic said calmly read on the glass container containing a brain connected to wires that recorded electrical signals which registered on

an oscilloscope. “At least they gave him a positive integer. Unlike..hmm, the next lab rat,” he continued as he pointed to the next decorative row of 'brains in the bottle', all of which were heated by lights from below and fed by bubbling gases from above.

“Kal Macon, negative 458,” Yannis noted of the next sample, on the opposite shelf. “Which means that maybe someone had the good sense to know that Conspiracy AI was using his creative cranial matter for something positive, and Macon was a genius for nothing more than being a manipulative asshole.”

“And these other test subjects,” Rastovic said noting the names on the other bottles on the shelves, most with bubbling gas pumped into them. All labeled with names of the movers and shakers who disappeared in the last 2 months, whose case files always left his and Yannis' desk for other destinations. “Creative celebs who were getting too righteous to fit into the marketplace, and asshole celebs who were about to become too powerful for the Caesars and Ceasarettes who are really in charge.”

“And creative Souls who want nothing to do with anything the Empire is doing except to offer people a look at themselves and their souls in a mirror,” Yannis said regarding one of the a bottles on an adjoining shelf. “Uma Dabaris,” he read. “Number 236.”

“Who's scheduled for surgery tomorrow, according to the logs posted on the operating rooms,” Anna mumbled over quivering lips, staring into space. Fading into a state of catatonic shock.

“Not if we can get her out here today,” Yannis said, his hands grasping hold of Anna's shaking shoulders.

“And get ourselves out too,” Rastovic said. “Before these scientists start investigating why WE never fit into any of their boxes or psychological categories,” he continued, pointing to three more empty brain bottles with labels on them. “Yan.D, 235, aka Yannis Dabaras? Isa.R 450, which be me, Isaac Rastovic. And Anna.T, the T crossed out and replaced by a W, standing for---”

“---White,” Anna replied, looking at Yannis with shame, and regret. “An experiment with social respectability that failed when I was a kid in college.”

“Who got knocked up by John White when he was a horny frat brat who got an unlimited expense account from Daddy out in Salt Lake City, going to law school in Manhattan while you were a Fine Arts Major in Brooklyn?” Rastovic said to Anna. “Who was blackmailed into giving up his baby for adoption, or slated for an abortion by the Family White's personal physician after he showed you the ultrasound of the fetus look like it had special problems that needed intensive medical care that no one except God himself could fix?”

“How did you know?” Anna asked the Old Serb who never showed his hand, but always offered it to anyone who needed it.

“I didn't, until now,” he affirmed. “As Yannis here knows, now.”

Rastovic got up from his wheelchair, pulled out a pencil and wrote down every initial, number and name on every jar in his notepad. After which he took a picture of the bottle bearing their name, be they empty, containing 'living' brains, or the chopped up remains of cerebral matter that had been already chopped up in slices and neatly put in the boxes of slides under them.

Yannis stared into Anna's face, finally seeing a side to her that he never did. And confirming in the bright light of the room that she did indeed cut her beloved hair off, as it was for something important. And something final. And perhaps something involving a final relocation. So many questions to ask the woman who ducked every discussion Yannis had tried to open regarding her real reason for wanting to be a Cop, her flings as flirtatious teens, her ambivalence on every case involving abortion, discourses about euthanasia, and clenched teeth behind closed lips every time Mayor John White was on the radio reminiscing about his golden days at Fordham law school as a student who wanted to put compassionate Christian justice back into the law. So many thoughts went through Yannis' head, but one question came from his mouth. “What was his name?”

“The fucked up 'baby' or the one the fucking 'sperm donor' wanted me to call him under the sheets?” Anna shot back.

“Either one, just answer me honestly,” he said. “Please.”

“A luxury we don't have right now, kids,” Rastovic said as he drew there attention to the footsteps marching their way from the door Anna had opened, and the exit door at the other end of the room. “How many doors till we find Uma?” he asked Anna.

Anna pulled a crumbled up map from her pocket, then held up two fingers in a V. Maybe a sign for victory, or a road to defeat. But Forward beat no direction at all.

CHAPTER 13

The exit door led to a corridor where “I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas” echoed from the distance. Then a lobby where punch and cookies were being served to well dressed adults with smiling faces and dead eyes. The hosts for this Ukranian Christmas, traditionally celebrated in January, included a heavily-beared Santa, and an army of assistants from the north pole that ranged from fashion models in hot looking Ms. Santa suits to 'nose to the grindstone, to rosy-cheeked 'mother hen' Mrs. Clauses in white wigs, to leotarded elves with tall hats who all had military haircuts and grimaces every time they looked at the superfemme pointed shoes they had to use to ambulate in.

“The All American success stories,” Yannis noted to himself as he tried to pretend to be one of the happy partiers. All with faces or names known to every New Yorker who

watched television, listened to radio or tuned in to any kind of news report on the net. Celebs in all areas of endeavor, which included authors whose books Yannis had read, or wanted to read. Scientists who were featured in the Technology Section of the Times and numerous appearances on Charlie Rose boasting about their work to give the world hope for the future, and of course contributions to the Agencies that kept them funded. Actors who were famous because of their abilities such as those recommended by Conspiracy AI, and those were completely known for their ability to know and manipulate people, such as his boss's kid, Saul Horowitz name. And critics, such as Oliver Wendell, who made their living attacking what those artists sweated and bled for.

From atop a make-shift Santa stage, the freshly shorn lead singer of the usually Zappaesque band "We Are Garbage" invited the partiers to sing along to "I'm dreaming of a White Christmas" while buttons were passed out reading "John White for President". There were no dissenting votes in the room.

Yannis noted that every step taken by the guests at this gala was in rhythm to the music, and every movement of their torsos swayed with the beat. Then the congregation was invited to dance, the men with the women, the spare women with each other, if they kept their distance of course. Doctors with nurses. Nurses with patients. Elderly patients with imaginary loved ones from their past.

Anna grabbed hold of Yannis and pulled him into her. "Play along, she whispered into his ear as she rubbed her crotch against his groin. "Or it'll be OUR blood in the punch."

"Nature never gives you a problem without a solution," Yannis whispered back, leading her over towards the single bowl of fruit filled refreshment being served to the guests.

"How sure are you that DMT will bring these happy people whose soul has been saved by Jesus to the idiots and assholes they used to be?" Anna asked him.

"Whatever it will turn them into, it beats what they are now," he replied as he led Anna into a dip, then a whirl that accidently knocked one of the elves guarding the punch onto the ground. During which time Yannis dumped his entire load of DMT into the punch bowl. Feeling like the Weathermen back in 1968, who planned to make the Pentagon give peace a chance was to put LSD into their drinking water. Not an unfair way to wage war against the enemy, since the US Army used draftees back in the Vietnam days to test various chemicals. And in all probability was exposing schleps who enlisted now in the Armed Services in the 'War against Terrorists Abroad' to fancier molecular compounds.

Yannis smiled with fabricated delight as he observed one of the 'Mrs. Clauses' with a thick covering of five o'clock shadow beneath the red rouge on 'her' lips, giving lists to Elves and the big breasted 'Ms.' Clauses, instructing them as to how much red punch should be put into the glasses of orange punch, and who gets which drinks. One of the Ms. Clauses, who looked a lot like Amy, came up behind Yannis and offered him two drinks. "For you and your wife, from Santa," she whispered, pointing to Old Saint Nick

while he sat on his big red chair, looking at a fresh list delivered to him by one of the elves.

“Drink up,” the spitting image of Amy as a younger, and saner, woman, smiled at Yannis. A woman whose face had been worked on by expert surgeons, according to the subtle scars on her face. And whose mind could have been made happy by lobotomy scars that perhaps did lay underneath her very attractive, and thick, bangs. Yannis considered that maybe it indeed was Amy. Stranger coincidences had been happening to him in the last two months. But frightening trumped strange when he took note of Anna's face as she looked at Santa's face, seeing through his beard into his soul.

“You are a dead man,” Anna said with angry eyes through a fake happy smile, in Serbian. But underneath Anna's anger was a catatonic state best labeled as fear, the kind she never allowed anyone to see.

“What did she say?” the Amy hallucination in front of Yannis asked. In a voice that thankfully wasn't Amy's, to his best perceptions anyway. As Yannis' perceptions regarding Santa came back to hard reality. “Yeah, I see that it's you, Mayor White behind that beard and jolly belly,” he thought to himself. “And whatever you did to Anna, you'll answer to me for,” he sneered. “After you answer to the White Rabbit,” he smiled as a Latino Ms. Clause put a glass of punch containing a whooping dose of DMT next to Santa himself, replacing the refreshment that was there already.

The Latino Ms. Clause in question winked to Anna on her way back to the refreshment table to refill her tray.

“Something or someone I should know about?” Yannis asked Anna.

“Mi rotas,” she replied, secretively. “He who asks too many questions when there isn't time for answers gets us all fucked over,” she continued. “And speaking of getting all fucked up,” she said, discretely pointing to Rastovic, dancing with the ghost of his first wife. Happily singing to her in Serbian, in a world of his own in the guise of an old geezer whose only connection to the world is the one that was. Drawing the attention of the crowd, then the Ms. Clauses, then the Mrs. Clauses, then the overly-muscled elves. Who hummed along with the only love song that every passed Rastovic's lips.

“What's he doing?” Yannis asked. “This wasn't part of the plan.”

“It's called improvisation,” Anna whispered as she took Yannis into her arms again, dancing him towards a darkened hallway. To Yannis hoped anyway, there would be an Uma whose ability to improvise would be awakened by the last few vials of DMT he had left in his pocket. After he discovered that one of the vials had broken and pricked his own flesh, making his thigh and the leg underneath it feel like it was part of someone else's body.

CHAPTER 14

The sound of celebration in the lobby disappeared very quickly after Yannis, Anna and finally Rastovic made their way through an easily opened door to a white-walled corridor in which all they could hear was the buzzing of the electrical system. And as they walked past the locked doors, to the only one that was open, a pulse monitor beeping at a steady 72 beats a minute, coming from a room guarded by no one except ghosts, that Yannis could feel, but not see. He froze, looking in their direction on either side of the open door, his face turning whiter than any of them could be.

“Hey!” Anna said, shaking his shoulder, trying to wake him up. “Before your soul takes the next spaceship back to Om planet, we still have one space cadet to save.”

“Many to save,” Yannis said. He looked toward the ghosts, opening up his inner eyes and whatever organ in him was responsible for that elusive modality called 'courage'. He could make the shape of their undulating bodies, and see glimpses of their big, wide eyed, blasting out a yellowing glow from behind an elusive fog around their large head. “Many to save, including you,” he said to the ghosts who had now moved in front of the open door, a promise and a threat.

The ghosts moved aside, allowing Yannis entrance into the room they were guarding.

“Thank you,” Yannis said in Greek to the interesting one on the right, and in English to the mundane one on the left.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Anna look at Rastovic with extreme concern. “Yannis is okay,” Yannis heard Rastovic tell Anna as his ears started to hear sounds from earthly rather than other-worldly beings. But the patient in the bed inside the room was anything but okay.

Once inside, Anna locked the door, yanked out wires leading from an outlet behind the bed, and motioned for Rastovic to open the window on the finger count of three. The old Serb drilled a hole the glass on the window with the a laser gun he had hidden in his shorts and and opened the latch.

“Uma?” Yannis asked the body in the bed with bobbed haircut, a cross around her neck, and a mouth reading chapter and verse from a Bible in a Semetic-sounding tongue that seemed to come from demonic sources. A body whose vital signs featured a systollic over dialstolic blood pressure of 120 over 80, for every beat, for three, four, then ten beats. “Uma!” Yannis scream-whispered to her. “It's me. Yannis. Remember?”

She turned the page of the Bible, her stare held hostage by the words on the pages. Yannis tried to shake her out of it, but she persisted. As if he wasn't there. A ghost from a world she had no interest in anymore. A ghost she tried to vanish by incantations in an Ancient tongue which Yannis somehow understood as 'be gone, demon...to the depths of hell, be gone'.

“Not on my watch!” Yannis grunted, pressing his fingers on the IV line leading from a numbered bottle into her recently tattooed arm, after which he started singing to Uma. Her BP rose to 130, then 140, after which color came back to her face, and that face looked at Yannis.

“Who are you?” she said, aroused from her state of contented compliance to terror. “Who in God's name are you!!!” she screamed. “Who---”

Rastovic placed his hand into her mouth, which bleed profusely after she bit into it. Anna held her body down with every ounce of her weight and strength. “Full dose, now!” she grunted to Yannis, who self-observed himself holding the vial of DMT in his hand. Having second, third and fifth doubts about the side effects of the hallucinogen which Doctor Smith 'suggested very strongly' was the only antidote for HOCH. An antidote that could deliver Uma from the pharmacologically-formulated prison of dulled-out 'Heavenly Bliss', to a universe populated by all sorts of extra-terrestrial creatures whose intentions were still 'under metaphysiological investigation.' Three of those creatures, this time ones with kind eyes, materialized in front of Yannis' eye. One gave a thumbs up to doing the injection. The other a thumbs down. The third, a grandfatherly being of gold-tinged light shook his shoulders with scholarly indecision.

“Now!” Anna commanded a very earthbound Yannis.

Yannis looked to the grandfatherly ET, who nodded a firm 'yes' to the proposition, while his two younger space travelers bowed their heads, their hands in prayer.

Maybe it was the ghosts whose consciousness invaded Yannis' 'never had been and never intend to be stoned, drunk or tripping' brain, or maybe it was the footsteps marching down the hallway. Or maybe it was his hatred for the Bible Thumper haircut White and his doctors gave to Uma. In any case, something in him decided to obey the elderly Messenger of Light. Yannis quickly injected the full syringe of DMT into the IV line. Uma shook like a leaf, her BP skyrocketing to 200 over 120 for three, four then twelve beats of the heart. A heart that send blood out to the brain at 80 beats per minute, than 120, then 180, then back to a steady and strong 50. Her face became flush and her eyes opened up. As did the Soul behind it. “Where are we, Yannis?” she asked the only Cop she ever really trusted, and the only soul in NYC who knew what and who she was really about.

“We are out of here,” Anna said.

Uma looked to Uncle Rastovic. “What happened to your hand?”

“A happy accident,” he smiled.

“Which we'll talk about later,” Anna said, after which she slipped a body bag under her feet, moving it up to her neck, and slipped under her head.

“What's going on?” Uma asked Yannis, as she felt her short hair, and caught a terrifying view of herself in the mirror. “Am I...dead?” she inquired.

“Not anymore,” Yannis smiled, stroking her cheek. “Right guys?” he said, looking towards the three maybe Wise Men from the distant stars.

They disappeared into the common ethers of earth. To his eyes anyway. Eyes that now saw Anna zip the body bag over her head. Rastovic helped her load it onto a stretcher. And demanding Yannis' help in getting Uma's body, and everyone else's asses out the open window.

CHAPTER 15

Yannis didn't recognize the yellow brick road en route to the Safe House Anna and Rastovic decided to take Uma to, an abandoned working class bungalow somewhere between one Hampton and another that had been the most lucrative Grow-Op on Long Island during the summer, and perhaps the summer prior to that as well. As for the safety of the mold-infested building ready to be reclaimed by the surf or the winds emanating from it, a low flying Elf whisked his way over the dunes outside of the taped up glass window, signaled a thumbs up to Yannis before he was pulled back to the more 'interesting' side of the rainbow by his other etherial buds. From then onward, Yannis' perspectives and perceptions were completely earthbound. For better, and probably worse.

With the coordinated aid of both feet working in unison, he got off the couch in the living room and hobbled over to the kitchen, where Uma sat on the only chair in the bungalow that had four intact legs on it which were not put together with duct tape. Yannis helped himself to a tablespoon of instant coffee, mixing it with battery-heated water which was more rust than aqua, throwing in five packets of sugar that the mice had not eaten through yet.

Anna finished explaining the 'what's' of it all to a now very alert, and Alive, Uma, in as accurate detail as she could, a process that took an hour or so, according to the dollar store clock on the wall. Yannis recalled from his half-snooze on the couch that during that process, Rastovic had attempted to relate the 'why' with as many Serbian sayings as direct answers.

“We have to tell someone about this,” Uma said to her two earth-grounded rescuers. “Besides ourselves. Or the ghosts, extra-terrestrials and imaginary constructs programmed into a lobulated molecule between carbon atoms by geeks who live on the safe side of the rainbow,” she shot directly at Yannis.

“You're talking like I think,” Yannis said to himself as he smiled proudly at Uma. Proud that she was standing up for herself. And regretful that the price of being assertive of in

mind was being less open in heart. An educated cynic rather than a Spirit-oriented optimist. “You've become less...likable,” he said to her, finally pinning down what was brewing behind her eyes.

“And right, instead of popular,” Uma asserted. “Or...happy?”

“All obtainable again, with this?” Yannis replied, opening up a violin case and presenting her with the best rental violin he could get from the shelves at 'Max the Music Mench'.

“Maybe,” she said, backing away from the instrument. Terrified of being who she once was.

“Take it, please,” Anna insisted, with a motherly assurance.

“Yeah,” Rastovic added. He grabbed hold of a pack of half-opened smokes in the drawer next to the stove. He sniffed it to assure himself that the only mind altering substances in them were the chemicals legally put into tobacco to keep consumers addicted to smoking, so that the government could collect on the taxes for purchasing cigarettes, so that they would die of cancer or some other disease, so they would not have to be paid out in Social Security checks till the ripe and healthy age of 100 and something. He lit one of the cigarettes, and puffed out a deep breath of transient satisfaction. “Ya know what I could go for right now?”

Yannis retrieved a bottle of legally purchased Johnny Walker Red hooch from the cabinet next to the sink.

“No,” Rastovic said, taking the violin out of Yannis' hands. With bow in hand, and cigarette in mouth, he scratched out four notes that drove nails into the ears of everyone around him, including the stray cat which had made a home for itself in the bungalow. The feline emitted a tortured yowl on his way out of the warm house into the cold, snow-covered sands outside. “The Conspiracy Concerto,” Rastovic said proudly of his new composition. “Which I think you can compose and play better than I can,” he said to Uma.

“And if I can't, or won't?” the once gleeful musician turned burnt out cynic challenged.

“Then I'll have to hand the instrument over to Maestro Yannis here,” Rastovic replied. “And have Anna sing the Aria accompaniment.”

“You have heard me play the violin,” Yannis said to Uma. “That time you invited me to hold your instrument while you went into Starfucks and to empty your bladder and bowels.”

“Yeah,” Uma said. “And I came back to a violin case that was emptied, the money people put in replaced by crumbled up garbage and a referral to two psychiatric clinics.”

On a street where all the pigeons fucked off half way to New Jersey. No offense.” She then turned to Anna. “And I have heard you singing in a voice that would scare even the bravest cockroach into staying inside the cracks in the wall in the shower, after you and Yannis, hmmm...had discoursed about philosophy in the bedroom. No offense.”

“None taken, for the review,” Anna smirked. “Or checking out who Yannis goes to bed with, for his own good, which is his business and the business of whatever bitch or babe he's with. No offense.”

Yannis self-observed himself smiling. But before his cheeks or ego could get too inflated with two women after his heart, in different ways, perhaps, Rastovic provided another saying in Serbian, with a fatherly tone of compassionate consternation.

“And translated into English, this means what?” Yannis said, eyes rolling.

“He who rolls his eyes when being advised, is not so wise, and loses his eyes?” Anna offered.

“Which...hmm rhymes,” Uma said, as herself again. Finally. To a tune she composed on the spot. She repeated those lyrics three times, with three different tempos. Then played an accompaniment to them on the violin. Making it sound sometimes like a fiddle. Then an instrument beyond description which was an extension of herself. With interwoven moments of drama, pathos and comedy. With musical jokes that made every listener in the room laugh, and think. Even the feline which chose to sneak its way through the dog door. While Uma focused on the instrument, and being the instrument.

At the conclusion of the piece, Silence took over the room. A loud hush accompanied by nothing except the harmonic movements of the surf on the beach. Then a lull, as the waves diminished. Uma looked out at the still water. “King Neptune is giving us a chance to make some waves of our own, maybe?” she asked. “Maybe on the airwaves?”

She looked at Anna, Yannis and Rastovic, all of whom nodded 'yes'. Indeed, Yannis could feel the fifth brain between them happily and satifiably dancing on the kitchen table after its presence was activated by their individual and collective intention.

“Conspiracy Al's place?” Yannis suggested. “No one knows he's off the air.”

“Or the planet,” Rastovic said crossing himself in the Eastern Orthodox way that he had not done for any other victims of 'accidental' death since his first wife's soul was prematurely pulled out of her body by a God he still had issues with.

“From what I hear about the crazy cat lady who looked after his place when he was away, there's still an emergency transmitter and audio board there,” Anna offered.

“In a city that probably has an ABP out for its newest, converted-to-sanity patient,” Uma related, looking into the mirror in the adjoining bathroom. “According to what you read

in my medical file at the 'hospital', I was going to be experimented with like the most valuable rat in the lab, then killed so they could look at what, you said, was 'the most interesting brain in the study'."

"The word is sacrificed," Yannis said. "Social scientists like Mayor White et al don't 'kill' their subjects, they 'sacrifice' them."

"Yeah, sacrifice," Uma said, an very different irony in her eyes. She turned her head downward, and opened a drawer which had nearly fallen out of its slot. With trembling hands, she pulled out sharp pair of scissors.

"What are you doing?" Yannis gasped as he grabbed hold of blades of the razor sharp, blood-tinged shears.

"Making myself less...noticable?" she added, grabbing hold of a pair of clippers in the drawer with one hand, a chunk of hair on the top of her head with the other. "And more...manly. For the cameras that will be watching us as soon as we leave this place, and maybe others we could hook up to Conspiracy AI's equipment," she said. "No one took Socrates or Buddha seriously till they lost the grass growing on top of their head, right?"

"It grows back," Anna said, pushing her hand through her black-dyed coif. "So I'm told," she continued, regretting having given herself the pixie doo and dye job, but thankful that it allowed her to get into ex-lover and never-to-be hubby John White's institute and sight. "As long as you don't shave it two inches below the scalp," Anna warned. "I thought about that once."

"I'll be careful," Uma pledged as she took clippers to head and removed every bit of hair except for a rim on top of the ears and at the base of the neck. Then taking covering her head with the remains of the shaving cream left by the previous owners. She searched for a razor blade, not finding one. "Damn, anyone have a kitchen knife?" she asked a shocked Yannis, an approving Anna and a proud 'Uncle Rastovic'.

"Yeah, I should do it myself," Uma said, opening up the drawers in the kitchen, finally finding a blade up to the job. While looking at the blinding shine in the mirror from her hairless crown, Uma sung a Hari Krishna chant with resolve and joy. As if she knew exactly what was in the Path ahead of her, armed with the Mission of preventing John White et al from turning the spice that was once New York into a bland dulled-out soup which was toxic for those who ate and served it.

Anna pulled back Yannis' hair. "You want to see me bald too?" he asked her.

"Only after you become very gray, and very old," she smiled back, appended with a kiss. While Rastovic looked at his watch, and a notepad containing a plan that he had worked out in the kitchen. Yes, another melody assigned to Yannis which he had to turn into an improvised song, and popular hit.

CHAPTER 16

The pile of dying winter weeds outside of Conspiracy Al's apartment building in Flushing was converted into an evergreen garden by the new groundskeepers. The almost-condemned building was renovated at record speed, inviting new tenants to fill the previously empty apartments inside.

“Cat people especially welcomed,” Auntie Isaac Rastovic read in the window of the lobby, adjusting the hippie moma dress and waist-long wig he had donned from the clothing in the bungalow to make himself unrecognizable. A disguise that Anna suggested, and Uma demanded that he adopt. While Rastovic was evaluating the authenticity of his new appearance in the mirrored glass of the building and his ambivalent reaction to it, Anna held the cat from the bungalow in her arms. The feline's attention was clearly on the five cats around the new landlord on the other side of the glass door, polishing the counter with a proud smile.

The crazy cat lady waved back to the cat, and then to Rastikov, which he returned, while blasting his niece beside him with an angry, and quiet growl. “Why is she waving hello to me like she knows me?”

“Because she knows me, Auntie Isaac,” Anna said with a forced smile directed at the cat lady, an angry growl to a very worried Rastovic. “She recognizes my eyes, despite the dark Latino make up on my face and the black butch hair cut,” she whispered. “Nothing to worry about.”

“And those migrant gardeners, with the three hundred dollar haircuts and spit-polished two hundred dollar shoes, who are probably better armed under their grass stained shirts than we are?” Auntie Rastovic said as two white haired grounds keepers whose muscles couldn't keep up with their younger colleagues took a break, helping themselves to a drink from their thermos, and a glance at his legs, chest and then face. “They're looking at me like they know me.”

“Or maybe they want to, Auntie-Granny,” Anna smiled. “Sex after sixty is better than anything under forty, right?”

“When I find out, I'll let you know,” Rastovic replied, smiling as ladylike as he could. He waved to the admiring 'gentlemen', pushing the long, grey-ish black hair of his wig over the side of his face, which got them even MORE interested in what was behind it. “I got a bad feeling about this one, Anna.”

“So do I, but it's our only option,” Anna said.

The crazy cat lady came to the door and unlocked it. With a loud voice, she greeted them with every word a building manager would say to a prearranged, perspective client. Then the cat lady welcomed a young, hunched-backed, slow-in-the-head delivery dude with a dolly loaded large duffle bags marked cat litter and building supplies who had been behind Anna and Rastovic. As Rastovic glanced into the mirrored reflection of the premature bald youth, bobbing his head in a circular motion and slurring out saliva from one side of his mouth under a peachfuzz mustache, he could see nothing of Uma in him. Hopefully the cameras mounted above them hidden within the new foliage would not either.

The old men were called back to work by tending the garden by the young ones, who were the bosses, instructing their elders to install wires and cameras within the new trees and which when turned around, showed branches trimmed to look like kittens and puppies.

With Rastovic, Uma and Anna safely inside the building, along with the equipment they would need to get Conspiracy Al's broadcast station operating again, Yannis emerged from the 'homeless hobo with bad harmonica' hoodie covering his head, kicking aside the guitar case in front of him containing a fistful of dimes collected from passers by, along with crumbled up garbage they had thrown into his collection case. "You guys looking for me?" he said to the gardeners, some of whom he recognized as colleagues from the Department, others which he didn't.

"What are YOU doing here, Dabaris?" the head hancha said to Yannis.

"Shhhh", Yannis said as he approached them, his head down, his back hunched over, hobbling over to the gardeners. "I'm Staking out this dude, like I was assigned to," Yannis he whispered, pointing to a car parked illegally, then to the plate on the back bumper. "The licence plate of the flower delivery bandit. Who collected another fistful of these, just this morning," he continued, pulling out no less than five citations for illegal parking and three moving violation offenses. "And a shitload more in his car. Word has it that whoever catches this guy who's embarrassing everyone who wears a shield is gonna get a fist full of medals on his uniform and a whole lot of unofficial bonuses put into his bank account, compadres."

Yannis' fellow brothers in blue all contemplated the benefits of ending the day with promotions for themselves and goodies they could buy for their wives, mistresses or kids. But the young Turk in charge of the detachment trying to pass himself off as a lowly Latino looked at Yannis suspiciously. "And you need our help to catch this guy, Detective Dabaras, because---"

"---All of you pea brained police patsies are idiots, assholes and everything in between," came out of the car from a window that had been abruptly opened. "Take this!" the elusive flower delivery dude yelled out as he threw a sac full of manure-covered flowers at the gardeners then floored the suped up klunker and ram-rodged it down the street, throwing a fistful of garbage behind him.

The young Turk was the first to buy the middle aged Greek detective's bait, leading his manure-covered men to the landscaping van, then zooming down the street at full speed, with the siren running. Then yelling at the crowd of pedestrians to get out of the way of the pursuit when they ran onto the street, in search of a fistful of garbage, which contained real money. Some of it fake, acquired from the evidence room in counterfeiting cases that were pending. And some of it real, liberated from the vault at Mayor White's Research Institute while Anna had cased the place out prior to Yannis and Rastovic's arrival.

Yannis looked down at the money grabbers with a wide smile on his face. Some were driven by greed, others by need, and others by the kind of excitement that few New Yorkers had experienced since John White took office and cleaned the city of its evil sins. They yelled out every expletive from the F word to inventions of their own, with enthusiastic voices that resulted in them inventing their own expletives.

Yannis looked at his watch, then heard a knock from the door to the building. Uma motioned for him come in, fast. He looked in the direction of where he thought the flower delivery dude was going, crossed himself, and said a quick prayer for him, and the others who he hired to create the biggest set of diversions the City had seen in decades. Others that included Greek restaurateur Nikos, whose diner was about to be shut down for trumped up health code violations after his wife caught him expressing the kind of love for his Russian waitress that he never felt for the woman who he had begrudgingly married. To Irving Horowitz, who really did want to find out why Cal Macon, his most promising lead into Hollywood and biggest tipper, died mysteriously. To Macon's Nebraskan Christian Mistress girlfriend, who loved a REAL humanistic part of the asshole actor that lay dormant in his soul, to everyone, most including her. To Spiros, who really did know how to make DMT, the antidote for the toxic effects of HOCH, most of them anyway. And of course prayers sent up to above for the elusive flower delivery dude with the highest record of parking and traffic tickets in recordable history, who had turned himself in to Yannis, with a flower delivery to his house in he dead of night reading 'no one else should do my jail time, maybe we can work something out between us?'. The anarchist related as well that he found Yannis' address through a purple-haired technician at Smith's lab who was the only one who gave a shit about why her boss didn't come in to work after 'the documentary shoot that shot the Truth into the minds of Docs and Post-Docs, straight between their closed eyes.'

Yannis felt himself talking with God, not negotiating. In a common cause. The dialog was brought back to earth very quickly by Uma opening the door to the building and waving him in, with the utmost urgency. Fear and anger behind her eyes, both competing for control of her Mind. A Mind that was central to a plan that had to work. For reasons well beyond what Uma could understand, or was supposed to.

CHAPTER 17

“Who do you go to when the system is fucked up from the top? The asshole on top. No, you idiot, the shitheads and morons on the bottom,” Yannis told himself in an abbreviated dialog with himself in the mirrors in the lobby of the building on the way up to Conspiracy Al's old apartment. Everywhere he went, another mirror caught his glance as he tried to focus on what should be rather than what was. “Yeah, I'm talking to you!” the reflection in the elevator said to him. “And if you're thinking about asking Uma if this plan of yours will work, she's not going to give you an answer. And if she does, it's the wrong answer,” Yannis' reflection yelled back at him as he tried to avoid it with his mind but couldn't break away from it with his eyes.

“What's wrong?” Uma inquired with and a gentle touch on Yannis' shaking shoulder.

“Just getting used to experiencing the world naked, I suppose,” he said, stroking his upper hairless upper lip and chin.

“So am I,” she replied, rubbing her fingers over the hairless crown of her head. “It does grow back, doesn't it?” she asked Yannis.

“On the inside and the outside,” he smiled back. “Just like what we're gonna do for the world we have to serve, but are paid to please. Cure it from the inside and the outside.”

“By me playing violin for them?” Uma said. “You really think that my music going over the airwaves to Conspiracy Al's fans is gonna make his enemies believe the words you guys have written.”

“Depends on if we rhythm them right, I suppose,” Yannis replied. He took a crumbled piece of paper out of his pocket, reading the illegibly-written words with a clear voice, that Anna told him on more than one occasion sounded more like Conspiracy Al than Al did. “Listen to my story 'bout a man called John White, who set in motion a plague worse than blight. Talking about a dull out drug that destroys the mind, and the hopes for awakening for all of mankind...And woman kind...And being kind...That started with a drug called HOCH, and instrument of the worst hate, by those who want to control fate, who---”

The elevator door opened up, half way, the oscillated back and forth in tempo with the lights on the ceiling of the elevator flashing on and off. “Guess that means we should walk the rest of the way, without delay,” Uma song-talked, with an 'everything is going to okay' smile, as she jumped through the crack in the elevator door, followed by Yannis, who hid his facial expressions from her, and the mirrors.

After he left the elevator, the doors to it shut closed. The cart plummet down the shaft, crashing into an ominous thud that vibrated the floor. To his right was the staircase, the door boltlocked with the third lock by the crazy cat lady whose real name Yannis still didn't know. “This way,” smiled the ammonia-smelling woman whose black stretch pants and red sweater contained a thick layer of multi-colored feline hair.

She led Yannis and Uma to the apartment across the hall from the one bedroom apartment which had been the home and command center for Conspiracy AI ever since he took to his own airways after being banished from the established ones. She opened the door, marked 'Janitorial Supplies', inviting Yannis and Uma to go in. Upon entry, Yannis' jaw dropped in shock.

“This place is...is...” he muttered from shaking lips.

“A state beyond the art, and the old farts, broadcast center,” Anna proclaimed, a black and white feline on top of her left shoulder, a golden-haired Persian in her lap snarking at the 'commoner' feline above it everytime it thought of coming down to get some 'Anna lovin'. “The latest of everything, for audio and video transmission, put together by Conspiracy AI's most valued Cockran, Doctor Jenna Renikova,” she said regarding the cat lady as she adjusted more of the equipment, a concoction of mismatched Radio Shack and Walmart reject parts which were pieced together as if they were tailor made for NASA, or the Central Intelligence Agency monitoring centers that were beyond anything in the Bourne Conspiracy Flicks. “Doctor Jenna has a doctorate in physics and engineering.”

“And a love for cats that MADE me release them from the research facility at the university that hired me,” the maybe not so crazy cat lady replied as she fine tuned the audio recording devises, along with the wires on a box marked, in very hand-made font, 'anti-jamming unit.' “But it was all worth it,” Jenna continued with an accomplished, but sombre grin on her wrinkled face, atop an underfed body. “Everything's ready to go,” she said, after which she looked at Yannis. “And you?”

“This plan will never work,” Yannis told himself as he withdrew the paper from his pocket, looking over the broadcast message he had written in the last hour. Writing that felt like it came from a different place than anything else he had penned, be it a lecture for new recruits at the Police Academy, a love poem for Anna he would show to her one day, a hate poem he would say to Amy, or that novel about True Crime which was more about raw, and perhaps sterile-worded, Truths than colorful criminalities. “Yeah,” he said as he looked at a picture of Conspiracy AI in a photo over the main computer, arm in arm with Jenna, and of course framed by a cat on each of their shoulders. “This one's for you, maybe channeled by you, AI. Maybe your, or our, last broadcast. Or my eulogy for you, to you, written by you. Which of those it will be...I guess we'll both find out after I open my mouth to the microphone. After I of course do one very important thing first.”

“Have to take a piss break again? Had one too many beers outside when doing sentry duty?” Rastovic said from behind the video camera, mounted on a multi-directional tripod as Uma set up with her violin, and multiple other instruments. “Be sure to do it standing up, and for Goddess' sake, put the seat down afterwards,” he smiled, still in female garb.

“I will do that,” Yannis said as he walked to the can, with appreciation to the Old Serb for keeping his fear-induced need to urinate before doing anything scary private. He

admired Rastovic's willingness to expand his consciousness to connecting to the female part of himself. Or maybe Anna intentionally forgot to bring the bag of his male clothing up to the apartment to get back at Uncle Isaac for his constant 'men should be men and women should be women' rants, and associated 'old world' saying that he would constantly compose on his own.

But even the longest piss breaks would not last forever. So Yannis felt when he evacuated his bladder, put down the toilet seat, than flushed. While zipping up his pants as well as the escape route for thoughts in his head that should remain there, he noticed a crumbled up piece of paper in the waste basket. A generic Last Will and Testament, with Anna's signature on the bottom, dated today. With the name of the beneficiary for all of her assets written, the identity of such blurred by fresh blood, after the first four letters, 'Luci'. Maybe a 21st century reference to Lucy, the lesbian gal-pal and fuck buddy that Anna always used as an excuse for not dating every man who approached her with the deal of the year. Or maybe Lucifer, a 'misunderstood fallen angel who was doing God's dirty work because the angels were too cowardly or prissy to do so', as Anna had said many times regarding the Prince of Darkness. Something that would have to be dealt with later as he heard Anna yell out the count down from ten, feeling that he was being watched by more than just the spiders on the ceiling walking their way to flies that had been caught already.

CHAPTER 18

Yannis started the broadcast as AI, saying that he apologizes for being off the air because he was 'off the Tao but now back on his dharma', after which he explained that Tao was the always uncharted road to dharma, aka, Life Job and Ultimate Purpose. Then, as Uma played music of her own design on the violin, Yannis, in his best Conspiracy AI voice, informed the public about John White's plan to sterilize the Soul of the city with a marvelous little blood pressure control drug that had a minor side effect of destroying the users from being imaginative, artistic, and expressive. Something which would of course be suicidal for those who already were imaginative, artistic and expressive. Such people were of course dangerous to White Bread John White, and whoever he was working for, or with. The audio was accompanied by the images of Uma passionately playing her violin and the other instruments around her, along with the images of the Yannis in the dark sunglasses and wigs that Conspiracy AI always wore, making him less recognizable with his real face than Lady Gaga OR the Lone Ranger.

Some of words delivered into the microphone were from the paper Yannis had taken into the broadcast booth, but most was not. Yannis could feel and hear Uma's music, but not his own words. He had no idea if he even sounded like Conspiracy AI anymore, and...he didn't care. "It's not like AI doesn't speak with different voices," Yannis' mind told his brain. "And even though I know I'm not as artistic as he ever was, Uma's music makes me sound artistic. I certainly feel artistic. Alive, with a really big AI!"

Phone calls, texts and e mails came in, asking for proof of one of the boldest claims Conspiracy AI had ever made. Anna collected them and printed them out, typing on her own quips, comments and opinions. Rastovic gave commentary to them afterwards, with pencil, on the print outs, still refusing to 'corrupt messages from the Soul by having a keyboard between the speaker and the listener' . 'Conspiracy Yannis' was given all of their opinions, and had the final word as to what would be shared over the airways, and what would be shelves.

All manner of co-conspiracies were suggested to be linked to HOCH. Ranging from the contention that JFK was dulled out by a precursor of HOCH, and that he hired Lee Harvey Oswald to take him out so that his life would mean something.

To Abba, Percy Faith and Disco being auditory vectors for HOCH and related dull out drugs, the hit songs having been composed by a mathematical formula derived by a Professor of Biophysics in Athens who was under the payroll of the Fascist Greek Junta in 1968, which was, as a matter of provable record, under the payroll of the American CIA.

To the proposal that extra-terrestrials from a distant planet, known mythologically as Mediocra, (whose logical cortical brain centers were over developed, and whose reproductive abilities had plummeted to zero) were experimenting with New York City, one of the the most expressive and presumably intelligent population centers, to see if they could deactivate earthling innovation before recolonizing their planet. This time, there were no et's sitting next to Yannis to confirm or deny those neo-Sumarian claims.

The broadcast lasted for what felt like forever. One of those eternal now moments that lasted forever, as Yannis felt it anyway. Like the doors to the entire universe opened up, until the front door of the apartment was broken down. An entourage of well armed SWAT police uniforms entered, backed up by three smaller framed behimiths in suits, and an even smaller leader behind them all. "That will be quite enough, now," their leader barked, his face hidden.

Rastovic turned the cameras on entourage, all of whom were wearing mirrored lens sun glasses over their eyes and expressionless grimaces on their partially-bandana covered mouths. With, of course, John White happy faces on their lapels. But the before he could pull focus onto them, one of the goons shot a lazer bullet directly into the camera lens, melting every piece of functioning circuit around it. Then shots from his buds blew holes shot a more substantial bullet into every piece of visible computer equipment Jenna had reconstructed after AI's self-inflicted 'suicide', converting the wires and knobs into a smoldering pile of metallic smoke. After the smoke cleared, the small-framed real leader, clad in a blue jacket, white shirt and red tie strode in front of the congregation.

"Are you alright?" John White said, with what appeared to be compassionate eyes, directly to Anna. "And did you get what we needed."

“Right here,” she said, handing over the printed copies of the Conspiracy callers, complete with cyber addresses, street addresses, and photos.

“And the ringleader, Anna?” White said, looking towards Yannis.

“In his dreams,” she said with a condescending eyeroll.

“Which have become reality!” Yannis insisted, adjusting to the shifting reality around him. A reality in which man's man Isaac Rastovic was still in a dress. A reality in which Uma continued to play her violin, defiantly staring down the suits, amplifying the intensity of the music when they laughed at her. A reality where Jenna calmly petted the cats on her lap who snarled at John White, promising them in some Atlantian language that everything is going to be alright. And a reality where Yannis was forced to look at Anna with a new set of eyes, a pair of oculars he hated more than he hated Anna, John White, or whoever else was behind the very real plot to neutralize the City that had once defined 'Vitality'. And a reality where someone else was calling the shots, or the moment, the people holding the guns.

“Who else is in this destructive anarchist movement of yours, Detective Dabaras?” John White demanded of Yannis.

“We call ourselves the Resistance,” Rastovic barked back, with the fire of a lion and lioness.

“I don't give a damn what you friggin, deluded, mother-fornicators call yourselves,” White smiled back, as he looked at the print outs given to him by Anna, his strong arm around her small shoulders in a 'me head ape who own this woman now, loser monkey' gesture. “Give me all the names now, Rastovic, and I'll see that your new fiancee doesn't get to see this picture,” White continued, motioning for Anna to take a picture of the old Serb. Which she did.

“Go ahead,” Rastovic said, giving Anna's camera a view of his legs. “She has a dress just like it, and gams almost as good as mine.”

“Then your kids, you fucked up, perverted son of a bitch,” White barked back, his true colors showing through every syllable of the expletives he always felt, but never said, in public anyway. “Give me the names of everyone in this fucking 'Resistance', or I'll see that they pay the goddamn price for your stupidity, and your fucked up, mother fucking for their attempts to---”

Uma delivered a disharmonic chord that drove a wedge into White's ears. His musical answer was with a single percussion beat, delivered from a gun he pulled from the holster of the SWAT Cop next to him. The bullet pierced the violin, breaking it in two. Uma dropped the now dysfunctional fiddle on the floor and picked up a trumpet, continuing the newly composed Revolutionary Blues cantata. A second shot from White's gun blew

the trumpet out of Uma's hand. Then he shot into dysfunctionality every other musical instrument in sight. Uma put her hands together and bowed her head.

“Now, that's better, kid. Who looks, maybe familiar, somehow,” White said. “But whoever you are, it's a smart thing for you to beg forgiveness from the Lord, and from me, and from Anna here, my right hand woman,” he continued with another 'me Tarzan, Anna my Jane and no one else's ownership half hug, which Anna accepted with a grateful smile. “Yes, Anna, who advised me that it's in our best interest to give all of you chance to be re-educated.”

“And re-medicated?” Uma said, after which she raised her head up, pulling a rod out of her left breast pocket. A kazoo, which she played like a fart, to the tune of Beethoven's fifth. Rastovic joined in with harmony, delivered as barfs. Then the cat lady, with meows at the appropriate places. Yannis added belches to the ensemble, a bit off key, but definitely on target.

Yannis could feel Ludwig's ghost come into the room, smiling and laughing. Conducting the trio with something the Over Accomplished Master shared with very few people in his lifetime. Yes, humor. The most important human accomplishment possible, forbidden in a White is Right and Might America. But alive and well now. Until White inserted words into the libretto that ended the music, and brought the Opera into a final act. With a pictorial representation of the end scene.

“Stephen and Wendy, or is it Dakota now?” White said as he pulled out two pictures of Yannis' kids, and or more accurately, children. “They would make good laboratory rats now, won't they?”

Yannis ceased belching.

“As will all of your grandkids, grandparents, and animals,” White shot into the faces of Rastovic, Uma and Jenna, respectively.

The improvised Beethoven's fifth and a half symphony stopped. Replaced by deadly silence as White approached Yannis, followed by a very obedient Anna by his side, who had pad and paper in hand. “I can make life easy for you, or hard,” White promised, and threatened. “And your kids, who you love more than yourself, and any Cause you THINK you're willing to die for.”

Anna looked at Yannis and nodded 'yes'. Behind those eyes, all of a sudden Yannis could see everything. Another 'everything' that put it all together.

“Your kid, or child's, name, Anna. Luci? Lucifer? Or maybe...hmmm...Lucias?” he asked. “An embarrassment to his Daddy here,” he continued, pointing to White. “Who maybe is in a special school for special needs?”

“Defective genetics, so the doctors said,” Anna confessed.

“From HER!” White barked out. “My family has no medical problems!”

“But knows how to create them?” Yannis said. “In kids you don't want to grow up to be thinking adults, or adults who want to connect to the Creative Playfulness of the kid within them? Or maybe you want to be top of the Creative heap, but you can't be because you're naturally a dull, boring, lifeless soul, and if you make everyone else less creative or expressive than you ever were, it's YOU who'll be on center stage, being the life of the Party, the Master of Ceremonies, the creative genius who you know you could never be. Instead of being---”

“---Shut up!” the always calm politician who never was seen to raise his voice even in the hottest of debates or with the most personal questions from insistent journalists yelled at Yannis. Kicking, hitting and punching him like the 'crude, spiritually-underdeveloped animals' that he claimed New York was overpopulated with. “I'll tell you who's the boss. ME! And you know why?”

“Because you can turn the most dedicated revolutionary into a passionless patsy?” Rastovic said. “Just like Stalin tried to do with HIS scientists. And, almost succeeded. Ever wondered why Russians today still have trouble breaking into a smile, or a laugh?”

“I'm not Communist!” Whit barked back at Rastovic. “I'm no magalomaniac!” he continued, exhausting himself as he screamed his case to every member of the Resistance, including the cats who continued to snarl at him. “I am a man who is using science and medicine to reverse the harm done to the Woodstock Generation and all generations by 'fun' drugs. And defective ideas about what individual liberty is. I am an innovator, in the service of the One True God! Who speaks to me very clearly, in a language that only I understand. A Prophet. A Servant of the Lord. And A level CEO in a network bigger than any of you can imagine.”

“And something else,” Anna said, tenderly touching his shaking and sweat-soaked shoulder.

“What else am I, my dearest Anna?” White smiled back to his beloved.

“A fool,” Anna said, pointing to Jenna, instructing her to place the two felines in her lap onto the floor, revealing a camera with a bright 'recording' button on it in her lap buried within her breasts. The cats lurched out at White, scratching his shooting hand, then making a quick getaway to the ceiling. Avoiding shots he fired at them with his left, using every expletive his new 'curse jar' laws forbade. Expletives that he heard again as Anna showed him the replay of the broadcast that had just went out on the cyber airwaves. Which recorded everything since his entrance.

“You've gone viral, Johnboy! Thanks to Doctor Jenna's ability to build a back up broadcast system that's very operative, hidden in places you'll never find,” she said with

a wide smile, letting him see on her phone the number of hits already registered for the entire playback since his entrance. “Your anti-fan club, President White!”

“Kill the bitch!” White commanded his goons, pushing Anna away, with all of his strength, nearly breaking her back against a hard wall.

“So we can get all of your faces on candid camera,” Jenna smirked, as Anna whipped the sunglasses of every Mench in blue, revealing their faces. Faces they hid from the cameras as they made a quick exit from the room.

“So, what are we going to do with you, Johnboy?” Anna asked.

“Put him in this dress you convinced me to put on and make him walk the gauntlet outside?” Rastovic suggested. “That is unless you had some other plan in mind when you conjured all of this up, Anna.”

“A plan you should have told me and Rastovic about,” Yannis said to Anna. “And should have told Uma about as well.”

“Mi rotas,” Uma smiled to Yannis. “Which means 'don't ask', right Anna,” the marginalized musician turned revolutionary winked to her co-conspirator.

“Because he who asked too many questions, does get too many answers,” Anna replied putting her arms over Yannis shoulders, gently pulling him into her chest. “And the answer to the question you're asking,” she continued, taking the ring off of Yannis' third digit, and placing it on her wedding ring finger. “Is yes,” she smiled.

“You could have waited for me to ask you in words,” Yannis replied, the voice inside his head finally coming out of its cave. Having realized in that moment every mistake he had made in relationships with women, now that he was with the Right woman, in the Right way.

“I like talking without words,” Anna smiled back.

Yannis said a lifetime of pledges and promises with his eyes to Anna. She offered hers as well. The third soul between them swallowed them both into a single entity that elevated each of them to places they didn't think possible. For better, or worse.

Rastovic tapped Uma on the shoulder, handing her the only unbroken instrument in the room. It was perhaps the first time a kazoo was used to play the Wedding Music from Wagner's Lohengrin. But then again, it was the first time for many things, for better or worse. Particularly when a faint John White asked Jenna to open the window so he could breath some fresh non-feline-infested air. Then leaped out of it, killing the secrets inside of him regarding his collaborators in the Dull Out conspiracy with a loud an messy thud on the pavement fourteen long stories below.

A crowd of people as diverse as the City itself gathered around the body. Some spit at the bloodied corpse of John White. Others cursed him. Some prayed for his deranged soul. The Cops who came by did nothing to stop any of them. One of them ripped off the Mayor White happy-smiley decals from his uniform. His fellow officers did the same, tossing them into a dumpster bearing White's smiling face.

“So, what do we do now?” Uma asked Yannis, then Anna, then Rastovic, then Jenna, then the cats.

“Sing us a song,” Yannis requested. “While the people down their find the music inside themselves again. We'll all be needing it, very soon. But in the meantime...” Yannis took the wig off Rastovic's head and put it over Uma's bald crown. Then handed her the kazoo, and took Anna's hand. Jenna took over as Priestess in an Atlantian ceremony in which Yannis could not understand a single word, except 'yes' with regard to Anna. And vice versa.

Yannis and the City with which he had a love-hate relationship had won a battle against the worst kind of evil—Lifelessness. But further wars were coming, as the struggle for Life always has as its ultimate opponent---lifelessness. An inefficient way to run a Universe, but then again, as the Promethian proverb echoed, 'Heaven watches, earth works, each dependent on the other'.