

HENRY AND THE WOLF DOCTOR: PART 2

Pray for the Prey

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, not somewhere else, ya know? Though we really, like don't understand you, we need you and you need us. And Cowboy Hank, you two have so much karmic history together that it would

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CHAPTER 1

It wasn't supposed to happen to Roberta, by any of her calculations or projections but...if the data fits the new hypothesis, you gotta re-think your theories. And if the symptoms fit the disease, that's what you got. And no matter how hard you try to say the sky is still blue and not a warped shade of green, and no matter what kind of filters you put on your sunglasses, that sky be what it is...Just as, according to the Great and Underappreciated Philosopher-Prophet Frank Zappa, "you be what you be and you is what you is."

Such is what Roberta Collinear, Ph.D., D.V.M. faced when she put on her stethoscope for another day of healing animals, hoping in the process to perhaps heal herself as well at Doc 'Dinosaur' Henry Steiner's clinic. The half-White, have Indian Metis misfit who never fit into any world except the ones she created herself had endured one Alberta winter and conquered another since her arrival in Knife Bend. The truck that got her stranded there was fixed, but kept breaking down again, as if the demon inside the engine found a comfortable home in 'Cowboy Hank's' garage and new home ten miles outside of town, a section of land that had been over-farmed, but after being left alone for 2 seasons, with Mama Nature's help, was rapidly coming back to the way the buffalo left it. Terri, Cowboy Hank's still ace mechanic and persistent neohippie optimist, who the Great Spirit had to work overtime to protect from the REAL world, said that the spirit of the truck was saying to Roberta, through the rumblings it did each time the engine was resurrected...'I want you herebe, like, not nice to Mother Nature to leave each other again.'

As for the young animal who was in the road that made her swerve into a ditch that stranded Roberta in Knife Bend two years ago, Prometheus had turned into a healthy, happy and, when he wanted to be, obedient wolf-dog cross, who considered himself more human than canine. Mahegan, Roberta's 'first' dog who was named Tripod by his previous and abusive owner, tried to teach Prometheus that listening to the humans was the best way to be liked by them, but Prometheus taught his older adopted brother far more about being a dog. Things like that missing one leg was no excuse for not running as fast as he could to follow horses and herd cows, celebrating the round up with a thorough roll in their soft, brown droppings. And though humans said they didn't want you to make noise and play loudly with each other was just what they said, and not what they really wanted, or needed. And that when the humans got that isolated, lost look on their face, wanting to be alone, that is when they needed you most to nuzzle next to their feet and wait for when they stopped crying, or were about to. And that when caught doing something the humans had on their real 'thou shalt not list' like eating meat left on the table before it could become 'table scraps', or chewing up a pair of shoes that really didn't go with their wardrobe or feet, try looking cute. Then helpless. Then needy.

As for Doc Henry, if the saying 'be true to yourself and you can't help but be true to everyone else' was REALLY true, than he was the truest creature on two or four legs in Knife Bend. The older he got, the more energetic he became, and he was pushing 65, maybe 70 at this point. Every day, the over-the-hill sawbones, redneck and very White animal doc who had been a fixture in Knife Bend for twenty years became louder in voice, bigger in gestures and even more sure of his medical abilities than ever. No one boasted about his humility with more confidence than he did, but to be fair about it, he was a know it all who seemed to always be right. Or at

least smart enough to turf off what he didn't know and couldn't do to Roberta. Tasks like telling him the molecular action of each new drug the pharmaceutical companies were trying to get sold to the veterinary public. And exploring branches of medicine that he made fun of, but allowed Roberta to employ, such as acupuncture, herbology and even aroma therapy. And communication skills with the public, like having Roberta 'making nice' to people who he didn't want to be nice to on the phone, and doing ANYthing with the computer, as Doc Henry's cyberskills stopped at being able to two finger type, very slowly, his password on Yahoo, which he still called 'Yoyo'.

On this day, old Doc Henry was doing his veterinary dharma, or as it was called in still Redneck Country Music loving Alberta, his 'first love', appropriately named such by all of the women who failed to become his second, or third love. Roberta looked at the appointment book that had got from empty to filled in between and over the page margins within an hour after opening time, at 8 AM sharp. The still-nocturnal Ph.D., D.V.M. who preferred to read John Steinbeck and The New York Village Voice until the wee hours of the night rather than Zane Gray or The Western Producer over a 6 AM breakfast squinted her eyes to make out Doc Henry's writing. "100 Pregchecks. Two horse geldings. Bloated calf. Wire cut. Three calvings/C sections." All to be done of course before lunch, on the road, leaving Roberta to, according to Doc Henry's phone message in his usual prairie 'naval talk' went, "keep the ship on course and the rudder steady".

"He could have said keep business going and try not to kill anything that wasn't supposed to die," Roberta said to herself as she took off her Cree Grandmother's Native fringed buckskin coat, replacing it with a washable jean jacket picked up at the thrift store. It made her look like a hot rodeo bunny to any of the old cowboys or young bull riders who came in for vaccines or antibiotics on their way from their chosen places of Work at their home ranches to their obligatory factory jobs where they were SURE of making a profit at the end of the day, week, or year. Roberta gazed up at the white garment that hung on the shelf, way behind the patient file cabinet, which held files that were still on paper. They would never be put into computerized bank, unless it was over Doc Henry's 'waterlogged body after it's been returned back to Davy Jones' locker'. The blindingly white garment had her name on it, in clearly-stated letters, sewn on by hand by the pharmaceutical company that she bought the last round of medications from, the font as impressive and professional as the writing. "R. Collineur, Ph.D., D.V.M." It was a custom fit lab coat, sent to her when she worked at Alpine Clinic, the 'professionally-run' veterinary clinic across town, according to the 'professionals' at the Veterinary Association, and the other 'professionals' who preferred to wear suits on their chests than their hearts on their sleeves, that she left to support its bitter rival enterprise, 'The Good Ship Doc Henry'. No matter how many research publications Roberta wrote in grad school or could ever write now, she was 'Doc Roberta' to everyone else here. An honorable, kind and respected position in a town where most everyone's position was equal. Where everyone, as long as they weren't a 'professional', listened to everyone else. Where everyone worked hard at something they believed in and liked for, well, at least most of the day. Such was not what Roberta could say about her own life now, and she did not know why. Even when she looked into the eyes of Mahegan, then Promethius. The Heinz 57 mutt and the wolf-something cross nuzzled in next to her leg, begging for some of the birthday cakes and cookies left by clients who understood her. And other well meaning souls who gave her gift-wrapped bottles of 40 proof brandy and high

quality weed who, well, didn't understand nor know about the worlds she had come from, and vowed to never return to again.

Mahegan gobbled up the gingerbread cookies from the top of the cake as fast as she could throw them up in the air. Prometheus let the pieces of cake hit the floor before lapping them up and then proceeded to clean the dishes they were on so Roberta would not have to scrub them. "I hit the big 30," she said to them, gazing into a mirror. "I still got my long hair. My could-be-if-I-really-wanted-to-get-a-lobotomy model figure. My, as Doc Henry called them once when he accidently gave me a compliment, 'mermaid arms that are as strong as any yoman's on the quarterdeck'. But not my...well...what did Katzanzakis, the guy who channeled Zorba the Greek and Last Temptation of Christ into print call it"?

"Kefi?" Terri said as she came in, her small framed four-foot-seven body towered by bags of cat and dog food that made her 3 feet taller.

"You know about...Kefi?" Roberta asked Terri as she unloaded the bags of food, enjoying the simplicity of the labor and joy of life that was as unobtainable now as Doc Henry going through full day without saying something 'nautical', insulting the hippies, feminists or gays, or doing another effortless veterinary task that by most people's standards would be called a miracle.

"Yeah. Like in the movie, 'Kefi's Garage'," Terri continued, as Roberta took note of four cars and two pick ups on the road outside the window, edging their way across the gravel road to the clinic, all with animals in them. "An old indy film I rescued from the throw out bin at the library that was made in Saskatchewan, with Gordon Tootossis in it. About this old Greek cowboy who---"

"---Yeah, I know," Roberta interrupted, impatient with Terri's slow and optimistically country speech, needing to get to the meat of the matter faster than she could dance her way to it. "This crazy Greek Canadian cowboy in the movie defends his kefi, his Purpose, big P, his vitality, big V, and his humor, big H, against a world that tries to take it away, or tries to starve him out of it. Yeah..Kefi. Something I wish I still had."

"But you do," Terri replied. "You got kefi. You're a great vet. You do fantastic work. Everybody says so, and knows so. Even Henry, when he doesn't think you can hear him. He says you're better than anyone else who ever worked for him. And, when he has a few too many beers at the bar where I work after hours, he says you're better than he ever was, or will be."

"As a vet?" Roberta asked, afraid of the answer.

"Yeah....As an animal doc. You can't be as good as you are at what you're doing and not love it, really love it. Right?" Terri asked.

Roberta thought about telling Terri the real answer to her question, but...as her Grandmother once told her, sometimes a Medicine Woman has to let people believe what they want to about her, even when the medicine woman is in need of healing herself.

Roberta subjected herself to another look in the glass over the medicine cabinet which insisted on being a mirror in the morning light. Fifteen years had passed since she was a drugged out whore who willingly worked for her Yuppoid pimp mobster husband Kurt the suit, who had 'rescued' her from the arms of a White father who had considered Roberta his trophy wife, against the wishes of her Native mother who committed suicide. Ten years had passed since Roberta's awakening from the demonic slumber that had been her life when she was determined to go to her grandmother's funeral, leaving behind all of Kurt's money and connections to a comfortable life. Two years had passed since her leaving vet school and grad school, an experience that required every ounce of tenacity, brain power and 'mystical' intuitive persistence. And, according to all measurements, she had successfully completed her 'real life' post-doc with Doc Henry in Knife Bend, a town and experience more raw and challenging than ANY of her professors, or teachers, back in University could ever imagine.

With all of her now finally published biomedical research articles in mainstream and alternative veterinary journals, Roberta could, if she wished, go back to the University and teach the clinical and research faculty far more than they could ever learn in their professional milieu. But...she didn't want to. And even though it would be noble and needed work, as was what she was about to do in 2 and a half minutes with six patients in real medical need, what was Work, big w, was now labor. Something done, like breathing, or taking a shit, or filling your stomach up so you could keep breathing, then have to take another shit. Veterinary medicine, something she once was fascinated with, was now just...a job, that was draining her with each patient she treated, especially the cases that went well. Like Captain Miller in Saving Private Ryan who said, "each time I kill another German soldier with my skill as a soldier, that's one step further from home it takes me."

But...Roberta was in the business of saving lives. Maybe that was the problem. It was a business. Or worse, a procedure. Or even more confining, a moral responsibility void of passion. She had considered other options as to the explanation for what had happened to her. Maybe it was burn out, something that happened to overworked vets after they put in a decade of 72 hour weeks, and or according to the stats, and Doc Henry's well intentioned chavenistic mathematics, '4 years of 50 hours a week work for women who should know that the only sailors who can endure a lifetime of duty on the veterinary ocean are, by biological design, men.' Or maybe it was biological, and she wanted a family of her own rather than take care of other people's families. During her colorful 'druggy' days, she voluntarily gave up her baby for adoption when she was 15. After awakening from her stupor 5 years later, she had tried desperately to find her beloved Daniel for nearly a decade. Every animal coming into her care being, for a few magic moments, became that Daniel. But her real Daniel was growing up, and wanted nothing to do with her, perhaps deservedly so. Besides, when Roberta, today, was asked to take care of anyone's kids, it was a chore that felt...irrelevant, even though they all lovingly called her 'Auntie Roberta'. And as for Cowboy Hank's asking her to marry him, for the fifth time...Roberta's self-observed image that made her still say 'maybe, but I don't know yet' involved her being with several little Robertas or Hanks at home, teaching THEM how to be a success in life rather than being one herself.

Mahegan nudged over to Roberta, pushing away her a veterinary magazine, perhaps moved by Roberta's Grandmothers spirit, or perhaps doing so because of the remnants of birthday cake

icing under it which he licked up after bringing it down to the floor. “Compassion burn out,” Roberta recalled from on the front cover as she let Mahegan, then Prometheus, lick the icing off the back cover. “The result of mentally anesthetizing yourself from the pain in this being a vet when you have to see animal suffering or put an animal to sleep when you have to and get the needle into the arm so it’s done fast, which also numbs you from playing with the puppies or kittens or colts or calves when you get them better.”

“Huh?” Terri said, having heard Roberta, not understanding a word she had said, but knowing that Mahegan and Prometheus just wanted to play.

“When one door closes, another opens, right?” Roberta speculated and voiced as the potential cure for the ailment that had sterilized her soul. Her eye wandered to Cowboy Hank’s newest CD cover, containing songs he was trying to get out into the world as...somebody else. Certainly not the “Hearty Party” country star he had been before he faked his own death and disappeared into the fabric of Knife Bend, blending in, still anonymously, as naturally as a spotted owl merges into the woods. “Explorations”, as the CD cover said, contained music he played on the guitar, piano and fiddle so easily and with so much vitality. He promised to release it only after Roberta provided him with lyrics, and her voice, her REAL voice. The Voice she had as a child, way back when, during those golden years with Grandma, and the ‘spirits within forms’ she taught her to see in the woods, and the Spirit of vitality that, well...had to be inside of Roberta SOMEwhere. Reachable SOMEhow.

But...business before pleasure, or Passion. The first car pulled up, Deathhound Jones, death-obsessed Goth turned self-taught healer by Roberta, bringing in a dog bleeding from the arm. A pick up behind her with a cow owned by Clyde Johanson with a calf inside her that was having ‘issues’ about coming out and facing the outside world. And self-appointed white-haired animal rescuer Norma, with five litters of pups for vaccinations, three of which were dropped on her doorsteps, two of which were looking poorly which she ‘acquired’ from backyards of junkies and oil rigger drunks who were too busy to notice them missing.

CHAPTER 2

Old Doc Henry stumbled into the clinic by noon, his overalls smelling of blood, piss and shit but the always clean white shirt and tie under it as crisp and clean as his smile. He proudly emptied his pockets of receipts, placing them on the table. “Twelve hundred dollars and seventy eight dollars worth of services this morning, which would have cost four thousand in dollars and at least three dead carcasses in the five-thumb paws of Alpine, or any of the other sell out clinics around, he proclaimed in his baritone, deep, bearlike voice. Twelve hundred and seventy dollars worth of real and good work.”

“Which makes after drugs, gas expense and miscellaneous supplies you DIDN’T put on the invoices,” the new receptionist at the desk said, showing Henry the profit margin on the new adding machine on the desk---a lap top computer.

Henry pursed his lips, realizing yet again that his claim to be a servant of the patients first, clients second and the veterinary profession dead last was at the price of his own economic bottom line. “No good deed goes unpunished, I suppose. But rule of the sea is that if you spot a lifeboat in trouble, or a stranded schooner, you share whatever tack, gas and mainsail you have without giving them a bill for the rescue. Otherwise you’d be a pirate who...hmmm,” he continued, staring at the folded out black ‘flat box’ which was smaller than any of the computers that Roberta had brought into the clinic and used only in her own office, cave and laboratory. “Did this instrument of the the devil that programs our minds and gives subliminal messages to our brains tell you HOW you came up with the fact that this morning’s work made me lose dollar ten an hour in wages for my well calculated and assertive efforts to----”

Before Doc Henry could finish, the receptionist showed him the justification for readjusting his overhead costs. He started with the one that he loathed most.

“---The pharmaceutical companies are charging THAT MUCH for antibiotics and anesthetics now!” he ranted. “The goddamn bastards, eh... I mean malicious pirates!” he continued, realizing he was in the presence of a lady, and one that looked very familiar.

“I know...I look familiar?” she said.

“My ex-wife,” Henry thought, but didn’t say. Her the reddish-blonde hair flowed gently down to her shoulders, framing her cherub-like face on the sides, the bangs in front gently bordering her sparkling blue eyes. Those ocular portholes sparkled like light reflecting off a windless bay when she smiled, and blasted out hurricane blasts of thirty foot swells when she was determined to make something right. Her slight shoulders seemed like they that could carry the weight of the world on them without breaking a sweat. Her long, slender fingers whose flexions and extensions were as graceful as any jellyfish tentacles, fish fins or flowing tide on a gently sloped sandy beach. At least that was the memory of the good times with Mary before, she stopped standing up for what was right and started vehemently defending what was, just stupid. But Henry himself felt stupid as he self-noticed himself looking over this new addition to his clinic, gazing into her soul before he even knew her name. But to be fair, this ‘Mary’ was gazing into his soul as well with equal and reciprocal fascination.

“Her name is Marie,” Roberta said as she entered the reception area with another pile of cases started and competed that day, stuffed into manilla folders that were at least a decade old each. “That’s Marie with an ‘ie’ not a y,” Roberta continued, handing over the paperwork to the new assistant. “She came in with five new cases, sat down and just naturally helped me out with five more clients who came in, one of whom was more of a problem case between the ears than her dog was below the neck.”

With one eye, Henry inspected Roberta’s problem case dog, vomiting and diahrea with no clear causes, after all the tests for worms, liver disease, kidney disease, Addison’s, panceatitis and foreign body were done both her way AND his way. With the other eye, he gazed at Marie with an ie’s legs, arms and ass in a way he never did before. Admiring her soul somehow, rather than lusting for her body. “You listened to the heart?” he asked Roberta, regarding the canine mystery-disease patient.

“I always listen to the heart,” Roberta answered.

“But never follow its advise,” he continued, knowing it was not a wanted but a very much needed piece of advise for Doctor R, turning his full attention toward her.

As expected, Roberta did that ‘breath in deeply before I say something I’ll regret later’ thing, then after three ‘breath beats’, replied, “Me and Cowboy Hank are getting along just fine. He has his life, I have mine, and in the middle we have this third brain that, most, some, well enough of the time anyway, thinks for us.. ”

“And did that third brain of yours pick up cardiac tamonode on...” Doc Henry said, looking at the name of the dog with the mysterious symptoms. He strained to read the writing on the file label.

“Lucifer,” Roberta translated. “That’s what the client called the dog.”

“First step in treatment may be to change the name of the dog,” Doc Henry suggested.

“And suggest a change in religion or spiritual perspective of the world in the client,” Marie offered, taking the words out of Doc Henry’s mouth. They exchanged glances again, which became stares, then smiles.

“No,” Roberta interjected as the silence became deeper. “I didn’t detect cardiac tamponade in...’Lucius’,” she said as she changed the name on the file. “But I’ll retest his feces for exotic parasites, a biopsy of the colon for eosiniphils AND basophils, and I’ve been investigating a new herb and several acupuncture points in combination for this, what I think might be, a canine version of feline irritable bowel syndrome that perhaps--”

“You know what to do. That’s cool” Doc Henry said to Roberta, realizing that he said one of those ‘new’ words he never thought he would. “Cool”. The last time he said that word it was during the Elvis days, before the world devolved into making beatniks, then went further down the road to damnation and created hippies, then feminists, and finally, the wrath of Lucifer, Satan and Beelisebub, ‘gays and lesbians.’” All perversions of the mind and Soul that had corrupted Doc Henry’s favorite daughter back when he was a vet in Montana, his students when he had become faculty member at the National Veterinary College in Saskatoon, and finally, his wife, Mary, with a y, soon after arrived in Alberta to set up his own shop, and example of how it should be done, to a world that would APPRECIATE his hard efforts, and God-given talents.

But this Marie, with an ie, seemed to understand all of that. And on top of that, she was honorable, never taking more than she gave. As first evidence of such, she pulled out a plastic baggie full of money, small denominations mostly, fives in paper and two dollar coins being most of the sum. “For treating my animals, Doc Henry. The ones I brought in today, and the ones my daughter brought in last week, that you treated so masterfully.”

“When God gives you a talent, you’re obligated to use it to the best and most extensive ability,” Henry said, with a bow more befitting the 19th Century than the late 20th, and most certainly the upcoming 21st which would be ruled by ‘cybergods’ or minions of such in whom rugged individualism, honor and compassion ‘did not compute’. Particularly in the veterinary profession, which was churning out technicians who followed manuals and flow charts rather than thinking with their brains, feeling with their blister-coated hands, and LISTENING to the voices of the old masters. These ‘state of the art’ doctors now vehemently dismiss any ‘old’ facts and foundations because of that ‘cool and hip’ idea that nothing published more than five years ago is biologically valid, despite the fact that the human or animal body had not changed in 500 years in terms of the way it worked---even with genetically modified foods finding its way into the feed chain at the grocery store and feedlot.

Henry’s rant about what went wrong in the profession he fought so hard to preserve continued, as he recalled that the New Age of ‘state of the art technology is our savior’ idiot vets saw fit to elect old fart assholes as their leaders and regulators. Assholes who held high office in the Veet Association, an organization of insensitive thugs who, on more than one occasion, did things like fine veterinarians who refused to euthanize healthy animals at the request of paying clients. Then suspend said vets if they adopted said animals after the client left the building without even saying goodbye to their ‘beloved’ pet. Doing the right moral and, according to Mother Nature anyway, the medically necessary thing was something which would inevitably cause you to lose your licence, or civil freedom. Particularly as common sense and compassion-driven innovation diminished with each page of the ‘Required Veterinary Guidelines’ manual that was added to the last already overheavy volume.

Somehow, Marie seemed to understand all of that, and more. A woman who finally understood Henry’s heart and mind! All she was proudly and dignifyingly offering to pay for services he rendered with a bagful of small change.

“Are you a waitress?” he asked, declining to voice his real assessment that she was broke, or poor.

“I do what I have to do to get by,” she said with a firm, dignified and ‘absorb the pain but don’t say ouch’ smile. “And this money is yours.”

“OURS!” he answered, taking the money. “And it’s our gift to the animals,” he said as he dropped the money into the “NewSPCA” jar. “And my gift to myself, and them is to...hmmm,” he continued, trying to be poetic, and real, and brave as that most cowardly part of any real man materialized.

“Hire you,” Roberta interjected, saying for Doc Henry in tone, and some words, that he wanted to continue Connection with Marie. “And maybe help him taste test the beef at that new Steak House in town afterwards?” she added, ducking out before Doc Henry could give him that ‘I’m allowed to teach you how to live your life, but you are not allowed to tell me what to do’ stare.

“Ya’ll can thank me later,” Roberta said as she whipped off her mud-soaked jean jacket, bloody surgical scrubs and pulled over her ‘going out into the woods to see if I can have another Vision

that I really need this time' traditional Native American buckskin coat. "Tansee," she said on the way out the door, calling Mahegan and Prometheus with a whistle of the first eight notes Beethoven's Fifth, her favorite music with which, so she claimed anyway, took her to a place more blissful and SANE than any 'Happy Hunting Grounds' or 'Pearly Gates' could offer.

"Tansee, that means goodbye," Doc Henry translated to Marie.

"And hello," added with a smile that was, yeah, corny and hoaky, but very real. And very mutual.

CHAPTER 3

The Alpine Clinic was fully staffed that day, as it was every day. Every detail of the 'top of the line', 'state of the art', supra accredited establishment was visible for all to see, most importantly, the clients. Very important clients, who would get state of the art quality service. Quality health care was worth both waiting and paying for, and as for the latter, anyone with any REAL brains knew that in a world where 90% of the people had 10% of the money, it's good business and professional practice to stick with the 10% of the people who had 90% of the money. And besides, it is irresponsible of people to own animals if they can't over-afford to take care of them, and besides that, anyone who has good moral fibre and a solid work ethic ALWAYS has money.

The people who knew this were the people who moved the world's economy forward, kept professional advances from slipping into the stone age, and supported top flight veterinary work that was worthy of the 21st Century. And the booming technology of the 21st century was unstoppable, finding fertile ground in 'Oilberta', a 'yes we can' province that would not take second place to ANY other Canadian Province, or for that matter, any American state. Such was what Tom Wilson, D.V.M., M.B.A., Esq. believed when he opened up the clinic three years ago on the tails of Mitchell Enterprises pouring millions of dollars into developing backwater towns which were one generation away from ALL of the farm kids leaving for better lives in the cities, creating ghost-towns that would be blown away by the prairie winds. The endeavors Dr Wilson set up were indeed worthy of his family pedigree, a bloodline of American and Canadian Eastern movers and shakers that went back to the days of the Civil War in the former and the Riel Rebellion for the latter. It was in the blue blood White Anglo- Saxon Protestant-impregnated

Wilson genes to both see and seize opportunity, dating back to the first railroad and oil refinery founded by Tom's great-grandfather.

The Wilson fortune survived five North American depressions, and wound up, quite legally, on the winning economic side of two world wars. It was a Wilson tradition, as well as a tax requirement, to of course give something back, which in the case of the valleys on every side of Knife Bend included a community college that was converted into a university, an abandoned Air Force strip that was turned into an international airport, two mega-mini-malls with chain restaurants and grocery stores that hired more locals and any of the 'ma and pa' shops that barely broke even, and a manufacturing plant that specialized in the best genetically-engineered grain and vegetable seeds in Western Canada, designed by the best scientists stealable from Monsanto or exportable from Queen's University and Harvard. And though some would call it money-hording capitalism it was, as Tom saw, and lived it, a necessary process to liberate people stuck in 'country simple' hand-to-mouth lives into something more comfortable than 18 hour work days subjected to Mother Nature's environmental challenges. Something more healthy than reaching the age of 40 with a tired back, 50 with arthritic knees, and 60 with legs that could barely carry you to the town barn dance on Saturday night without a cane or a walker. And something more sustainable.

Tom's veterinary education started as a 'convenient accident', not having the sufficient grades to get into medical school to be a 'real' doctor, and being the only one caught with hash and cocaine at the yacht party in Martha's Vineyard in his third year of college. It was a miracle from somewhere that he was accepted into the National Veterinary College, though Tom suspected that his father pulled strings around the balls of the admissions committee members to get him into his own Alma Mater. Tom didn't, of course, investigate his suspicion and acquired an A for every course he did C work in, in part because of his father's connections, and in part because Tom Jr. did learn how to manipulate or blackmail people further up the ladder than he was so he could get a leg up. It was all fair, and legal. And besides, it was a means to an end. Wilson genes were after all superior to most others, and the veterinary profession would thank him for bringing his brilliance and insights to the endeavor of animal medicine. As would Tom senior, his father, who gave up veterinary medicine ten years after trying to establish a clinic in Knife Bend, withdrawing from a battle of wits and wills with 'Old Doc Dinosaur' Henry Steiner with, of course, 'honor', seeing more profitable endeavors in the East, then in other professions.

Tom looked at the picture of his father up on the wall of the Alpine Clinic lobby, above everyone else on this crisp, sunny Oilberta morning. Everything below Tom Senior would be to his liking. Professional fully accredited technicians with crisp white coats and top flight attire underneath. A senior staff of veterinarians who were all diplomats in one discipline or another, having done their residencies in the most prestigious vet schools in North America. A junior staff of new graduates who were hand picked for their ability to absorb what they were taught and carry it out to the letter. A back room which featured the very latest and best in laser, digital x-ray, ultra-sound and diagnostic machinery which was being used one way or another for every patient...whether the disease or treatment called for it or not.

"That doesn't make sense, you wanna do all of these tests?" a new client in town who brought in a Heinz 57 barn cat in need of testicular removal for spraying on his best couch, getting the

neighbor's two prize Persian felines pregnant when he found his way through the open window, acquiring a superficial two inch cut on his right shoulder while making his getaway from the 'satisfied lady's' owner. The part-time overpaid oil-rigger, part time money-losing rancher and part time show-off on the mechanical bull at the bar put the list of 'required procedures' up into Tom's face, demanding to know why his bill was so high. "You didn't explain all of these charges and tests to my wife when she came in here. Blood chemistry test for a hundred and fifty bucks, anesthesia fee of 80 bucks, X-ray and ultrasound of a shoulder that wasn't busted but only had a scratch on the skin, fecal and tests for diseases that haven't come West of Winnipeg anywhere, injection charge, needle disposal charge..." He went on and on about what his wife had not expressly disallowed when bringing in the cat, completing his rant with, "You advertized neutering and other minor incidentals for seventy bucks. You didn't tell me that I'd be charged for 'incidentals' amounting to four hundred bucks."

"We did provide a de-wormer, for free, Sir," Tom informed him.

"Doc Henry and Doc Roberta charge me a flat rate for everything. Only forty bucks."

"That everything doesn't include all of these tests, Sir," Tom asserted. "To be sure that your pet's surgery, anesthetic and aftercare is safe."

"Tests that Doc Henry never did, so I was told. And he never lost an animal to surgery or anesthesia. And never developed complications afterwards. Can't say that about this place, so I've heard AFTER my wife brought in Felix."

"We had a few problem cases, that had unexpected complications," Tom said, backtracking, holding his eyes inside his head, trying to not be seen through, and hoping that he could still put the blame for those unexpected complications for which he was responsible on one of the junior veterinary staff members who wanted to come to work with purple hair and a nose ring, or the new upstart underpaid Mexican technician who perhaps could have made an error due to her 'lack of English language skills'. "We do professional, thorough and responsible work here," he assured the client in front of him.

"For cut-throat prices, that I ain't gonna pay!" the redneck ranted. "Now give me Felix and I'll be getting out of here."

"Felix leaves when you pay the bill, Sir. According to legal procedure." Tom showed him the two page contract his wife had signed upon admitting the cat for neutering and 'any other malady threatening his life or health that is discovered'. "Felix did have quite the gash on his shoulder. Nearly six inches that went down into tender soft tissue."

"He came in with a flesh wound an inch wide that barely broke the skin."

"And he's leaving here fully repaired, using PROFESSIONAL surgical techniques, having been given the latest multi-cocktail of anesthetics available. Ten drugs, Sir"

"When Doc Henry and Roberta only need to use two."

“Which is illegal, and ineffective and...” Tom considered his next option, then changed his strategy, doing his best ‘down home country’ accent, appended by loosening his tie. “Tell ya what. I can recalculate this bill, with a marked discount. Bring it down to what Doc Dinosaur and his Hippie Dippie Medicine woman Roberta would have charged you if you, for the sake of the safety of the animals that are at the mercy of THEIR stoned age services, tell me what you know about how Doc Henry puts cats under anesthesia. I’ve heard stories of Doc Henry shoving a cat into a boot while Roberta blows sweetgrass down its nostrils.”

Tom observed a bit of a chuckle from the Rancher-Rigger. Yet again, Tom’s wit at criticism allowed him to trump and top those who he is criticizing.

“You DO know that Doc Roberta sees Spirit Animals in the woods,” he continued. “And that Doc Henry hasn’t purchased a new surgical instrument since the Berlin Wall came tumbling down.

“Maybe so,” the client said. “But, I think I’ll just pay you what you said you’d charge,” he continued in a so ‘like yesterday/yesteryear’ Sam Elliott voice, taking out his wallet and taking out, yes, how outdated, cash. “Forty dollars for the neuter and twenty for the incidental laceration that you over-repaired. Now, where’s Felix.”

“In a cage in the back of the clinic, until you pay the full amount, Sir,” Tom said. “According to the law,” he continued, pointing to his law degree prominently mounted on the wall. “Which also says that you can be arrested you for animal cruelty for not providing the best care for your animal, and any other animals in your possession, should an accredited veterinary clinic such as this one take notice of it.”

Apparently, the Sam Elliot wannabe in the CAT hat and worn out jeans valued Felix more than the satisfaction of a High Noon duel on the street outside which was in the process of being converted into a corridor for an indoor mall. He pulled out one bill after another, laying it on the table. Tom knew that redneck yahoo cowboy didn’t have the full \$400, but being generous that day, he settled for \$310. And the look of defeat and humiliation in the eyes of the ‘rough and ready’ cowboy who weeped with joy when he and Felix were reunited, then went out the door, perhaps to never return again, or perhaps to come back with a more civilized attitude.

As for the rest of the waiting room, there were less customers there than Tom anticipated. He looked down at the appointment list, noting 3 no-shows and two cancellations. By his calculations, such would bring the practice daily income to 20 percent below costs, maybe 40, instead of the 900 percent profit which he projected that he would get that week, and which he deserved.

“What’s going on?” he asked Rhonda, the head technician as she passed by him. “Why are we losing clients?”

“Don’t know,” Rhonda replied, wanting to go on with her work in the back bossing around her underlings, rather than being third degreed by her boss in front. “I have to administer a staff

meeting of my techs. If I'm late, it's a bad example for them, and an excuse for them being late. Right?" she said.

"Correct," Tom said, dismissing her with a wave of his hand.

He looked across the street and out to the prairie hills which could double as mountains in bad weather, over which his competition was. He looked at his watch, thinking and perhaps praying that the other plan he had for filling his lobby with customers would come through. Thankfully, it did.

"Over here," he said to John 'JR' Robinson, whose farmer face had three days of stubble on it, his boots scuffed down to his socks, his overalls torn most everywhere except the crotch. "In my office, please," he said, pouring a cup of coffee for himself and his honored guest. "Tell me how I can help the upcoming Farm Aid concert and Royal Legion dance. Without farmers to grow the food, and soldiers to defend our land, we'd all be dust in the wind."

Having impressed his new staff behind the counter, and potential new clients at a far distance in front of it, Tom opened the door of his private office for 'JR', inviting him to sit on the chair in front of him. "So, what do you have for me. No, for US!" 'Doctor Tom' said, closing the door behind him.

JR presented Tom with an old bag, which inside contained a vial of medicine with a yellow label on it. "Phenbarbital. Highly controlled substance label," he said. "Prescribed to me for my dog Yellar, for his seizures. Prescribed by Doc Henry himself."

"Without him ever seeing the dog?" Tom inquired.

"I told him that Yellar was with my wife, who was dying in the hospital in Winnipeg, with cancer," JR said, his farmer diction becoming generic suburban.

"And that you didn't have enough money to bring him in. Or pay for blood chemistry to rule out other diseases before being given this highly controlled substance."

"As requested by you, Barrister Wilson," JR continued, taking off his manure stained overalls and placing them as far as he could from his mostly clean Docker slacks as he could. "For my entrance, I rented the worst vehicle from rent-a-wreck that I could find, and pumped up the Country Music as loud as I could as I 'mozied' into Henry Steiner's clinic. Oh, and by the way you owe me some extra money for dry cleaning. These Dockers don't come cheap."

"Were you spotted?" Tom asked. "Any indication that they found you out?"

"I got those pills, as I was supposed to, without him, or anyone else, writing anything down about the transaction, which constitute Steiner and his Scientist-Medicine Woman breaking three federal laws, two veterinary act statues and five veterinary bylaws, taking into account everything else I witnessed there," JR said, handing over other goodies and his camera which he had used to get incriminating pics of dusty cabinets in the surgical suite, technicians wearing

teashirts rather than smocks at the reception desk, and 'expressive' pop culture posters that would potentially discredit the veterinary profession as well as more serious violations of the Association Guideline handbook. "As I calculate it, Doctor Wilson, I gathered enough evidence to shut them down on at least five major veterinary association violations."

"Twenty," Tom boasted, taking JR's spy-cam into one hand and the most prized vial of illegally given controlled substance drug in the other. "After the new board is elected and we re-adjust the rulebook."

"And you, of course, know the election results, before the votes get counted," JR said.

"A means to an end," Tom said, wise enough to not state in words that losing ballots from some 'deluded and naïve' association members and repeatedly counting those from responsible members is just...honoring the traditions of his American forefathers. The Visionaries who founded the Electoral College in which, back in early America anyway, wise representatives could legally change the ballots given to them by unwise, illiterate voters, in the best interest of the country, and those voters. "A means to an end," he continued, putting down the pills and the camera, taking out his checkbook. "For consulting services rendered," he said writing out the payment on his special discessionary account.

"In cash, please," JR said. "The bank had a problem cashing the check you gave my brother, and my ex-wife for their consulting services," he continued. "They bounced."

"I stopped payment on them because their consulting services fell short of my agreed upon expectations," Tom said, backtracking into another provable lie, hoping that above all else, the real numbers for his profits for this week, month and year would not be known to anyone except his very private accountant. "They underdelivered, so I didn't pay them."

"You mean they got caught, found out," JR said. "Or maybe, they turned double agent on you?"

"Like you never will," Tom said, finding his way to turn shit into shinola with the quickness of a Superbowl winning quarterback facing a 4 point deficit with a minute to go on the clock in the fourth quarter. "Because, well, I know you're an honorable man, who would never cheat on his new wife, particularly with a purple-haired stripper, named Electra, at a Lounge in Red Valley or Blue River."

"We were just having a drink!" JR asserted. "And the only reason why I was in there was because---"

"---She had information about where your runaway daughter was," Tom smirked. "Electra's a really nice girl. Working her way through nursing school by day by stripping at night. Who saw your daughter in the ER one night and tried to help her. Her telling you about that makes for...interesting pictures." Tom withheld the rest of the details, letting JR squirm the rest of the way. "But in the meantime, I have work to do and you have, a check to cash," Tom contiued, writing JR a check which was less than what he intended to write. Enough to keep JR on the payroll. Fed but not satiated, of course.

With JR out of the room, Tom helped himself to a look at vial of phenobarb bearing Doc Henry and Roberta's name which would put them on the streets and then into the slammer, and Tom back in BIG business. Carefully, Tom poured the contents of the vial onto his pill counter to get an accurate numerable account of how many 50 milligram violations of Federal, Veterinary and Civil Law Tom's family rival Henry and his former once-favorite employee Roberta would have on their new rap sheet. The smell of finality entered Tom's nostrils, then the aroma of something more base. The pills of similar size as Phenobarb, but not of the same consistency as the now highly regulated anti-epileptic drug. "Shit!" he yelled out as he felt one of the pills in his hand, its odor penetrating into his nostrils. "Yellow dyed shit!" he continued, taking note of the real chemical identity of the booty he had paid so much to obtain.

Frustrated, and foiled, yet again, Tom Wilson relied on his next best ally---technology. He picked up the camera with which JR had captured images of violations ranging from non-symmetrically arranged surgical instruments in a storage cabinet to labels on unapproved and most probably illegal medicinals in the shelves viewable only by their most trusted clients. But the pictures were of something else. Doc Henry and Roberta sticking their tongue out at the camera, their fingers pointing at pictures of Tom and his buddies at the vet association. And in the bathroom, likenesses of Tom and his cronies on the toilet paper. "What the fuck happened to pictures JR was supposed to take?" Tom screamed as he scanned the pictures, hoping to find what he had sent him in to get. "What's going on!" he grunted. A text message came over his phone. With every word he read, his WASP White face turned redder and redder, particularly because of the Redskin who sent it. "Hey, Tom Tom. Your ex-Sqwaw Roberta here. Hope you're enjoying the pics the replaced the ones 'JR' took. Replacement made possible by heap powerful Injun medicine that one day, me and Doc Henry might share with you, and want to share with you. Tansee."

How dare Roberta be so...insolent! After Tom had opened his door and life to her, two years ago, offering her a chance to elevate herself OUT of Doc Henry's sinking ship after Henry had told the 'dream job' clinic in Vancouver she was heading to that she was a 'loser, cheat and self-deluded medical idiot'! And 'honest Abe' Henry did not tell her about it till SHE found out, something he did 'for her own good', so he claimed! It was Tom who took Roberta in after she left Henry, with no where else to go. And after she did join him, how DARE she disobey his suggestions as to how to become a more professional veterinarian! And how DARE she refuse to testify against Doc Henry to save her job, and her veterinary future! And, most personally, how DARE Roberta not accept Tom Wilson's offer to become an ESTABLISHED veterinary scientific professional with his support, the victories of such to be shared side by side in the Exam Room, heart to heart in the bedroom! And now, how dare she, the only scientific mind worthy of working with him, turn hippie, rebel and 'Injun' on him! "How dare she do that to me!" Tom kept screaming, again and again, hearing Roberta laughing at him! He had enough of people laughing at him in his life, and it was going to stop NOW! Starting with her.

Rhonda knocked on the office door, then opened it. "Something wrong Doctor Wilson?"

"Nothing," he claimed. "Nothing at all."

“Good then,” she smiled. “And I can tell my staff what about all of this screaming?”

“It’s a celebration,” he said, turning his grunt into a grin. “For a new business plan that will turn this practice around, going Upward in ways that you never imagined possible. A plan that is already in place,” he continued, this time, telling the truth.

“In time for your father and brother’s visit here in...” Rhonda said, looking at her calendar watch. “Only a month.”

“Everything is going to be back to the way it should be, and envisioned to be,” Tom assured Rhonda. “No matter what the staff thinks, this ship isn’t sinking. It’s...”

“Submerging so it can fire the torpedo that will sink the Good Ship Henry and establish Pax Wilsona across the entire ocean?” Rhonda replied with an alluring smile.

“Yes, indeed,” Tom answered. “And I reward all of my mates accordingly.”

Tom continued the conversation with Rhonda between their eyes. She said that she wanted a promotion to well-taken care of wife, or if he had a wife somewhere, even better taken care of mistress. Tom related that the spoils of war were best enjoyed after the battle is won, and that he would share the nectar of his enemies blood with his most favorite employee, and conquest. What he didn’t tell her of course was that if he, as Prince Thomas II, could not impress his father, King Thomas I, and his brother, Prince George, that there would be more Alpine Clinic heads rolling on the chopping block than merely his own.

CHAPTER 4

Lucious’s diahrea still baffled Roberta, as what came out didn’t smell what her head said was

there. “Are you sure there isn’t any coccidia in here?” she said as she sniffed the most recent droppings in isolation cage.

“I didn’t see anything under the microscope,” Marie said as she was making the rounds scrub-dub-dubbing the cages, talking to the dogs and cats. Talking to them in a high pitched voice, then commenting that ‘he says’ this or ‘she says’ that, as if Marie knew exactly what they were saying in ‘human talk’. Cutsie talk about cutsie things. Baby talk about things ‘simple and country’. Oh how Roberta wanted to say about the Labrador Retriever the day after a rock was removed from his stomach who who looked stoically at the dish of food containing a third of his rations, “he says ‘man doesn’t live by bread alone, but the heirarchy of needs does require some nutrients’”. And of the recently spayed cat whose litter box was replaced with the kind of shavings she wasn’t used to at home, “she says ‘you just deprived me of one basic biological function, at least you could allow me to indulge myself comfortably in another,” and of the philosophically-looking Shepherd pup whose broken leg had been put back into place by a pin, “he says, ‘when man or dog seeks what is in perceived by the eyes in the material world, he runs or hobbles after emptiness, but when he, or she, seeks the innermost Truth about Life, he experiences the fullness of existence.” And of every animal within hearing range of the country music station blasting out four tunes with lyrics about absolutely NOTHING urban, global or scholarly, ‘they all say, “We want some Beethoven, Bartok, or at least some John Coltraine. All this meter-timed happy country shit is making us nauseous with its regularity that leads to nothing.” At least it wasn’t the Hearty Party, that anthem tailor made to make people country-line dance in synch with each other on Saturday night with the same regularity that the time-clock made them work the factory line in synch during the week.

But there was more at stake here than just Lucious’ foul-smelling yet not life-threatening trots that kept emanating out of his anal cavity. There was something very odd about Marie, as well as something wonderful. She seemed to learn every task in the clinic that had to be done, after just seeing it done once. Shown, of course, by Doc Henry. That ‘see one, do one, teach one’ credo that only worked in TELEVISION medicine was fully operative in Marie. Everything from looking at worms under a microscope to running the new blood analyzer that ever Roberta had trouble figuring out. It was only a matter of time till Marie would be able to stitch up a cow after a C section, then do them herself. But, still, maybe Marie was mistaken about the fecal sample from Lucius. “You’re sure Doc Henry looked at that slide,” Roberta asked multi-tasker Marie. “There is more than one species of coccidia and some are better at looking like something else than others.”

“He looked the sample,” Marie confirmed. “And he assured me there was no coccidia there. Or giardia. Or anything else.”

Still, Roberta took out the Baycox to give to Lucious. She measured out four cc’s and brought it over to him. Lucious growled, nearly snapping her hand off, in keeping with his admitted name of Lucifer.

“He says, that ‘I don’t want any bad tasting medicine today, Auntie Roberta,” Marie translated, petting the dog and somehow calming it down, with all her fingers intact.

“And I say he gets Baycox just in case there’s coccidia there. And metronidazole. And Drontal, even though you and Doc Henry didn’t see anything in the sample,” Roberta replied. She made another attempt to administer the medications to the dog, escaping this time with a nicked finger that started to bleed. Holding back the unexpected biological urge to bite or hit the dog back, Roberta squeezed her finger to bleed out whatever microbes wanted to be houseguests in her weary and poorly nourished body.

“Best wash that off, Doc. I’ll take care of giving Lucious what he needs,” Marie said.

Roberta accepted the offer from Nurse Marie, as Roberta was a Doctor now. Roberta washed off the blood and slime off her finger in the adjacent room, seeing that, for the moment, her hands still contained five digits each, then heard Marie ‘sing’ to a now silent Lucious, she contemplated that Doctor-Nurse thing. People became nurses because they empathized and cared for patients with their feelings...their caudo-lateral and cranial-medial limbic brains, according to the latest articles in Brain Research and Vertebrate Neurology. Humanoids became doctors because they were fascinated with disease using their cerebral cortices, most probably parietal association areas 5, 7 and 24. Roberta felt lacking in both neural centers, as if the biological plug had been pulled on all of them. Yet, she was still standing.

“Maybe you can take the rest of the day off, Doctor R,” Marie yelled out. “I got everything covered here. Doc Henry said you never took a vacation. Dedicated Docs need a break.”

“I don’t want to take a vacation, or time off,” Roberta answered back, noting that everything listed in the appointment book and daily ‘maintance’ list was completed, mostly by Marie. From cleaning the floor in the large animal procedure shoot to neutering the barn cats that were dropped off by the new SPCA in their attempt to control the excess cat population without resorting to the ‘see ‘em, shoot em’ methodology that still was a tradition in the very White farm communities around Knife Bend, and at most of the Indian Reservations Roberta had lived in during her childhood or travelled through afterward. “If I did take a vacation, I’d just have to do something obsessive compulsive like create life in a test tube, or resurrect the ghost of Ghandi from the dead body of a Mitchell Enterprises CEO, or the spirit of Beethoven from the finger of a sadistic country singer who lost it in a drunken poker game, or...”

Roberta couldn’t come up with anything else...Nothing with any teeth to it, or color, or REAL wit. The kind she admired in Master comics like Groucho Marx, who could bridge Kantian philosophy with ball park Brooklynese sports humor. And what she aspired to in Master musicians like Frank Zappa, who could make sex-obsessed grunge kids giggle and monks who had given up sex for a Higher satisfaction really laugh, as well as think. And what she was jealous about every time Cowboy Hank, who she still called by that name, picked up a GUitar, or Fiddle and made even a simple country tune sound...deep and profound, in ways beyond her intuition or understanding. Instruments that she could play, sort of, but with a Midas ‘death hold’ that killed the music with each note she played. Producing sounds that were sterile, echoing nothing but lifelessness with their vibrations. The Animal Spirits in the woods, as well as the Spirit of Granny, and the Great Spirit within them all, had no answer for her as to how to awaken her soul other than...’just keep listening, and working at it.’ And ‘let go’. But of what? And with what? For reasons of ideology as well as practicality, Frank Zappa’s example being

creative without the use of booze, dope or sex was a methodology Roberta held onto like...well, some person or animal that was very desperate and determined.

Roberta set herself to facing the abyss, the black and white void which was the blank page on her computer, upon which she was supposed to be writing her first novel, opera, discourse for the Uncommon man/woman or...satirical digs that would maybe turn into a great first play or stand up comedy routine. She walked into her office (aka, the cave) to face that open space and started to write, with eyes closed...Not looking at the page. Letting it all come out, without censoring...Feeling something inside of her finally move, like the brilliant 30 page theory and hypothesis mini-thesis she wrote in renal biology while under the tutelage of Jack Bowman. One of the only REAL professors and friends she had in grad school, and vet school, who assigned her the task of writing discourse of 'freeing and upward expanding consciousness' regarding the renal experiments she was doing in his lab for three credits of independent study. She went through 10 legal pads and 20 cups of coffee during that 32 hour writing marathon, possessed by something to write about biological systems beyond the kidney, and systems beyond biology, and systems beyond systems. According to 'Professor Jack', it was the most brilliant and insightful collection of scientific ideas since Nikola Tesla did an all nighter with a fist full of paper and a pintful of ink. Unfortunately, the B and E assholes who took her stereo and tv one night pilfered the only copy of that manuscript. But, maybe she was writing that, and more, now! Roberta had found that mad leap forward, and upward, then heard a 'beep' from the instrument she had driven to its limit and its knees. But when opening her eyes to look at what the exhausted computer had registered, the pages were as confusing as the diagnosis for Lucious's diarrhea.

"Another language?" Norma Poundstone commented, as she came into the door, with a strange man behind her, gazing at the computer screen in front of Roberta's just-opened eyes. "I didn't know that you wrote in another language. What is that?"

"Jiberish," Roberta replied, noting that her finger position on the keyboard was one key off. "Or, maybe something subconsciously, well..." she continued, thinking about translating the piece someday to see if her journey to the Beyond was real or illusion.

Roberta turned around, seeing something very odd about the 'animals first and everyone else last' self-appointed 60 year old savior of any four legged creature in need. "You're wearing...shoes. Not boots or slobber-soaked runners," Roberta commented as her eyes went upwards.

"And a dress too," Norma said. "Which Gustav picked out," she said proudly of the towering man with the chiseled face, kind eyes and gentle smile behind her.

"I wanted to get it for myself, but it didn't fit," Gustav mused regarding the blue dress that fit both Norma's surprisingly shapely body as well as her vibrantly-open eyes.

Norma laughed, actively sharing the joke. She hugged him around the waist, their bodies fitting so well into each other. "Is Doc Henry around?" she asked.

“No...I think he’s...out,” Roberta said, thinking that it was best to spare him the sight in front of her, particularly the ring around Norma’s left fourth finger. “I can tell him you came by,” Roberta said to the woman with whom Henry had had a solid Platonic relationship with for 15 years, one which wanted to but never quite advanced from the deepest admiration and respect to love, despite Terri’s well intended attempt two years ago to make it happen by faking love letters from each of them to each other with her masterful forger’s pen.

“You can tell me what?” Henry said as he came in through the side door, unexpectedly.

Norma answered him with a showing of her left hand. “So you don’t find out from anyone else, Henry. You’re the closest friend I have, on two legs anyway, and I want to introduce you to...”

“Gustav,” the dream man besides Norma said, extending his hand in friendship to Henry. “Norma’s said a whole lot of good things about you, Doc.”

“And some colorful things too, no doubt,” Henry continued, seeming to be...okay with it all, accepting the offer of a gentlemanly handshake. “We sail on different boats to different shores, but the greatest thing one loner can give to another is the knowledge that there’s someone else out there trying to cross the ocean in a rubber dingy.”

Roberta’s usual eye-roll at yet another nautical analogy from the man who spent 4 glorious years in the Navy, yet had never seen the ocean again for nearly 3 decades, was held in abeyance when with her left eye she saw Marie come out into the reception room and smile at Henry, putting her arm under his.

“And I guess I have an announcement too,” Henry said, smiling at Marie.

“A new ‘mate’ on the Good Ship Henry,” Roberta interjected, trying to keep the rudder on the rocky emotional waters ahead steady.

“The GREAT ship Henry,” Marie said, smiling, her now loving eyes fixed on a pleasantly and un-characteristically-happy Henry.

Norma didn’t seem so happy. Maybe it was jealousy, or maybe something else. But, a lifetime of battling the sadistic whims of diseases mounted by Mother Nature against her most innocent four legged creatures had turned Norma into a pragmatist, who accepted the way things were, and knew what she could and couldn’t change about such.

“Looks like everyone’s ‘first mated’ up,” Norma said to Henry with a ‘I’m glad for you smile’ that seemed to be reciprocated. Roberta stayed out of it, making her getaway before the ‘mating fest’ would get around to talk about how she should settle down with Cowboy Hank and raise little strong Hanks, pretty Robertas, or perhaps gay, bi, lesbian or transgender children in between.

CHAPTER 5

Cowboy Hank was named such in Knife Bend ever since his arrival because of his mode of presentation and transportation. To appropriately scout out the area, five long years ago, he had parked his horse trailer outside town and rode his steed into town, seeing who would do a condescending Yuppoid eyeroll, gawk in disbelief as if they had never seen a horse and rider anywhere but on a tv screen, or give him a ticket for operating an 'unlicensed mode of transport' on public roads. Such did happen in four towns around Knife Bend that he sampled when deciding upon which town he would disappear into. Knife Bend gave him the best and most natural reception, though he was one of the only modern day Westerners wearing a cowboy hat, which was real. He wore it with as much authenticity as the 'real life' ranchers wore their caps with visors and overalls, except for special occasions when attending cowboy weddings and poetry readings, or going anywhere East in an airplane. Hank also had sported upon his entry into Knife Bend a honking big mustache which, upon first presentation, was fake but which he

let grow out as soon as he put a down-payment on the garage and gas station where he worked in town, and a ranch rent-to-own opportunity ten miles away and a century away from the center of commerce.

The owner of the ranch died six months ago and his brother saw no value in keeping 600 acres of bush with soil that could not maintain crops above it, nor contained any recognizable minerals or fossil fuels under it. Cowboy Hank saw his opportunity, selling the gas station and garage in town and buying the windblown, hilly bushland before the price went up, or an enterprising botanical grower discovered that the soil unable to grow wheat or barley was excellent at growing recreational plants which when burned or creatively ingested made the consumers very, very happy.

The house was little more than a barn converted for two legged dwellers in stages. It suited Hank very well. A wood heating stove in the living room, a second hand oven with two functional burners and as many for decoration in the kitchen. A loft where the acoustics were perfectly symmetrical for the piano, guitars and fiddles that he played as soon as he got up in the morning, and just before hitting the hay at night.

The mounted trailer next to the house, the same one Roberta came in with two interesting years ago on the way to her dream job in Vancouver, had not changed a bit, the only upgrading done to it being insulation between the aluminum coverings and the imitation wood paneling inside. Shared accommodations were the shower inside, the living room which contained a tv that got three stations on a good weather day and ghostlike and alluring static on cloudy ones, and the stock barn where Roberta's canines took their slumber next to the riding-horses, guard-llamas and milking-goats and whenever she was sleeping with the owner of the facility.

It was a slow week for the car and truck repair business, and even the tractors and snow-mobiles seems to be, as Terri said, 'in synch with the universe'. Good news for the mobility status of the citizens of Knife Bend, bad news economically for Hank, but excellent news for his horses, who all got a chance to be ridden. The always-hatted Hank rode took his third riding horse, Dakota, around the property three times that day, it usually taking only twice around the 'Ponderosa' to settle him into a short-gaited hand gallop requiring no hand contact on the reins. "Compassion and consistency," he informed the steed as they did the 'victory ride' into the main yard after traversing up and down the bush, the theme to Lonesome Dove going through Hank's well satisfied mind while some other kind of music was going through the horse's. He hoped, and prayed, that it was something better than the kind of music which had made Cowboy Hank a celebrity in the 'real world' as the million-dollar-record-selling "Hearty Party" guy whose feel good, simple-beated song topped the country charts for a month, and remained there for six more.

There were other hits that happened as well, as accidental as the 'Hearty Party', and even more commercially oriented. The bigger the back up band and special auditory effects, the more the audience liked it, loved it, and worshiped it. He recalled the time when he tried out an album of one on one traditional tunes with real, and mind expanding, nay, SOUL expanding lyrics, but the record company execs shut him down nearly as quickly as the sample fans they hired did. And there were the drugs, groupies, gold diggers and fake smiles one had to do to maintain reputation

so one didn't lose popularity with a nose dive, something which would have plunged Hank and his well-meaning investors into inescapable debt. "Hey, maybe if we all are true to ourselves, and get booted out of the big leagues, and tossed in jail or on the streets, I can release an album of REAL jailbird tunes and homeless stories that would make Woody Guthrie proud of all of us," he remembered 'speculatin' to his 'posee' one day when wearing custom-torn \$300 jeans at the \$40 a cup 'Cowboy Java' café in Los(t) Angeles.

Of course no one around Hank knew who Woody Guthrie was, until he said he was Arlo Guthrie's father. And when Hank sang some of Woody's songs, about real struggles of real people during the Dust Bowl days that were, for real, a lot harder economically and psychologically than the 90s, he found himself presented with lawyer-appointed psychiatrists, 'for his own good'. What made best sense for everyone, most importantly him, was for Hank to disappear, which he did, with a death scene that was found out to be false very quickly.

On occasion, Hank heard his former name said, mostly on the Entertainment Tonight shows that came over the tube, showing pictures of him in his former glory. "Billy Bob Jackson" had a clean shaven country face, long blond hair that flowed down his back and never wore a cowboy hat. Roberta laughed at the images of Cowboy Hank as Billy Bob Jackson on Country TV when there was nothing else that came in over the antenna. Cowboy Hank sighed sadly behind a forced smile, knowing that the past that only Roberta knew about him could come back to haunt him, and everyone else he cared about someday.

Hank always feared that imaginations could become reality, and yet again, it did. A sparking-clean white van with the tinted windows that pulled into his driveway as he got off Dakota and fed him a 'thank you' carrot, seemed to be a messenger from that world he had left, calling him back. The man who emerged was as 'undirtied' by the rugged terrain of Knife Bend as his vehicle. The man clad in a perfectly-pressed 'SWAT fashion' overalls and shiny combat boots looked at Hank as if he knew him, and Hank seemed to know him, there being something familiar about the way he carried himself behind his sunglasses, and the eyes that were faintly visible behind them. Accompanying him was an underling who ran five steps for every one step the driver walked, said assistant whipping out a video camera from his belt, taking pictures.

"Can I help you?" Hank asked, holding on to the reins of his horse with one hand for quick getaway, reaching for the licensed, hundred-year-old Winchester under his coat, which he kept on him to protect his cattle and horse herd from bears and cougars, and make urban cultists from the rapidly expanding towns around him who were doing Satanic rituals on land that was not their own think twice about intruding on his land.

But the intruders didn't seem to hear him, and didn't seem to listen, the 'boss' looking at his clipboard, his assistant taking pictures at his boss's direction. And both of them, upon examination, with modern pistols strapped to their 'Flashpoint-wannabe' uniforms that bore not a single semblance of artistry.

Hank approached closer, yelling even louder. "This is private property. What do you want?"

“You,” the ‘boss’ said, moving aside his coat. “You are,” he said, looking at his clipboard with the same motions and gestures that line Producers from Los(t) Angeles had when bossing around the musicians and artists who did all the work.

“Hank Ralston,” Hank announced, hoping the visor on his hat would hide his face.

The boss looked up towards Hank, then walked a few steps closer, seeming to recognize him.

Hank pulled his hat closer down his head, but Dakota, seeing an other carrot in Hank’s breast pocket and helping himself to it, moved in to grab it, pushing Hank’s hat further up. “Thanks a lot, friend,” he said to Dakota as his face was now visible. A now mustacheless face which was made so to Roberta, when he wanted to reveal his identity to her, and her only, two years ago. A face he kept mustache-less because he thought it would make her more Indian like to her, thus trying to work his way into her still-untrusting and self-tortured heart more easily.

“I know you,” the boss said. “You’re---”

“---Hank Ralston,” he interjected in a very non-Billy Bob generic accent. Hank pulled out his last reserves, taking off his hat, revealing under it a look that Billy Bob Jackson never had, nor even thought about displaying. “Owner of this land, who didn’t recall giving you permission to take pictures here without my say so,” he continued, stroking his bald head, shaved cleanly to the skin, a semi-straggly rim of dyed greyish-white around his temples that spread across the back of head. A look that made him look ‘Socratic and wise’ to Roberta, when she finally got used to it. One which he adopted to make him look as non Billy Bob as possible. True, he could have gotten plastic surgery, or tried living underground as a fillie rather than a stallion, but...the clean shaven and self-induced male baldness look was something was afraid of when he was a teenager, that he decided to actively embrace now. At least he wouldn’t have to fear what would happen to him in old age, on the inside, and as long as he kept his cowboy hat on, everyone else in town thought he was just Cowboy Hank, who had shaved off his stash to please his new Indian Princess.

But matters of more importance seemed to be afoot here. These two intruders seemed to be on a Mission, requiring no permission to do so. Being uniformed, they had to have badges. “Can I ask who you are and what you are doing here?” Cowboy asked, limping his way down the hill like the old man who he was trying to portray.

“Of course, Mister Ralson,” the boss said, taking off his sunglasses and showing his badge, instructing his video-filming and photograph-taking assistant to do the same.

“Society to Prevent Cruelty to Animals?” Hank said, taking note of the badges, Inspectors Sorensen and Trainee Dinosolvic their names.

“The NEW SPCA. On a routine inspection tour,” Sorenson said.

“Something wrong?” Hank said. “Someone lodge a complaint against me?”

“Someone who, as we see, so far anyway, is un-informed about your so-far acceptably-run operation, here,” Sorenson said. “We have to follow up on leads, even if they are false ones. For the sake of the animals. You DO understand.”

Hank didn't understand, the few hairs on his head at the back of his neck sticking up on end. “Who's lodging a complaint against me? My animals are well cared for, and if they get into trouble, I got a vet who lives on site.”

“And this vet is,” Assistant Dinosovic said, taking out his notepad, a black book.

“Someone who knows a lot about animals, and more about people than you, or me. And someone who would want to know who is filing ridiculous accusations that...Who did you say lodged this complaint against me?”

“We're not allowed to say,” Sorenson said, as his assistant took more pictures.

“Great looking horses,” Dinosovic comments.

“And llamas and dogs and goats, who are living as happy llamas, dogs and goats,” Hank commented regarding the animals running around playing with each other, digging holes into the dirt, and rolling around in the manure left by the horses and the cattle that had just grazed down the fields.

“What kind of shelter do these animals have?” Sorenson said.

“That barn over there, and the lean tos, when the weather's real bad. The trees when it's just an nuisance. The open sky when it's good,” Hank replied, thinking to himself that such would make a great intro for a new album he was working on, with music that would be presented to the world as ...forty-something bald philosopher-seeker Hank Ralston, bearing no resemblance or identity to shaggy-haired Hearty Party dudud Billy Bob Jackson.

“And these horses all have their own stall as where they spend most of their time?” Sorenson said.

It had been a long time since Cowboy Hank heard such stupidity coming out of a mouth that was so over-educated, with the possible exception of Tom Wilson, of course. In preparation to answer such a moronic question, Hank took in a deep breath, telling himself that these people don't know any better, or...maybe they should. “The horse is a free-roaming, grass eating creature that enjoys movement and hates confinement. No matter how many horse cookies you put in its plastic feeder or hay you lay in its stall,” he asserted. “You get a horse used to living inside, like a rat in a cage, it forgets how to be a horse. Just like people who live in small apartments, no matter how much room service they get and how comfortable the jacossie is inside. They stop being people and get afraid of the open, the unknown and start ‘accepting their limitations’. Dying from a depression they can never claw, nor see, their way out of. Like the dwellers in the cave in Plato's Republic who chain themselves to the comfy fire inside and look

at shadows on the wall, thinking they are reality rather than walking outside and seeing the sun, the stars and the open which can be harsh at first, but gives you more life than---“

Hank turned around, noting that his guests had put away their cameras and clip boards. “Nothing here to report, but we’ll send you our official report after our inspection committee makes it official.” Sorenson said. “But you don’t mind if we periodically visit you. Make recommendations as to how to make this good operation better.” He handed Hank a card. “And if you see anything that needs reporting, you WILL let us know. For the sake of the animals.”

Hank obviously could not say ‘no’, but he refused to say ‘yes’ either. The van pulled out of the dirt driveway back onto the road, making its rounds. As to where those rounds were, perhaps a closer look at the card would reveal who to talk to. Hank called the main number for this new, super-funded, ultra-modern animal shelter on his phone, and upon asking for the director, got a generic answering machine. Twice. No, he would not leave a message on it until he knew who was behind it, be it for improving animal care, or, as he feared, beginning a witchhunt against animal-loving people who got in their way.

CHAPTER 6

The work day, small w, finally ended, Roberta spraying the final coat of ‘Wound heal’, a specially formulated concoction of collagen, emu fat, antibiotic, blueberry seeds and catspaw, onto the horse she had just finished stitching up. “Standing Bull” had found on the highway side of the fence abandoned property after a midnight move by what were probably his owners, five flaps of skin open to muscle underneath, three more exposing bone. With all the soft tissue damage, some say it would have been more humane to put “Standing Bull” down, even Doc Henry. But Roberta would not hear of it. She knew that she could put back together the tendons, skin and even nerves that negotiations with poorly-constructed wire fences had torn apart. As for the neural component of it, Roberta’s hands found a way to stitch the proximal portion of the nerve stumps to the distal ones using branched plastic tubes that allowed, according to what she read, growing nerve fibers to find their natural homes at the other end of the repair site. And as for giving those growing fibers a kick in the ass so they could grow fast enough down the leg so that the muscles would not die of atrophy, she employed an implantable electronic current device with the distal end containing the negative lead, the proximal one the positive pole. According to what she had read in the literature, and applied in thus far 9 cases, recovery of function was not only fast, but miraculous in 8 or the 9 cases, making it statistically significant and real. She wanted to thank the inventor of the technology, but she would have to do it in the afterlife, as the ‘fraudulent wack job’, according to the competitors who had discredited his work in the journals and framed him for fraud, had committed suicide after being incarcerated.

“Maybe Nick Remidias couldn’t handle being in the world of mere mortals, or immoral humanoids,” she pondered, asking “Standing Bull” for his opinion on the matter.

“Maybe so,” the horse seemed to say, “but first let me say thank you. After you accept it, we can have a real conversation about equine philosophy, humanoid politics or speculations about what

the ETs who probably put us both together are doing back on their Om planet, or perhaps ours, in places you and me look at every day and never notice.”

“Thanks for trusting me, and letting me help you,” she replied back to the horse with her eyes, and a gentle pet on his neck. “I have to put you back in the coral now, where you do what you do after the day’s work is done, and while I do, well...something else,” she continued.

As what the ‘something else’ was, such was not so simple. Avoiding that complex and demanding task, she tended to the paperwork from the day’s work. It had been a particularly busy one, where it was mostly her working, and Doc Henry watching. Or him getting back into action whip-stitching flesh together and examining biological body parts of patients to his new audience, Marie with an ‘ie’. Taking on the simple cases, leaving Roberta with the complicated ones. Like the dog with a ‘Mister Hankie’ doll in its gut that on the X-ray looked very similar to manure which the South Park character was made of. The cat with a swollen and infected zygomatic salivary gland which most vets would write off as an abscess in the upper molars, a finding that made possible emergency surgery that saved its life. And the goat with ‘simple bloat’ which wound up being a combination of a twisted stomach as well as diaphragmatic hernia that Doctor R not only intuited without taking an X-ray, but repaired with Doc Henry’s oldest surgical tools in ways that even he was impressed with. Or so he showed with a proud ‘that’s my girl’ grin she noticed in the mirror when he thought she wasn’t looking.

But, such was the way Nature seemed to work in Knife Bend, as well as, perhaps everywhere. If you were the ‘big boss’ in charge, be it the Christian God, the Cree Great Spirit, or ETs who had been gods at the time of Socrates and Plato who were still taking their ‘assignment on earth’ seriously, you would reward your most Creative souls with increasingly less compliments and increasingly more responsibilities. Mix that up in a mind that already has an inferiority complex about itself, and a heart that has a moral responsibility to always do the right thing (aka, an unkillable conscience), a limbic brain complex that is hard wired for survival and self preservation, and a frontal lobe which not only can handle but has learned to enjoy pain, and you have the ideal, or at least the most efficient, innovative and useful humanoid. A Promethian creature created by the gods to defy, hate and mistrust them, who elevates the well being of both heaven and earth, that Promethian workhorse of course feeling like they are in a state of constant hell.

It was a simple formula, at least for Roberta’s grandmother. A complicated one for Roberta. And made more complicated by the canvas which she was being assigned to. A voluntarily ‘simple’ earthling walked into the clinic as Roberta put aside the last file. “So, who did you save today, Doctor R?” always optimistic Terri inquired as she brought in supplies from the distributor from Edmonton that finally arrived, half of the items intended for other clinics, half of what Roberta and Doc Henry ordered not in the boxes.

“Apparently everyone except me,” Roberta replied, stating the matter not arrogantly, but accurately as she engaged in simple tasks of moving items from box to desk and then shelf.

“Who’s staying in our guest cabin, Doctor R?” Terri asked, hearing the symphony of animal sounds from the back which had become as irritating to Roberta’s ear as the ‘Hearty Party’ had upon her arrival in Knife Bend, two years and 20 transitions ago.

“A zygomatic abscess, a foreign body removal, two quill cases, three simple spays, one complicated one, a fractured femur with a displaced acetabulum, and a radial nerve neuroma, an idiopathic vomiting and possible hepato-portal shunt that---”

“---I asked WHO is back there, not what,” Terri said.

“So you did,” Roberta replied, frozen in motion, the realization hitting her like a load of bricks dropping onto top of her head, ramming open the closed lid on her third eye. “What made you ask?” she inquired of Terri, hoping that the neo-hippie ‘all you need is love’ idiot sevant mechanic who was always motoring around doing something could come up with answer to why Roberta, who has saved so many lives, was feeling so irreversibly dead inside.

“Why did you ask me WHO was back there in the kennels and stalls, and not WHAT?” Roberta asked Terri, and herself. Yes, two years ago Roberta would have named every case coming into the clinic and every animal on a farm call, violently opposed to the calves she helped deliver being given a number on an eartag as their identity. Now, she was becoming as insensitive as those redneck stock owners, and in ways that were darker than she imagined possible. Roberta held her breath, waiting for an answer to be channeled from the Great Spirit from Terri’s mouth, or some insight to come out of her, what HAD to be, brilliant mind, somewhere under her wildly blonde, red, blue and black three foot long topknot. “Why did you ask me WHO was back there in the kennels and stalls, and not WHAT was back there,” Doctor R asked, yet again, this time prepared for the most honest and soul-penetrating answers.

“Because I got them all tags,” Terri said, pulling out a bag of identification necklaces, bracelets, body harnesses and halters that seemed hoaky at first but, upon closer examination, were not only colorful, but something that Roberta wanted and needed to be more than anything else.

“Artistic?” Terri asked. “When I made them, I wanted them to be artistic. Are they?” she inquired, begging for a ‘yes’, but fully able to accept a ‘no’, if such was the judgment.

As for how to judge the art, Roberta was as blind as Ray Charles and as deaf as Beethoven. She contemplated her inability to appreciate artistic expression within a world of her own.

“You don’t like them,” Terri said.

“No, that’s not the problem,” Roberta said, helping herself to a closer look and feel of the intricate and joy-filled images painted and engraved on the horse halters, and the simple yet elegantly portrayed designs on the cat collars.

“Then what is the problem?” Terri asked. “Are they, like, put together wrong?”

“No, they’re put together just right. And say to the animals, and the people who they own, far more than I, or you can say with words. With an expression so far beyond words that it becomes lost in the most profound and blissful silence,” Roberta replied.

“Wow,” Terri said. “That means you like them?”

“Almost as much as I’d like to have been the one who did them,” Roberta replied, handing them back to Terri. “You’ve done great work, Wolfgang Amadeus. Take it from this Salieri...you are to leather and canvas what Mozart was to music.”

“Huh?” Terri replied. “I don’t get it.”

“You aren’t supposed to,” Roberta replied, with a warm smile, and a painful heart. Not bothering to inform Terri about the ‘Salieri syndrome’, a disorder of the mind, brain and spirit in which KNOW you are mediocre and non-creative, and no matter how hard you struggle, you can never be as creative as the creatures that the gods, the Great Spirit, or the Ets, designated as being the ‘creative’ ones. “You’re a creative soul, who has to keep creating, for these animals, and the rest of us,” she said to Terri with as many thanks as she could from her breaking heart and defeated spirit.

“You’re creative too,” Terri said to Roberta. “All of these animals you saved, and help.”

“Are because I have to, not because I want to,” Roberta finally admitted, finding the window to do so, finally, to someone in Knife Bend other than Cowboy Hank. Then, a flash of realization hit. One of those secrets about how the Universe works which is revealed only to the hardest working souls within it. “But maybe that’s why I’ve become good at what I do. Because I don’t want to do it. Like Lincoln,” she said.

“That wildie horse me and Norma took in who finally figured out that letting a human ride on your back is better than having him hit you with a stick from the ground?” Terri asked.

“No...Lincoln,” Roberta replied. “The President, who was more depressed than Leonard Cohen on valium-laced BC weed,” she smiled, staring into space out the clinic window towards the setting sun as the sky acquired that bright blue color just before it would turn bright red, then yellow, then black, on its own timetable.

“Huh?” Terri said.

Roberta turned to her student, and possibly teacher, explaining the situation. “Lincoln hated to go to War. He hated fighting. He hated to see people do horrible things to each other, even if it was for what they thought weren’t horrible reasons. But he was the best President to have in a Civil War. Like US Grant, his favorite general, who by the way did more for Civil Rights than any president, including JFK, or Truman, Lincoln wanted to end the war as soon as possible. So, everything he did was designed to efficiently end the Civil War ASAP rather than let it drag on because he was enjoying the glory of it all”.

Before Terri could utter another “huh,” Roberta continued, leaning forward with a maternal bow to the woman who was five years older than her in body, but 20 years or more younger and fresher in spirit. “Those animal docs who are fascinated with diseases who do every test possible on even the simplest cases. The ones who do as much complicated medicine as possible because

they're fascinated with the process and don't give a shit about the product, or result," she related.

"The kind of idiots and a--holes you worked with when you were with the Alpine Clinic," Terri said, reminding Roberta about darker times when she had sold out to her lower aspirations, before coming to her senses about what 'state of the art' super-science owner Tom Wilson was really all about.

"You call them a--holes and not assholes, this is...good," Roberta said. She continued onward, afraid to lose her train of thought, hoping to not lose grasp of the realization that was hitting her with a barrage of images which had to be grasped by open eyes with the ultimate sense of urgency. "But getting back to the doc who is the most effective one to treat disease. It's...hmmm...the one who wants to put himself out of business."

"That doesn't make sense," Terri said.

"It does to an animal that just wants to go home instead of lingering on for more tests and academic observations, and the owners who want to get on with their lives and not spend their money funding 'fascinating biological investigations' that do nothing more than keep the minds of doctors and researchers occupied with the head games they enjoy playing, with other people's money, the patient's time and...when it gets out of hand, a whole lot of lost animal lives." Roberta held back the flashes of how many rodents and other 'expendable' creatures killed in the research world which said it was dedicated to finding cures, but which was more about keeping researchers fascinated with biology. A realm that Roberta excelled in, but left once she realized that she was becoming part of the problem rather than the Universal 'healing and Truth seeking' solution.

"So, does this mean you're quitting working here, like you did once before?" Terri asked, feeling both hurt and betrayed, regarding the stint she did working for Tom Wilson after storming out of Doc Henry's clinic after, according to some anyway, causing his 'breakdown'.

"If I leave, this time," Roberta said, "it's only here," she said, pointing to her head. "But not here," she continued, showing her bio-medically still-gifted hands. "Or here," she went on, putting her right hand over her heart, in a sacred pledge. "I promise," the pledge delivered to Terri, the universe, and herself.

After feeding the 'cases' in the back room, Terri left the clinic feeling satisfied, or so it seemed to Roberta. Doctor R feared that perhaps she said too much to Terri that would be misinterpreted, but unsaid truths were as bad as formulated lies. So Roberta recalled from observing the harmless half-truths that became vicious lies which laced every aspect of the marriage her helpless, abused Cree mother had with her White father, who had become possessed by the Demon of evil in stages, culminating in Roberta becoming, in 'daddy's' eyes, his second and most favorite 'wife', and 'lover'. And from Kurt, college educated and politically suave 'manfriend', who she thought was the way out of 'daddy's' black hole, who wound up becoming a more effective drug dealer and enslaver than Roberta's father ever was. And from the time spent working for Tom Wilson, who seemed to represent the best elements of

the academic and scientific world that Roberta wanted 'in' on more than anything else, until she was re-awakened once again to who she really was and how that was not what everyone around her wanted her to be.

Was it time for Roberta to re-find her ever-changing Inner Core? She asked that question of herself as she took off her surgical greens, and put on Granny's Buskskin coat. Nothing came from the mirror, yet again. So, she asked Promethius, the wolf cub who was now living a happier life under her protection than the Greek god and Revolutionary who she named him after ever experienced. Promethius didn't have an answer. She asked Mahegan, twelve going on four year old (thanks to his younger brother) three legged canine co-survivor of three careers, five moves and a dozen internal transformations. "So, what do we do now?" she asked, hoping to reach the 'Merlin', or grandmother spirit, within the 'simple' canine.

Mahegan pushed over the violin case, or as Cowboy Hank called it, 'the fiddle bag'. Magegan seemed to like the sound of the strings being made to vibrate with catgut, and had trained Promethius to howl along with the tunes. If indeed they were tunes.

"We need a bigger audience this time," Roberta smiled at him, gazing towards the setting sun. She led Mahegan out the clinic door to the 'observation deck,' as Doc Henry named it numerous times. Mahegan barked out for Promethius to cease searching for horse apples and cow-pies, summoning him to Roberta's 'starboard' leg while Promethius nuzzled against Roberta's 'port' thigh.

"Okay," she said. "Here goes." Thinking that no one except the animals and the Spirit which made life within them possible was listening, Roberta let loose with what she felt was a not so bad melody which she had composed. It felt like a song, somehow, then...like music. Going with the Magical Moment that seemed to be upon her, she let go with song, from the most ancient of instruments, her mouth. Singing, with the heart that she did when lullibying Promethius back from the dead like she did two years ago in Cree, then in English, then in the German she had taught herself, then in the scribbling which she wrote down, which became poems, then...maybe a single person opera. Profound words which she felt channeled from Beethoven as well as BB King. She could feel the Universe saying 'yes', and the Ghost of Frank Zappa smiling, and the Spirit of her Grandmother laughing. Indeed, the animals in the field seemed to gather to listen, some joining in, being led by second fiddle 'howlist' Promethius. Mehagan just seemed to be zenning into it, like the Roberta did with the Greatful Dead music when she heard her records or attended that magical concert so long ago after she left the Suit. But this time she was playing the music. Maybe she was free now. Or even better, she was talented! Maybe even gifted, awakened to such by the final pay off of hard work, persistence and having done right by the world morally though her medical and scientific work. Yes, Granny's mathematics was correct. Creativity of the Spirit comes to you if you do whatever you can for people morally. Effective compassion is the ultimate result of expanding intelligence. And Creative Talent is the ultimate reward for being vigilantly responsible!

Roberta heard applause after she had poured out her heart to the setting sun, and sweat all over her now lighter body. She turned around, and the metaphysical had merged with the physical. "Great work!" Cowboy Hank said with a loving smile, clapping as he strolled forward toward

her. “Groovy! Like totally cool.” Terri added with a happy grin. “None of it sucks. Really.” Deathhound Jones, the Goth cynic whose brain was doomed to be pessimistic but whose Spirit still said that ‘its worth one more try to be optimistic,’ she asserted. The whole ensemble of onlookers had come in unexpectedly, for veterinary business most probably. Some kind of emergency call where the ‘all hands on deck’ call went out.

Roberta felt herself believing the compliments. Yes, maybe they really were true. Maybe she wasn’t Soul-dead, and her music and lyrics did have value. Craft. And, most importantly, Life. And she reached that liberation without getting hammered on booze, ditzed out on dope, endorphined up after wacking someone in the face and head, or ‘dopamined into creative mode’ in the brain by penile invasions of her vaginal porthole.

But, as Roberta’s mind came back to...”The Truth Shall Set You Free,” above all from the one who spoke it honestly. Doc Henry and his new fishing buddy Marie, with an ‘ie’, had apparently heard all of Roberta’s ‘benefit concert for the Spirit’, as they were both unpacking the fourth load of rods, lures and buckets of trout in front of Henry’s kitchen door. Roberta played few more bars of her improvised ‘conata for Connectivity’ for Henry, speaking to him in music rather than words. He seemed to like it, chuckling with a warm congratulatory smile, having gotten the humor she was expressing, finally, and in MUSIC this time. “So, Doc H,” she asked him, hoping to push HIM into the liberation she was experiencing. “What kind of dance music do you want me to play for you and your fishing partner? Captain’s choice.”

“Something where you don’t play any sour notes, and where the music breaths some more instead of just slumbering,” he said as he put away the fishing gear and removed veterinary supplies from the truck. “Key to being a great, or even a good musician-poet, or whatever you are trying to be, is practice, practice, practice.”

Roberta’s jaw dropped. Though her ear heard refuting of Henry’s claim from Terri, Deathhound and Cowboy Hank, with more accolades for her artist Work, or what she thought was artistic anyway, her mind dwelled on Henry’s derogatory words, and his disapproving grimace. Then, the final words that drove her resurrected Spirit back into her self-dug grave. “You’re not a musician. Or a poet. You’re a doctor, who is needed on three emergency cases that are coming in within,” he looked at his watch. “Ten minutes. I need you to be responsible, not colorful, which you still have a long way to go at being, if you ever want to get there. Only a few people really get to be artistically talented, and you aren’t one of them.”

Marie didn’t seem to share Henry’s viewpoint, but she didn’t seem to empathize with Roberta’s struggles either. All she did was coax him to go inside the house with another load of fish and a peck on the cheek, whispering something into it. He grumbled something back. She seemed to ignore him and just went into the house.

Roberta put the violin back in the ‘fiddle case’ and walked through the part of the audience that liked her, or said they did anyway, feeling less talented with every accolade Terri, Deathhound or Cowboy Hank offered. The final words from Henry devastated her not only because of where they came from, but that they were the same words that Kurt, and her father, and in her weaker moments, even her mother told her so many times when he wanted, or needed to keep her in her

place. “Only a few people really get to be talented, and you aren’t one of them.” The words weren’t exact, but close enough.

Marie worked her way to Roberta as she became Doctor R again, by moral necessity, two truckloads of sick animals making the turn off the highway and onto the access road to the clinic. “He doesn’t mean it. He really cares about you,” she said to her, looking over her shoulder to see if Henry was watching.

“He doesn’t know who the fuck I am,” Roberta grunted.

“But I do,” Marie said. “And I think I can....”

“...You can go fuck off, just like he can,” Roberta replied, spotting two mauled horses being helped off one trailer, three cows in worse shape hobbling off another. “After I finish treating these sick animals...and the next ones and...fuck it, I have to get back to work, small w,” she said, going into Doctor mode, feeling more diseased than ever, in ways that seemed no one could cure.

CHAPTER 7

“I wasn’t trying to destroy her, just trying to make her stronger,” Henry grunted at Marie as she slammed the cooked catch of the previous afternoon in front of him as the clock hit 3 AM, the veterinary work outside finally finished. “That which doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” he continued as he placed a forkful of succulent trout into his parched and hungry mouth. “I was giving her incentive to not only be good, but to be great.”

“Which requires lying to her like that, and making me lie to her too!” Marie protested staring into Henry’s face, her hands firmly placed on the table in front of his self-assured grin. “All of this tough love, Henry---“

“---Made my son Jack become the best immunologist at the University of Winnipeg!” Henry asserted. “Everyone wanted to just praise him to death for the satisfactory paper he gave at his first scientific conference. Had I not got up and criticized his work, challenged him to get better, he would not have rose up the ranks to become an assistant professor, then associate professor who published top flight work only three years later!”

“Which you read alone, after he sent you a Christmas card telling you to leave him alone and never to contact him again,” Marie said, pulling the fork out of Henry’s hand and throwing it at the wall. “And the next Christmas, well, he didn’t spend with anyone.”

“His new wife drove him to commit suicide,” Henry asserted. “Combined with the dope that she shared with him. And as for my daughter, who my wife claimed that I drove away for being a father who tried his damnest to prevent her from wasting her talents living on a dope-smoking, free-love, commie commune----”

“---We’re talking about Roberta here!” Marie blasted, turning her back on Henry, looking out the window at the dark horizon which was delayed in becoming brightened by the coming dawn. “I was anyway.”

“Roberta can handle herself,” Henry said, getting up to give Marie a ‘let’s reason together’ hug, a gesture he learned about all too late in the marriage to Mary with a y, who left him a decade ago with no forwarding address. “Roberta knows that I, you know, love her,” he said, struggling to let that ‘L’ word come out of his mouth.

“The key ingredient to love is respect,” Marie said.

“I know,” Henry conceded. “And honesty,” he continued, hugging Marie with the compassion which his mouth could not give voice to.

Marie felt hit between the eyes, harder than she thought she would. “Maybe it was the ‘H’ word, honesty, that made her feel less than comfortable. Or the sincerity with which Henry was hugging her. All agendas inside of her forced Marie to move things forward, as they inevitably should be moved, and had to, with action. “I think I can help Roberta in her new Calling,” she said. “Or rather her SUPPLIMENTAL Calling. You and I know that she’ll be a better vet if she....”

“...I know, achieves whatever she can as an artist,” Henry said.

It was a point of agreement, Marie agreeing to make some calls, which she did, to points East where, as she said, ‘people of power and influence’ lived who can make life easier for people ‘here in the real world’.

The sun finally did come up, heralding in a new day of surprises for some, and challenges for others.

CHAPTER 8

The dog's name was Chester, a pure bred, fully insured, \$5,000 value tag golden retriever. His owner was Bradley Chesterson, Hollywood superstar executive in the area for an overly funded commercial shoot and, other business that his fans would never know about. One of the 'cool kids' who somehow always out did Tom for touchdowns on football field, lead parts in the school play, the grades in classroom and prime picks from the girls' school across town in the bedroom. No matter what Brad wore, he looked in style. And no matter how windy the weather got, or how much rain poured down at soccer practice, his long, wavy hair always looked perfect. A far cry from Tom Wilson, whose 'mop' always looked disheveled and was thinning out on the crown.

Normally, Brad would not bother to take his pets to the vet. That was a job for 'the help'. But Chester seemed special, at least to Brad's new trophy wife, woman half his age and five times more attractive than his now thankfully divorced first 'mating mistake'.

When it came to matters of being in control, and on top, Brad wrote the book, and dictated its terms to Tom. Not once did Tom beat Bradley at anything, except of course the race to becoming nearly bankrupt. But now, finally, the shoe was on the other foot.

"Tom," Brad pleaded as Tom did the once-over exam on the dog, looking as doctorly and authoritative as possible. "My new wife, and me, want the best for Chester. He was doing fine before we took him out on my new yacht with Brad Pitt and Angelina when they were in Vancouver for the film festival. Marty, Scorsese of course, gave him a treat from his pocket, and..."

"What was in the treat?" Tom asked, steaming inside, recalling how Brad always bragged about important people who he had intimate friendships with who would have nothing to do with Tom. "Any raisons? Chocolate? Sugar free gum?"

"Just a rawhide," Brad said, getting worried about the far away look in Chester's eye, trying his best to massage the top of his head to make it go away. "But Chester got these episodes again when I was invited to Charlie Rose's birthday party in Calgary, and the Presidential Golf Open in Denver. I was signing autographs of fans who recognized me from being on Entertainment Tonight and Forbes Business Magazine after the uppedy-ups in DC and LA named me one of the top ten actor-director-producers who was an expert in softwear design and major G8 representatives for Canada and the US, when---"

"---He got these seizures again?" Tom said, recalling his own father inviting Brad to sit on the board of boards at the G8, dismissing his own son's plea to attend with a condescending 'you aren't qualified and you weren't invited'.

Brad's worry escalated into desperation, as Chester's eyes started to rotate in the sockets. "What's that?" he asked, fearing the worst.

"Strabysmus," Tom said, taking his time, examining the dog's eye movements. "A result of inappropriate signals from the vestibular nucleus to the abducens, periorcular, and subocular nuclei in the oculomotor motor complex," he continued, not really sure about most of the terms

he was using, but certain that Brad didn't know either, and was not in a position to correct him. Particularly when Brad's beloved Chester went into a violent seizure, brought on by "idiopathic and aberrant discharge from probably the temporal lobe of the cerebrum," which Tom explained as a wizard. Chester's seizures escalated when Wizard Tom manipulated an acupuncture point with a small electric probe, out of Brad's view, a very intentional show of both force and medical confirmation of symptoms.

"Save him! You gotta save him, Doc!" Brad pleaded as he hugged Chester, hoping there was enough strength in his arms to stop the shakes. And enough elixir in his tears to penetrate into the skin over his scalp and make the 'demon' go away. "Save him, Doc! Please!"

It was one of the first time Brad had addressed Tom, his childhood and manhood 'second banana' as 'Doc', or that he said 'please'. "Now I've got him!" Tom thought to himself in the one, then two, then three seconds where he let Brad sweat. Then a fourth when Brad would give him respect, like everyone else who came to the other side of his examining table with a life that was in Tom's hands. "Yes, you arrogant, stupid and over-privileged villagers who would and have ignored me, and laughed at me, when you come here have to respect me. Because I am the wizard who has the power of life and death over your beloved pets, and you," he continued to say in his head, as he turns around to the 'special box' that had the 'magic elixir' to inject into Chester. "Five mgs of diazepam per kilogram body weight, 'valium' in simple man's language, and---"

Magic elixir in hand, Tom called out to the closest available technician. "Holding help, and set up a chem profile, CBC, T4 test and get the X-ray and ultrasound unit ready to go. Now!" The 'commoners' in Tom's domain jumped to his command. One of them came in and held down Chester's violently shaking body. Another held off the vien. Another consoled Brad, assuring him in 'commoner' terms that Tom was the best there is and that he would do whatever it takes to make Chester 'better again'.

It was only a four second delay, but one that had to be taken. "Yeah, you need me now," Tom sneered at Brad as the proud, arrogant and condescending 'cool dude' who walked into his office was not pleading for his favorite companion's life. "This is why I became a doctor," Tom thought to himself. "To now make people like you, who laugh at me or dismiss me, behind my back, respect me. Because if you don't, well...maybe I'll miss the vein or 'accidentally' inject some strychnine into this dog's blood system to make you suffer, and blame his death on you for not bringing him in early enough."

"Doctor, I've got the vein," one of the techs said, awakening Tom out of his daydream, which included perhaps Brad being on his operating table one day, dependent on Tom to do some emergency work on his brain, the golden opportunity to turn his 'best friend', who he envied his entire life, into a non-creative, mediocre vegetable, but smart enough to KNOW he is mediocre. "Doctor Wilson!" The tech screamed out again.

"I need you to hold that arm more steady," Tom said, so he could give Brad some 'lesson time'. Then, when the time was right, by Tom's timetable, and perhaps Chester's, he moved in and did

the ‘magic injection.’ As predicted, Chester’s seizures stopped. And as projected, Brad thanked Chester with a grateful and, perhaps, for the moment anyway, repentent hug.

“I owe you, big time,” Brad said to Tom. “No matter what anyone says, you’re a brilliant doctor.”

“I do REAL medicine here, not backwoods patch up like Doc Henry and his hippie-dippie Indian sidekick,” Tom said.

“Who?” Brad asked, pulling away from the thank you hug.

“No one you know now, but may have to know about later,” Tom replied. He wanted to press Brad for the answer as to who was saying he was a not-so-brilliant doc. He dared not ask which one of locals in town, or disgruntled employees in the clinic had voiced that opinion. And for one reason...if it wasn’t someone locally, it was someone at a distance who was badmouthing Tom Wilson. And those nay-sayers would be none other than Tom’s brow-beating father, or ‘Dear Old Dad’s’ favorite biological son, George. Both were due for a visit soon, and, for reasons he still didn’t want to face. And despite every bit of advise given by the three shrinks he fired, and the two women he dumped, Tom needed the undivided respect of his father above all else before he could ever really respect himself.

Tom went into ‘doctor’ mode, acting like the medic that Brad played on his short lived but popular and ultra-hip ‘Combat Doc’ series. “Now, people and other humanoids mascerading as such!” he announced to his staff. “I find out why this dog is having seizures within half an hour, or some of you find yourselves out on the streets dumpster diving for food or asking your beloved customers ‘do you want fries with that, Sir?’”

Tom knew that it wasn’t up to the edgy and witty writing on the shows that Brad produced, but for now, Tom was the director, producer and actor in his OWN drama, with Brad as his captive, and, for the moment, respectful audience. The ultimate reward for becoming a doctor. Which he would have to re-write and polish for the REAL audience, his father and brother, who would be arriving within a month in the town that Tom was supposed to have colonized by now.

CHAPTER 9

“You’re sure you want to do this?” Cowboy Hank asked his very special self-invited guest as he helped her mounted ‘Thunderbolt’, noting that when her ass plunked into the saddle it settled into terror rather than contentment.

“We talked about this, Cowboy Hank,” she insisted, grabbing hold of the horn with one hand, and with desperation to the reins around them with the other.

“YOU talked about it, I just listened,” Hank replied with the melodic rhythm of his voice that sounded musical no matter what he was saying. “And love ain’t doin’ what scares ya for someone who loves ya,” he continued.

“That’s Bullcrap!” she grunted. “Just like you naming what you say is your gentlest mare ‘Thunderbolt’. You saying ‘ya sayin’ instead of English the way it was ‘wrote down’ in a dictionary. And you keeping that hat on like it was glued to your head,” she ranted.

“You’re sounding a lot like Roberta, there, Norma,” Hank smiled as he sized up Buttercup’s still kind and ‘human sitting’ eyes, and Norma’s body posture which was a recipe for biological disaster as he adjusted the ‘South end of it’, leaving the “Northern correction” to the 65 year old, white haired woman who had recently donned a 40-something cowgirl outfit from the ‘Henry’s Tack and Saddle’ shop and a new brownish-blond hair color beneath her own rodeo bunny hat. “Ya gotta keep yer heels down, so ya sink into the saddle, and yer eyes upright, so ya can connect with the far horizon,” he said, saying as many ‘yers’, ‘yas’ and dropping as many g’s as he ‘chose ta’.

“Yeah, but...what’s she doing now?!” Norma screeched as Thunderbolt bobbed her head up and down three times then backed up. “She’s gonna rear on me, I know it.”

“Not if ya stop yanking on those reins, and trust her,” Hank replied, gently moving Norma’s gripped hand forward from her belly to just on top of the withers.

“Ok...ok...ok. Okay..” Norma said, starting off with panic, ending up with ‘vigilant relief’, as Hank coined it in his head, and would perhaps put it to paper and new song lyrics that night, or the next. “So,” Norma said as she let Thunderbolt take her forward at a gentle walk. “How do you make her go left?”

“Left leg forward and pressing into her, right leg back, reins gently pulled over to the direction ya want her to go,” he said, still holding onto the lead-line on the horse’s neck.

“She’s doing it,” Norma exclaimed with glee. “She’s doing it. Now how to I make her go right.’

“Do everything I told ya bout making a left with a 180,” he replied, this time giving Thunderbolt her head.

“She did it!” Norma proudly smiled. “She did it.”

“YOU did it,” Hank said, putting the safety rein over Thunderbolt’s neck, seeing that Norma actually did keep her heels down and back arched, looking up at the horizon. “Let’s do it again, but this time, a serpent-pattern,” he said, knowing that such always gave rider confidence and calmed down any horse.

“You mean an ‘S’ shape pattern,,” Bible believing Norma said, continuing on about the only animal created by the Divine Essence that she both feared and hated. “Snakes are a tool of the devil.”

“Then an S shape it is,” Hank said, guiding Norma to the distance fence post in a swerving line that he did with his own feet, which Thunderbolt would most likely follow in the event that the mare’s rider had gotten the right and left signal lights confused.

Hank could hear Norma hum “You are the Sunshine of My Life”, both the song and smile very uncharacteristic of her. “So, how’s it going with you and Gustav?” he inquired. “Things good?”

“Good, and they’ll be getting better after I tell him I learned, eh...know how to ride,” Norma said. “On his computer profile, he said he really liked horses.”

“You met him online then?” Hank asked.

“The only other choices are the bars where everyone’s drunk. At work where any inter-office romance means eventually one of you having to quit or losing your job. Or Church where everyone is either inhibited or being matched up by Paster Heinrick who thinks he’s the best matchmaker since Yenta from Fiddler on the Roof.”

“Or Terri from Knife Bend,” Hank smiled, reliving and sharing the story about how ‘love is all you need’ Terri wrote love letters to Henry as Norma, and lovingly replies back to Norma as Doc Henry in an attempt to bring the two ‘comrades in service of animals’ together, an attempt that failed miserably even before it was found out. “But doesn’t Doc Henry like horses?”

“From the ground,” Norma said. “And ‘as long I don’t have to get on their backs where they think it’s a great joke to run the Captain on their back’s hull into an iceberg’,” she continued, in her deepest obtainable baritone ‘Doc Henry’ voice. “But, maybe Doc Henry will take to horses if he finds one that can learn how to walk on a lake or hand gallop over the ocean. Ya think you can conjure up such a creature?”

“Roberta probably could. Super scientist that she is. Just give her a few days off, some test tubes, and access to the High School Chemistry department, and she could probably biologically engineer, or maybe surgically make, such a creature,” Hank said. “Yeah. A Real Seahorse,” he smiled.

“I heard she had other gifts too,” Norma answered. “Terri said she heard Doc Roberta singing out at the clinic that night that---“

“---I know. The night she came home and stopped singing, composing and playing any instrument other than her own fist beating as hard as she could on the drum of her wrists.” Hank said, lamenting. “She gathered all her writings, put them in a pile, and wanted to burn them.”

“Which I hope she didn’t,” Norma said as Thunderbolt made a turn at the fencepost, going back for another round of ‘S’ rows as part of her training ‘get acquainted’ drill.

“I did a switchero,” Hank said. “Snuck Roberta’s work in a safe place. Burned something far less valuable in the fire.”

“Those ‘guidelines’ from the new SPCA?” Norma said. “They’ve been visiting everyone I know, ‘making recommendations’ like they’re orders. Making people who care about animals, I means the ones who REALLY care, feel scared, small and stupid. They put Terri into tears, making her think that she’s a cruel and insensitive animal owner because the Cockerpaniel she rescued from a bankrupt puppy mill and the Husky-Blue-Healer cross had a few burrs in their tails when they came to greet the ‘inspectors’”

“Tails that were wagging with more happiness than we’ll ever have, or those inspectors ever experienced, I’d wager.”

“Any idea who sent them?” Norma said. “I know I petitioned my member of Parliament and everyone above her to set up a government-overfunded and very legal animal rescue that will take care of all the stray, homeless and abused animals, so I didn’t have to do it all. But when I asked them who their boss was, they just gave me a card.”

“That led to a phone message that was very official,” Hank said. “That the Cops here said was valid.”

“Maybe those Cops were visited at home by these ‘smiling Goodwill Gestapo’ troopers too,” Norma advanced. “And it’s a...” she stopped to ponder the matter. “No, it couldn’t be a that cult of Satanist who are trying to seize animals for ritualistic sacrifices to please their ET masters. Or maybe the Biomedical Military Industrial Complex that’s trying to get as many animals as they can for germ warfare experimentation, and leaving implants in the ones we have so they can spy on us.”

“You been listening to Deathhound too much,” Hank replied. “Now that she’s about to hit the big One Eight, her Intelligence quotient is probably over 200, and her inevitable cynicism quotient most likely is over a thousand.”

“No...Actually that came from Terri,” Norma said. “Who, I fear, is getting the wrong kind of education about life.”

“Yeah, life does chose to educate us on our own terms,” he replied. “And on its own...”

Before Hank could say ‘timetable’, a car pulled into the driveway. Thunderbolt jolted, Norma holding on with legs she didn’t know she had. Hank stabilized horse and rider as the red sedan with the sleek lines slowed down and pulled gently into the side of the dirt path. Exiting it was a woman who was as out of place in Knife Bend as Doc Henry atop a bucking bronco, or Tom Wilson at a Greatful Dead benefit concert for the homeless.

The visitor with perfectly sculpted shoulder-length auburn hair wore a beige business suit and black blouse, her three inch heels not sinking at all into the ground as she walked up to Hank with the utmost confidence, grace and style. She checked her directions, looked around, and seemed confused. “Hello” she said with a tight but sincere smile. “I’m looking for Roberta Collinear,” she asked Hank and still atop-horse Norma. “I was given this address.”

“And you are?” Norma blasted out, causing Hank frustration, as he wanted the visitor to talk more on her own terms, thus revealing more about herself, as arrogant people give away more secrets to people who they think are dumb than those they see as smart, or assertive.

“Fair enough. I heard that this town has been invaded, challenged and perverted by enough strangers already,” the woman smiled. She pulled out 2 cards, giving one to Norma, and one to Hank.

“Sarah Rosenthal,” Norma read. “From...The Weinblatt Group.”

“An entertainment conglomerate with offices in LA, New York and Toronto,” she said. “I’ve been referred to Roberta Collinear. I’ve heard that she has talent that my company can use, and the billions of fans our artistic clients have can---“

“---Who sent you?” Norma pressed.

“Maybe someone who heard Roberta sing,” Hank added, softly, looking into Sarah Rosenthal’s eyes, which looked LA, NY and ‘Jewish’ enough to be authentic. Someone who perhaps could have been brought in by Doc Henry’s new love interest, Marie with an ‘ie’, who seemed to take a great interest in Roberta’s music work on many occasions, and asked more than the usual ‘by the way’ of questions to Cowboy Hank about their ‘musical life’ together as a sort of common-law married couple.

“Roberta writes her own songs,” Cowboy Hank boasted to Agent Sarah. “She wrote down the notes and the lyrics. And she’s a crackerjack novelist too,” he added. “I got some of her best stuff stored here waitin’ fer just the right person ta come along an’ .---”

Maybe it was the rhythm of his old ‘Hearty Party’ voice, or the ‘fers’ ‘yas’ and dropped g’s in the words he was “sing-sayin’”, or the hairless face beneath the visor of his wide-brimmed cowboy hat, but Agent Sarah seemed to recognize Hank’s face as...

“Billy Bob Jackson!” Sarah said. “The Hearty Party guy who died in that truck accident, if you believe what the tabloids said. Anyone ever tell you that you...”

“Look like him?” Cowboy Hank said, taking off his hat. “Maybe a little bit, here,” he said pointing to his eyes. “But not quite here,” he continued, stroking to top of his skin-bald, the C rim of hair under it. “Or here,” he went on, pointing to his head. “The Hearty Party guy was a dumpshit country puppet who didn’t have a brain cell in his overinflated head. He was nothing more than a propoganda tool for the ruling rich, elite and powerful who could keep the masses subservient if they lived for bobbing their heads to mindless music that kept them happy being

‘simple’ country folks who strived for nothing more than the work whistle at the end of the work week on Friday, a big bottle of whiskey on Saturday afternoon, a boink in the bunkhouse with anyone who complimented their erotic biology, and a ‘please forgive me’ Jesus prayer on Sunday morning with a hangover that kept their heads pounding for the next work week.”

“Correct, and guilty as charged,” Sarah said. “And something that Billy Bob Jackson would have not even been able to say, much less think,” she continued. “But my subdivision of Weinblatt is interested in serving another demographic. One that I heard---”

“---from a birdie named Marie?” Hank interjected gently, putting his hand over Lioness Norma’s mouth as she was about to roar out something sincere but destructive.

“Yes,” Agent Sarah said, sizing up the ‘country bumpkins’ as being something other than that. Something that she actually enjoyed finding out, so it seemed, She extended her hand out to Hank. . “Marie DeLong and I went to school together. A long time ago. At Ryerson.”

“In Los(t) Angeles? Or maybe New Yawk!” Norma blasted out.

“No...Toronto,” Hank gently corrected her. “Small lake town on Lake Ontario that, I suppose, grew bigger than it wanted to be, or planned to.”

“But needed to,” Sarah said, with a healthy undercurrent of regret. The beeper on her cell phone went off. “Hmm...I didn’t think you could get signals from the world this far out.”

“We get lots of things,” Norma said, as Sarah looked at the text on her phone, wincing at something that was not so good, and very non-sharable, for the moment anyway.

“We get lots of things this far out. Like that opportunities come when you best need them, for everyone’s benefit,” Cowboy Hank said, looking at Sarah’s card. “Doctor Collineur, aka Meastress Roberta isn’t here, but I’ll see that she gets this,” he pledged.

“Great then, have a good one,” Agent Sarah smiled, getting into her car and gently pulling out of the yard.

Cowboy Hank looked at the card, smiling with delight.

“So,” Norma interjected. “I finally saw you without your hat on. And, I’m out ten bucks.”

“Huh?” Hank asked.

“A bet I had with Deathhound. She said that any cowboy who doesn’t take his hat off, like Dwight Yokum and Alan Jackson, is hiding a follicularly-challenged head under it, and God knows what else under the skin. I said that you being as attached to that hat as Terri’s attached to her hippie mother’s deluded dream of ‘Peace, Love and Harmony’ was just you being a cowboy,” she said.

Hank stroked the top of his hairless head, projecting what he hoped was lament at his looking grandfatherly at an age when most guys were just fathers.

“It looks good on you,” Norma said. “Like I heard, no grass grows on busy streets.”

“That’s what Roberta said when she helped me shave it down,” he wanted to say to Norma, but didn’t. “New look, new life,” he said instead. Thunderbolt interjected an ‘okay, you humans have had enough mindless banter amongst yourselves’ snortle, nuzzling Hank. Hank looked up at Norma, her heels still down, her back arched, her eyes looking towards the horizon. “Either of you into road testing a trot?” Hank asked.

“That sounds a little scary,” Norma said.

“Maybe to Thunderbolt here, but not you, Norma, right?” Hank challenged.

“OK...Let’s bring it on, baldy,” she gritted out.

With that, Hank ran ahead of Norma with a lead line while Thunderbolt plodded along with an effortless short-gaited trot that she could keep up for miles without breaking a sweat. While Hank started to sweat inside, sensing new opportunity in the horizon, for better or worse.

CHAPTER 10

Though Old Doc Henry Steiner was known for doing medicine and surgery the old fashioned way, that way had been upgraded five times in his 40 years of being a practitioner of the healing arts. But the upgrades were on HIS terms, the specifics of such determined and verified by no referee other than Mother Nature. Though humble with Mama Nature, and the Good Lord above who created her, and him, Henry always played to an audience, trying his damnest to impress them both.

For his first upgrade, he played to, and under, Doc Jiri Dimitrovic, a Ukrainian trained to be a veterinarian in Czarist Russia, who learned to be an effective healer during the Russian Revolution, saving whatever horses, dogs and people he could from Bolshevik bullets, sword-blades and toxins that officially were not supposed to exist. Doctor Dimitrovic was not one to smile a lot, and was even sparcer with his compliments, but when he said, through the seasoned grey tufts of his walrus mustache, ‘this what you did, not so bad,’ it was an ‘A plus’ grade. As a lad of 26, three years out of vet school after having done a hitch in the Navy, Henry Steiner was just on the verge of getting better than his teacher when ‘Doctor D’ died, leaving his practice to the care of his prize student, young Henry, who, according to his Will ‘with the help of God, will not kill or harm more than the minimal number of animals required to make him the great veterinarian that he will be some day.’

Doc Henry's next revision of his techniques and medical thinking occurred three years later when he married Mary, an animal lover who adored his healing hands who was born to a father who required that his daughter be married to a man who could not only bring home to bacon each night to his family, but some prime rib and lobster as well.

Doc Henry's third revision came when he was hired to teach his highly unique and miraculously successful surgical skills at the the Montana Veterinary College, where he decided to teach medicine as well, seeing potentials and problems with 'high tech' medicines that none of his academic colleagues could. His fourth revision of skills came after he was retired from his position at MVC, and found himself in private practice again, with limited money and a whole lot of sick animals and economically-challenged clients in need of help. His fifth revision of how he did things was happening now. It contained elements of Roberta's scientifically-proven physiological findings AND, if he was being honest with himself, Native American metaphysical perspectives. But whatever it was, it was inspired by Marie, the only fan in the audience he was playing for now.

It was Tuesday, the sky alternating between warm and cloudy to crisp and clear, the chill from outside entering through the glass window in the surgical room with the help of a North wind behind it. "Wish it would make up its mind to rain or snow," Marie said, grabbing hold of an old jacket hanging on a hook behind her and putting it over her shaking shoulders. "You sure you don't want me to help with those bleeders?" she continued, reaching for a hemostat.

"Everything's under control," he said as he grabbed hold of the dog's uterus, plying away at the nuisance bleeders on the omentum surrounding the left horn, pulling up on the ovary attached to it. "I do know the difference between a drop of blood and bucket of it," he continued.

"Yes," Marie said. "I know you do. As do the...how many animals did you do this morning?"

"WE," Henry smiled. "How many animals did WE do this morning."

"Three spays, nine neuters, two leg repairs and that exploratory in the gut obstructed cat which you diagnosed as pancreatitis about to burst open like a protease-filled volcano," Marie said, looking at the log of patient notes stuck to wall like trophies, on a wall that was nearly filled.

"Strange," Henry said. "The X-ray you took of that cat didn't match what my fingers saw when I opened it, but, as Old Doc Dimitrovic always said, 'your fingers and eyes can see more than any X-ray machine can,' he replied, in his best Ukrainian accent, noting that Marie was mouthing it along with him. Had Roberta done so, she would have gotten a lashing from Henry's fire-breathing tongue. When ex-wife Mary, with a Y, had done so, it was one step closer to him reminding her in no uncertain terms who the breadwinner of the family was. But, Marie with an 'ie' was something special. SomeONE special who, perhaps at the end of this day, he would propose a longer term collaboration with her. It would be in celebration of the two of them doing more medical and surgical work together today than he had ever done alone. Rivaling as well the best days of volume, quality work done with Roberta as well.

"Where is Roberta, anyway?" Marie asked, as if reading Henry's mind, yet again.

“Composing a song, writing a poem, penning a screenplay, I suppose,” Henry replied. “That agent friend of yours saw some of her stuff and assigned her a whole lot of work to do,” he continued.

“And you’re not worried that Doctor R is taking three days off, in a row?” Marie continued, gloving up to grab hold of a hemostat to assist Henry in clamping the ovarian ligament, only to see that he had pulled, compressed and tied it off faster than she could say...anything, yet again.

“Regina here is doing good, as I can see,” Doc Henry said regarding the dog brought in for a routine spay. “All the other patients in the back are doing great, as you verified,” he continued as he grabbed hold of the right horn of the uterus, exposing and ligating the ovarian ligament with a speed and confidence, and modified technique in his hands that were, yes, on the way to becoming the fifth revision of his way of doing veterinary medicine. A version that, perhaps he would write up in a textbook that would be read by others someday. “And we are doing exceptionally, as the Good Lord knows,” he concluded, checklisting his work as always, find it A-plus, perfect by even Doc Dimitrovic’s standards.

“There is one thing I wanted to ask you,” Henry continued as his hands whipped over to the stump of the uterus, and he began the transfixing and ligation procedure that he had done thousands of times with what was now effortless and 100% proven reliable success. “It’s about Roberta. Do you think that she...well...”

“Should become a writer, musician or singer?” Marie asked, again reading Henry’s mind. “I know that you liked her stuff. I heard you humming along to her singing, and reading her scripts and books. And at least ten times I heard you smile and say ‘that’s my girl’.”

“I did, didn’t I,” Henry confessed as he proceeded to sew up the incision in the abdominal wall, with his self-patented double interlocking stitch that a bulldozer could not tear open. “But...my tastes in music and literature are stuck in an enlightened century. What would people in this decrepit one say about her? It’s them she’ll have to please, and if she can, serve. Like that mall rat of a daughter of yours, who by your own admission has a brain the size of a bonbon and the work ethic of a deadbeat stoned out hippie, who buggered off to be with her father just before I was about to meet her.”

“My EX-husband has legal custody over Ashley, and she’s going through things that she’ll grow out of someday,” Marie replied. But as for this clinic’s ‘daughter’, Roberta.”

Henry smiled behind his surgical mask, treating himself to the sound of ‘family’ again, and the vision of such.

“Roberta will be...okay,” Marie assured Henry, gently laying her gentle fingers on his firm and muscular arm. “Artists have to suffer. But suffering is redeemed if they have the right literary and commercial representation.”

“Your Jewish rival from acting school?” Henry grunted.

“My born-again Buddhist friend from FILM school,” Marie replied, backing off towards the wall. “The theory is that we were colleagues in many adventures in past lifetimes.”

“A theory is proven only by scientific fact, clinical findings or inferential observational verification,” Henry said.

“And by that third criteria, you mean a feeling in the gut. Intuition that makes sense down to your Core,” Marie replied.

Having finished the stitching on the abdomen wall, Henry whipped through the skin, creating a seamless seal that was barely visible to the naked eye. He thought about challenging Marie’s claim about reincarnation, having heard it from his own rebellious daughter, her surrogate Roberta, and countless other throwbacks to the 60s who wanted to make the whole world a commune and each place of business an ashram. But, maybe it made sense. Helping himself to a look into Marie’s eyes, Henry did see someone he had known for a long time...perhaps a lifetime, or many lifetimes. He thought about what words to say to this woman who he had not grown tired of since the day his eyes fell upon hers. As a writer of several thick, overworded and literarily written textbooks, there was no shortage of verbiage he could compose with both accuracy and style. He took a deep breath in, took off his mask, and smiled. But, being about play only within the context of work, all that could come out was, “We’re done here with Regina. Anyone else?”

“Doc, I need your help here! Now!” Terri said, carrying a 80 pound labrador in her arms with as strength as her 98 pound body could manage. “A firefighter came by, then got called out. A five alarmer he said. ‘Charlie’ here fell down stairs twenty minutes ago. The paperwork on him for everything else he’s got is on the desk.”

While Marie took Regina into the recovery area, where Doc Henry had one of one of Roberta’s recorded tunes on the CD player, Henry looked at the Charlie’s history and background. “Woodbridge Clinic,” he noted. “Don’t know it,” he said.

“It’s in Newfoundland,” Terri said.

“Best clinic on the Rock,” Marie yelled out. “They got a Doc there who is as good as you are. On a good day, maybe better.”

“And you’re telling me this, Marie, because...”

“You always said that you’re too old to need compliments, and that too many compliments make people who can be great become not so good anymore,” she grunted out. “Can’t Captain a ship right if you don’t earn your wings every day.”

Ignoring the aviation metaphor appended to the nautical one, Henry looked over Charlie’s history then helped Terri bring him into the exam room. He noted that up till now, the hound had been healthy with the exception of advancing arthritis, up to date on his vaccinations and de-

worming. Normal aging parameters listed, with the kind of thoroughness that Roberta had done, and still liked to do, time permitting. All things considered, for the mutt. He watched Charlie try to walk, then noted that he wasn't walking. He tested the proprioceptive reflexes and found them severely down on the left side, nearly absent on the right. He ran a paniculous response to test the rest.

“Draw up twenty miligrams dexamethazone, stat! And a hundred mgs of thiamine,” Doc Henry said, pulling out the contents from the bottles as fast as Terri delivered them to him, getting them into Charlie post-haste.

“But, I heard, and read that...”

“Thiamine is toxic to injured brain tissue and high end doses of steroids have ‘no significant beneficial effect’” he continued, mocking Tom Wilson’s pseudo English Ontario blueblood accent. “Whoever wrote that never did any REAL lab experiments and whoever believes them is an idiot.”

“Or an asshole,” Terri noted.

“And grab me a few of Roberta’s voodoo chopsticks,” Doc Henry continued.

“You mean acupuncture needles,” Marie said, handing Henry the needles that Roberta had done far more with than any textbook she ever read said could be done. “Let’s see the spots are...” Henry continued, letting his fingers, as Roberta told him once, ‘be found by the point rather than force the way to them.’ “There we are,” he said having located ‘GV4’, otherwise known as the junction between L2 and 3 midline, letting the needle fall to its natural depth, then twirling it like a wizard. Then finding and working UB 39 and 40 in the popliteal space, points that he knew about from messaging calves with ‘dummy brain’ disease, along with UB 64. To keep the dog alert, he maneuvered the tongue, snout and ears in the manner that his own fingers taught him when trying to keep newborn calves alive whose brains had been squashed by a hard attempted pull through a small pelvis by impatient clients.

“Come on Charlie, we’re not gonna lose you,” Henry promised the canine, himself and Marie. “It’s not your time yet,” he informed the dog in an authoritative tone. “You still have to live out the rest of your senior years here before reincarnating into whatever the Good Lord wants of needs you to be.”

Henry couldn’t believe that he was mixing Pagan reincarnation theory with his hard core traditional Christian beliefs. But, whatever he was doing felt miraculous, and god-like. Charlie was revived, able to stand on his own four feet, and looked Henry straight in the eye. Eyes that seemed to be...not so right. “Draw some blood on this one,” he said, sensing something off about this dog. He sniffed to dog’s mouth. “We have a kidney problem here,” he observed. “Uremic breath.”

Henry drew the blood, then handed it to Marie, who pulled out the stack of BUN sticks. While she was waiting the one minute required for the rapid test for kidney function, he completed the rest of the exam on Charlie. All seemed alright.

“BUN is normal,” Marie reported.

“You’re sure?” Henry blasted out, putting animals’ health in front of people’s egos, or feelings, as was his right, and Calling.

“Here, see for yourself,” Marie said, showing Henry the stick.

“Run it again,” he said, handing her the syringe of blood.

Marie turned around to the sink, grabbed another stick, from another container, a fresh one this time, and ran the test. “Still light green,” she said, turning around and showing it to him.

“Hmmm...” Henry said, puzzled about the situation.

“Maybe it’s just simple arthritis?” Terri offered.

“And your nose is maybe not as good as it used to be,” Marie offered.

“My nose is as good as my eyes!” Henry growled. “My eyes, hands, ears and nose are as sharp the brain behind it!” he asserted.

Henry looked up for affirmation of his claim. Marie had that ‘I didn’t want to tell ya’ look in her forlorn face. “You have been forgetting some things,” she gently offered.

“What things?!” Henry barked.

This time, Terri AND Marie were sharing a secret he was about to find out.

“What things am forgetting? To tell people they’re doing a great job when they’re doing a good job, or a mediocre one?” Henry challenged.

“Details,” Marie said, gently, with Terri’s approval. “Like...this.” Marie continued, showing him the log book for surgical drugs used. Encouraging Terri to look after Charlie while she looked after Henry.

“Log books on how many medications I’ve been using....So the bean counters at the Veterinary Association office can keep their eyes on my business! I know every detail about how much drug I’ve been using, and Roberta’s been using, and I....” Henry’s eyes popped out of the back of his head. His jaw dropped. “Who are these patients? What are these numbers? Have I really used this much stuff?”

Marie gently whispered something in Terri's ear, directing her to check something important in the patient recovery room and kennels alongside them. After Terri left, Marie spoke to Henry very confidentially and directly. "You've been doing a lot of work, Henry. Way more than your share of it. You're exhausted. You forget the unimportant things, I remember them for you. So you can remember, and do, the important things," she continued in a loving way. A voice that Henry found himself trusting, and relying on in ways he never thought possible. "It happens with getting older. And you've been working harder than maybe you should," she said. "And it's nothing to be ashamed of," she continued, putting on a smile. "I'm okay with you forgetting little things. Like where you put the files that you always ask me about where they are. And your thinking that you dump all the garbage into the can when most of it is on the floor. I'm okay with that...And the world will be okay with that...Just as long as you don't forget to put the toilet seat DOWN after you use it, like..."

"Like I always do!" Henry asserted.

"Most of the time," Marie smiled back. "But that's okay, you're a man. A man who the world still needs, and man who I..."

Before Marie could say 'love you', 'like you', 'respect you' or 'will give a beating to in the ass that you'll enjoy way too much', Terri rushed back into the room.

"Regina's bleeding through the belly!" Terri exclaimed, her hands soaked with fresh blood.

"That's impossible!" Henry said, check-listing everything in his mind, including the blood work he had done to check her clotting factors before even making the first incision. "I---"

"And Charlie!" Marie said, looking at the dog, who started to breath heavy, reddish fluid coming out of his back end.

"And that pancreatic cat who you took that foreign body out of!" Terri said, hearing wheezing, then labored breathing, then death-rattle gasps from the recovery cage room. "He's having breathing problems."

It felt like an apocalypse, a nightmare Henry had several times in his younger life about his older life. A day when everything he thought he did right was going wrong. His mouth went pale, his head felt faint, his legs shaking, as the once-solid Alberta ground under him gave way from under him. Terri did what she could to keep Henry upright, while Marie did her utmost to keep the animals from dying.

As Henry fell into a chair behind him, the fifth rider of the Apocalypse strolled into the clinic door. "Doctor Henry Steiner?" Tom Wilson exclaimed, with a voice Henry never heard from him. "I have a peace offering," he said with respect, and even admiration. "For you and your new girlfriend," he continued, contrite and sincere. "A large bottle of your favorite whiskey, Highland Bliss with prime tickets to the Stanley Cup playoffs in Calgary. And the keys to MY clinic. I won't be needing them, as it is time that I move on to what I am good at, and you---"

“---Don’t need your help!” Henry ranted. “I don’t need anyone’s help,” he said pulling himself up, running from one dying patient to another, injecting drugs into them which only seemed to make them worse. Marie did what she could to stop him, grabbing him with her fingers, two of which felt like prickly fire rather than the touch of a warm soul. Terri finally pulled Henry away from the mass of body excretions and fluids that coated the floor and covered his clothing.

“I want to help,” Tom said to Henry.

“I don’t need your help!” Henry yelled back. “Someone get Roberta!”

“You sent her to Edmonton to get supplies,” Marie informed Henry. “Don’t you remember?”

Henry didn’t remember telling Roberta anything. He couldn’t even remember what Roberta looked like. He couldn’t remember much of anything. And when looking at Marie, couldn’t remember who she was either. But there is one thing he did remember. “My name is Henry, right?”

“It is...very much so, and always will be,” Henry heard from a voice of the loving yet unrecognizable woman in front of his terrified and dissociative eyes.

CHAPTER 11

Roberta arrived back at the clinic five hours after Tom and his emergency rescue team had left, according to a confused and angry-for-being asked to get out of the way Terri said. The floor was coated with animal excretions, the usually clean and spotless tile under it barely visible. Every table surface was cluttered with loose medical files, syringes and blood-soaked gauzes. Not one cabinet was unopened. As far as she could tell, there was no animal life in the clinic that was still suffering, at least those animals that were still alive. She retrieved two X-rays from the floor below the viewing lamp, both of them leaning against the garbage bin. As per usual for Doc Henry X-rays, the date, identification and name were hand written in his own barely readable hieroglyph.

“This cat sure as ‘bullshit ain’t buyable shinola’ has a diaphragmatic hernia, and it would take a blind man, or woman to miss it,” Roberta commented to herself, testing out new lyrics for her emerging movie-opera, as she looked over the X-ray of the cat which, according to Doc Henry, had simple and surgically-curable obstructive pancreatitis. Doc Henry was out of hearing range, alone in his office, as suicidally despondent as Roberta had been when she found out the baby she gave birth to when she was fifteen had grown into a teenager with a strong mind, and affirmative spirit, that told her, via all the proper channels, that he didn’t want anything to do with her. Had it not been for her dogs getting into porcupine quills and needing her immediate assistance, Roberta would have taken her own life that day.

Doc Henry had no dogs, cats or horses as companions, only as patients. In Doc Henry’s hand was an engraved autopsy knife, the one Old Doc Dimitrovic used for most of the first part of the twentieth century and willed to Doc Henry so that the two hundred year old cutting implement could make it through another 100 year veterinary shift. He was staring into space as if it was finality. Too sad to cry. Too broken to fall down. And more alone than ever.

“Where’s Marie?” Roberta inquired.

“Emergency call from Vancouver. To visit her sister. Cancer’s getting worse. Was building up. Wanted to stay, but couldn’t.” Henry replied in phrases rather than sentences, something he never did.

Roberta gently moved in and took the autopsy knife from his cold, shaking hand. The blade was not as sharp as she thought it would be. For today anyway, it wouldn’t be used by Doc Henry to do his own autopsy. Or, as he would probably call it from the netherworld, his own ‘anatomical and neurophysiological exploratory’. “We all make mistakes. It’s part of being a doctor,” she offered.

“I just glanced up at the X-ray of that cat that Marie took,” he muttered. “I never saw that diaphragmatic hernia. If I did, I wouldn’t have even attempted that exploratory surgery that...was justified, given what I thought I knew or saw at the time. Vomiting daily, according to the client, with sticky gums. Elevated liver enzymes, particularly GGT. Amylase twice normal. Bilirubin rising. I asked Marie to run the blood twice to verify it. Before the gall bladder had a chance to bloat up, I drained it and inserted a shunt.”

“That saved three animals with pancreatitis before, Doc.”

“But killed this one, because...” Henry’s face welled up, but he refused to cry. “Like I always told you, and everyone else, you can’t be faulted for not knowing, but you can be faulted for not looking. Or....not seeing.”

“You want me to do the autopsy on this one?” Roberta asked, wielding the autopsy knife. “Keep what happened between us?”

“An independent party is already looking into it,” Henry said. “The client isn’t going to sue, but when they find out what I suspect, the Association is going to have my licence for this one. And, maybe it’s time that I give it to them.”

“For one case gone bad? In a profession where, as you say, ‘it’s impossible to sail a ship on unchartered waters without hitting an iceberg at least once, twice or even three times?’”

“Try five, six, or seven,” Henry said, pointing to a stack of papers on his desk. Roberta rifled through the faxes, the top one being info about Charlie.

“So,” Roberta said. “Charlie had a history of arthritis, that went untreated, because of ‘owner declining steroids and NSAIDs because of ideological reasons’. From this clinic in Newfoundland. Healthy history physiologically.”

“That Marie said was run by one of the best docs on the Rock.”

“Who I never heard of.”

“You still don’t know everyone or everything, Roberta.”

“But I DO know, from my own makeshift lab and every trustable research paper, that if you give a dog steroids and acupuncture with a traumatic neurological injury, and they get better, that it means you had neurological disease as your main problem.”

“And some other problem that nearly killed him later,\. Like kidney disease that I couldn’t confirm that was made worse by high doses of steroids, that I GAVE HIM!” Henry said. “He’s alive now, thanks to the meds that Tom Wilson used on him.”

“What meds?”

“Nothing I’m gonna use or allow myself a chance to use, but, if you decide to stay in this profession, maybe you can, or should,” Henry replied, picking up a fishing rod. “Maybe baiting and catching fish. Killing them after it’s all over. Maybe that’s what the Good Lord has planned for me. After all, if we’re good at anything, it’s because of His grace. The Lord gives us miraculous talents and what some say are creative instincts, and he takes them away, on His time.”

Roberta looked through the rest of the faxes that poured in from a variety of clinics, some run by Tom Wilson’s cronies, some operated by indifferent bystanders to Wilson-Steiner feud, and some operated by quiet sympathizers to Doc Henry’s Cause.

“Cases from last week, last month and even last year, about other docs repairing or trying to repair mistakes that I did,” Henry said, turning his eyes to the sky. “Someone up there had deemed this medical judgement day.”

“Or someone down here?” Roberta speculated.

“The Lord works through some instruments of justice and good sense that walk on two legs rather than fly with white wings,” he smiled, sadly. But with a sense of relief in his voice as he collected the rest of his fishing gear. “I’ll be fishing for a few days. Figure out how to word my resignation letter.”

“And me?” Roberta inquired.

“If you’re sensible, you’ll keep this ship afloat, and not raise the pirate flag unless you absolutely have to. But if you’re brave, you’ll jump ship and sail the kind of craft the Good Lord, I think, wants and needs you to,” he continued, patting with extreme affection a stack of notes and CDs beside blotter on his computerless desk.

“So that’s where my notes and experimental auditory data went to!” Roberta said.

“Marie asked me to read them, and told me to give you my honest opinion of them,” he said.

“Which is?” Roberta asked, prepared to have the Truth told to her, no matter how raw or painful.

“Yes, to ALL of it,” Henry said with an encouraging and enthusiastic smile. With that the Captain who said that fraternizing with anyone, even the First Mate, is an offense that King Neptune and Lord Jesus would prosecute to the fullest extent of nautical law hugged Roberta. With his tightly held hand he said ‘I love you’, with his beating heart he said ‘keep up the good fight’, and with his sincere fatherly eyes he said ‘we’re all counting on you to do the best you can with what you got.’

Roberta now felt the Captain’s hat on her head, and didn’t know how to wear it. Or even IF she would wear it. Maybe she could Captain two ships, the veterinary boat Henry had just left her,

and the artistic starship which was ready for launching with Agent Sarah, and Cowboy Hank's, help. The only problem...a veterinary boat moves along the water, and a musical starship move themselves forward in two diametrically opposed axes.

CHAPTER 12

The room was filled with extremes, to the eye, ears and skin. On the dimly-lit main floor, you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. On Stage, everything was illuminated, to a point where anyone on it was blinded to ANYthing that in front of it, or anywhere else. "Amateur lighting guys," Cowboy Hank thought to himself as he saw them adjust the lights as the audience came pouring in from outside. "Watered down brew," he noted from the faded color of the beer, ale and wine coming from the bar that served anyone who was old enough to walk on two legs, and sober enough to not stumble on anyone else. "Weird, Wonderful and Wacko Artwork", he said taking note of the paintings on the walls for sale by local artists ranging from over-accurately painted copies of landscapes and animals which the eyes could see clearly any afternoon to and formless, bizarre, yet very real depictions of what the inner eye saw during nightmares, or dreams, done by 17 year old Goth-turned-'Whatever' Jennifer 'Deathhound' that Jones. They were all overpriced by the artists, but then again, the artists would forfeit 24 hour a day rights to see them to their new owners, and all money collected would go towards the Cause at hand, "Knife Bend Bends Back Again," the brochures read, pledging that all proceeds from the event would go towards buying back any property purchased by the Mitchell Developing Corporation, a multinational giant which brought jobs to some people in Knife Bend but, if allowed to have its way, would take away meaningful Work, big W. And seeing that decisions about what oil, minerals, gas, or artifacts extracted from under the ground would be decided by citizens who lived their entire lives on top of it, honoring their pioneer ancestors who were buried in it..

The "Knife Bend Bends Its Knee to Nobody" benefit was, according to logical calculations, doomed to be a money-losing proposition. But still it was worth trying. If nothing else as an example for the towns around it. But it would take money, and people from those other towns, or perhaps cities that never heard of Knife Bend, to make it happen. Perhaps the people on stage would make it so.

"We built it, and they will come," Terri said to Hank as he looked over the brochure that had been put on every pebble-damaged windshield in Knife Bend and every rust-free vehicle in five towns around it.

"We have name talent coming," Norma added. Jack Stonebridge, Emmy Ann Harrison, and the Buffalo Bone Medicine Show.

Cowboy Hank, from his days as 'the Hearty Party' guy, recognized the names, knowing they were as fake as the people who used them. But, as the expression in Hollyweird went 'sincerity is great, and if you can fake that...'. Still, there had to be some REAL incentive for them to come. Cowboy Hank looked at his watch. "Looks like they got held up in that rock-fall our of Grand Falls," he commented, not having the heart to tell Norma or Terri that they had probably never left Vancouver, Memphis or LA. Particularly as it was all a verbal contract and honorarium money transfers were made with their agents, nothing on paper so that everyone would 'save legal costs'.

“But all these people showed up to see them!” Terri said, looking over the crowd. “For the first time in, like, as long as I can, ya know, remember, this auditorium is filled with people.”

“From everywhere,” Gustav commented, coming up behind Norma and giving her a hug.

Shocked more than a horse seeing a two headed cow, Cowboy Hank looked over the crowd coming in, dropping their money into the ‘Independence Fund’ saddle bags at the front door. People from all classes, ranging from bank managers to those who cleaned the sidewalks outside. And some who looked official.

“Those shitheads looks familiar,” Norma said of one of the better dressed ‘foreigners’ who smiled at the ticket taker, then strolled over the bar to buy a beer for himself and his companion. “Weren’t they...”

“The new SPCA inspectors,” Terri said, recognizing them by their walk before their faces.

Hank ducked into the shadows, hoping not to be recognized. Norma did the same.

“Something wrong?” Gustav asked.

“Not if you drop a little of this in their beer,” Norma said, producing a powder from her pocket, giving it to Gustav, requesting him to assist as a bartender.

Tom Wilson was next to walk in, straddling alongside his two loveliest female technicians, donating ten times the entry fee for each of his companions. “No....This asshole doesn’t belong here. He’ll ruin everything.” Cowboy Hank protested.

“Where’s Henry?” Terri asked.

“Fishing. With Marie,” Hank replied. He looked at his watch, seeing that the plans he had in mind were all going to shit. Showtime was already delayed by the usual ten minutes. And the crowd was getting restless. Then, finally, the person who was most important in the audience came in.

“So, she did show up,” Norma said, regarding Agent Sarah. “The Jew Agent.”

“And her congregation,” Hank smiled, noting the seven people behind her, three of which he recognized from his ‘celebrity jail time’ days. “It’s time that we wow this crowd, give them all their hard earned money’s worth,” he continued.

Sneaking around the two SPCA agents, and giving a ‘thank you for coming’ nod to Tom, Hank made his way behind the curtain.

“Yer soloing tonight. We’re all counting on you,” he said to the first performer.

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“I’m terrified,” Roberta said, the fringes on her authentic Native buckskin coat shaking like autumn leaves in a brisk winter wind, the beads around her neck and wrists rattling like a marble factory in the epicenter of an earthquake.

“Fear is your friend,” he said. “As am I, and everyone out there.”

“Everyone?” Roberta asked, demanding with her stare an honest answer.

“Everyone who has ears to listen, that you’ll open up with the scalpel of your heart, and lazer of your mind,” he replied.

“You would quote me to me,” she chuckled.

“After tonight, lots of people are going to be quoting you to you, and to lots of other folks,” he smiled. With that, he hugged her, giving her a kiss on the cheek, then the lips, that said far more than any words he ever wrote in song, or could tell her now. He hoped that after the performance, she would understand and accept them, particularly given what he had to do without telling her about it---for his own safety, and hers. A necessary act which she would see was necessary...in time anyway.

CHAPTER 13

Roberta had faced death many times, sometimes on her terms, sometimes on life's timetable. 'The End', as she intuited it, or 'The Beginning', as her long departed Medicine Woman Grandmother said it was, came in different forms to the eyes. Sometimes it was a black hole. Sometimes it was a bright white light. Sometimes it was a feeling that what the ocular portholes on either side of your nose perceived was a two dimensional illusion (e.g., 'normal life') that had absolutely no relationship to time or space. This time, it was all of the above.

When faced with the bright lights blasing into her face, and the 'numbing' applause of the crowd after she was introduced as the first act, Roberta experienced the eternity of the 'now'. In that three seconds that seemed like three millennia, she felt her body become 'mass-less', a cold sweat pouring out of her chest above her thumping heart. This was the real test of her worth. The test of who she really was. The judgement by Life as to whether her newly discovered talent was real, or illusion.

It wasn't the first time Roberta faced a crowd, naked to them, exposing herself with everything she had. She found herself recalling the first time she had given a scientific paper at the International Neuroscience Meeting in London. Her thesis advisor had gotten a travel grant which had to be spent on a 'minority' student, and Roberta was it. Professor Rosminski assured her that when confronted with a crowd of peers or superiors, you are supposed to get scared, but you never freeze. After saying the carefully rehearsed, and accurate, 'previous studies in our lab suggest...' line, it would be a piece of cake. It was a piece of cake, but more like one that smashed on the floor and spread crumbs all over the kitchen cabinets. All Roberta remembered of the experience was a series of stutters, stammers and fumbling of index cards that resulted in them falling back into her hands in the wrong order. The audience applauded afterwards, but politely, the smiles that greeted her at the beginning of the talk turning into indifferent frowns, of those who actually stayed for the ordeal.

But, after that baptism and burning by fire, Roberta learned to give stellar talks. But they were talks, discourses where the data was the star, the hypotheses the featured attractions. This time, it was about...her, and the Life, big L, inside of her.

Cowboy Hank had said to start any gig on stage with a signature line. Something that is pre-rehearsed as well as improvised. And something that is a shared experience with the audience. "Cold night out there, an offering of warmth if you need it, fire if you want it. Starting with a song about wanting, needing and that very grey zone in between."

It worked. The silence felt real. People were thinking out there on Roberta's wavelength. And with the strumming of the guitar in the Bach-like fugue she had rehearsed with the Beethovenian jokes imbedded into it, they were feeling with her as well. Yes, it would be a shared experience. Somewhere out there, she felt Cowboy Hank saying 'yes' to it all, though all her eyes could see was other people. Such was okay. And maybe planned, as the worse audience to present your thesis to are your closest friends and relatives, since if you flopped in front of them, there was no one to go home to. It would have been nice to have Doc Henry out there so she could have someone to prove something to but, as the showbiz expression goes, 'it is what it be'.

“Who to play to?” Roberta thought to herself while struggling through the first few notes, then couplets, then chords. “The faces out there as Cowboy Hank advised, the foreheads as Professor Rosdilksi recommended or...yes, the eyes,” she recalled from Granny. “And the many people inside any one pair of them,” she recalled from the golden summer when the Old Medicine Woman gave her most special gifts to her then very young granddaughter. Roberta let the guitar pull in her fingers and the air bring out her voice. Then she looked for the eyes in front of her, seeing only the bright stagelight light that illuminated her, the audience underneath them becoming black as night. But not as dark. “Maybe I am playing to the Light, big L,” she thought with the part of her mind that still was trying to assess what was going on, while her Soul edged its way for control, bit by bit, till the whole experience felt Unified somehow. She was open and closed at the same time, fear converting into courage, then the kind of confidence that was not built on any construct of someone being on top and someone being on the bottom. The Circles of Life were all connecting, the Sound of Silence accompanying every note she heard from the guitar and her mouth, with ‘more than perfect’ harmony. She didn’t have to recall any of the notes or words from the first song, but became them. Such led to the second song which she had pre-written, then a third that she found herself composing on the spot. By the time the fourth and fifth song-poem came out, she had lost all sense of time and space, half closing her eyes as if in a meditative trance, the kind that she had experienced in the Sweat Lodge with Granny as well as the EconoLodge with her canine companion, Mahegan. But no matter how deep the waters she had dived into and was sharing with the audience, whose heartbeats she could hear and whose minds she could feel, it was time for everyone to go up to the surface for a breath of air. One of the strings on the guitar had broken, the one next to it remaining but stretched so much that it was way out of tune. Converting the disenant note into a new chord she completed the arc, then moved aside from the bright light, requesting from the wings another “axe to chop down the trees of ignorance and the weeds of cruelty, and grind the fallen material into the biggest joint this side of Oz, Winnepeg or... “

Before Roberta could come up with a geographical or metaphysical location that made visceral sense, her REAL world eyes saw emptiness. Empty chairs where there had been people. And those chairs that were still occupied contained faces that were less than satisfied, particularly around Agent Sarah. Her Hollywood friends who she said had loved the CDs seemed disappointed to say the least. By way of explanation, all Sarah could do was to give Roberta a ‘hey, we gave it our best shot’ shrug. When the light hit her face as she threw her oversized purse over her shoulders, it was more like an ‘I gave it my last shot’ grimace.

Of course the locals who had still remained gave Roberta a polite round of applause, which even Deathhound was unable to rally into something respectable by intimidation and Terri was unable to arouse with optimism. Terri’s singular clapping embarrassed both herself and Roberta. Roberta desperately looked for Cowboy Hank for some answer as to what happened and why, but he was nowhere within sight. The only thing that did enter Roberta’s visual field was Marie at the door. She stopped Sarah on her way out, insisting that she accept an envelope. Agent Sarah refused to do so, but Marie would not take ‘no’ for an answer.

One person did approach the stage with an offer for Roberta. “My invitation for you to work for me, doing what you were trained for, is still open,” Tom Wilson smiled as he placed, between

Roberta's worn down guitar strings, his laminated business with his work number printed in plain black Roman print, his private after hours contact info in boldly-scripted red cursive on top of her guitar.

Roberta thought about giving him either the finger or the fist, but did neither.

"Good then, noon tomorrow. We'll discuss the details of how we can be of service to each other, Doctor Collineur," he said with a confident professional smile. He then walked towards the door, where his two barbie techies were waiting for him. He dropped a hundred dollar bill in the "Knife Bend Bends to No One" collection bucket, then went out the door.

The lighting and sound guys asked Roberta what she wanted to do. She answered them with an index finger slice across her sweaty neck. "Show's over", she whispered to herself. "Life's done with too," she thought, overcome with a depression so deep that it precluded committing suicide. She packed up her guitar then threw the song and lyrical notes in her jacket pocket onto the stage floor, stomping on them as she walked off stage. Again, she looked for Cowboy Hank but he was gone. As was the trailer he had brought to the parking lot. Norma passed by, cleaning up tip money that had been put on the now empty tables. "Norma," she asked. "Where's Cowboy Hank?"

"I don't know. No one else here does either," she replied in a voice that was unusually loud, looking around as if she hoped that someone would here her. "No one knows where he is. Rumor is that he left town for good this time. Packed up everything and everyone he owned and just vanished. He must be five hundred miles away from here by now. Maybe more if he got his truck working the way he wanted it to," she continued, moving away from Roberta as discretely as she could. "

"But.." Roberta said, following her around the hall that was supposed to be making money for the town that owned and kept rebuilding it. "He was just..."

Suddenly, a truck pulling a large trailer pulled into the parking lot. Her heart on her sleeve, Roberta looked out the window thinking it was Cowboy Hank, there to take him AND her a thousand miles away from this place. Her jaw dropped when the vehicle screeched to a halt and the doors opened to the rebuilt horse-trailer behind it.

"Buffalo Bones Medicine Show got here!" someone screamed out from the parking lot. The stars of radio and Country video TV strided like lions as they exited the converted stock trailer that had been sent to get them, surrounded by a mass of two legged sheep.

Roberta watched the entourage of stars and the star-struck citizens of Knife Bend, and everywhere else, enter the hall. Within a minute the tables were packed with people, the dry benefit bucket replenished with a flood of new money. Roberta sneaked out the rear exit door, hearing the sound of loud applause and raucous adulation behind her back, driving a knife into her back.

CHAPTER 14

“So, how goes it, Doc?” the diner in the blue denim jacket and John Deer baseball cap at the other end of the table asked Tom Wilson.

“I hope better than this soup of the day,” his companion in the black leather vest and matching Stetson commented as he loaded up his spoon with the entrée in front of him, letting it fall back

into the pool of muck from which he retrieved it. “What kind of vegetables do they put in this? Hay mixed with buffalo dung?” he speculated.

“Straw flavored with goat droppings,” Tom smiled back. “A trick they tried on me once, but never again,” he continued. “Particularly now that I’m the only vet in town.”

“What about Doc Henry?” the blue denim jacketed gentleman inquired.

“Gone fishing,” Tom replied. “Permanently.”

“And that Indian animal doctor? The one with the cute ass and ass-kicking brain?” the black jacketed man inquired, noting that the soup smelled better than it looked.

“Coming to work for me,” Doctor Wilson answered, sipping his coffee, made just the way he liked it by the owner of the establishment which he now co-owned, thanks to him saving it from bankruptcy.

“Working for you in the operating room or the bedroom?” the blue denimed man asked with a whimsical smile.

The older gent in the black leather coat awaited Tom’s answer, his face dead serious.

“I’ve had some trouble with her before, but now that she’s given up her dreams, personally and professionally, she’s...hmmm,” Tom replied.

“Part of our master plan, or yours?” the blue denimed diner demanded to know.

“Ours, of course,” Tom assured them both. “We’re in all of this together, George,” he assured the younger man in the denim jacket. “You’re my brother after all.” He then turned to the black leather jacketed gentleman, who still held a stern look on his face. “I know that as your son I disappointed you on a few occasions.”

“Many occasions,” Tom Wilson Sr said.

“But not now,” Tom answered, leaning in toward them to be sure that no one else in the café could hear them. “Look, I know that asking you both to come here looking like commoners is unusual. But it’s the best way I can show you my kingdom.”

“Our kingdom, Tom,” brother George reminded Tom. “Built with my oil money.”

Tom collected his thoughts, and composure. His father leaned back, folding his arms in that ‘I dare you to please me’ way he always had done, at every Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner at the family mansion in Toronto, and every Canada Day dinner party at the summer cottage on Salt Spring Island. If Father unfolded his arms, you were allowed entry into the dining hall. If not, no matter what Mother said, you had to go back to where you came until you brought

something of worth to the Wilson table. “There’s something in this town that’s a lot more valuable than oil,” Tom Junior said.

“On top of the ground, or below it?” George inquired.

“Both,” Tom assured his smarter and always more successful older brother, and yet-again disappointed and unbelieving father. But this time, he had more than words to prove his claims. Seeing that the café was filling up quickly with locals that had goofy farm hats, but sharp ears and eyes, he reached into his briefcase and pulled out two copies of Western Producer, handing them to his rancher clients. “Check out the cattle prices and projections for blackleg disease incidence on page 3,” he said.

George seemed surprised to see Tom’s ‘business’ plan and what had been done with it so far. “The numbers seem impressive,” he commented.

“And the methods you used to obtain them are...” Tom’s father said as he noted the legal, and illegal, ways Tom had turned his business, his life and what was soon to be his town around. His right arm unfoled, as he lifted his hand up to his mouth, his grimace turning into a grin. Then his left arm came to his side, his lips turning upward into a smile. “Psychologically and fisically innovative,” he said proudly. “You’re a late bloomer, but the flower you have sprouted here outshines anything anyone in this family has done in decades,” he continued. “And you seemed to have done it without breaking a sweat.”

“Well, as we know, effortless success is the best kind. And, as OUR favorite authors wrote, ‘Commoners can’t handle a world without laws and struggle, but innovators make their own rules, because without them, nothing would be possible.’”

“Yes indeed,” Tom Senior said to his now grown up and redeemed son. From the corner of his eye Tom could see George feeling cornered, then threatened with regard to his ‘secured’ position as ‘number one son’. Soon, everything he promised would happen in Knife Bend, all according to the designated timetable. But for now, keeping the commoners in the dark about the Enlightenment the Wilson Dynasty would bring them, through the Mitchell Development Corporation and other entities, was necessary. And fun.

“So, I’ll see you at the rodeo in two weeks?” Tom said in a loud countrified voice to rancher number one in the blue denim jacket and his older companion in the black leather coat with matching stetson as they got up and shook his hand.

“You bet,” George replied in his best ‘Good ole boy’ diction.

“Yes, indeed,” Tom Senior answered, very much as himself, the eyes under his black stetson aimed straight into his son’s face.

CHAPTER 15

According to the calendar it had been nearly a fortnight since Tom Wilson had made Roberta two offers she could not refuse. The first was to officially take down the shingle on Doc Henry's operation, as he had voluntarily retired himself from what had been his passion due to his medical instincts to save life turning into medical nightmares that had killed at least three animals and, according to the faxes coming in from other shops, had put in severe danger the lives of ten times that number during the last few months. According to that option, Roberta

would join Tom as an associate, her medical activities and personal life monitored and corrected 'at the clinic board's discretion for the benefit of the collective group'. The other offer was even more unthinkable---let the lawyers draft an agreement between Roberta and Tom which said that according to the authorities and the public, she was in charge of Doc Henry's shop but it would contribute 50% of its income to Tom Wilson's shop, in exchange for 'Doctor Tom' paying for 80% of the 'rebel vet operation's' inventory and overhead costs. How medicine would be done under Roberta's care would be under Roberta's control during the day, as long as she serviced personal Tom's needs at night. For 12 days she lingered between both options, the deadline for deciding which to do coming up in less than 24 hours. Every day she hoped and prayed for something that would present options to her other than deciding to either 'join Hitler' or 'sign on with 'Uncle Joe Stalin', as Professor Rosdilski had to when he grew up in the Ukraine during the dark days of the early 40s. Rosdilkiski had served in both the German and Russian Army, alternating alliances as he had to so that he could do whatever he could for Ukrainians stuck in the middle.

Roberta's Ukrainians were of course the animals under her care, most notably now the ones at the vet clinic who came in as patients, and of course her own two hounds who she had brought in to Knife Bend. At home there was nothing left on two or four legs, except for the field mice that scoured the barn for left over feed that Cowboy Hank had left during his midnight flight to 'points elsewhere', taking with him any form of animal life he could. The note he had left behind read, "I'll tell you where I am when I can. Come back when it's safe, for me, you and our children. Hoping that time is soon." Roberta looked at the note yet again, for the fourth time that day. Most other days she had tortured her soul at least ten times reading the note, trying to discern what Cowboy Hank, or whatever his real name really was, was hiding from, or protecting HER from. Terri came in with another box full of discount drugs from the Veterinary Distribution Center in Edmonton, herbs aggressively bargained for from the Health Food store in Sherwood Park and the latest line of 'All Canadian' specialized pet food manufactured in China.

"You still looking at that?" Terri asked Roberta. "Would have thought you had it memorized by now."

"Research is about RE searching, till you find something that you never saw in it before," she replied.

"The handwriting analysis guy did up a profile on Cowboy Hank that matched what you and me already knew about him," Terri answered, noticing the broken blood analyzer next to the desk. "Machine's busted again?" she asked.

"No, it's the words this time," Roberta said. "Like him saying 'children' instead of 'kids', with a Biblical font, with the kind of kindness that he feels only for his horses, and dogs, or the cows, cats and pigs we used to have at the ranch who act like horses and dogs. 'Children' is so pretentiously 'James Taylor' or offensively NPR, PBS and CBC. I know he isn't gay. Or is he?" she considered. "Or is there something about his past, or present, that he's not trying to tell me?"

Terri didn't answer. One of those 'ace mechanic-owner of the garage' pacts that neither wind, rain nor rage of any wife/lover/companion can break. Terri turned her attention to the blood analyzer next to the desk that Roberta had just placed there, evidence of having banged it back into reason on three panels.

"Demons inside of it," Roberta replied. "Like it still gives me data that doesn't make sense to me and my very biologically oriented brain," she continued. "It's been a bad puppy today, again."

"Want me to look under the hood?" Terri asked, grabbing hold of the toolkit she always kept on her waist.

"It's a computer not a carburetor," Roberta replied.

"There's more computers under the hood of cars now than tubes and cylinders," Terri replied, miffed more than usual, to the point of being actually angry. "Unlike YOUR truck that I keep running just as good as any of the new vehicles that come into the shop sick and leave after my surgery as happy, healthy---"

"---Okay, Doctor Terri!" Roberta said, pushing the patient towards the mechanic-physician. "She, he and/or it is all yours."

While Terri took apart the blood analyzer which seemed to work so well when Marie was still at the clinic, Roberta glanced over the latest batch of 'problem case' files. The black cloud which had taken away Doc Henry's hard earned medical skills seemed to be raining self-doubt on her as well. So far there had been 8 'problem cases' in the last 7 days, more than twice as many as the week before. From new clients mostly, referred, so they said anyway, by long standing ones. The kind of cases where animal comes in on Monday and gets sent home with a 'problem most probably 100% solved' seal of approval to come in on Tuesday with that problem being worse, or another developing 'on the side'. Patient and client doesn't show up on Wed, and by Thursday she gets a fax from another clinic that it was seen and 'cured' of its problems in ways that are not completely specified. Those other clinics included not only Tom Wilson's overly accredited hospital, but a few others she knew he worked with, and others she didn't recognize at all.

Promethius and Mohegan walked in to 'help' her solve the problem, or maybe it was to get a free snack of the new food Terri had brought in. They helped themselves to the new brand of beef, bacon and buffalo flavored 'Three Bs' chips, Roberta served up her own cerebral plate with a review of the room. The file cabinet filled with records of patients who Doc Henry had served over the years, and decades, not a single note being thrown out no matter how old. The thick, small-printed textbook on Large Animal Medicine bearing his name as author which he said upon leaving 'was written by someone a lot younger than me who I used to know.' And the bottle of Highland Bliss, Doc Henry's favorite scotch, brought to him by his most hated Doc, Tom Wilson that Apocalyptic day when he came into the clinic to surrender his sword and scalpel, congratulating the old Doc for his new relationship with Marie, then left after having

taken over the care of the cases that Henry had screwed up. Roberta walked closer to the unopened bottle seeing something in it that was...missing.

“Highland Bliss, it’s supposed to be dark brown not light auburn,” she commented to Terri, picking up the bottle whose lid and ‘guess you win this war after all’ ribbon was still securely on it. “Ah yes, me lad and lassie, ye let me shake a wicked hoof rather than get me ta boot meself in the ars. But I’m not the same bampot that I used ta be. Nay be ye either. But, nay probs. Der ya kin?” she recalled with a Scottish burr looking at the brew, recalling her days when the solution to any of the day’s problems was obtained at night at the bottom of the bottle.

“And that’s Cree for what, Doctor R?” Terri asked.

“Scottish,” Roberta said. “Recalling my days living with me big Sister Highland Bliss and her relations when they drowned out the pain of all my family problems, and other problems. But I’n not the same now. And neither is...my older sister,” she said, gazing at the bottle in the light, moving it around.

“The guys at the repair shop said that there are three things that never change,” Terri replied. “A hundred above weather sweating you dry in July. Forty below freezing your ass off in January. And the golden flavor of Highland Bliss tastes as rich on the first sip as the last gulp.”

“Yeay, Golden flavor,” Roberta seeing something speak to her from the bottle and the sunlight hitting it. “But not pale yellow color that...” Roberta’s hand accidentally untied the ribbon over the lid of the bottle, then noticed that the lid had been opened. And with hands that were both bloody and smelled of...”Antifreeze” she said, trying to pick up the pieces.

“Which kills dogs and cats if they swallow it,” Terri said. “There’s not one drop of it on MY repair floor. Not after that accident years ago with Snuffy.”

“Who was cured by Doc Henry with a swig of whisky?” Roberta surmised. “That inactivates the toxin in antifreeze by competing with the enzyme that catalyses its final and fatal chemical conversion.”

“Yeah. Something like that, as I remember,” Terri replied, confounded, looking to Roberta for an answer to the questions that were formulating in her rapidly moving head. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“AnyONE, is the right answer,” Roberta commented, remembering a smell of something in the back room of the clinic that entered into it one day, when Marie was alone. “Charlie,” she continued. “The dog that was brought in with arthritis and that spinal cord injury. Treated with high doses of steroids.”

“And acupuncture,” Terri replied.

“But who almost died of renal failure,” Doctor R continued, letting the pieces of data rushing into her head fall into their natural slots rather than pre-made ones. But still not into something that made sense. “Let go”, Roberta felt the spirit of her Medicine Woman Granny say to her. “Let go of what you think is logical so you can feel is real, and you will---’

“---Produce kidney disease in a dog by giving him antifreeze, sending him in with an absentee client, make the situation worse by faking a spinal cord injury with any number of temporary paralytic anesthetics, injected intramuscularly so there is a delayed action, making it necessary to give massive doses of steroids, which make any kidney crises worse. And when the dog is in renal crisis, or about to be, rush in with a large glass of ‘Scottish Bliss’ to inactivate the toxin that you replace with water afterwards, to make it look like to bottle had never been opened,” Roberta reasoned into a working hypothesis.

“But the BUN sticks showed nothing wrong with the kidney,” Terri said.

“BUN sticks that you ran?” Roberta inquired.

“Marie tested it. Three times, Doctor R. After Doc Henry put the blood on the strips himself.”

“And you saw her do it? And saw the strips?”

“No. I didn’t,” Terri said. “But she said they we light green when she tested them in the sink.”

“Odd,” Roberta said. “I remember seeing three DARK green strips on the rim of the trash bin by the sink that day. And that we still have only two BUN sticks left in the container.”

“They’re still on back order,” Terri asserted. “I tried to get more but---“

“---There were 10 in there the day before this whole thing started. And I haven’t used any of them,” Roberta noted. “I would have waited for results from that blood analysis machine that was never the same after Marie calibrated it,” she continued, thinking of yet another possibility. “At least for me.”

Roberta looked at Charlie’s blood work as printed out from the blood analyzer, before and after the kidney crisis. She hadn’t noticed it before, but the dates didn’t match the name, or the condition. Massive elevations of creatinine and BUN on Charlie at the time of admission, lowering of them three hours after Doctor Wilson performed his miracle cure, along with massive perfusion of saline. “Doctor H would have never given steroids to an animal with Creatinine and BUN this high, or phosphate that was off the charts like on this print out, unless this wasn’t the printout he was shown. And she replaced it with a fabricated blood profile from a normal dog labeled with Charlie’s name but, as I see now, the wrong date. On the other cases she probably figured out how to make the numbers on this blood profiler tell her what she WANTED them to say rather than to reveal what the real values were,” Roberta surmised.

“Or Marie showed Doc Henry an X-ray of a normal cat instead of the real one that had a diaphragmatic hernia on it?” Terri offered.

“Said diaphragmatic hernia being created by her kicking the cat, then sneaking in to take an X-ray of it AFTER Henry did the surgery,” Roberta noted. She whipped into the freezer containing the deceased cat, finding that there was a detached label near it reading ‘cremate and return ashes to owner’. She looked closely at the abdomen, noting impressions of a shoe matching Marie’s size 5 foot on it, and Doc Henry’s suture lines inside it.

“And what about Regina?” Terri asked. “The dog that bled out after Doc Henry did, according to what I saw anyway, the fastest and best spay in the world on?”

“A little bit of biochemical help to prevent good blood clotting. Warfarin, coumeran or Decon would open up any ligated blood vessel no matter how many knots were used on it, and how great the knots were,” Roberta said. “A little bit of rodent poison administered by a two legged rat named Marie with an ‘ie’ or a client she sub-contracted would have made every knot he put in bleed out. To be rescued by master surgeon Tom Wilson, with the help of a little vitamin K and concentrated plasma of course.”

“Why would anyone who is in the veterinary world poison animals or give doctors false information so that animals would suffer, or die?” Terri asked.

“The question is HOW they would, not why,” Roberta said. “Determining which part of the brain makes some humans inhumane will have to wait until we get some proof of how they did it. And what we need to do to unlock that proof is....” Roberta let the rest of her talking come out with a pencil on a piece of scrap paper from the trash.

“This is a big list,” Terri said.

“And Doc Henry’s formal resignation hearing at the Vet Association is tomorrow,” Roberta pointed out. “So, tempus fugit! That means time flies.”

“I know what it means,” Terri blasted back. “I’m not an idiot!” she asserted, in a way that made Roberta feel that perhaps she was on her way to being an effective asshole. A necessary step forward in her Spiritual evolution, for the present time anyway.

CHAPTER 16

Doc Henry's tired eyes remained on the lake, staring at the rod and the line hanging down from it in a pool of water that was as empty of fish as his heart was empty of anything resembling primal fire. "You had no right to violate Marie's privacy like that," he admonished Roberta. "Breaking into her locker at the clinic. Her car in the parking lot. And her house in town. While she's in Vancouver seeing her dying sister for the last time. How would you like it if someone did that to you? Besides, it's very illegal, and if this reaches any court of law, it's YOU who will get into trouble for how you got them."

"Just look at them!" Roberta grunted at Henry, pushing the box of evidence in front of his eyes, grabbing the fishing pole from his hands.

"And if I do, you'll leave me alone. Leave US alone?" Henry demanded an honest answer and threw one of his 'non-nonsense' stares towards Roberta.

"If you read these and don't come to the same conclusion that I did, then I promise to stop wearing my 'hippie Injun love beads', do something 'civilized' with my hippie-commie-anarchist mop of a topknot, let Cowboy Hank, IF he ever decides to come home from wherever

he is, marry me and give him five Robertas and ten Hanks,” Roberta pledged. “On my Grandmother’s honor, I swear it!”

This time Roberta was serious about it. Henry had no choice but to humor her. But when he looked at the contents of the box, and various hypotheses put into print by Roberta’s shaking hand, he was not laughing. “So, while Marie was working for me she poisoned animals and tricked me into doing defective medicine, while she was being paid by Tom Wilson?”

“For ten times the money you paid her according to her direct deposit bank statement and cashed checks,” Roberta said. “And as for those faxes that came in from other clinics reporting how they repaired what you screwed up, half of those clinics never sent those faxes. They’re all fakes. As verified by phone calls to them, and this…” She pointed to the numbers they had been sent from.

“Fax numbers they were sent from that don’t match the ones from the clinics in the phone book,” Henry noted. “But match....hmmm.”

“Yeah...fax machines from hotels and copy stores in ten different towns. And some of the clinics that that fixed your work, with comments that could get you crucified by any veterinary competency board, well, they don’t exist at all. Except in the minds of someone vulnerable and dumb enough to believe them.”

“Like me,” Henry said, angry at himself for missing that detail.

“And the veterinary association board members who have these right now, and are going to act on them tomorrow,” Roberta said. “But not unless WE act first.”

“We?” Henry asked, seeing more of himself in Roberta’s eyes than he was comfortable with. “You’re thinking of doing something very stupid, and dangerous, aren’t ya?”

“Go big or go Om,” she smiled back, leaving the box of proof with Henry. He riffled through all of the evidence, which included pictures, toxin samples, fabricated clinic faxes from outside of Knife Bend and fake lab reports from within his own haven.

“Speaking of HOME, and all jokes aside,” Henry said. “Where did Cowboy Hank go anyway? When I catch him, I’ll have a talking to him that he is not gonna forget.”

“It’s okay,” Roberta said, casting the line out into the water, getting lost in the solitude of fishing and hoping to not find herself again. “One of us was going to bugger off sometime. This way HE gets to feel guilty and I get to feel hurt. Beats the other way around. And besides, it’s a strange and vicious world. Tom Wilson trying to break your spirit by making you think you’re a medical idiot.”

“And maybe Marie, if that’s what her name really was, setting you up to think you were a star, then making you feel like a loser again,” Doc Henry speculated.

“That would explain why Marie insisted that Sarah take the envelope that looked like it had money in it at the benefit, then Sarah left like she did something very wrong,” Roberta gasped. “I gotta find that bitch’s phone! Deathhound can hack into her e mail. Terri can distract her. But,” she said, turning to Henry. “How did you know about all of that? You weren’t even there when I went on stage!”

“People still tell me things. People who still trust me, and who I trust,” Henry said. He picked up the evidence box. “And while those people work on proving my hypothesis about how Doctor Tom and Matahari Marie tried to destroy your sense of self worth, we both have to...” Doc Henry lifted his arms, spelling the stench of the pits under them. He stroked the stubble on his unshaven face that had sprouted into a beard.

“We both have to get cleaned up?” Roberta asked. “If you’re serious about this, I’d be willing to do what it takes. Axe the buckskin and get a suit. Chop the topknot into a respectable ‘professional Mom’ bob. Maybe even see what pantyhose feels like after never having worn them in dog, or bitch’s, age.”

“Or fight them as you really are,” Henry offered, having seen in his inner eye the ‘converted, cured and grown-out-of-hippiedom’ image of Roberta which he never saw come to fruition in his first daughter, Jennifer. And knowing that how you die is how you are remembered.

CHAPTER 17

Cowboy Hank romanticized it, but he never thought he’d be living it. “The Alamo’ was his favorite movie, as it was with most every North American citizen with a Y chromosome. As he looked at the cold, dark blue Alberta sky he recalled the concert he gave under the light, hazy canope which covered San Antonio in front of that revered location. “Last Stand” was one of those populate tunes that would stay on the charts forever, and it almost did...Until someone found legal problems with copyright and ownership of the piece in those days when there were so many other legal problems that none of his fans knew about, or would believe. Not that they were his fault. Legal problems are never anyone’s fault, though someone has to pay the price for their existence, as if that was a way that society got rid of them as problems.

“So, whatcha think of all of this, Buttercup,” he asked the gelding who still retained the grit, courage and independence of a stallion, despite the fact that he was NOT proud cut. “Ya think you, me and whatever God is hanging out above that blue sky can hold off THIS Army of Mexicans that Santa Anna’s gonna send our way?”

Buttercup didn’t know the answer to that question of course, as did the herd of horses munching on the grass below him, as did the goats, cows and even chickens that Cowboy Hank had relocated to the most hidden, and inaccessible, valley in Alberta. Like Pitkcarin Island, its location was not on any map, at least one that was published for the public. The only way in

were two thin roads which was surrounded by swamp and quicksand, an island of solid ground, green trees and spring-watered grass in the middle of it. According to the old timers who were known to never tell a lie, Yankee whiskey traders in the 1880s hiding out from the Mounties or rightfully pissed off Injuns built the half-buried rocky road into the swamp so they could have a safe place to build their still, and imbibe its byproducts. In the 1920s, gangsters from Chicago took it over, putting warning signs around a barbed wire fence, so that no one would get 'lost in the sauce'. In the 1970s, a renegade band of Indians who had made armed stands against White Developers hid out for a while there, the sole survivor who came out claiming that the Mother Ship had lifted all of his comrades out. In the conspiracy-crazed 80s it was rumored that the location was built as a secret launch pad for ETs, the location for a CIA bioweapons manufacturing plant and a 'fountain of enlightenment' in which the most powerful brand of mushrooms and genetically-modified weed was available to whoever could find the Path inward, and the escape route outward. As for drop in or extraction from the sky, the thick woods had hidden all visibility and access from above.

The only reason why Cowboy Hank knew about 'Hole in the Wall Island' was because he remained sober one night at 'Harrold's Holdup' while everyone else at the establishment was sloshed. The old timer whose breath reeked of whiskey and whose eyes emanated regret had no one in his family left to pass the secret onto. No one who he thought worthy of knowing them, anyway. No one who respected him as a man.

"Good thing I respected that old coot that night," Hank continued to Buttercup. "No one else in town did."

Buttercup finished the bucket of grain, and nudged Hank for more, nearly knocking him over.

"Sorry, pal," he said to his main saddlehorse. The mount who on all days the mares and geldings listened to, and on some days listened to the human atop his back. "Until I figure out who is running that new Society to Prevent Cruelty to Animals as legal entity that has, so the lawyers tell me, the right to take you away from me, we gotta stay here. Norma's got the same problem. Seems like they got it all turned upside down. Folks who care most about their critters, and take care of them smartest, are the ones who are being charged with cruelty."

A dog barked in the distance. Hank looked over at the cabin which had been over its 170 year history, a distillery, a brothel, a temple, and an armory. Now it was a dog kennel, and a cat holding facility as well. The animals were hungry, as it was feeding time. Hank looked at his watch, noting that Norma was late with her delivery of animal food for the bellies of the critters, and any news about progress to figure out who was in charge of this new SPCA. Tom Wilson was no doubt behind it, but the rumbling in Hank's own empty gut told him that he was not smart enough to mastermind such a scheme. Unfortunately, Tom knew that he wasn't smart enough to stop it. Not by himself anyway. But there was one thing he was thankful for...the old man in the bar who told him about "Hole in the Wall Island" died just after Hank had driven him home.

Hank thought about the whys and wherefors about it all. Maybe he should have told Roberta where he was going, and where he had hidden his animals, Norma's and those of at least five

other people who were on the top of the SPCAs' seizure list. But he also knew what would happen to her if she decided to join him at the Alamo to defend it. Charges were already laid against him by that good-gone-bad, very legally-supported organization that would land him in jail for a year. And once fingerprinted, there would be no clothing, hair or body color makeovers that would hide him from the charges awaiting him for the dasterdly deeds that 'Billy Bob Jackson' did after Hank faked his death. True, it was someone else who did those robberies, embezzlements, rapes, and worse, but it would be Cowboy Hank who would do the time for those crimes, to say nothing about the criminal act of faking his own death, having someone else collect on the insurance policy, and giving all the money to feed starving kids in Africa. Or hoping the money went to them anyway. In any case, if caught by any legal authority who checked computer files outside Knife Bend, it would be a long time in prison or on trial to avoid such. Nothing Roberta should be exposed to.

But such were would've and could've, worth as much as a dollar and a piece of Fast Food beef jerky. For the moment, Buttercup looked up to the sky, his sensitive ears hearing something. Cowboy Hank saw nothing through the canope of thick trees that provided a roof to the big sky but then heard something. He heard a loud screech, probably from a large wild bird looking for domestic animal lunch. The cats and small dogs in the hastily-constructed pens were good eating to such predators. The screeching got louder and closer. Reluctantly, Hank withdrew the Winchester strapped to Buttercup's saddle, put the silencer on it, then let the barrel follow the sound of the bird above. "Sorry, guy. I know you gotta eat, but these guys gotta live," he said apologetically to what now seemed like not only one, but three large birds of prey coming in to feed their bellies on animals that had the fortune, or misfortune, of being dependent upon two legged humanoids for their food, shelter and sense of well being.

But it was the bird behind the two large hawks that scared Hank most. It's flank was white, it nose black and its tragetory was straight into a clearing in the wooded canopy barely large enough for drop in, one that only the most skillful airborne hunter would know about. The birds ahead of it fled upward as it came downward. The buzz of its wings scared Buttercup almost as much as it terrified Hank.

"Mitchell Corporation," Cowboy Hank said, identifying the species of this metallic bird with wings atop its back. The claws of the chopper swooped down fast, and loudly. Cowboy Hank got on Buttercup's back to make a desperate attempt to herd the cattle and horses into the bush, scattering them about so they would be harder to find. But Buttercup had other ideas. He reared up and sought shelter himself, Cowboy Hank finding himself flat on the ground. Before he could regain his consciousness or hat, the uniformed pilot of the chopper came out, assistant bearing arms in tow. They had cat hats on of course, as well as sunglasses. They looked around, inspecting everything within 360 degrees around them. Cowboy Hank reached for his Winchester and aimed it the one who looked like the leader.

"It's us, Hank," the assistant said in a familiar voice. "We put on these costumes because it went with the chopper," Norma continued, taking off the hat revealing her new hair-do and her glasses, showing that despite having a new man in her life, she was still the same old single-minded aging wench who refused to grow old.

“The guns?” Cowboy Hank asked. “Good idea that you brought them. We could use them now.”

“Sure can,” Terri, aka SPCA special officer number one said, aiming her sawed off shotgun at a dog getting too close to the chicken coup, spraying it with water. She turned around and smiled at Hank. He didn’t smile back.

“Why did you come in that thing?” he inquired.

“Norma’s truck was busted, this chopper was in for repair. I fixed it in one day, saying it would take three. I’ll ‘find’ something else broken in it when I get back,” she answered while removing two truckloads of animal food and building supplies from the back of the cockpit.

“And what happens if they, or the satellite folks they probably have on their payroll, see where you leave from, or followed you here?” Hank offered. “Or if you can’t find the GPS in there that probably records everywhere it went.”

“You worry too much, Hank,” Norma said entering into the small animal holding area. “But you’re so good at it, you might as well keep doing it,” she continued while saying hello to dogs greeting her with wagging tails, and the felines reclaiming her as theirs by brushing against her leg. “Terri, tell Cowboy Hank that he worries too much.”

Such was one request that Terri couldn’t do. She was all grown up now, fear of the worst replacing anticipation of the best. Distrust of life replacing love of it, bit by bit, faster than anyone anticipated. Even the ever calculating Cowboy Hank. While trying to hide the chopper from anything else on its way, he looked at his fellow castaways, then his watch. There was one hope left in the world outside of Hole in the Wall Island. He picked up his phone and left a message, being sure this time that the sound of finality was in his voice and words.

CHAPTER 18

Roberta showed up to Doc Henry's hearing at the Veterinary Association on time, at 9 AM sharp, as commanded by the suits around the table. She didn't know their names, but she knew their jobs. And the reasons why some of them did them, and they were divided into subpopulations, according to stories she had heard about them and verification, or refutation, of such when he finally put the face to the name. A third were autocrats who seemed to feel entitled to the money and power they extracted by being on the board, small time hoodlums who hoped one day to be smart and successful mobsters, or perhaps if they got clever enough, politicians in the arenas behind veterinary medicine. A third were 'yes men' who didn't know what they were saying 'yes' to, and didn't seem to care. The third that had the most say, administratively, DID know what they were saying 'yes' to, and for whom. These were people who Tom Wilson controlled, or blackmailed in some way. Their economic and political survival depended upon Tom Wilson, the Mitchell Corporation and probably someone above both of those 'entities' keeping their secrets secret. The President of the association, Doctor Klaussen, with more letters of affiliation after his name than in his name, wore a very manly suit, but still moved his fingers and crossed his legs under the table like he was not so. Very much in keeping with the stories Roberta heard, via teenaged goth-rebel Deathhound Jones, that he had not only one, but two male lovers that his rich, very Christian blue-blood wife or his two beloved kids did not know about.

While sitting in the waiting room outside 'the hearing chamber', Roberta looked at the time, approaching noon now. No one had come out the front door in three hours, and to the best of her knowledge, there was no back door, or escape tunnel. She recalled what Henry had said to her at the gas station where he thought it best that they arrive in separate cars. "I'll be right behind you," he promised. Apparently, he meant that figuratively more than literally. She felt angry at him, and afraid for him. Here she was, going as his representative, defending him against the suits, requesting that his voluntarily-requested lifetime suspension from doing veterinary medicine be revoked. And from a board that, when it spoke with the final vote, was always diametrically against Doc Henry in every way possible.

The mirror caught her glance again, her eyes caught by the image, and reality, within it. She had done everything 'right' according to logic, intuition and reason. The evidence against Tom Wilson and in favor of Doc Henry, and herself, was tighter than the skin pulled across a well-made Cree prayer drum. As was the outfit she wore, plain brown pencil-skirt business suit with tastefully frilly white blouse and black pumps, reconstructed from that dreadful day when she did her second vet school interview, adopting the 'infiltrate as them then change the system from within' paradigm which Rosdkiski said was not right but sometimes 'practical'.

No one in the board room today had recognized her, and for that matter, she didn't even recognise herself, particularly between the ears. She ran her fingers through the 'doo' on her head that fell no longer than chin length on the side, chopped into tastefully professional bangs in the front, trimmed down to the skin on the back of her neck in a 'mushroom' cut. The 'why' of it didn't matter now, as the deed was done. To save Doc Henry's ass, and her own if she ever wanted to continue as an animal doc, it was a 'professional necessity'. It was also a ceremonial 'goodbye' to her deluded dreams of being a hot looking singer, poet, and/or improvisational on stage novelist. It was also a cultural requirement, particularly after Cowboy Hank sent his final 'Dear Roberta' farewell on her voicemail, asking her to 'move on with her life as his will be ending now', appended with a loud gunshot at the end of it. She didn't know if she hated him, loved him or felt guilty for not being there at his last moments. Then again, she didn't know where he was. In any case, that fact was irrelevant.

What was relevant now was what had happened in the board room earlier. With Henry still not in attendance, somewhere else on this planet or in a dimension beyond the life-death line, she replayed the movie in her mind that it recorded three hours earlier.

"Gentleman," she recalled addressing them upon arrival. "In this box I have evidence that one of our members, Tom Wilson, has been behind the most disgraceful and prosecutable offenses in the history of this province, and country. It is in the best interest of this association that you examine these, and my verified affidavits from many trustable citizens, as it is in the best interest of our Association, the clients we serve, and the animals they bring to us."

The order of 'whose best interest' was of course in direct opposition to what Roberta's heart and soul lived by. But putting 'the profession's' well being before the animals it was suppose to serve, in words anyway, was necessary for her to get into Vet School, advise she got from Professor Rasdiski himself, a man who burnt his bridges way too often because there was too much honest fire, and warmth, in his soul. Kurt 'the suit', thankfully ex-hubby who still had not come back to extract revenge for leaving her and not taking the rap for his drug and human trafficking offenses, had taught Roberta how to lie very convincingly as well. Her mind oscillated between 'the Truth shall set you free' and 'give the people what they want so you can acquire what you need', trying to find an ideology in between that worked.

She looked into the mirror in front of her, asking the image that she didn't recognize as to what to do. Trying to see Grandmother in it somewhere. Or some spirit animal, maybe one of the flies buzzing about the waiting room, advising her as to what to do other than wait to see what would happen inside. To see which third would emerge more powerfully, and how to survive the

outcome. After assessing all of her needs and wants, and getting nothing her pearl-earring-adorned ears could hear and shorn head could comprehend, another solution hit. A practical one. She looked up the sky, down to the floor, then to the Natural elements beyond the walls to the North, South, East and West. "It's Your fucking call," she muttered with the utmost reverence. "I did what I could, I think, or hope anyway. Since You know better than me how to handle whatever will come out that door, throw it at me."

Maybe it was coincidence, maybe it was the Power or prayer, or maybe it was because prior to said prayer Roberta had seen something from the corner of her eye. She braced for the worst. She heard the sound of a car approach the parking lot, the police car pulling in for a halt. A man in a brown coat was pulled out of it, fighting as hard as he could with his body, despite the fact that he was cuffed. She couldn't see his face, but she could feel his anger. She closed her eyes, trying to send Doc Henry a subliminal message to 'just go with the Cops, they have bigger guns than we do,' but also remembering that the Indians back in 1885 who died with dignity were NOT the ones who went with the Cavalry escorts peacefully back to the Rez. She smiled, remembering those times, braced for her own crucifixion. She would go to the burning stake with a smile on her face this time. Granny would have it no other way. "It is a good day to die," she said to herself in Cree.

"Doctor Collineur?" a very authoritative voice said to her from above.

"I'm ready," she said in Cree, opening her eyes to what perhaps was the Christian God, or the main Dude in charge of it all, no matter what color he was. Then, her ears were opened by the struggling bear in the parking lot turning around, screaming all matters of obscenities at everyone. "Tom Wilson?" Roberta said, focusing her eyes on the struggling captive's face.

"We verified all the charges against him, and he will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law," Dr. DeLong, D.V.M., LLd., Diplomat, AVMA, WASP said. "Which will also lead to several other vacancies on the veterinary board. Two prominent ones on top which perhaps you and Henry could occupy. Fresh young wolverines and Old Dinosaurs seem to be just what we need to put this ecosystem right again," he smiled, expressing himself with more humor and openness than Roberta thought possible from his stiff upper English Canadian lip and hard chiseled chalk-white face. "When you do locate him, please inform him that we have put him on the ballot, assuming there is no objection to any of that with you."

"None at all," Roberta smiled back. She felt...good about looking and feeling respectable. Maybe one day she would come to the meeting in Buckskins with an offering of sweetgrass to start off the proceedings, but for the first few sessions, it would have to be played straight. Which would be in a direction leading upward. Of course, Doc Henry would first have to say 'yes' to the proposition, which he of course would, after he was finished with his 'brief errand' elsewhere, wherever that was.

CHAPTER 19

The old woman who had been in Knife Bend as long as anyone could remember didn't recognize the place. Though Norma always did a better job at sheltering animals, the Humane Society had always done a passable one. The no-kill policy was, for the most part, honored and everyone was welcomed. The floors and cages were not always sterile, but they were clean, as were the hearts and minds of those who ran it. Most people in search of a needy animal found one, and most animals in true need that could give something reliable to humans somehow wound up in the paws of such. But was then, and this was now, as the old woman approaching the building saw, hear and smelt.

The sign overtop of the building read 'Under New Management' with inviting, friendly font, each letter resembling a cute and fuzzy creature of some sort. But as the old woman found out when she tried to gain entrance to the building, the new Humane society was run by a very different form of human. All were in para-military uniform, a stark contrast to the 'wear whatever covers your privates and protects you from the elements' dress code that had been in place for decades. They wore sunglasses over their eyes and combat boots over their feet. Metal detectors were at two locations, for 'security' reasons. Cameras were mounted everywhere, and though arrows had been shot in their vicinity to try to break their lens, none penetrated the mark.

The old woman recalled when she was far younger and the air smelt of dog cookies and catnip, yelping and yipping in the background. From everything in view of her senses, the woman could not detect a single sight, sound or smell of anything animal. Except for the ugliest of creatures roaming the earth---Inspector Generals. One of them operated the checkpoint at 'level A' reception, which led to level B reception which led to the interior of the building, whose windows were locked tight, the blinds slit shut. In front of the old woman was a younger man, in his early forties by the look of his wrinkled face and receding hairline. He wore well seasoned jeans caked with mud and work boots containing deep crevices of manure that had dried into fertilizer. He leaned on top of the desk with his left hand, forcing several pictures of three dogs with his right into the face of the Animal Protection Inspector.

"Their names are Moe, Larry and Curly," he said of the three mutts. "And they are very distinctive in appearance, as anyone can observe in these pictures," he asserted.

"No, I haven't seen them," the Inspector said. "And I've been on shift for the last 6 hours."

"That's funny," Harry replied. "They went 'missing' four hours ago, after a van like yours was seen near my farm."

“Were they adequately fenced in, Sir?” the Inspector asked from the safe place behind his dark sunglasses.

“As good as you assholes fence yourselves in here!”

“There is no need to be insulting, Sir,” the Inspector replied with an eye-roll. “And if you continue to be abusive, I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

“With your rabies pole, electric prod or sidearm?” Harry challenged. “I and everyone else who’s donated to this place pay your salary. Unless of course you overpay yourself with the money that’s supposed to go to feed hungry dogs. And to find dogs that I know are here.”

“And you know this, Sir, because...”

Harry had been called ‘Sir’ long enough. He clenched his fist, ready to pull the sidearm out of the Inspector’s belt and shoot the lock open. Rather than let Harry join the ten others who had been incarcerated for standing up to this new SPCA, a small framed yet quietly assertive young woman next to him lay her hand on his shoulder. “Dogs looking like Moe, Larry and Curly were taken into this building through the back door,” she said.

“According to who, Ma’am?” the Inspector asked.

“A reliable source who you can’t pay off,” Harry asserted. “Now, I want to get back there to get my dogs back!”

The old woman just behind Harry and his wife saw the Inspector think about something, make a call, then excuse himself. “I’ll take a look for you,” he said, but this time with a pleasant smile that even seemed sincere.

“I got two eyes, and can look for myself,” Harry replied. “And if you accidentally put any of my animals onto the ‘kill’ list because of overcrowding, or you trumped up some disease they have, I’ll kill you myself!”

Harry’s wife tried to calm her husband down, and eventually talked her way into being allowed into Reception Area B. Harry turned to the old woman and said to her, “I hope you have a whole bunch of money in that purse of yours. Either these assholes will demand it as an administration fee to get your animals back. Or they’ll make you see one of the vets on their payroll for unnecessary and overpriced medical care. And if you make a fuss about it, they’ll tell you that ‘if you don’t have money, you shouldn’t have animals.’”

The old woman remained silent. All she could do was give him ‘an I know’ nod, and write something down. She gave it to the rancher who was caught between screaming in anger or weeping in inconsolable sorrow. He read it. “Doctor Roberta Collineur and Doc Dinosaurs Henry Steiner ain’t on the approved list. And I heard that their shop is about to fold up.”

The old woman shook her head ‘no’ with a confident smile.

“If you choose to believe that, Ma’am, all power to ya, But some of us have to live in the real world,” he replied.

That real world materialized when Harry’s wife came back into Reception area A. The Inspector was behind her, and behind him, two other guards nearly twice his size, and three times better armed. “If your animals show up, we’ll call you,” he pledged.

“And if any of your kids are missing at suppertime, I’ll be sure to NOT call you,” Harry pledged.

“That sounds like a threat, Sir,” the Inspector said quietly. “Perhaps you want to repeat what you just said.”

“So your cameras and microphones can record it? I don’t think so,” Harry said, taking hold of his wife and escorting her out the door.

The Old woman was at a loss as for what she could do for Harry and his wife. But she took it upon herself to do whatever she could for Moe, Larry and Curly, their pictures imprinted into her still sharp brain.

“Yes, Ma’am, what can we do for you today?” the Inspector said as he sat down at his desk, inviting her to do the same on the chair in front of it.

She remained standing, and took out her pad. She wrote one note and handed it to him with cordial smile.

“Can I speak to the Director?” he read. “I’m afraid the Director is out of town, and he will be for the rest of the week” he replied with a face so motionless that it had to be a lie.

She wrote another note, handing it to him.

“Information I have say that she is here,” he read, seeming to be caught on something.

The old woman wrote another note.

“Tell Marie that I know what she’s been up to?” he read, looking around as if the cameras were on HIM instead of the visitors to the facility.

The old woman crunched her hand up and took out her whittled down pencil yet again, putting another message to paper, handing it to the Inspector.

“That is a command, not a question,” he read. “And why I am talking like a valley girl?” he continued as he read the scribble as best as he could decipher it. He looked up at the woman. “Who are you and what do you want?”

The woman wrote another note, a longer one this time, placing it in front of the Inspector's disbelieving and terrified eyes.

"A friend of Charlie's," he read by way of who the old woman was. The rest of the written material he read to himself, three times.

The old woman was running out of patience and read the contents outloud in a soft, deep voice, embellishing on it. "Terri took note of the truck you drove him in on, and it's exactly what you have outside. And those firefighter boots you have on now were exactly what you were wearing then. I don't know if you knew if Charlie was poisoned with antifreeze, or if you did it, but if you did, Gary."

"Let me explain," the Inspector said, his name and history being found out. And recognizing the old woman's real gender by the remnants of hair on her knuckles and the Adam's apple beneath the scarf slipping down her neck. And recognizing the identity of the man who evaded being spotted at three other checkpoints before him. "Tom Wilson made me do things, Doc Henry. I didn't know everything he was doing, and didn't want to know. But he said that if I didn't do what he said he'd tell my wife, kids and everyone in town that..."

"...That what, son," Doc Henry asked, knowing fully well that most of the people carrying out Tom Wilson's demonistic plots were victims rather than minions of evil. "What did that son of bitch excuse for a doctor and disgrace of a human being have over you?"

Inspector Gary looked over Doc Henry's 'Granny Henrietta' get up from the ballerina flats to the silver-haired wig. He chuckled at himself, his fate and his decisions with irony. "His spies got photos of me dressed up like you are, in places a lot more public than this one, in towns that I thought were far enough away from here," he said. "But, I looked prettier, I suppose. And I never took anyone home who bought me a drink, and never went home with them!" he asserted. He looked up, his hands shaking, his face pale. "I just got laid off from the mine and haven't had work in four months. I got a wife and two new kids. Who are dependent on me for...everything."

"Who don't have to know anything about your explorations if you let me see whatever files you have clearance to see," Henry requested. "Then show me to Marie's office."

"Sure," Gary said. "But can I ask you one thing first, Doc?"

"If it's that I'm secretly gay, the answer is 'no!'" Henry asserted.

"No. It's something else," Gary asked, assessing how good he really was at his new job. "How did you know Marie was the director of this place?"

Henry gave Gary a Sagelike all knowing smile.

"You didn't know," Gary surmised. "It was a lucky guess, wasn't it?"

“An accurate assessment,” Henry said, sadly. “But not a lucky one. And not one that I’m happy about being right about.”

CHAPTER 20

It took a week for all of the authorities to gather the paperwork. In exchange for lighter sentences for charges ranging from embezzlement to blackmail to animal cruelty, all parties involved made it a piece of cake for the prosecutors to nail Tom Wilson to the wall, and burn Marie at the stake. Naturally, their attorneys chose to appeal, taking the proceedings to points far away from Knife Bend.

The Mitchell Development company moved its offices and investments out of Knife Bend as well. After all the blame was absorbed, it was a time for celebration. A parade was in order for the REAL citizens of Knife Bend to celebrate. As soon as the Feds came in and negated all of the Provincially-levied charges against animal abusers labelled as such by Marie and Tom's SPCA, every one of the missing critters came back to town via main street. Leading the parade, on horseback, was Norma, who did her utmost to impress her fiancée Gustav that she was as good a horseman as he was. Gustav applauded her from the ground, as the pictures of him atop bucking broncs on his dating site profile were taken while the animals were being held by skilled wranglers. But, Norma was not offended by discovering this. Terri was sure that the trucks and cars bearing returning animals were in not only good, but GREAT working order. Cowboy Hank, his hat OFF in public for the first time ever, kept any creature too big or ornry to be carried back into town in an open trailer or truck in tow by riding behind atop Buttercup, who showed off his herding skills for not only his rider, but the crowd of two legged mares lining the street. Deathound Jones shot a video of the event, her first film, the 17 year old loner, genius Goth on the best and most cordial terms with well meaning but far less intelligent souls who volunteered to be crew. The music and additional narrative was to be added by none other than Roberta, in her own time and space. And without having to have the approval of ANYone in Hollywood, or anywhere else.

Doc Henry, Roberta, Mahegan and Prometheus watched as Cowboy Hank really did carry himself as a Cowboy. As always when in public, a stethoscope and a tie around his very red neck, as he was on the job again, 'manning the mainsail', 'round the clock', 'in gale or doldrums', avoiding modern phrases such as '24/7' or any other landlubber metaphor. Roberta stood next to him, back in her Granny's buckskin coat, exchanging smiles with Cowboy Hank that only Doc Henry could see and fully appreciate.

Something had to be said regarding what Roberta had become, and still was. Particularly as it pertained to Cowboy Hank, whose head was shaved down to almost the wood, all around. "Seems like you both went through transformations, and matured real fast," Henry said to Roberta in a congratulatory tone. "And that you both got smarter than your elders."

"Sometimes accidents happen," Roberta offered by way of explanation for it all.

"But there is one thing that I would suggest," Henry said, leading Roberta away from the fanfare for a more private conversation behind what was now 'Hank and Terri's Vehicular Healing Shop'.

"Keep our hands on the rudder in choppy waters?" Roberta shot back, respectfully, running her fingers through the short chop job she had done on the 'seaweed' atop her own head.

“No...Both of you should NOT get a haircut for a long while,” he said. “It makes you look too old before your time.”

“YOU, telling hippie, commie, pinko freaks to NOT get a haircut?” Roberta noted. “The world has turned upside down. Yin becoming Yang. Yang meeting with Yin, ‘Henrietta’.”

“I told you, I did what I had to do. With detachment,” Henry replied. “And I’m not gay.”

“I know you aren’t,” Roberta replied. “And I know that one day, you might meet the right woman. In its time.”

“Worktime before playtime,” Henry said, breathing in a whiff of landlocked Alberta air, looking at his watch, then his appointment pad for the afternoon’s medical duties, and related responsibilities. “Damn. How am I supposed to do veterinary medicine if I’m also supposed to administrate it?”

“You always wanted to be in charge of the Veterinary Association,” Roberta said. “It’s a sure thing that you’ll be elected President of it now. What will you do as your first order of business, Doctor Prez?”

“Make all those three hour meetings twenty minutes long. Give everyone a chance to have their say, then make them vote, fast and decisively,” he replied. “Reduce down that damn guidebook for practices to one page, no, one line. Which reads...hmmm. Maybe you have something in mind. You’re the master writer.”

“Do right, be kind, listen to others, do no harm, and always remember that your talents are rented from a Higher Paw.” She smiled back.

“Sounds right to me,” he replied. But something wasn’t right in the distance. A police escort pulled in, Tom Wilson emerging from the back seat. Behind him were two Cops. He was cuffed, but discretely.

“What the hell do YOU want!” Henry barked at him.

“Maybe he wants to apologize,” Roberta offered. “For being a weak,now- unaffiliated loser.”

”Who you beat, fair and square,” Tom said. “I did and was a horrible creature to you all. But...”

“You want our forgiveness?” Henry asked. “Hell will freeze over first.”

”Hell is coming, And well before the Winter snows,” Tom said, nodding to one of the Cops, who handed Roberta and Henry an envelope.

“Don’t where I got it, but your Presidency at the Vet Association is not as firm as you think. This shows the final election results,” Tom related.

“The election isn’t until next week,” Henry said.

“Not for those who control the election, the ballot box, and situations elsewhere,” Tom replied. “I was Beowulf. Grindel, who threw me out of my own cave and to the wolves, is going to make a comeback at your meadhall, very, very soon.”

“What are you jabbering about?” Henry said.

“English literature that will become a Canadian Reality,” Roberta replied. “Two of Beowulf’s Grindels, aka Tom’s brother and father, are planning a comeback with weapons far more devious and destructive than anything Doctor Tom here and Marie, with an ie, ever wielded against us.”

“I’m ready to fight against them,” Henry said. He then turned surprisingly reflective. “Hmm... maybe them being them makes us better at being us.”

”Best way to be a better revolutionary is to be challenged by a fascist?” Roberta offered.

“And stand against them with my help,” Tom said. “Offered, if you want it, from wherever I’m allowed to be, or required to be.”

“Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer?” Roberta offered.

“And your allies in a common Cause closest,” Tom replied with the eyes of an orphan, yearning to have revenge on the family that disowned him, and, from the other side of this soul, looking for a new family to adopt him.

It was a proposition that would have to be considered, modified, then tested. But after a day’s celebration that was long overdue. And fully enjoyed by all concerned.