

HENRY AND THE WOLF DOCTOR Part 1

By

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CHAPTER 1

The night was dark, cold, long, and seemed to have no end to it. Though the calendar said it was early October, the biting wind said December, at least. Still, Roberta Collineur prodded her five and a half cylinder truck down the empty stretch of winter road connecting one dying Alberta town to another. On the map it was simple. All the roads straight, open and well connected. But somehow one-inch on the map equaled far more than 100 miles, or 160 kilometers.

She looked at her watch, the minute hand swaying like a pendulum, teasing her. Two-thirty AM, though it felt a lot later. She gazed at the dash, and the cluttered cab behind her. Three duffel bags containing nearly thirty years worth of her collected belongings. Two boxes of books, most used, but as up-to-date as could be afforded. And one satchel, a 19th century doctor's bag with her name inscribed on it... Roberta Collineur... Ph.D., D.V.M. It was a gift from her grandmother, a Cree Medicine Woman who had the good sense to marry a struggling doctor from the East rather than a rich cattle baron from the West. No one was at the graduation ceremony to bestow the letters of accomplishment, no boyfriend, no girlfriend, no aunts, uncles, or even First Nations politicians looking for photo ops. But Roberta felt her long-departed grandmother's hand etched in those six magic letters into the bag... Ph.D., D.V.M. Barely one in a thousand First Nation's people ever got into vet school, and even less had the balls, or conviction, to supplement it with a Ph.D. in biochemistry in her spare time. It was worth putting in the extra four months of clinical rotation work for the double-doctorate certification. It was even worth risking dismissal from the program by writing a thesis paper on the post-translational protein synthesis that defied what the department, and her mentor, said was fact in the textbooks. It was all worth it if the Truth was served, and if you were more Alive between the ears.

But the magical six letters had an even more special place, on a leather pouch tied to her belt. No Shaman or Shamaness ever inscribed White letters of accomplishment on a traditional medicine bag, but then again, few had the nerve, or idea, of owing allegiances to the Spirit of the Earth as well as the Power of Science.

"Whatever works, and makes sense in the gut and in the head," Roberta mumbled to herself, reflecting on the dichotomy she had become on this, her 27th and a half birthday. "So where's something to keep my brain alive?" she grunted through a yawn at the dash, as it blasted out loud static, the Blues station from Edmonton disappearing into the dead silence of the moonless night.

The flatlands of Alberta now appeared to be mountains, the two percent incline in the road seeming like it was a drive up Mount Everest for a Truck Commercial sponsoring

the Twilight Zone. "Static beats dead quiet in the grave or a breakdown in the snow," she told herself, re-checking the fuel gauge, hoping that the next set of towns would have SOMETHING open.

Station one brought in exactly what the doctor DIDN'T order. MUZAK, at 72 beats a minute of pure, tranquilizing sweetness that angered her brain and caused her eyes to close, her head to nod, her hand to fall off the wheel and... HONK!!!!

"Ahhhh!" she screamed, waking up from the three second slumber that would have been a permanent deep sleep had the driver of the eighteen wheeler not honked first and found a corner of shoulder to turn into.

Roberta breathed deeply, connecting lungs, eyes and reflexes together again, then took another sip of coffee. Two day old coffee from the Donut Shop with five day old milk. Stale and curdled went un-noticed by her pale tongue and dried mouth. But when "Onward Christian Soldiers" came blasting on the radio with the next adjustment of tune, the anger inside fumed a volcano that had not been tapped for a long time. "Fuck off, Missionary Assholes. Save your own Goddamn sterile souls!" she snarled at the radio, trying to turn the dial, the knob losing connection with the innards of the third-hand radio. The more joyous the singers, the more intensely she remembered the stories about the Reservation Schools that killed her people with Christian 'love' at the point of a gun, and the guns pointed at her by God-fearing Christians in her own life.

Then... finally, a bump, a reconnection of the knob, and an upbeat voice with a new tune. "What'ya say out there?" the DJ screamed out with a voice undoubtedly boxed in by a glued in, AM-radio smile, "One more time for the Hearty Party."

"Nooo!!!!" Roberta screamed as the top forty favorite oozed out of the radio reserved for Blues and Beethoven. "No more Hearty Party!" She had been hearing it for the last 600 miles, and on the way to her first job as a six-lettered double-doc, the last thing her scientific mind or Aboriginal Spirit needed was to have the 2/4 dancing tune that bopped the heads of millions of mindless morons echoing through her ears. "Come on, pretty baby, stop driving my heart crazy, don't be a dardly lardy, come join the Hearty Party." The rest of the lyrics were simplistic, easy to dance to, and begged all oppressed people who felt like they were being controlled to join in the singing and the beat... together... in step with the singer... dance to the beat of your own drummer, just stomp your feet with the Heart Party". A definite 'keep the masses mindlessly dancing so they don't indulge in revolution or free thought' kind of tune.

The knob wouldn't give way, and the station broadcasting the tune that had turned around the charts was getting stronger. Left with no other options, the battle took on another dimension. Roberta clenched her fist, grabbed the wires under the radio and yanked with all of her strength.

She grunted a declaration of victory, giving the defunct radio a third digit salute, and a battle cry in Cree which had no translation in English, or French. Then, from the seat

besides her, a whine, from a creature in need of help, and comfort, waking out of a slumber, pointing its paw at the radio.

"I told you, Mahegan. The Hearty Party kills brain cells," she said to the warm pair of brown canine eyes that kept her sane while going through vet school, reminding her that treating animals was about being a Soul Healer, not a veterinary doctor. "The CIA is killing millions of people with the Hearty Party every day. Trust me, I'm an animal doctor."

Roberta showed off her recent diploma to Mahegan, but the Shepherd-Collie-Whatever cross was getting restless. He loved riding in the truck, but he was well past his 4 hour 'joy ride' limit. He laid his head on her lap, hiding his paws under her fringed buckskin jacket.

"Don't worry, Mahegan," she said to him. "We'll be at our new job in two hours."

The truck hit a small bump, putting out four, maybe five of its horses under the hood.

"Okay, another three hours," she conceded.

Another noise under the hood, and three more units of equine power laid up.

"Okay, another four hours," the revised promise, and hope.

Mahegan nudged his nose towards Roberta's medicine bag, and the reward behind it. She reached in to get what he was after - two dog biscuits, one large, one small.

Mahegan barked, clearly indicating his preference.

"No, Mahegan. Until I get my first paycheck, I get the bigger..."

Before Roberta could finish describing in advanced human language what the command was and the reason for it, Mahegan had taken matters into his own hands, or rather mouth. As he chomped on the larger biscuit gently taken from Roberta's hands, his Mastress, or in his mind, servant, glanced at the smaller canine treat. It wasn't too bad. Liver flavor, or maybe it was bacon. Protein was protein, and what was good enough for Mahegan was good enough for her, and vice versa. After all, his blood lines did go back to the wolf, her Spirit Animal, so her grandmother told her during the precious 4 years of childhood she could remember. And it was only appropriate that the animal was named Wolf, in her Native, and nearly extinct, tongue.

The taste of the dog biscuit in Roberta's mouth felt sweet, then bitter. Then, rancid upon the first swallow. She had downed the cherry-colored 'Doggie Donuts' before, but they never tasted so putrid, evoking in front of her eyes, smells and tastes of another time. She hadn't fallen asleep, so the nightmare decided to visit her in her waking hours.

The movie inside her mind played behind her blood shot eyes. The first movement of the Symphony in a Very Minor Key came as a primal scream, a girl crying for mercy. "Shhhhh," the fatherly voice of 'assurance' said as the girl screamed louder, shame and fear added to her physical agony.. "Don't tell anyone. This will be our secret. Just between you and daddy. Now open up your legs and let me make it all better. You know I won't do anything to hurt you." His voice was White, and sadistic. Then, the child screamed out again, begging the White God in Heaven as well as the Great Spirit in the Mountains to end the 'pleasuring'.

Watching from the slightly open door, a woman with terrified eyes. "Go back to bed, NOW!" the man commanded her in a quiet authoritative voice. "No!" the child screamed.

"Help me, Mama," the child begged.

But the woman slithered down the hall like a beaten squaw, closing the door behind her. Then, the crack of a whip, making the screen in front of Roberta's inner eye black, then white, then a gray fog, and a moan of sadistic pleasure from a fourteen-going-on-forty year old teenager.

"That feels nice," the young woman moaned in delight, gazing down to her arm, watching the joy-juice being pushed into her veins by the Candy Man, a 25 year old hunk straight out of a James Bond film. "That feels nice, baby," she said again, his smooth hands caressing her breasts and unzipping his pants, her wrists still tied to the bedpost. The faces were clear enough, the mirror opposite the bed revealing that it was indeed Roberta, and that her Knight in shining armor bore a frightening resemblance to her father. Then the cuffs came off, and she embraced him, a warped orgasm echoing through her head and body, the mirror clouding up again, to fog and a bright light, and a baby crying.

The screen changed once again, flashing in front of Roberta's half-shut exhausted eyes, now wide open with terror. "Don't take my baby!" she screamed as herself in the hospital bed, and the fifteen year old patient being fitted for a straight-jacket. "Don't take my Daniel!!!" she screamed, as the Nurses took the half-breed infant toward the door and down a long, long hallway.

"You signed the papers," the Doctor told her.

"I didn't sign the papers! My boyfriend and father did!" she ranted, her breath stinking of booze, breaking loose from the restraints, and nearly decking the Doc who came to work that day trying to be civil to his clients and effective to his patients.

"Daniel is better off with someone who can raise him right, right?"

"You mean White, not right!" she spat into his eyes. "You let me out of here, NOW!!!"

“So you can keep on doping and boozing yourself to death, and kill your own baby with neglect?” he challenged. “Not on my shift.”

The doctor walked out of the room. Roberta snatched a scalpel blade from the tray next to her and cut herself loose, running down the hall toward Daniel, running toward the door from Security, then running down the street to the next not-so-Great White Father who could give her a fix.

The Midnight Nightmare running led her to a bedroom. A phone call came in telling her that her grandmother had just died on the Rez, and requested her presence there before she departed. “Like hell we’re going to an Injun funeral today,” Kurt ‘the suit’ barked as he came into the room, emptying the suitcase of the Traditional Native belongings Roberta had somehow kept over the years. “There’s another deal coming down in Miami, and we’re both part of it. Coke, horse and weed, make heap big wampum, squaw woman.”

“Not this time,” Roberta said, looking at the photo of her and her grandmother on the Reservation taken on those precious summer breaks from ‘family time’ in town. “I have to pay my respects.”

“To ME,” Kurt grunted, grabbing her by the collar, slapping her across the face.

“No more!” she screamed. “You took Daniel! All of you did!” She opened the door, prepared to scream her proclamation of realization to the Palatial dining room.

Kurt shut the door, threw her onto the bed, and pinned her down with every kilo of his 180 pound cocaine-powered body.

“What are you doing?”

“Keeping you quiet, bitch,” he grunted, grabbing a roll of duct tape to put over her mouth. “Those people out there are our friends and legitimate business associates. Cops, lawyers, and bankers.”

“YOURS! YOURS!!!” she screamed at the top of her lungs, feeling her grandmother’s spirit coming into her arms, throwing Kurt aside, trashing the bags of Canadian Rocksalt and Party Power Powder open to reveal their true contents.

Then, an in rush of people, an escape out the window, and the sounds of sirens behind her as she kept running, and running, and...

Roberta felt herself running, each millisecond of the nightmare seeming to last hours, days and years, till finally - GUNSHOTS, from the realities on both sides of the rainbow.

Back on the Alberta highway, Roberta shook. Her hands on the shaking wheel. Her truck was sucked into a swerve. "Daniel! Where are you!" she muttered with quivering lips. "Daniel!!!"

Appearing in direct range of her headlights, a pair of eyes, bright, shining, and helpless. Grabbing hold of reality as hard as the wheel, she yanked the truck to the left, trying to avoid hitting the ghost in front of her. Then, as it moved, to the left, a hard turn of the wheel to the right, leading her away from the eyes, and down, down, into a dark abyss.

Opening her eyes completely to Alberta, 2002, she took stock of the situation. The truck had stopped, very dead, in a pile of fresh snow. Mahegan barked, hoping that his Masteress, human servant and best friend, was okay. But the trail of blood in the snow led to the injured and helpless ghost, and it was indeed very, very real.

CHAPTER 2

The injured wolf cub lay helplessly in the snow, its green eyes shining brighter than anything else around it. It turned around on its back, hoping that the pain in the rear leg would go away, but it didn't. The gunshot wounds were too deep. Pain, maybe forever! It wasn't going away! And the red stuff on the snow kept trickling out of the swollen muscle around the knee. And it was on Reservation Land, too. Reserved for The First Nations People who were supposed to protect him.

"Think we got 'em!" came echoing from the woods in a voice that sounded very... White, maybe. Two, maybe four yahoos.

"Go away or we'll scalp ALL of you assholes!" Roberta yelled out in English, then in blood-curdling Cree. Anticipating the laugh from the Trespassers, be they White or Indian, she appended the message. "Mahegan, go get them!"

Roberta's dog, part wolf himself somewhere in the Heinz 57 Mutt-Mix that was his pedigree, took off into the bush, growling and snarling with the ferocity of a pack of wild canines out for revenge.

Apparently it worked: a truck in the bush starting, heading off from someplace to nowhere, but nowhere someplace else. Mahegan came back, a bite of redneck underwear in his teeth, bringing it to his Master and Friend, now-Doctor Roberta.

"Good dog," she boldly said to Mahegan. "Bad injury," she tenderly informed the injured wolf cub, barely 10 weeks old, probably still yearning for the warmth of his mother's legs and the nourishment from her warm, well-nourished teats. If, indeed, she was still alive. But for now, the protector and hopefully friend was this human, a Hippie-looking Indian who examined the wound like a scientist, or worse, a doctor.

Robert tore off her scarf, quickly adapting it to a tourniquet. She tied just tight enough to stop the bleeding. She tore off part of her shirt to put pressure on the places that were oozing blood, or maybe some other kind of fluid. It even stopped the pain. Then, the antibiotic clotting powder from her leather pouch, generously sprinkled on top of the wound. It still looked horrible, but it felt much better, for now. Still, the wolf cub couldn't move its right hind leg, and the left one wasn't doing so good now either. Maybe whatever was going wrong was spreading?

Doctor R pinched the skin along the spine. "Paniculus reflex response on the back...depressed," she noted, pessimistically.

"What did that mean?" the Wolf Cub wondered. "Does that mean that I'm never going to walk again? And what's she doing sticking those small needles, that she said were

acupuncture needles, into my back, behind my knee caps and behind my ankles? They don't hurt, and when she's twirling them, it seems to be doing something, I think. She must know what she's doing, I think. I hope."

The emergency acupuncture points for spinal cord injury hit, the Native concoctions put on top of the bad, probably broken, leg. The examination continued.

"Pale mucous membranes, some dehydration, abdomen tense but not overly tender, capillary refill time..." Another pause, and the verdict. "Normal," all things considered. She delivered a 'thank you' to the Sky, or was it to the Mountain, or some other doctor, or maybe her clutzy dog. "Maybe this human doesn't know what she's doing," the Wolf Cub noted in her eyes.

That sentiment was particularly evident when Roberta looked at her truck. "Damn! Shit! Not now!!!" The rants and screams escalated as she examined the rebuilt clunker, now clunked and crushed metal paralyzed in a snowbank. "Turn over! Now, you mother..." she yelled at the engine as she tried to start it, with words the cub had never heard before. Perhaps they were only meant for adult wolf ears.

The horses under the hood rebelled, smoke coming out from between its eyes, its rubber feet on the right side giving way, its metal body falling down into the snow. "Axle problems too!!!"

Mahegan covered his ears at the insults delivered to the truck, and the screams of frustration, as double-doctor Roberta kicked the truck with all her might. A punch to the fender, a kick to the rear bumper, and a stick taken to the trailer. Maybe she was trying to find the 'fix it' button. Or maybe she was just trying to open the frozen lock on the back of the camper, with all of her possessions inside.

Mahegan walked over to the cub, trying to lick the wound well.

"No, Mahegan! Motts!" she commanded, taking some bags and boxes out of the truck, sorting through them. "We have to take Promethius to a doctor."

"Do I have a name now?" the cub pondered. "And why this strange name? It sounds like a god or something, or a man trying to be a god, but it beats being called 'hawk lunch' or 'roadkill'."

Mahegan had no answers. He had been trying to figure Roberta out since she rescued HIM from the 'animal population' program at her Grandmother's Reservation. The kind where one Chief drunk on White Man's whisky, and another Chief inebriated with White Man's money, decide to rid the Rez of excess animals by shooting any canine or feline in sight. Mahegan remained fearful of nothing, except guns, particularly those that killed his buddy, Patches, in front of his eyes, a dog's age ago.

Doctor R didn't look much like a Doctor, or one of those 'respectable' humans. Her coat was torn, her jeans ripped by the barbed wire from which she rescued the cub, her face was dirty and all sweated up and her smell...even the wolf cub could sniff the body odor, the kind that happens to you when it's been a long time, or many intense experiences, between baths in the river, or whatever kind of place humans bathed.

But this human looked like she had a plan. "Knife Bend, 10 kilometers, population 1,530....On a Good Year," she read on the half official half home-graffiti sign around the curve with eyes sharp as an eagle, and maybe even guided by the Eagle Spirit. "We'd best get moving, guys," she said to Mahegan and Promethius. "I just have to get some stuff first."

It took less than five minutes, but Roberta took everything she needed, or so it seemed. Some books, her medicine pouch, a medical bag, an extra blanket, an Indian jacket that looked two hundred years old, her wallet, and a ring, taken from the glove compartment, put on the fourth finger on her left hand.

Maybe she was married to her work? It appeared so, as Promethius enjoyed a ride on her back, in a papoose fashioned from burlap sacs and an old tent... a 'pup' tent, ironically. Ahead of Roberta lay a cold, windy night, an uncertain town, and a medical mission to save another "Daniel". Behind her, everything she owned, locked up as best as she could in a Camper that had, even with an ace mechanic, one trip from nowhere to Someplace left on its odometer.

The account may have not been intuited quite that way by the injured wolf cub, but it appeared so to an Eagle who watched from atop an ancient Pine overlooking the highway. Doctor Collineur, Ph.D., D.V.M. was supposed to be on her way to the Ribbly Veterinary Clinic, an upscale, state-of-the-art medical establishment on the outskirts of Edmonton. She had worked hard at the backwater Saskatchewan Veterinary College for that position, and had double-earned the right to win over the 200-plus cream-of-the-crop veterinary graduates from A-line \$30k a year tuition Tufts, Penn, Colorado State and the like.

The Eagle spoke to itself, with Roberta's grandmother's voice. "She's graduated to a higher school now!" it laughed, and sighed.

CHAPTER 3

Knife Bend was everything it promised to be, and more. Roberta remembered something a literature Professor told his class of 126 students, heard perhaps by only her. "The character of a town is known at three times. Tuesday afternoon, when everyone is doing business of making money, Saturday night when they're spending it. And ANY morning just after dawn, when the streets are empty, when you see how wisely they spent it." Professor Kerabellas never got his novel published, but perhaps he saw it in his head, and it was now in front of Roberta's bloodshot, tired eyes.

The weary visitor to Knife Bend, in search of Peace and Harmony, was treated first to a view of Henry's Gun and Tackle Shop, featuring the newest weaponry and fishing gear available, window-dressed by photographs and art-work fresh out of the 50s, maybe early 60s. Henrietta's Hair Salon boldly showed pics of models happily showing hair doos worthy of Patsy Kline, Leslie Gore, and Farrah Faucet during the Charlie's Angels days. Harrold Wong's Chinese-Canadian Restaurant was a requirement for the one Chinese restaurant per Redneck town quota, unofficially established by the Canadian Pacific Railroad, featuring, appropriately, range beef Chop Suey and, thankfully, egg fu young with free-range chicken eggs. Hank's Pit Stop had three gas pumps out front, a "Mechanic On Duty" sign on the window, and no one inside.

"Think there's a theme here?" Roberta asked her canine colleagues as she stepped into town, looking for anything that was open, even an overpriced convenience store operated by an Indian-hating Redneck, or even an Indian-hating East Indian.

But this was about business, not political-bashing pleasure. Promethius was breathing heavy, his gums seemed less pale, and maybe the splint on his broken leg was doing more harm than good, pushing broken bone against injured flesh, rather than stabilizing the shattered limb that was in need of surgical repair, and fast. The fading paniculus response on the back indicated, maybe, progressive spinal cord injury, causing Roberta to re-run in her head, the medical procedure for emergency vertebral disc surgical repair. It was a procedure that she had seen done, once, when she slipped out of the required lectures on Veterinary Law. "Create a fenestration in the dura, laterally, then dorsally, and re-adjust the ventral spine of the vertebral process, or is it the dorsal spine?" she ran through her travel-lagged head. "Or maybe... I'll just know it when I see it. Assuming I see SOME kind of hospital open in this town. Even a goddamn drug store!"

Such were the thoughts in her head. But out of her mouth, something Promethius needed more than sound medical judgment. It was a song in Sioux, most of the words not known to her, passed down from her Grandmother. The lyrics said something about channeling the Great Spirit through the healer, the healer offering her own body, and

soul if required, for the life of the patient. The healer sacrifices the right to eat, sleep, breath or even laugh for the patient, if the Great Spirit demands it. It was a chant that had a musical quality that said more than the words.

Roberta always sang it, even in a silent, abbreviated form, to every patient. To every animal under her care. To every “Daniel” she COULD save, or help, even in a small way. And, apparently, it was working, as was, perhaps, the smoke from the Sweetgrass Roberta kept smudging over the injured wolf cub’s head.

Five miles back, Prometheus had no deep pain in his left leg, diminishing sensation in his right. A sure sign that the spinal cord and the nerves leading from it were schmucked, along with the patient’s ability to walk, according to the Established books. But Prometheus was living up to his name, defying the laws of men, medicine and gods. Deep pain had returned, to both legs. Though there were other complications now, papillary signs not so normal, abdomen not so okay, and respiration harder, and deeper.

Roberta felt her sense of humor go away. Maybe the Great Spirit had a cure in store for Prometheus, and He, or She, was going to collect from Doctor Collineur this time, for good. But there were other reasons to be somber, and concerned.

There was an ‘uptown’ side of the tracks in Knife Bend, featuring a small row of newly built Chain Name specialty shops, boutiques and grocery stores. The clients seemed to be up in the hills, in those linoleum, fluorescent, un-naturally symmetrical housing units nestled in the wooded hills, becoming less wooded with each new unit. Then, an empty lot, wild flowers struggling to hold on around its edges and through the upturned dirt in the middle. A bulldozer resting for the night in the middle of it, an arrow shot into it by someone who was brave enough to fight for the Cause of rugged individualism, but dumb enough to not know that Ancient Arrowheads can’t penetrate 5 inch-thick rubber tires. The sign over the juxtaposition of cultural agendas read “Future Site of McMillian Mall”.

“And mortuary for dying souls,” Roberta told herself, and her canine companions, remembering the lost years spent living in the worst kind of poverty - with Yuppie Kurt, aka ‘The Suit’, in the townhouse with all of that money, and no honor, compassion, or love. Kurt swore he would get revenge if he ever got out of the slammer, and could find her. She cost him time, money, and most importantly, prestige. When Roberta just ‘went with the flow’, the part time oil exec, part time dope dealer brought in lots of cash, much of which was lavished upon Roberta. She got the best of everything. Five Star restaurant meals. Shopping on Rodeo Drive in LA and Marshall Fields in Chicago. The best cars money could buy, with Sterling quality chauffeurs to match... as long as she didn’t do something outrageous, like get her own driver’s license.

She reflected on her past, thinking that bad as this is, broke as she was, tired as she was becoming, “better to be one of us than one of them, Mahegan. Even better to be

one of you, who's fighting to stay Alive, instead of economically struggling to be 'comfortable'." There was a reason why the Cree called a stupid or selfish Paleface a Munios, "those who have gone mad in the pursuit of money".

Roberta's claim was instantly put to the test when she saw a truck coming down the road, a bright red Dodge Ram, at top speed, breaking the silence, and stagnation, of the morning with a loud Indian war hoop. The details weren't clear, the identity of the people in the box of the truck fuzzy.

"Hey, over here!" she yelled out, in English, then Cree then.... fluent Fear.

The truck swerved in towards her, heading straight in to hit her head on, or so it seemed. She huddled in the ditch, hoping that the driver, apparently drunk, would take his buddies in the back, apparently White, down the RIGHT side of the road. Mahegan barked at them.

"Motts Mahegan!" she screamed at the dog. "Astum. Come here!"

Luckily, the 'my owner's life comes before my own' dog obeyed this command. Unluckily, Roberta saw the wares being displayed by the drunken Palefaces in the back of the truck.

"Hey, that's my stuff!" she yelled at them, as she saw most everything she owned, and left behind in what she thought was a secure truck, in a 'no one steals anything in this part of the country' town. So many of the things she valued, or used. The 18 inch television that could pick up any station from anywhere. The CD and tape player, along with the recordings of BB King and Beethoven. The 'good clothes' deemed so because they didn't have holes in them. The Army Surplus camping gear that had kept her going through so many wars between Mind and Spirit. "That's my stuff!" she affirmed with every emotion at her disposal, except desperation.

"Sure it is," one of them screamed out, a blue-eyed, blonde-haired teen sporting a CAT hat reading 'Heinrick's Beer', his over-the-limit alcoholic breath stinking of the demon Roberta had valiantly thrown off her own back, so many times.

"Get a job, squaw," another blasted out, a face straight out of a Norman Rockwell Church Social portrait, a sneer that reminded Roberta of all the Munios' who her Grandmother talked about during her days at the Reservations schools. The places where Indian children were taken from their parents, their hair cut off, their language forbidden, their connection with the Great Spirit replaced with a White, blue-eyed, blonde-haired Christian god who looked amazingly like General George Armstrong Custer in sandals and a grown-out beard.

"Drunken Indian, go back to the woods!" the brown-eyed one with dark hair yelled back to Roberta. Oh did she wish she could. To leave behind the despair of being

Indian and the spiritual sterility of being white, the genes for both pathologies deeply ingrained into her Half-Breed biology.

But the Eagle wouldn't have any of that. It squawked, making its presence known.

"Where to now?" she asked the bird soaring above her, hoping that her Grandmother's stories were correct, and that the Spirits above actually LISTENED to mortals below.

Mahegan barked, pawing at Roberta's thigh, scratching it with his sharp toenails, the trimming of which was always on the B-lists that Roberta never got to, or the C-lists she kept losing.

"What, Mahegan!?" she barked out. "I don't have any more dog bisquits left. We have to..."

The eyeline led her to the next destination. "Doc Henry's Veterinary Clinic," the faded letters on the weather-beaten wooden wood sign read. "Of course. Another Henry," she thought, and found herself ranting in words. "But another block, another mile, another.... town?"

Mahegan just walked forward. It was the direction Roberta had trained him to always take at times of doubt, even when lost in the woods. The arrows indicated 'forward', the direction immaterial to Roberta. Maybe it was North, South, East or West. Roberta had lost her bearings on the Four Directions, something her Grandmother always told her to never do. "You become oriented to the White Man's directions if you lose contact with Nature's, and your own."

CHAPTER 4

The sign on the door of the converted barn and tack room read "J. Henry Steiner, D.V.M.." His clients knew him as "Doc Henry". To his enemies, and friends, he was "Doctor Dinosaur." Indeed, he had survived just as many eons of global upheaval. He had logged in nearly three decades in Knife Bend in his one-man, overworked practice, surviving eras championed by the Beatles, Bob Dylan, Beegees, the Bengels and even the Backstreet Boys, remaining true to Hank Williams, SENIOR, et al, throughout. "Stuck in the fifties" described his culture, no other term other than "rugged" to his physique. The six-foot-four sixty-something anachronistic legend boasted a triple chin on his always-clean-shaven face, a haircut straight out of a US Army recruiting poster circa 1957, and a regulation redneck old-fart Bubba belly, making him appear to be an ex-NFL football defensive lineman, with an active All-American liking for fat-laden hotdogs and sugar-loaded-apple pie. When he moved, it was with a wide, determined rancher-stride, eyes front, with a bad back that tried to hold him back with every step forward.

Though he seemed to be just another colorful old man in a town championing its own fading colors, Doc Henry was a force to be reckoned with on his own turf. It was no wonder why so many children born in Knife Bend seemed to bear his name. Ten times, new veterinarians came to town to try to squeeze out a living off his discontented, or faithful, clients, and ten times they headed back to the big city, their stethoscopes between their legs. Maybe it was Doc Henry's veterinary skills, low prices, or gruff 'likability', particularly to those ignorant or insensitive clients Doc Dinosaur would lecture at with a firmly admonishing finger. Of maybe it had something to do with Knife Bend, a town that refused to change, even though the world around it had.

Henry always woke up early, whether he had clients or not. On the day Roberta walked into town, business was slow. A slow day, on a slow week, in the year that might, for real, mark the exodus of the rugged individualist of Knife Bend forever, with grain prices up, cattle prices down, and tariffs to export Canadian products to the US at an all time high. Then again, there were always emergencies, sick calves, cats or canines coming down with any number of diseases at 2 AM, the time Demon Death was most active.

Morning was a ritual, the very-single High Priest of Veterinary Medicine rolling out of his clinic cot, trudging to the bathroom guided only by the feel of his feet, slapping lather on his tired face, turning on the luke-warm water, waiting for it to get hot for the morning shave. He remembered the night before... the drive to the Heinrich Johansen's farm for the cow with bloat at 1 AM, the C-section on the Hank Newman's dog at 2:15, and the hit-by-truck cat he found on the way home, resting comfortably in a cage overlooking his 'bed'. Feeling the water warm up on his wrinkled, gnarled, frigid, and

hopefully not-too arthritic fingers, he contemplated the way the cases went, writing the schedule for the upcoming day in his head, in red ink. This was the quiet time, the sunrise to sun-up time when the phone didn't ring, and no one came up to the door. If he was lucky, Henry would think about only the business of healing animals. On a bad day, his thoughts would drift to the always-postponed agenda of healing himself. He had caused so much harm by caring so much, and using the passionate intensity inside of him the way he had done, in ways that none of his clients knew, but every animal did. For this reason, he had no pets of his own.

The shaving was all according to the way he had done it since he could grow whiskers. The left side first, feeling the smoothness underneath it, being sure to get the sideburns to just below the bottom of the earlobe. Then the chin and neck, gently rolling over the wrinkles that had become folds and now were becoming deep valleys. Then the upper lip, thinking about whether he should grow in that mustache for a second or two, then remembering how it made him look like a "Goddamn Hippie who didn't have any respect for the Bible or the Lord". Then, the right side of the face, being careful to not cut open the scar left from the dog that bit him in his first year of veterinary practice, a hound he adopted and remembered as the dog who taught him everything he knew about canine medicine.

The right-sided face-scrape was a slow affair, the lather taken off in pieces. His hands shook a little more than usual today, maybe due to pain, maybe to some kind of injury he did to it when he pulled out the last calf in the pitch-black barn from the cow that kicked harder than she hurt. As usual, he stroked above the scar, then on its side, then... as he went to take a gentle swipe off, and - a BANG on the door.

He opened the latch on the weather-worn wooden window and saw a Half-Breed woman shuffling her way to his doorstep, her back turned, her head held low, her eyes bloodshot, her long dark mane looking more like matted straw than hair.

"Another drunk Indian looking for cheap gas," he thought. "Making me cut myself shaving!" he observed, the six-inch blade of the vintage buffalo skinner piercing the skin over the scar, spilling blood into his face and fingers. "I'm coming!" he grunted, grabbing a rag to put around his hand, wiping the knife en route to the door, stomping on the floor with his boots, his face still lathered with shaving cream and clotting blood.

"I'm coming!" he groaned, grunted, then screamed as the before-hours visitor continued to knock, then pound on the door. "I'm not deaf!" he barked out, anticipating another 'hurtin' unit', there being no shortage of them since Mitchell Construction Corporation came into town, promising careers to the townsfolk, then not even delivering on jobs.

The pounding became louder, then more desperate. No "I need help here", no "please", not even a "hello". But there was the smell of something on the other side of the door, as Doc Henry reached for the wooden latch masquerading as a doorknob to

the back of his clinic, home and fortress. When he opened the creaking plank of wood, it was confirmed.

“Blood,” he said to himself, as his eye was instantly drawn to the wolf cub, passing over and ignoring the human with him. “What happened?” he asked in an assuring voice that said “everything will be okay”, even though he didn’t have a clue.

Henry’s hands instantly went for the cub’s mouth, gazing into its eyes, asking permission to open the injured jaw. Just then, a yap of disapproval, from another canine at the Old Doc’s tired, gnarled, yet still muscular legs.

“Motts, Mahegan!” Roberta said to her pet and decade-long companion. “Motts!”

Mahegan backed down, as commanded. Roberta felt something else in the leg, and the hip. Another break, another bleed, maybe another sign that something had to be fast or the hawks would be having wolf cub for lunch. She was cold, tired, and her frozen and dried out mouth barely connected to her mind. The Sweetgrass smudge in left hand was still burning. It was a mixture of Sweetgrass offered to the Great Spirit, and other ingredients used by her Shamaness Grandmother, and White Doctor Grandfather. Those extra powders and potions had various Ancient Latin names, but could still be found in a North American forest, as long as there were forests. How they stimulated the sympathetic nervous system to maintain heart, lung, vascular and brain function, Roberta never knew, and neither did any scientist she had asked. But the numbered potion mixed with Sweetgrass kept the Wolf Cub’s blood pressure up, his anxiety low, and the heart rate at “safe”, for now. Or maybe it had that effect on Roberta.

“He eh...needs...eh....,” she stuttered, pointing to the wolf’s arms.

“An IV line, yeah, yes, I know,” Henry related, checking the pups gums, finding them pale, sticky with a delay in capillary refill time.

Roberta sucked it up, smelling Redneck Horsedoc all over the half-shaved Neanderthal with the cut up face, a blood-covered Bowie knife under his belt. It went well with the freshly-touched-up 30 year old sign on the door reading “Keep America Beautiful, Get a Haircut”

“He’s gonna need antibiotics,” Roberta stated, noticing how Henry’s hands did the overall body exam. Nothing like anything she had learned in school. Fingers inside the mouth, grabbing the wrists and ankles with an apparent squeezing action, a pull on the skin over the neck, a finger under the legs for the femoral pulse, and the human ear applied to the torso while a finger pinged the underbelly, right side, left side and top of the abdominal and thoracic cavity.

“His leg is broken, in three places, at least. And his back...”

"I know," Henry said, his face hidden, the rhythm of his exam unbroken in even the smallest degree by anything Roberta was saying, or feeling.

"He got shot, by someone."

"I know," Henry came back with, anger under his concern, and poker face.

"I did what I could for him..."

No "I know" from that one.

"He's gonna need surgery," Roberta asserted. "Now!"

"I know," Doc Henry's final evaluation. "Bring him inside."

Roberta's medical instincts sprung into action, handing over the cub, slowly and carefully. But Mahegan had other ideas about his newly found buddy, and bro. "Not on your life!" he growled at the Henry, snapping at him.

"Mahegan, awas!" Roberta commanded her dog, shooing it into a chicken-wire and plywood holding pen besides the door.

"He can come in," Henry said gently to Roberta.

"Thank you," her reply, picking up her belongings, most particularly the pouch of herbs, the sweetgrass smudge still smoking.

"But I'd appreciate your leaving that leather pouch outside," Henry commanded with a tone that said 'no', based in long, hard experience. "This is a clinic, not an opium den."

It was not time for a political debate, or a cultural defense of her Grandmother, her Ancestors' Heritage. or even her own dignity. Roberta Collineur, Ph.D., D.V.M, knew she was in Doctor Henry Steiner's teepee circle now, and it was play by his rules, or "Promethius" would suffer the worst of consequences. Still, old reflexes die hard.

"That's sweetgrass. And these are medicines!" she asserted, thinking that perhaps she would need them, anticipating that the only innovative drugs this Old Coot would have would be a bottle of Penicillin, dated 1959, horse Bute for the pain, and resterilized KKK hoods for bandages. "These are medicines," she pleaded, "And I'm sorry that-"

"Inside, now," he commanded, his eyes and mind still on the cub, taking off the pieces of wood Roberta had fashioned into a splint and spine stabilizer, secretly thinking that this 'squaw' did SOMETHing right. "You people should know better than to use wildlife as target practice. Even when you're drunk!"

"I don't drink," Roberta protested, remembering that she had been dry for five years, and that one sip of beer, even offered in friendship, would tip her over the edge. "And I don't-!"

"When your husband wakes up from his hangover, tell him he could have shot one of YOUR kids, instead of this wolf cub."

Roberta looked down at her left hand. Indeed, the ring was there, put on, reflexively, on her way into town. The easiest way to say 'no' to a guy who won't take 'no' for an answer is to say 'taken already', particularly in a strange town. But the ring she put on 5 hours, and four dimensions of experience ago back at the busted truck, stuck on tight now. It wouldn't come off her red, sweaty and swollen fingers. "I'm NOT married and there is no way I'd-"

"-Pay me when you can. From your next welfare check. HIS welfare check. A woman shouldn't have to pay for her husband's cruelty, or stupidity."

"That I have no problem with." The remark about a wife paying for her hubby's 'activities' hit home with Roberta. Kurt the Suit had pulled her into a life of crime on all levels, and wouldn't let her out. The deal she made with the Feds through her lawyer to get out of the charges for drug running, embezzlement and murder, would hold only so much water. Eventually all the facts would come out of the witnesses who didn't talk. Once Kurt was out of jail, he'd find them, and her. Roberta was too unique to be protected by a new name. She was the kind of person who would never disappear into the crowd of commoners, even if her life depended on it. A Native chick who was a rugged individualist with an IQ of 160, and a social-integration quotient of less than 50. It was only a matter of time. And when she found Daniel, Kurt would find her.

But time had a different meaning now. It was about Prometheus living up to his new name and beating the odds. And it was about Roberta being sure that he did. Not so easy, after having a look around at Henry Steiner's Veterinary clinic. It was a medical museum, featuring equipment the Saskatchewan Veterinary College showed in their glass-enclosed cases on the History of Medicine. Maybe the X-ray machine worked, and, if turned on, maybe the gas anesthetic machine did. That is, if the skeleton with the cowboy hat and cigar sitting on it would help out, or if the fishing gear in front of it could be cleared away. As for the medicines on the shelves, some of it was recognizable to Roberta, most of it not. Old names, old brands, from companies she had never heard of. Indeed, she wondered if the Provincial Veterinary Association had ever heard of Doc 'Dinosaur' Steiner, or would want to.

Henry interrupted her in mid-ponder. "I can save the pup, and the leg," he stated with a fatherly assurance which he seemed to mean.

"So can I," Roberta affirmed, part rebel, part mother and part....something that the Eagle above knew about, and her Grandmother never told her.

CHAPTER 5

From a dog's viewpoint it was a frightening situation; a fellow member of the same species being cut open, pieces of flesh taken out, chunks of metal being put in. But Mahegan was told by Roberta that Promethius was being taken apart so he could be put together right. Doc Henry assured him, in fewer words, and in Redneck English, that the injured wolf cub would be okay. And that Doctor Roberta would be, too, despite her own fears, worries, and shaking hands holding the scalpel blade.

Mahegan had seen Roberta do surgeries before, and quite enjoyed it. Especially the castration of horses, bulls and cats on those house calls Roberta did before getting her license. The free-lance farmer or rugged individualist rancher would pay Roberta with eggs, chickens and some cash not reported to the tax man or the Veterinary Association. Mahegan would get a snack of prairie oysters, fresh off the hoof. But this time it was different. The scraps of muscle Roberta took out of the injured wolf cub went into a bucket, out of his range of taste, and sight.

He listened, though. The veterinarians seemed to be digging more into each other than the work at hand. Roberta, gowned from head to toe, was doing the work; Doc Henry, in a clean white shirt with a stained tie, was looking on with some kind of sneaky hidden agenda behind his kind, very fatherly eyes.

Roberta seemed to be calling the tunes, though. Doc Henry's eight-track radio played "Revolutionary Blues", off of Roberta's blues tape. Gritty, South Chicago down-but-not-out blues music, with lyrics that seemed to come from a novel by Steinbeck, Kafka or Katanzakis, the Greek with the long name and short list of gems, including Last Temptation of Christ and Zorba the Greek. Music from the blues masters who would never make it to top forty radio, or maybe even any radio in a top-forty obsessed country. It wasn't the hound's favorite, but Roberta said that the top-of-the-country-charts "Heart Party" destroyed brain cells, and Comrade, now Doctor Roberta was right. She was a certified animal doctor now, with straight As in veterinary surgery, but as for her people skills... Mahegan still considered himself her protector, and advisor.

The Heinz-57 mutt barked as he noticed Roberta shaking with apprehension.... maybe even fear... or possibly panic, Henry looking down at the table, smiling.

"It's okay, Mahegan," she pledged, her head drenched in sweat under the surgical cap. "Promethius is gonna be alright."

"Promethius?" Henry inquired gently. He looked into the eyes of the cub, staring into the backturned pupils, smelling the wolf he would become. "Looks more like a Jake. Or Billy the Kid or Wild Wolf Cody. Or pioneer Kentuckian Daniel-"

"-Not Daniel!" Roberta growled out, like a wolf mother defending her cub against a cougar twice her size.

Promethius barked. Henry shhh'ed him, with a gentle and assuring left hand, his right pointing down at the patient, reminding Roberta of the real business at hand, and a tendon she might want to consider putting another stitch into.

"He's Promethius," Roberta continued, voice calm, soul determined, brain totally focused on using all the state-of-the-art technology she had learned, or invented herself, to the cause of getting the cub up off the table so he could shit in the woods again. "Promethius. Greek mortal who told the gods on Mount Olympus who wanted to keep fire to themselves to piss off. Paid the price. Got the glory - and the pain." Roberta thought it best not to relate the rest of the tale. How Promethius of old allowed mankind to have the gift of fire, to cook their food, light their camps, and keep shivering babies from dying in the cold. And how Promethius' good and heroic deed was rewarded by having to be pinned to the ground for eternity, crows dining on his liver. Maybe Doctor Steiner heard the story, maybe he didn't. Maybe the only Greek he knew were call letters for his college fraternity, just like every other redneck Yahoo with a veterinary degree who got through school on a combination of beer, brashness, or bucks from their father's bank account.

Doc Henry still looked on, with a wide smile and understanding heart, as he noticed Roberta struggling to figure out where to go next in this textbook operation that wasn't going according to the books' promises. Tendons weren't where they were supposed to be, bleeders popping out of places unexpected, and the danger of bone crushing on flesh, with the nerves to the leg being crushed in the process. "Mahegan?" he offered by way of left handed advice, and inquiry.

"'Wolf', in Cree," Roberta replied, feeling the breath caught in her tight chest go back down toward her gut, releasing itself... as Doc Henry's finger 'inadvertently' pointed to another bleeder about to spurt open.

Roberta snagged the blood vessels before they could spurt upon her. She knew they were there, before Doc Henry pointed to them. Still, she was appreciative of the 'advice', and the interest in the canine that kept her interested in life, rather than her own death. "Mahegan gave a piece of his right ulna and left jawbone to protect me from Kurt. The Suit," she related.

"The suit?" Henry inquired.

Roberta's hands shook, her brain and soul edging towards paralysis as to what to do next. Mahegan barked. Henry went to open a fresh pack of gloves to take over. Roberta 'sucked it up', and got her medical ass back into gear, wielding the hemostats and suture needle like a Symphony Conductor tackling Beethoven's 9th, with the determination that Life will and MUST conquer anything that prevents Its full expression.

"The Suit," she continued, Henry smiling with 'pride' from a safe distance. "Creature who turns from a rock concert dream mate into a yuppoid psycho when you try to live outside his shadow, or on the clean and sober side of-!" She stopped, the memory of

the past instantly freezing her hands and mind in the present, the hemostat from her hand dropping to the floor.

Mahegan perked his head up. This was trouble he had never expected on this road trip. But there was also an unexpected helping hand, in the form of a big, White human paw holding a fresh pair of hemostats.

"These gloves," Henry said. "They make you drop things. New kind of plastic in them."

"Yeah," Roberta slurred out, assessing with her eye the medical problem at hand. As predicted, a bone break in three places that had to be repaired with everything she had learned by the book, and some extra tips, from her OWN manual.

"You've had a long and rough night. You want me to take over?" Henry asked.

"No," her reply, grabbing the hemostats, preparing the busted leg for a complete plate and wire repair job, no matter what it cost.

"You got it, Doc," Doctor Steiner said with a dispassionate voice, but a subtext that meant something else. Maybe it was "Good Girl" or maybe "Arrogant Bitch", or something in between. But there was a history behind his poker face, one that he hadn't revealed to anyone, even an animal, for a long, long time.

About five "are you sure you don't want me to take overs" later, Mahegan still watched. This time, it was with a top view. Doc Steiner gave him a stool as a jumping point. The view from the counter of the clinic's examining table was comfortable. A kind of wooden linoleum, soft to the belly, gentle on the paws. With an eyeline two feet above Promethius, his head as high as the humans operating on him. Just like in the front seat of the truck. And the sight was magnificent, medically-speaking.

"Putting in a lot of screws," Henry commented as Roberta cranked in the twelfth half-incher into the home-made plates holding Promethius' fractured femor into one solid, and hopefully functional, limb, now more metal than bone. "And with all of that hardware you used on the vertebral processes, I'll have to buy out whatever's on the shelves at Hank's Hardware supply."

"The rule at the Saskatchewan Veterinary College. Three screws on both sides of the fracture. No more than 2 centimeters apart," she shot back in a scholarly tone.

"True enough," Henry conceded. "In a hundred pound St. Bernard, or a horse."

"I'm paying for these screws, plates and wires, right?" Roberta grunted, poised to use the scalpel on the 'Good Doctor's' tongue.

“And you’re doing a brilliant job putting them in,” his comeback, delivered with a warm smile and congratulatory nod.

“Thank you,” Roberta found herself saying, and meaning.

“I always thought you people would make great veterinarians once you applied yourselves,” Henry graciously proclaimed.

“Yeah,” Roberta replied from the side of her mouth. “We people’ got ‘lectricity’ in our teepees now an’ everthin’. Caught onto that new invention, too. What was it again, the wheel?”

Henry’s upturned lips turned abruptly downward, his muscles tensing, ready for a fight.

Mahegan barked. No one was going to interfere with Roberta’s work, or well being. Not as long as he was still able to bark, bite, or take a dump on the assaulting party’s lawn, desk, or car seat.

“Motts, Mahegan! Motts! No!!!” Roberta yelled again.

Begrudgingly, Mahegan backed down, though Henry had not. Yet, the Good or perhaps not-so-Good Redneck Doctor took another look at Roberta’s metallic surgical handiwork, from several angles.

“Precision alignment,” he complimented on the bridges between the shattered pieces of bone. “Textbook stuff,” the cudo.

“The space between fractured bones should be no more than 2 millimeters. Retrospective review article in JAVMA last week.”

“In the hands of a competent surgeon, a broken bone will heal as long as the pieces are in the same room,” the retort, fueled by a volcano Roberta had unexpectedly uncapped. “A fact that I’ve proven on this table for the last twenty-seven years!”

This time, Mahegan’s growl turned into a snarl as well. No one yelled at Roberta like that, for any reason.

Roberta’s “Motts’s” didn’t work. The only thing protecting Doc Henry from getting a free canine-facilitated removal of a finger, or a hand, was the fact that Mahegan was stranded on an examining table, too high up to jump off.

The barking continued, the noise level escalating. Prometheus whined as the anesthetic started to wear off. Then, a jolt of the wolf cub’s good leg, another bleeder saying ‘howdy’, dangerously close to the sciatic notch.

Roberta dealt with the bleeder, Henry with Mahegan.

With head bowed, hand outstretched, palm to the dog's mouth, Steiner edged in closer and closer, assuring Mahegan that he was his friend, and Roberta's and Promethius', though his pronunciation of the cub's Hellenic name was highly inaccurate and Americanized.

Growls gave way to soft barks, then to sniffs, then to a sample lick of Henry's hand. Steiner honored the gesture of trust. He patted Mahegan on top of his head, licked his nose, and offered him a chunk of his morning donut, the big portion, with the jelly, which Mahegan naturally expected would be his portion, anyway.

"Doctor?" Roberta said in a pleading and panicked tone.

Henry calmly walked to his medicine cabinet, his back turned to Roberta. "Coming," he answered with a casual flair that seemed lazy, complacent, or perhaps non-caring.

The signs were all alarming to Roberta. Pupils coming back to central location, and dilating in an oscillating manner. Palpebral reflexes coming back to the eyelids. Signs of withdrawal reflexes returning to the forelimbs and opposite hindlimb. And the anticipation of a neck turning. "He's coming out of the anesthesia! Fast!"

"And he'll go back down, slowly, and safely." Henry shot in two cc's of an unlabelled anesthetic into the mismatched bunch of surplus human hospital tubing adapted as an IV line.

True to his word, and predictions, Promethius went under, his mouth upturned, consistent with the guess, hypothesis, or fact that he was dreaming about chasing happy wolf cubs or asshole hunters out in the bush.

"We always used gas anesthetic at Saskatchewan Veterinary College, according to National Veterinary Association recommendations," Roberta commented, noting that the dust on valves of the legally-required gas anesthetic machine was rust.

"Here in the REAL world we use treatments that work," Henry countered. "The kind that REAL people can afford. I haven't lost a single patient to anesthetic overdose. Like to see the eggheads at the Saskatchewan Veterinary College or ANY Veterinary College match THAT!" He turned his back, throwing the used needle into the sharps bin, the syringe into a bowl for cleaning and re-sterilization. "And I'd like you to show some respect for your elders, Young Lady," he affirmed with a stare aimed straight at Roberta's Soul, and so many other people he had instantly seen in her.

"Young Lady?" Roberta's reply, genuinely inquisitive about where the old coot was coming from, and why.

Mahegan held his piece, Promethius' body and mind safe and secure... for the moment.

It was Roberta's turn to be civil, Henry's to scream at skeletons in his closet who had decided to come out for a walk, and a taunt.

"Your generation is only concerned with themselves!" he screamed back. "Everything is 'me, me, me'! You throw away anything that doesn't keep you entertained! Principles! Values! People!!! ALL of you!!!"

"Not all of us!!!" Roberta shot back with a blow that hit him where he lived, and shut him up. "Not all of us," she added, tenderly remembering things about her past she would not explain, or maybe couldn't.

Mahegan barked again. A "back to business, guys" notice. At least that's how Roberta took it. She took stock of herself, the progress of the surgery she had done, the distance to go, and her empty energy tank.

"Hey, Doctor Steiner. Maybe you should take over here. It's been a long night. A rotten morning and-"

"-We'll finish this together." Steiner gloving up. "Your head, my hands. When yours get tired."

The Warring healers nodded to each other, then got back to work. Roberta dissected, sewed and stitched. Steiner cut the odd piece of wire or suture when instructed to, but was following another set of protocols in his head. It was a plan that would involve the hard-working Roberta in ways that she would never imagine, and the kind-hearted Mahegan would never understand.

CHAPTER 6

Some folks said that Norma Poundstone loved animals too much. Some said she understood people too little. Others said she was a combination of lonely, defiant and old. But like the little old lady who lived in the shoe, Knife Bend's resident "Animal Collector" had so many critters that she didn't know what to do. Then again, she did.

The five-foot four spitfire with the long, straggly white hair and blazing blue eyes sat in her barn, surrounded by four-legged, and some three-legged, furry creatures. They ranged from dogs, to cats, to raccoons, to shotgun-injured squirrels. The house was already full, the master bedroom residence for twenty-one stray cats, the den for the abandoned pups. The bathtub for Daffy, the wild duck who had the misfortune of being splattered by the non-existent oil spill from Mitchell Construction, which was coming very close to making Knife Bend's only fishing pond non-existent of life.

Though Norma gave off a contagious aura of caring and sharing, everything she owned, or wore, stank of ammonia or urine. The smell of odorous discharges from creatures became as common to her nostril as the scent of Italian sausage and NJ Transit System bus fumes to a toll collector in Newark. But, maybe it was a good thing. Norma lived alone by choice, or so she kept telling everyone who visited, as she offered then another cookie, coffee or piece of apple-crisp pie.

Chores ran late that day. By 8:30 the first call came in on the speaker phone, doubling as a nest for a one-legged mother sparrow. This time, it started with a clearing of the throat, a familiar caller at the other end. She listened as she groomed the next dog, putting special ingredients into its coat.

"This is Sergeant Klassin, Ms. Poundstone," the very male, very stern baritone voice announced before it became indifferently 'official'. "We have a report that you may have in your possession a dog named "Blacky," owned by Tyrone Mitchell, CEO of the construction company you have filed a protest against. We are aware that you've reported that this animal has been neglected and, on occasion, chastised unfairly, but..."

Norma answered the silence with a confident eyeroll. She looked at the White canine in front of her, noting that its black fur was not completely concealed by the dye applied. Maybe a little more platinum than white, but it worked for her, and, by the contented and grateful look in "Blacky's" eyes, it worked for him, too.

"Norma, please," Sergeant Klassin continued, speaking as a fellow citizen of Knife Bend rather than a hired official of the Provincial Government. "The Mitchells have money. Lawyers. And judges who WILL back them up..."

Norma answered this pause with caution, and the most agonizing pain for compassion-valuing revolutionaries. That conflict of loyalties thing again. Henry Klassin was an honorable cop, and a good man. His kids didn't deserve to starve because Norma cajoled or intimidated him into looking the other way, all those other times when

she adopted abused animals outside the law. Helping Norma almost cost Klassin his job on more than one occasion, yet Norma had to do what the law, and the legal institutions, didn't, or wouldn't.

The Animal Shelter servicing Knife Bend was two towns away, run by an ex-con masquerading as an animal lover, who didn't give a shit about anything except lining her own pocket, the board composed of social climbers who only cared about their own egos and a cut from the booty. Animals coming in were killed in three days if not claimed. If they came in owned by an enemy of the President or a board member, said creature would not even be alive long enough to enjoy a last meal. It drove Norma from being an animal-responsible citizen to Mother Theresa for anything bearing fur, feathers, or fins.

On the phone, a long silence. Sgt. Klassin said nothing, dead air conveying his ultimate meaning. Maybe today was the day he would send his crew out to her place and do a complete inspection, by the book. "Norma...Norma..." he pleaded. "If you don't answer me, now, I'm going to have to come out there myself."

Norma held her composure, and "Whitey". "You'll be okay," she assured the newly-Caucasioned-colored canine. "We'll all be okay."

Then, the heartfelt whine from Blacky, appended by a symphony of meows, cackles, barks, whinnies and moos in the background. Then, a prayer offered silently by the 62 year old VERY ex-Catholic to God asking that He (or She) "get back from His/Her lunchbreak already."

Then, a deep breath, bracing herself for a life behind bars, or worse, in a big house with no animals. Then, from Klassin. "Okay, Norma. I guess I should spend the day doing something important, like checking parking meters or looking for Colombian drug lords down at Henrietta's Bar and Grill."

With the click of the phone, Norma gave a thumbs up to "Whitey". The hound licking her wrinkled, weatherworn hands, the fingers still long and, under the scales, quite feminine, and beautiful.

"Blacky! Is that you?" rang out from the back of the barn. It was a familiar voice, one Norma recognized, and always obeyed, even when spoken at with a question.

"He's Whitey, now," Norma insisted as Terri Kewlaski sauntered up to the picnic table converted into a treatment platform.

Terri was in a green mood that day, quite literally. The 21 going on 15 Neo-Hippie with the bell-bottoms and eco-objective was sporting a wavy doo the color of the Emerald Isle, and twice as boldly stated. Her walk was always a dance, her laugh always a symphony, her smile always contagious...and annoying! Particularly to Norma.

She had stolen, and intended to keep, the dog owned by The Montreal Mitchells, who now all but owned most of the financial assets, property and mortgages in Knife Bend.

There was much that could be said as Terri approached the eight hundred dollar dog that had been periodically abused and often abandoned by the Mitchells, even by legal definition. She could have said “the only chain around you have now is to the stars, Whitey”. It could have been “the Mitchell’s maid threw you scraps fillet mignon, but Norma, and me, or whoever we find for you will give you love.” Or it could have been “no more spending 23 hours in the crate and an hour in the living room to show off to the reporters, bankers and lawyers”. Instead, it was “he’s got Bill’s eyes.”

Norma returned the ‘innocent’ observation with an eyeroll, a stare of disapproval for the smile that stayed firmly on Terri’s face. “Bill’s dead, Terri,” Norma replied. “As my husband and friend, he gave me twenty great years.”

“And someone else could give you two hundred more!” Terri’s reply.

“Like who? A Tibetan llama, or one of those old coots from the Ukrainian steppes who eats yogurt and sunflower seeds?”

“I think we can find you someone, if we look real hard. It’s hard to be alone, ya know?”

“Yes, I DO know,” Norma replied. “I know that being alone scared a young person, and sustains an older one.”

“Wow. That sounds, like...”

“A quote. From Albert Einstein.”

“Einstein...hmmm,” Terri thumbed through the phone book under “E”, behind Norma’s back, or so it seemed.

“Einstein’s dead, too,” Norma commented, with a smile.

“And you’ll be, too. If you don’t find someone to be alone with,” Terri shot back.

The cupid’s arrow from the eco-warrior/pacifist hit Norma where she lived. That dwelling was a place of compassion and caring, but a place that needed... something to keep it going besides another day, another stray creature in need of help.

Just then, a truck pulled into the driveway, screeching in at full speed from the road, slowing down to ‘farm speed’ instantly as it hit the loose gravel. A 14 year old beater with a rebuilt engine, bent right and left fenders, but a clean, simonized shine. A tall figure more like a bear than a man emerging from it, and twice as sweaty. But with a clean white shirt, a tie, and a big, bold dinosaur stride.

It was back to business for Norma, five of the twenty cats needing vaccinations, three a medical test for Feline Leukemia virus. The arthritis leg on the nearly three-legged collie left behind by its owners as they skipped the rent in a midnight, end of the night move. The kitten with 'accidental oven' burns on its tail, belly and face from the Blanchards, the very White, rigidly-Christian family with recently-discovered 'children behavioral' problems. A check on the gunshot wound on the half-deaf, half-blind German Shepherd left by ex-wife A when ex-hubby B tried to take custody of said canine along with the kids for an extra hour on visitation day, the courts deciding who gets what while Demon Death called for another round of battle with Doc Henry and Mamma Norma.

As Henry marched into the barn, a wide grin on his face, a bold mission in his stride, Norma thought of one thing. "What's Terri thinking behind those smiling eyes?" she thought. The Neo-Hippie Aquarius was possessed by a new wonderment, a new plan that would transform Norma's life and life mission forever, so it seemed. Whether Norma wanted it or not.

"What's going on, Terri?" 'Mama Norma' asked Apprentice Good Samaritan First Class Kewalski.

"Nothing," the reply, Terri's poker face hidden behind a very wide smile.

Little did Norma know that this 'nothing' from Terri would be a something which would threaten everything she had worked, and slaved, for.

CHAPTER 7

Knife Bend's town clock was always behind the rest of the world. Sometimes it was five minutes, sometimes ten. It depended on the ticker in the chest of the cowboy on the bronco, from which the minute hand jutted out. But no one seemed to care. It was more important that the Cowboy determined the hour, than that Mean Greenwich Time determine the movements of the Cowboy's hands on the clock. Appropriate, since the likeness was taken after Heinrich Richter, a German Immigrant who fled Europe after the Pan-European 1848 peasant revolts failed. The rights of the Commoners were sold out to the Middle Class, who ruled with money, rather than Regal Authority of bloodlines.

No one was sure of Heinrich's real story, but the legend was as believable as any fact, and ten times more useful. No Hollywood film-maker or Toronto publisher ever printed the story, or the legend. Both were too.... human, celebrating the rugged individualist in a way that put a mirror in front of the faces of people TODAY.

But somewhere between becoming a man (or woman), and consenting to be a Knife Bend 'citizen', every child was exposed to the tale from one of the unofficial White Elders. On occasion, the legend came from one of the "Old Injuns" who pitched their two thousand dollar trailers besides the two-thousand year old Medicine Wheels outside of town. Those rare patches of Natural Grassland, thus far, were still not covered by concrete or made to bleed with the plow.

'Old Heinrich' Richter hit the shores of New York in 1850. It was a land filled with opportunity for immigrants with compassion and intelligence, and the courage to put it into practice. It was a place from which he could recruit support for a People's Revolution that honored the People and served the Truth. He came well armed for the task, with a suitcase filled with leather-bound volumes of the writings of Plato, Emmanuel Kant, Cervantes, Goethe and Shakespeare, along with another suitcase with books written by his own hand. Some of the stories would be converted to opera, orchestrated and presented to the New World by an Old Friend in the struggle against Tyranny of the Spirit, Richard Wagner, a fellow intellectual exiled from his homeland with a price on his head. An opera house and cultural center for the Arts in the Wilderness of the New World, accessible to all classes, all races and all religions. According to Plato, it would only naturally follow that a Utopian Society would emerge around it.

The Nordic ideal of boldness in a New Land! A new adventure for a the New Vikings!
A place
where you boldly said what you felt, knew and believed in.... just before you got thrown in jail for trying to undermine the economic power of the American Industrialists by trying to give dignity to the Irish factory workers. And, the even graver offense of bringing to life the dead Passions of a WASP Steel Baron's 'good little' wife, who took up the banner of liberation for the sake of the Emerald Isle Immigrants.

Heinrick was tossed into the clink, the door locked behind him... by an Irish Cop. The key was to be set aside for the next thirty years, but when Confederate Guns opened fire on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, and the First Battle of Bull Run told EVERYone that it would be a long, hard, bloody fight, opportunity knocked on Heinrick's cell door.

The deal was that he'd take the place of a conscripted lad from Syracuse. Said 19 year old was from a well-respected family, with enough pull to negotiate the deal. Heinrick was issued a Union Army jacket two sizes too small, trousers three sizes too large, and two left shoes, which he felt appropriate to his political affiliations.

Nothing about the War fit. The North, with three states still allowing slavery, fighting to teach the rebs that Slavery would not be tolerated South of the Mason Dixon Line. A Commanding Officer who brought his Black Servants, and Mistress, with him to Training Camp in Southern Pennsylvania. A Black Soldier, an escaped slave, whipped nearly to death for refusing to polish the Commanding Officer's boots. A horse, dubbed "Horatio", owned, and abused, by said Commander.

"Horatio" was the only thing that Heinrick related to, in the days just before the Third New York Regiment set out to do battle with the Army of Northern Virginia in Western Maryland. The steed appreciated Heinrick's gentle touch, his private performances of "Die Fliegender Hollander" and "Ode the Joy", and his conviction that there would be ONE horse and ONE rider who would not be pulled into the madness that was, ultimately, about the balance of American wealth, with puppeteers from Washington, Richmond, London, Paris and Berlin.

It was a fast ride Westward on that fateful night. Heinrick pushed Horatio as hard as the steed could go, and then some. Shot rang to his right, left, and a bullet found its way into his thigh. Then his life was saved, by the Confederate Army. His "Comrades" shot at by Rebs.

By dawn, the Confederate line advanced to engage the Third New York Regiment in hand-to-hand combat. By breakfast, nine out of every ten bluecoats wore red blood over their dead bodies. The others were on their way to Andersonville, the Commander holding firm to his conviction that the battle was lost because the Dutchy Deserter gave away his position.

Horatio and Heinrick kept going, Westward past the factories, past the farms, disappearing into endless sea of grasses that offered no definition to the eye except Infinity, to a man bold enough to grasp and embrace such a concept.

Revolutions need money, even People's Revolutions. So, Heinrick figured on following the gold trail, to a little known site, revealed to him by an Indian who told him "riches beyond your imaginations" would be there upon his arrival. Little did Heinrick know that it was a collection of Medicine Wheels, allowing access to Mystical Powers far more powerful than money chests of Princes and Principalities. At least to the Old Indian.

There was some gold, enough to get by. Then enough water, enough for a town to be built. Then enough people, once the railroad came through. Heinrich never built his opera house, and old friends from the other side of the Great Waters declined his invitation to found a New Society within an unsettled country. Richard Wagner decided to 'tough it out' in Europe, once he was re-invited into the 'loop' by Kaiser Wilhelm, and given his own theater at Bayreuth. Karl Marx found a publisher in Europe, and an always accessible collaborator in Engels.

"Make do with less, and never be satisfied with a life less than magnificent!" Heinrich would preach in words and deed to every newcomer arriving in the town he named "Knife Bend." The map makers thought it was taken after the twisting creek-sometimes-river below Heinrich's front door. Little did they understand that it had a deeper meaning, "bending the fight so you could win it!" according to the town Patriarch.

The Socialist Revolution, with such things as free health care and education for all, came to the Prairies forty years after Heinrich's death. His written works were pure insanity or inspired genius, depending on whom you asked. The real answer was Academic, since all of them were destroyed in the fire that took his cabin. As for Heinrich himself, he went down with the cabin, trying to save the books. Charred body and manuscripts were absorbed by the River after the Fire Department inadvertently induced a mudslide. The Old Indians said that the River would give those books back to the world.... when the world was ready for them.

"Old Heinrich" struck high noon with his roping and writing finger. Underneath, the streets reeked of a town flavor that could not be bottled, as if the ghost of Heinrich Richter was nurturing the stew himself.

There was "Cowboy Hank", coming back to work at his garage from his morning ride on his horse. A young man with a honking-big mustache that made him look like an older one, a brown hat over his eyes making him seem like a very private one. No one knew why Henry Ralson came into town barely a year ago, and how he instantly fit in. He never had money problems, but he worked damn hard for every dollar earned shoeing a horse, breaking a colt, or fixing a truck. He always said that "if it got legs, I can ride it or talk to it, but if it got wheels, I'll take me a little longer." He had a body every man wanted, a face every woman wanted to be with, and never a speck of stubble around the Walrus soupstrainer on his upper lip.

Heinrich 'watched' Cowboy Hank ride by underneath him, dismount, and park his horse in a corral behind the garage. Apples and carrots awaited the steed, dropped off by Terri, her bicycle license reading "Cars Pollute the Planet." Why she was working for Cowboy Hank as her ace mechanic was a mystery to him, but never crossed her mind. Then again, Heinrich always knew that consistency had its contradictions.

Construction workers walked towards Henrietta's Café, oblivious to the plan of their boss to shut down their favorite eating establishment, once the new Mall was contracted

to the very silent partners of Mitchell Development in Toronto. Maybe they'd get a reading from Psychic Susie, a mentally challenged person who, without warning, would say things that challenged the most brilliant minds in town.

White kids out for recess, riding their bikes, some new, some repolished from the pawn shop by their parents. A few half-breed boys in baggy pants, scuffling around, some on home-made skateboards. One or two kids not knowing what race they were, or wanted to be.

It was all seen by the Eagle and, according to Psychic Suzy, Heinrick. But something else was visible to everyone who looked beyond what the eye could see. A new car in town, license plate "WIN", matching the new Transam's fifty-thousand dollar price tag. A driver in a thousand dollar suit, fifty dollar sunglasses, and a million dollar ego, matching a look that said 'first class'.

There was nothing offensive about him as he got out of the car and took a look around. The kids watched, both White and Indian. Maybe he was an American movie star, looking to buy a cabin that he'd use one week a year for his Canadian vacation. Maybe he was a politician, looking to see how many votes he'd get by putting Knife Bend on the list of places to hit with radio ads. But there was something very Yankee about him. Only an American would be so upright, so confident, so... sure of himself.

He looked, scanned, and took pictures, of everything. When the kids came up to him, thinking to ask for his autograph, he took their picture, smiled, and gave them the Polaroid. "Cool," most of the youngsters said as they saw themselves in living color, their three dimensional smiles shining through on the two dimensional snapshots.

"Cold," said the runty kid in the bunch, noting how the stranger looked at Roberta's truck undergoing repairs by Ace Mechanic 'Terri the K'. "Dangerous," the half-breed half-pint said as he noted the stranger taking photos of the license plate - "VetDoc" with Native ornament around it. Then, looking closer, finding Doc Henry Steiner's one-sheet pamphlet of services and contact numbers crumbled on the dash. "Big Trouble," the pre-school prophet muttered to himself as the 'stallion' got back into his TransAm steed and galloped away, just as Roberta emerged from the fast-food counter of the multi-purpose garage. She was smoking unfiltered cancer sticks like a chimney, scraping the chalk off the pin number of the five dollar calling card, heading towards the pay phone, completely unaware that the visitor had pegged her number, and would be calling it very soon... on HIS timetable.

Not even Heinrick could alter the clocks on the events that were now firmly set in motion.

CHAPTER 8

April 20th was a special day on the Collinear family calendar, but no one would let Roberta forget that she was born on Hitler's birthday. Aries, the ram. If there was open prairie all around her, but a three foot rock between her and where she wanted to get, the rock would have to be moved out of the way before she proceeded. "Intensity is your life," Grandma Collinear would tell her in a gentle voice. "And it will kill you," she added with a smile, never telling her most prized grand-daughter if her defiance against all authority, even kind authority, was a gift or a curse. To Grandmother, gifts and curses were the same thing... opportunities.

But on this day, in this town, in this state of below-broke economics, opportunity had to be connected to and confirmed - fast. The calculations said she had enough gas to get to Kelowna, the contract with the Ribbly Clinic promising payment within two weeks. Living on dog food was good enough for Mahegan, and had been good enough for Roberta during more than one bridge month between student loan checks. But once she got to White Rock, the White Folks would be eating out of HER hand.

The phone receiver felt cold against her tired and sweat-drained fingers. Everything on Prometheus had gone well, or so she thought. When all the incisions were sutured, there were no leaks from unexpected bleeders. The cub woke up from Doc Henry's 'private recipe' anesthetic reversal agent ahead of schedule. Henry offered to put the animal up at the clinic, but the mounting bill incurred for cost of materials, and his all-too eager offer to have the cub there 'as long he wants or needs a bunk bed', told Roberta that home care was the best care.

Her home, for the moment, was still the Camper, behind the truck cab, behind the engine that needed the kind of surgical skills only a ditzed out mechanic-ecological genius like 'Terri the K' had. The neighborhood kids watched, and waited for something to happen. There wasn't much else to do in Knife Bend and when strangers burst into town, it was always an event.

As the seconds lingered into minutes on the phone, Doctor Roberta wondered. "What's taking so long? The secretary said that Doctor Ribbly was ten seconds away from the phone two minutes ago." She waved at Mahegan, pawing at the window of the Camper, his new little buddy under his arm. "It's alright. I'm on hold. A place and condition shared by millions of people across this great, raped land and..."

A click, and jerk back into action, and, as the kids saw it... a dropped jaw, a shattering of a lifeline when the secretary returned to the phone. "What do you mean I was supposed to be there this morning?" Roberta burst out, noting as Heinrich's little hand ticked past noon. "I got delayed. I can get there by..."

Roberta looked at her watch, estimating the mileage and time. But before the numbers and proportions could be worked out to a workable integer, 'zero' came over the phone.

“What do you mean, don’t hurry? You’ll call me when there’s another opening? I have a contract, in writing.”

The delay, then...”I know, contingent on my being there by the morning of... today. But...”

The list of ‘sorries’, ‘we already got someone else,’ and ‘we will keep your resume on file’ came across cold as ice from the secretary who had been warm, enthusiastic and even bubbly just a few minutes ago, before she had a conversation with ‘the boss’. The top veterinary internist in Western Canada, who had selected Roberta to top the list of 240 applicants for a dream job in his state-BEYOND-the-art clinic, was either ‘with a patient’, ‘on the other line’ or ‘in conference’, depending on which lie Receptionist “Maggie” decided to use between the half-truths she was well trained to deliver.

All that was left for Roberta were a civil “Right...Right...” to a very powerful dude who could make or break your career anywhere West of Medicine Hat. Then, a final... “Wrong!” as she rammed the receiver onto the phone, a flushed face filtering a chill of ‘nothing’ going through her shaking body, and a final scream of frustration out to the gods.

The neighborhood kids retreated backwards, keeping an eye on the irrationally-enraged Injun Animal Doc from a safe distance. The scream was primal, and desperate. To any normal human being in possession of their faculties of logic or reason, it sounded deadly to anyone within ten feet.

Yet Terri Kewlaski had no logic based in reason. “Yer truck is alive again,” she said with an obnoxiously optimistic smile.

“How much?” Roberta replied back, looking in her purse, calculating that after the repair bill, she would have six days of eating money, or six hundred miles of travel distance, left in the Warchest.

“Negativity is bad karma,” Terri offered as reminder, and gentle suggestion.

“How much!” Roberta pushed out with full force through gritted teeth, the blood between those choppers still being her own.

Terri unfolded the bill, slowly. Roberta breathed, deeply... praying, silently.

“Six Hundred and fifty bucks,” Terri related as if it was another “I’m happy ‘cause I was born that way” song on the Charts.

“What!” Roberta’s rant, as she snatched the bill, checking it for herself.

“I only charged you for three hours of labor,” Smilin’ Terri related. “The GUYS in Harrison would have charged you for at least eight.”

"Yeah, we GALS gotta stick together," Roberta shot back sarcastically, an emotion Terri never quite understood.

The payphone rang. The thoughts ran through Roberta's mind. Maybe it was a paperwork mistake with the Ribbly Clinic. A bitchy Secretary, a misprint on the fax, or some inter-office shuffle that finally settled itself. They wanted her back! They had to! She had worked hard, done right by the animals in vet school, tried to do right by the people who were presumably helping her help the animals. Nature REQUIRED that brilliance and hard work be rewarded with acceptance.

Three, rings, then four, then... "Hello." Roberta, out of breath, spoke into the receiver, letting a smile come to her face after a night and morning that was a nightmare by White or Indian standards.

"Please deposit two dollars and forty cents for the last..." read the machine at the other end of the phone. Not even a person! A goddamn machine adding chemically-treated salt to her open wound.

This time, the scream was going to go Eastward all the way to Toronto, and Westward PAST the Pacific Ocean. Nothing could stop the rage from going full bore now! Yet, one man with a soft voice, with a strangely mystical power, intervened.

"Your X-rays, Doctor Collineur," Doc Henry said in a deep, baritone voice that was gentle in its tone and intention. As a professional, he presented himself to the public, and Roberta, in a clean blazer, pressed white shirt, tie and blue trousers. The only thing not 'neat and tidy' about him were the manure-stained soles of his polished Oxfords.

Roberta could feel his condescending look at her shabby jeans, buckskin jacket, and unwashed everything underneath. She had seen his kind in vet school before. Redneck Vets from rural anywhere who thought that a man's place was to do the C-sections on the cows, the woman's place to serve him milk, potatoes and bacon afterwards. These guys were always smiling, as long as 'the little women' knew their place, and stayed there.

"This place is a time warp," she concluded as she examined the post-op X-rays, affirming that plates, wires and rods were in the right place, and that the wolf cub could safely travel with her to her next destination...wherever that would be now. "This small town is a Twilight Zone, and you're a defective clone of Rod Serling."

"Come again?" Henry's comment, with a confounded country grin.

"Rod Serling. From the Twilight Zone. Writer who always puffed a cigarette before he told the audience what they were going to see?"

"Smoking. Bad for the health," Henry's comment, noting the pack of cigarettes in Roberta's pocket. "The devil's way to an early grave."

"Which will be someplace ELSE for this Indian cowgirl, partner!"

"No veterinarian under me smokes. Less time for you to spend in your later years treating my animals."

"YOUR animals!!!" the blast back at the smiling Redneck with the Buddha belly.

Mahegan barked an ear piercing expression of concern.

"Motts, Mahegan!" Roberta yelled out. "Motts!." The dog persisted, barking louder each time. "I'll see about this bill, then I WON'T see you, or this town!"

Roberta stormed into the back room of the garage. Mahegan barked to beat the band. Doc Henry raised his finger to his nose, giving dogs that reassuring 'look' he acquired from a place of which he never spoke.

Mahegan ceased barking. Henry petted him on the head, offering his finger to the cub for a bonding lick. "It's gonna be alright, boys," he assured them. "It's all going to be okay, for all of us," the append as he looked away from the canines. It was a superstition, or maybe just a constantly proven fact. Look an animal in the eye when you're holding something back from another person, or yourself, and it's a lie. But would this lie hold water? Would it work? And would it serve the Truth, as the Old Doc saw it? It had to. There was no time left, and opportunity knocks only once to do right that which you had done so wrong in the past.

CHAPTER 9

Business was business, but before life's business came... Life business. Every day for the last eight years she made the call, and every day the same answer. Maybe today would be a different answer. Everything else had gone so wrong for Roberta. She was broke, tired, unemployed, and even lost sense of the Four Directions, North seeming like South, East like West. After all, Knife Bend was a time warp, but maybe today, a worm hole to her most precious destination would finally appear.

The cement hallway to the backroom of the repair shop was empty, save for a single payphone. The black linoleum was mostly white, paper left on top of it from old condom ads and rodeo events that had been partially torn off. The receiver felt ice cold in Roberta's shivering hand as she picked it up, inserted the required change, and dialed the number her fingers had punched out for countless sleepless nights. She muttered Grandmother's prayer to the Great Spirit under her breath. Though Roberta didn't understand the words, she felt its music, and in its music was its Power.

At the final 'stanza' of the offering, her own voice spoke to her at the other end of the line. "This is Roberta Collineur, Daniel's natural mother. Daniel was born on January 11, 1994 at Calgary Hospital, adopted by coerced consent soon after his birth. He was last seen at..."

Impatiently, she pressed the '6', speeding up the greeting on the 1-800 number she had advertised everywhere she went, with the posters, the flyers, and the radio spots that could be afforded. The courts said Roberta wasn't to know the identity of the step parents, as did the shrink in the locked ward in which she spent three months as a patient. That sabbatical was worse than being a prisoner. Deemed 'involuntary', at the age of 16, there was no release date set, or talked about, till she talked the talk that the Soul dead doctors and nurses wanted to hear. It took nearly a year with her Grandmother for Roberta to find her voice again.

Roberta's mind, tired beyond all measures of exhaustion, reviewed everything about Daniel, past, present and future. What he ate for his big Zero-Two birthday party. All the friends whom he had played tag with on the playground at preschool. The puppy that would raise him, until he could raise the pooch. The song he sang this morning for the White teacher at the White school that would get him into the White college of HIS choice. The smile he would give her when she finally found him, a smile he was reserving just for her.

Such were the hopes, and the dreams, with each call, every day, without fail.

"There are no new messages on your machine," the mechanized operator mouthed back in a monotonous drone. Such was the reply for the last four years, after every call, every day, without fail.

"Tomorrow is always better than today, if you let it be," she remembered. It was what Grandmother said, every day, without fail, every day of her life. Even during the bout of

cancer that got worse, sadistically taking her ability to speak, and smile, before taking her life.

But today was about moving on, and standing your ground. Getting another tomorrow for those who had no more tomorrows. Demanding a re-estimation of the repair bill was a matter of principle. If a White man takes a dollar from an Indian, that's life... the way of the world. If an Indian fights back and takes back a dime, it's victory... a cultural obligation. And if there was one thing that Knife Bend was, at its cultural core, it was White. And male. The deep voices, loud grunts, boisterous beer belches and fragrant farts from the backroom left no mistake that it was a 'guys only' conference, with all those bearing a penis in attendance.

The door was three sizes too small for the frame, but it was shut closed, and very hard. She knocked once, twice and three times. No response. The laughing and the 'oohs' and 'ahh's' getting louder.

Another way in, she thought, bill in hand, agenda to Jew or Indian the guy in charge down to a bill that was acceptable, and fair. Her truck. Her life. Her choice to fix only what NEEDED to be repaired on the clunker.

There was another way into the old boy's club. A narrow hallway to what sounded like the secret entrance to the 'secret hall' made so for the noon-time ritual of something stupidly silly. But it seemed dangerous as well. As she approached the open door, down the narrow hallway, Roberta spotted outside a row of choppers. The kind of hogs ridden by pigs wearing biker colors. One horse in a corral watching the wheeled beasts in front of him with familiar fascination.

CHAPTER 10

The Old West came to Alberta, Canada, 30 years after it arrived in Tombstone, Arizona. It lingered on for another century in Knife Bend, in places like Hank's Garage, with the kind of men who fought for power and independence in places so remote. An old feud this time, a rivalry that went back as long as anyone could remember.

Bikers vs. cowboys. Representing the social outcasts who saw life from the back of a Harley, "Blade", a 6 foot 5 tall giant weighing in at 230 pounds of pure determination. Championing those who rode motorcycles with legs under the banner of rugged individualism, Cowboy Hank, a medium height featherweight squinting his eyes under the brim of his off-white hat, nodding to the officiator to move the proceedings onward.

"Gentlemen," Mayor Williams asserted in a voice more assertive than loud, silencing the mutterings of boast, claims, and individual wagers as to who would win the winner-take-all contest. He stepped to the middle of the room, stopwatch in his leather vest. "It's been twelve months, and all the talk is over now. Time to decide who's the chief, and who's the Injun." Being 1/16 Sioux, long in the face and longer in the tooth, J. Henry Williams felt it his right to say "Injun" instead of the more politically-corrected "First Nations", "Aboriginal" or even "Native." They didn't fit around William's mouth, and only served to distance the "Injuns" rather than respect them, anyway. "Take your positions," he announced. "Back to back, turning toward each other after ten paces."

"Eight," Blade growled out, juggling the chain on his belt connected to something notably hidden in his back pocket.

"Five," Cowboy Hank countered in a soft voice exuding quiet, and very private, confidence, gazing at the buffalo skinner slapped to his side, which hadn't been drawn for anything except repairing a loose saddle cinche for months. "Five," he reasserted, the choking in his dry throat hidden from the crowd by his sweat-soaked bandanna.

"Three," Blade barked out.

The muttering in the room escalated from loud thoughts of 'who's gonna mop up the floor afterwards' to upping the wages. Bikers intermingling with ranchers, each putting their money where there mouths were. No one asked where the money came from, but the outcome of the contest at hand would say where it would go, and stay.

"Two?" Hank replied back, turning his head towards Blade in a polite, cordial gesture with a secret agenda, and past.

"Let's do it right now!" Blade grunted out, head up, turning around, ready to throw back whatever the smooth-and-suave new Cowboy in town had in him.

Both champions turned to each other, five feet of air thick as year-old 5W-40 oil between them. A loud clambering from the crowd, eyes of the opponents fixed on each other, counting down to the final first draw and - BANG.

The single gunshot silenced the room. The holder of the 1890 Colt Revolver was Williams. Everyone knew that the smoking gun was legally supposed to be locked in his antique box at home or under lock and key at the gun range. But in matters of cultural war, misdemeanors such as this were meant to be purposely ignored, even by the off-duty Cops in attendance.

Roberta shivered, separated from the arena by a thin wall of sheetrock, metal, or rotted wood. Her gut ached, her chest tightened. It was, after all, a gunshot that put her in the mess she was in, lifewise. One that Kurt 'the suit' fired at her, which missed her vagina after she kicked him in the balls. Another that she fired as a warning shot at her father when he went after her mother, that one hitting its mark, by accident. So said the Judge who let her off.

But there was the 'extra' evidence ex-hubby Kurt promised to make known to the authorities once he got out of jail, and the mob lawyers he got to know while in the clink. Roberta had revealed evidence on Kurt's illegal Organized Crime and 'quasi-legal' Oil Company activities to put him away for life, a sentence reduced down to 6 years, due to 'good behavior' and most probably a bought-off judge or DA somewhere in the chain of justice.

The provisional witness protection deal made with Roberta gave her a change of name, a new driver's license and even social insurance numbers. She was safe, as long as she stayed obscure, and unknown. But the closer she got to finding her son Daniel, the closer Kurt could get to her. 'The Suit' lurked behind every shadow, in every dark alley, and behind every pounded locked door for the last 3 years. Such was Roberta's perception, or such could be the reality.

Back in the Knife Bend Garage hallway, Roberta pondered the issue. "Perhaps Kurt is back, he found my truck, followed me into town, and is waiting in that room around the corner with his 'guys', waiting to shoot me after he, and all his buds, have had the chance to prove their manhood by raping a roped down, gagged, and terrified woman." It was a real enough scenario. She had been offered as "an appetizer" to Kurt's friends before at those Company dinner parties she worked so hard to prepare. Maybe it was HER fault for enjoying it in her intoxicated situations. Or maybe her miscalculation, thinking that verbal abuse and rape is a way of demonstrating love, connection, emotional engagement. "You wanna fuck me again, please?" she asked her father many times, knowing that there would be pain with the pleasure, and that the only time her White father smiled at 'his little squaw' was when he pleased himself at the expense of her pain, and confusion.

But, as the Councilors said, 'that was then, and this was now'. Time to get back on the pony and ride, to get what YOU want. And the battle, today, was about getting the keys to her truck back, without paying the bill for all those repairs so skillfully given her dying clunker that she did not request.

From inside the room, Williams counted it down, from ten. As long as he was holding the watch, and the drawn gun, he was the boss.

“Ten,” Mayor J. Henry proclaimed in the warehouse that doubled as a repair shop when business was good, or messy.

Hank took one step towards the can, Blade pounding his black-leather boots one stride towards the workbench. Roberta edged three feet in, turning the corner to a closed door reading “Ladies, Lawyers and Bankers Not Allowed” in bright red.

“Nine,” J. Henry continued, his eye looking around the room to see that the two titans were keeping their eyes straight forward, their feet firmly on the ground to the predetermined spots.

Roberta knocked. No answer. A cottonwood door that replied with a low-volume thud to an abrupt knock.

“Eight,” the count continued.

Roberta juggled the door knob. Stuck, but not locked. But stuck, and stuck hard.

“Seven, Six, Five,” Mayor J Henry asserted.

Roberta stood back. A leak from inside the door, oil, maybe transmission fluid, tinged with red. Maybe blood, maybe not.

“Four, three.” Some muttering, disturbed male voices with a primary agenda on their mind, in a secret ritual and rite that had to be continued, no matter what the world outside thought. Death before dishonor.

Roberta looked around her. Where was a payphone when you needed it? The one down the hall had worked. She turned, trying to silently make a getaway, succeeding in slipping on the floor, her fall causing an echoing “bang.” A deadening of the chatter from behind the “No Ladies Allowed” door. Then, a deadly delay in the cadence of the countdown.

Spectators looked to the door. Blade grabbed hold of the chain on his belt, the hidden attachment in his pocket, then the attack angle through a mirror, calculating the trajectory he would use to make the first blow count, and make it final. Cowboy Hank gazed through his oversized mustache, always in view of his ever-watchful eyes, hoping it would hide his fear, and the real reason why he landed in this backwater town, and this bushwhacking fight.

“Two...” Williams calmly said, eyes focused on his assigned job. It was his town, it would be a fair fight.

Roberta knew she'd been found out. So did, apparently, someone on the other side of the door. The knob was opened, the crack behind it saying "Enter, we knew you were coming."

"Annnndddd..." Mayor J. Henry expanded, leading the room into heightened suspense, and dead silence.

Cowboy Hank gathered the saliva in his mouth, looked forward, determined to make this showdown a straight-up affair. Blade 'phlegmed up' as was his pre-rehearsed ritual for the contest of all contests, the primal battle between hombres on Harleys and desperadoes on 'donkeys'.

"One," the Mayor said softly, smiling, savoring the moment at hand, which would make all those droning City Council meetings and stacks of paperwork worth it. The event of the year, maybe the century.

Blade roared out a primal scream that could scare a grizzly into becoming a teddy bear. With lightening reflexes, he noted his mark on the Cowboy, straight at the heart, just over the blue denim shirt that would be beet red in a matter of milliseconds. The Cowboy stood his ground, took a deep breath, and breathed out fire of his own, aimed at Goliath's big, hairy chest, the black T-shirt covering the tattoos, which would be no protection against the wrath of the Displaced Cowboy, determined to get back his rightful place in the New West after surviving the untold hardships of surviving the Old West.

From outside, Roberta heard yells and screams. Then... agony, a large man falling to the ground. The door closing, the latch catching. And on the floor underneath the crack, more flowing red fluid.

From the crowd, a plea. Sympathy, empathy, a call for help, maybe. "Is there a doctor in the house?" she seemed to hear in her head. "Yes! There is now!" her Sucker Samaritan instincts screamed out as she rammed through the closed door.

Bursting into the room, Roberta's eyes focused on the man fallen on the floor under her weight. His chest was beet red, his eyes revealing pain, and shame. And she was on top of this beaten Goliath biker in black.

The thoughts raced through her head, the worse ones first. "Chest wound, probably pneumothorax, pericardial tamponade, probably busted three busted ribs, and my falling on him broke two of them." She tore off the shirt, proceeded to feel the flesh underneath, and instantly felt a cold, clammy, sticky substance. And a dying patient, eyes open, his lips smiling at the Angel of Mercy, a third leg sprouting up on his crotch, extending a hearty welcome of appreciation.

"What the hell is this?" Roberta.

“Spit, on your hand.” Mayor J. Henry related to the shocked Doc. “Delivered by the new Western Canadian Spittoon Spitter, Cowboy Hank Ralson.”

“Ralson, without the T, Ma’am,” Cowboy Hank humbly acknowledged to Roberta, tipping his hat to ‘the lady’, while the crowd gave him a round of applause worthy of a prize fighter who just won the bout of the century. He was very uncomfortable with the applause, to the point of seeming terrified by it. Maybe something about being noticed, or acknowledged for something he didn’t do, or wasn’t worthy of being.

“And what’s this?” Roberta asked, feeling the red gunk on top of the chest, hot inflamed flesh around it with a tinge of burnt plastic. She smelled it. The answer was apparent, and she had walked straight into being the butt of a joke that would be remembered as long as horses roamed the range and Harleys pounded the pavement.

“Red food coloring in a specially-designed bag,” a grungy biker sporting a neatly trimmed goatee commented, in an academic tone Roberta had not heard since her voluntary rotation in the Bioengineering Department at Saskatoon University. He pulled a flat plastic bag out of his leather-jacket pocket, flattening it like a pancake against his crotch. “A polymer which releases fluid inside after it’s hit by a projectile of salivary mucoid material.”

“Huh?” Roberta asked, fluctuating between confusion and indignation.

“Spit, Ma’am,” Cowboy Hank related, demonstrating his skill with a wad of phlegm that hit the mark from fifteen feet away, making the macho biker mench look like a recently-castrated bull.

Roberta fumed with something beyond anger, beyond embarrassment, beyond exhaustion. Money flowed from wagerer who bet on the five-year champion biker to gamblers who put their pesolas on the newcomer Cowboy. Hearts of bikers opened up to the ranchers, hog-riders to bronc-busters. Time for the beer, ‘Pussy Juice’, a private label brew with a flavor as distinctive as its name. Guaranteed to make the drinker forget a bad day at the office, or herald in a happy night with his, or her, buds.

It had been a long time since Roberta tied one on. Her throat was parched for anything that could whet her whistle, her brain screaming for anything to dull the pain. The offer was kind, cordial and meant with the warmest of intentions. “Ma’am?” Hank asked Roberta, offering her a brew from the best part of the keg.

Roberta panicked. “The demons tempt you when you’re closest to your goal,” she remembered from one of those 1950s Greek writers who were too insightful to be published in the 1990s. “One drink and it’s all over,” she remembered from her recovery councilor. “Yes, it would be all over!” she told herself. “Ya can’t fight the world, join it! Go with the flow. Enjoy the ride. And the vib. And the slide to...”

"No," she said in a soft voice, a hand extended outward, pushing the brew away from her. The demon would have to tempt her again on another day. "I came here to talk about this!" she proclaimed, once she felt that she had won another battle in a life-long war against the bottle. The banner for the new battle was the bill for the truck. "Who hosed me?!"

"I'd like to," Blade interjected as a dig. "If you want me to," the gently added qualification.

Roberta's eyeroll of indignation only served to fuel the fire. It made the Doctor Lady with the hot bod, who didn't want anyone to play doctor with her, even more sexy. More uhhs, ahhs, and all manners of grunts she could hear, feel and taste. Indeed, Roberta was on the Warpath, and the man's scalp who she wanted most was the dork who had the keys to her getaway pony.

"We can talk in my office, Ma'am," Cowboy Hank offered with the courtesy of a Southern Gentlemen, from a time long gone. A look at the bill brought it all back to him. "Yers was the..."

"1993 Ford," Roberta asserted.

"Ninety one. Had a bear of a time getting that old nag fixed to turn out into the pasture. Put my best gal on it fer ya."

"We're called WOMEN now," Roberta shot back.

"Didn't mean no offense, Ma'am, and if I -" the gentle reply, smooth as Southern Comfort and twice as inviting.

"-I'm not a Ma'am, neither, partner," Doctor C interrupted with her best 'ya'll country' act out. "Or maybe I'm a Miss, chick, rodeo bunny, babe, baby..."

"What should we call ya, then?" Hank interrupted, in kind, with kindness.

Beer steins went down, ohhs and ahhs hushing down. Silent wagers between the more quiet Chopper riders and cowpunchers. Mayor J. Henry dug into the pocket of his vest, pulling out his Grandfather's watch, anticipating another contest of wills and wits.

"You're Ms. what?" Hank asked, respectfully.

"I'm no Ms," Roberta asserted, remembering the failed experiments as a 'liberated woman' in the movement that was about females having power over men, not rights for themselves and their children.

"That's right," a voice rang out from the back, a town citizen, probably a 'minor' Henry in Knife Bend's hierarchy. "This woman ain't no Ms."

"Thank you," Roberta's reply.

"She's a Doctor," the squirrely man with the plaid hunting jacket added. "Was yapping with Doc Dinosaur about her."

"Doctor who?"

"Henry Steiner, Doc," Mayor J. Henry interjected.

"He said you had the best pair of hands this side of Banff," the squirrely Henry Second Class continued.

The sexual innuendoes were clearly there. Doc Henry Steiner seemed to be a stud of the first order, at least to this riff-raff. Roberta still had to smile. She knew that the old doc was talking about her surgical skills. To extract a verbal compliment from one of the old coots in the Old Boys Club was a victory for herself, her people, the animals and her gender. The issue at hand was - what was Doc Henry trying to extract out of her? And why?

CHAPTER 11

Grade eleven drop-out Cowboy Hank was a mild mannered man, who spoke in smooth grammatically-incorrect contractions by habit, and choice. Some called him Randy Travis with a Sam Elliot Mustache, and an Alan Jackson smile. But unlike his 'almost look and sound alike', he never sang a note for any one in Knife Bend, even in the shower. He was also well read. "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, but Knife Bend ain't gonna forget Hurricane Roberta for a long time," he related to Mayor J Henry, as he noted Roberta marching out to her repaired truck, keys in hand, her wallet empty, her mind set on a destination far, far away from the small town which detoured her from her destiny. Where that destiny was seemed to be a scary TBA, a look Hank had learned to spot from miles away, and smell through the densest psychological smoke screens created by man, or woman.

"Drive her gentle," Terri reminded Roberta, with a smile made even more irritating by its escalating optimism. "She's still healing."

Roberta's low volume, high tension growl scared Mahegan and the Wolf Cub, both huddling close to each other on the front seat behind a box of books. Those precious, sweat soaked prints were one of the only items not pilfered by the band of good ole boys who raided the vehicle the previous night, when it was wounded alongside of the isolated road.

Roberta marched to the door, opening it with an assertive grab, then slammed it - hard, three times, till the latch finally took.

Cowboy Hank put his pants in his pocket and country-strided it to the counter in the office. He pondered on the woman under the volcano, wondering if, indeed, he might be up to the challenge of being up to her standards of excellence. Though the ladies, and girls, in Knife Bend called him "Hunk Hank," he preferred "Cowboy Hank," considering his features common, his body type 'average,' his cute ass merely "adapted to long hours in the saddle."

"Everything that came in with this truck AND camper better still be here!" Roberta yelled out, breaking into his sorrowfully-sweet daydream.

"It is, Doctor Collineur," Hank replied, politely. "Polite" was so foreign to Hank. "Friendly" was more natural to his temperament, and inner nature. Knife Bend was friendly, or maybe it was just a good hiding place for a man who was still deciding if he wanted back 'in' to the twenty-first century, with all the frills and trimmings. A reminder of what was outside Knife Bend came over the office radio, the "Hearty Party", mantra for head-bobbers and country line dancers from Vancouver to Thunder Bay.

"The Hearty Party Guy is DEAD. Don't they get that!!!" Roberta screamed while pumping gas up into the carb at her OWN speed, which turned out to be far slower than what the engine wanted to do by itself. "That moronic keep-it-simple-stupid song he sung killed him! Like it's killing the rest of us."

Hank smiled. Indeed, maybe Roberta was right. No one with so much intensity and dedication to her own private cause could be all wrong. She had to be very right about something.

But one thing she wasn't right about was machinery. If it bled blood, Doctor R was the mechanic of choice to fix it. If it was made of metal, or attached to Industrial Age advancements such as 'the wheel', she always misdiagnosed the problem and prognosis. She had driven five clunkers into the dust, a reason why she drove them very gently, always under 90 km/hr, even in a 110 km zone. But this was War, Roberta against the world, and the battleground would be somewhere OTHER than Knife Bend. Maybe her Grandmother's Old Reserve, if indeed it wasn't converted into a Casino and golf-course yet. Maybe a parking lot outside Edmonton, from which she could do pro-bono veterinary work until she could pull into a trailer park. Or maybe just... the bush. She had inferred something about "the Big Open" when settling the bill, referring to an Eagle flying above with crazy eyes, or maybe sane ones. Sane eyes based in a Reality beyond reality. A Reality that Hank once felt, a long, long time ago. A reality that he might regain in Knife Bend, perhaps.

But Roberta's reality was now somewhere else - Fast. Never mind that where to go would be decided at the fork in the road outside town, the route to be related by the loudness of the silence from the woods. Never mind that 150 miles away was as far as her depleted War Chest would take her. Never mind that a speed bump lay directly in her path out of the service station, that she negotiated at a screeching 60 km/h.

The outcome was inevitable. A re-broken axle, a dropped muffler, a rebuilt tranny that gave up the ghost an hour into its new life, busted in three places by the clearly marked "Caution" sign in explicit English and bright, yellow paint.

Everyone within sight cringed, awaiting the scream that would be heard around the world. Leaning against the soda machine, extracting his noon-hour fifty cents worth of flavored toxins for two bits, Mayor J Henry expressed in words what everyone was thinking. "On the count of five, four, three, two and..."

"She's a professional," Doc Henry interrupted, walking up, sure that his new protegee would meet adversity with calm collection. "My new partner."

"She know that, Doc?" Mayor J Henry interjected.

Henry's smile, skewed to the right side of his mouth, said "Ask, but I won't tell you." Everyone in Knife Bend saw it, at one time or another. And everyone respected it. Doc Henry was allowed his eccentricities, and more than the average person's fair share of secrets. After all, he did have 'the touch'. The power of the Healer over Demon Death. In the tradition of the Priests and Warlocks of old, he was kept alive because he held the masses technologically hostage, with medical technology every one of their animals

needed. In an animal-based community such as Knife Bend, the horse doc held more power, and respect, than any human physician.

True to Henry's unspoken prediction, Roberta walked out of the truck, calmly and collectively. She assessed the damage to the back rear axle, the mess of tubes, cylinders and rods amidst the pool of automotive fluids on the sidewalk. She nodded.

Henry did the same, adding "A professional with a clear diagnostic plan and reason-based treatment, Mister Mayor."

True to Doc Dinosaur's prediction, Roberta gently opened the door, pulled up the seat, gently retrieved a metal crow bar, prodded the underbelly of the wounded mechanical beast and...

"Now," Cowboy Hank gently asserted to the Old Doc and the Aging Mayor. He emitted a portion of his chewing tobacco as a projectile of phlegm, straight at the target he had designed for practice, an old archery target with Mitchell Construction Company's logo in the middle, featuring the smiling face of its Eastern Based Founder, G.W..

By the time Hank's projectile of spit had reached GW's "I'm a 35 year old winner and you're all over the hill losers" grin, Roberta's crowbar had smashed three holes into the left tire, along with extremely expressive impressions of her discontent on the rear bumper.

The only thing louder than the smashing and bashing of metal was the screeching of her voice, a roar that wore out 100% of her oxygen reserves and, according to all laws of biology, 120% of her vocal chords.

This time, everyone shuddered in fear, even the eagle. But two remained firm. Doc Henry knew it would happen like this. A minor miscalculation. Cowboy Hank looked at the Doctor who always did right by animals, even if their owners didn't, and wondered what he was calculating.

Exhausted beyond measure, Roberta stopped, her body frozen in a mixture of emotions, none of them good. She took a deep breath, said a brief prayer in Cree, and turned around, the fringes on her Western buckskin jacket, adorned with Traditional bead work, flowing in an oncoming wind.

Without giving anyone so much as eye contact, she kicked the soda machine, forcing out of its mouth a caffeinated pop loaded with sugar. She threw Hank two bits for the carbonated elixir, then a crumbled five dollar bill from the bottom of her left pants pocket. "A pack of smokes, Cowboy. Stat!"

“Bad for your health, Doctor,” Henry countered in a tone that sounded most dangerous to Roberta. Compassionate, and fatherly.

“Beats dying of good health,” her reply. “Unfiltered!”

“You got it, Doc,” Cowboy Hank replied, stepping inside to retrieve a green pack of cancer sticks, unknowingly picking the one that said “Smoking can kill your baby.” It hit Roberta in some way that he saw, a place in her that Doc Henry didn’t. Or one the always-focused Old Horse Doctor wasn’t interested in being very interested in, or actively avoiding.

“We start clinic hours at 8 sharp, Doctor Collineur,” Doc Henry commanded with a wide grin.

“My patients I treat my way,” Roberta countered, taking a puff out of the unfiltered smokes, the tobacco stale and rancid.

“Fair enough.” Henry countered.

“And I have the right to quit at any time, with two weeks notice.”

“Fair enough.”

Roberta saw the Good Ole Boys’ agreement already in place. Hank would up the bill for repair of her vehicle just as she had enough money to pay the bill, maybe as part of a financial arrangement for discount drugs, or a tip on a prize horse for sale for meat prices. Still, it was an honorable day job, reasonably paying she hoped, and the only one on the table.

“I’m on for four nights a week,” Roberta asserted, knowing that those 72 hour without sleep shifts served nothing except the egos of the administrators who inflicted them upon the vet student in question. “I need my sleep if I’m going to deliver quality medicine,” she offered by way of explanation.

“You’re on for five nights a week, six in calving season,” the Old Doc grumbled out. “I’ve been on for seven nights a week...”

“...For the last twenty-three years,” Roberta interjected in mocking Redneck-ese, just as the words were coming out of Doc Dinosaur’s mouth.

No one spoke that way to Doc Henry and got away without a severe reprimand, even his most trusted and paying clients. You just didn’t talk to him that way. No one knew why, but it was an unofficial rule. And one that Roberta violated, knowingly and willingly.

Hank saw all the scenarios. Roberta would be rummaging through garbage cans with her dogs. Doc Henry would see to it that the insolent biomedical genius wouldn’t get

work anywhere, except maybe waitressing, to teach her a lesson in humility. Volcanic lava was about to come out of the Old Doc's beet-red cheeks.

Hank braced for it, as did Roberta. She had overstepped the line, and knew it. "The most powerful healers pay the most severe consequences for the smallest amount of harm they intentionally do to others," Grandma Collineur would say to her so many times. "A hell of a time for Grandmother to be right," Roberta thought, as Henry cleared his throat, about to utter his final proclamation.

"Fine," Henry Steiner, D.V.M, proclaimed, smiling over the volcanic fire brewing inside of him. "Great to have you on board, Doctor."

He bowed, gave her a warm handshake, and walked home, whistling with delight as soon as he had gotten ten paces away.

"He's got a hell of a nerve singing that tune to me now!" Roberta ranted to Cowboy Hank.

"The Hearty Party," Hank noted, feeling equally uncomfortable with the good doctor's bad choice in music. "Top of the Charts. Even here."

CHAPTER 12

Bessy knew it was coming, but it was inevitable. Even when she gave birth to her first calf as a heifer, she was an overgiving Mom, keeping her skin and bones calf from the flesh-eating teeth of coyotes, foxes, and the ambitious hawk or owl. She had caught season after season for 10 years, without any delivery problems. But this year, it was different. The 1500 pound Hereford got caught by a roving 4,500 pound Charolais bull, nothing the rancher who owned her had in mind. Giving birth to a calf three times her breed size, with five times the appetite for milk, wasn't in Bessy's plan, either. Neither was 'milk fever'.

Norma noticed Bessy's shaking legs in the livestock range next to her animal Shelter. It was she who gave the aging bovine, number 145, her name. And it was Doc Henry Steiner who she called out to infuse the calcium into her tired veins, in an attempt to get her old heart pumping again. Both looked with hopeful hearts at the old cow, hoping, and praying, that the Steiner-special calcium gluconate-containing concoction going into her 'jugs' would boost her muscle tone from near dead to Bessy's usual alive-and-kicking-everything-in-sight. Doomed by disease to defer the hand of fate to the hand of the horse doctor, she saw Norma and Doc Henry looking at her, both anticipating the worst and hoping for the best, amidst the chitter chatter the old farts always engaged in.

There was much that Norma and Doc Henry spoke about, and much that they didn't. If anyone symbolized the Miss Kitty and Sheriff Matt Dillon for the New West, it was this pair of rugged individualists, always with people, and always alone.

"The windshield got awfully brown coming in here," Doc Henry commented from the side of his crusty, speckled lips. "Bugs are real bad this year."

"Not as bad as last year," Norma commented back.

"No doubt about that," Henry bellowed, moving his warm fingers around the cold stethoscope head as he listened to Bessy's ticker, adjusting the IV line accordingly. "I wore a bandanna on my mouth from June to August, and still ate a mouthful of misquotes every time I took a deep breath of fresh country air."

"We burned half the haystack to make smudges and still got..." Norma wanted to continue, but she was silenced by the finger.

Doc Dinosaur could quiet any chatter, or clamor, from man or beast, with his famous right index finger. Once it got put up, the world stopped around him. Bessy wondered if her existence in the world would be ended, extreme concern on his face.

"I knew this was the season to be churned into hamburger, or drop down right here and wind up in the rendering plant," the cow pondered. "He's not telling me something. But my heart, and my legs..."

Bessy felt something go through her front legs, then back legs. It felt like a jolt. Something odd, strange, and as she felt an eerie warmth on the tails of the electroshock...

"She's got her juice back," Henry stated with assurance. "No McDonald's meat market for you, girl," he warmly related, petting the cow as her vitals came back.

Heart rate down to normal range with a strong systolic outflow. Muscle tone improving, enough strength to get up. And in thirty seconds, enough to give the three-legged dog laying on her ass a reminder to move or start learning to hobble around on two appendages. And the nipples, still full, ready to feed "Baby Hoss", as Norma called the oversized calf. But hopefully Norma would give the always-famished calf some milk from the fridge first. Norma had been good enough to 'observe' the 'broken' fence across her property line and bring Bessy in to the Animal Farm. It beat being shot for the coyotes, or put into those trucks that took her fellow cows and steers away, forever.

There were other agendas on hand at Norma's Home for Wayward Four Legged Creatures, and those two legged ones who shared her Visions and Passions. Terri bicycled in, parked her two-legged steed at the door, and unloaded the bag of dogfood donated by Heinrich's Grocery. Normally it was no-name label brand, but a quick look from Terri into the owner's busted truck, along with her list of possible diagnoses for why it was sputtering, earned an upgrade on the dog chow to something more substantial.

Substantial was what was going on between Doc Henry and Norma as well, as he packed up his gear and worked up Norma's running tab. It was running high indeed, the lead in Henry's two inch pencil rapidly getting laid down on the pocket notepad that never left his shirt pocket or attention. Then again, Norma already anticipated the bill. She had been the economic brains of her husband Bill's construction company way back in the 80's, keeping records in her head more accurately than any accounting notebook or computer software program.

"There's Heathcliff, Pumpkin, and Bear. The cats we adopted to take care of dying patients at the hospital," Norma recalled, easing into a vindictive tone. "Against doctor's orders."

"The 'healers' who are dead themselves," Henry commented, apologizing for so many of his colleagues, as well as his former students.

"Kitty, Merlin and Jumping Jack. The dogs that went to the mentally handicapped school to help out the kids."

"And their teachers." Henry added.

“Interesting that they ‘escaped’ from their cages at the university research labs at Golden,” Norma noted, slyly smiling with delight.

“Yeah,” Henry commented, purposely avoiding the issue, and his acceptance of scientific research on laboratory animals as a required tool to develop reliable medicine for creatures in the world. Inducing controlled pain, discomfort and confinement on ten animals, so you could develop cures for ten thousand others, was a mathematical reality he had accepted. There were other issues with Norma as well. For every nine stray animals in need of her help, one was better off roaming around on the streets, or allowed the chance to be re-united with its owner. But the suffering of the nine abandoned, abused or stray creatures outweighed the questionable ‘care’ given to the one who didn’t need it. Such was another mathematical reality Henry had to accept, particularly because there was only one Norma Poundstone. Besides, she represented at least 10% of his practice on a busy month during calving season, 40% during the slow times between last calving and first summer heartworm testing.

Norma braced herself. “So, what do I owe you?”

“You owe me...” Henry worked up the figures, did some ‘hmmms’ and ‘ahhhs’, then revealed the final tally. “....One giant oatmeal cookie.”

Norma put her still slender, wrinkled fingers on her still-shapely 60 year old hips. “Henry, you have expenses,” she admonished.

“I do that...” Doc Dinosaur replied, recontemplating the situation, working out his own overhead in light of the escalating cost of drugs in the new Winter pharmaceutical catalogues.

Norma braced once again, as did Terri. Though there was no shortage of good will in Knife Bend, there was a paucity of people who were good with money. At least the kind of money that would stay in Knife Bend, and allow the citizens to continue their life experiments with freedom and individuality.

“You owe me...” Henry considered, gazing at the notepad, working the figures with his oscillating right index finger. “Two giant oatmeal cookies!” he exclaimed boldly, closing the book, and his medical bag, parking his big, fat redneck ass on Norma’s three-and-a-half-legged picnic bench.

Norma retrieved the cookies from the cookie jar, as she always did.

“I like them hard!” he blasted out.

“You like everything hard,” she commented, reaching for the hardest cookie in the jar, also knowing that those were the most stale. “Bet ya want some coffee, too.”

“Black, bitter, and thick.” Henry’s requisition.

“So you can eat it with a spoon?” Norma replied, in rhythm.

“A fork this time.”

Norma said nothing. Her grateful, and lonely, smile said it all. It was a ritual, after all. Henry always booked in an extra ten minutes in his appointment book when coming to Norma’s place, for their break. Norma sipped her tea, Henry slurped down his coffee and ate her cookie jar down to the crumbs, even after he’d already had a big lunch.

Terri looked at Bessy. “What do you think, Bessy?” the neo-Hippie vegetarian asked the cow.

Bessy looked away. She just wanted go back home to the other side of the fence, munch on some grass, overfeed her calf ‘Hoss’, and do her shift as sentry on the outside of the herd to keep away the coyotes and cowboys.

But Terri’s want list dealt with need - at least how the ever-smiling optimist saw it.

Noting Norma and Henry at the other side of the barn, hiding her eyes so her thoughts couldn’t be read by her employer, she picked up a piece of fresh white paper and Henry’s blood-and-manure-stained pencil. She observed the shapes of the letters on feeding formulas, medication instructions and unpaid invoices in his hand writing. She grasped the pencil between the second and third finger, according to Henry’s manner of wielding it.

Dear Norma...

You may be a pain in the ass to the rest of the world but you’re the best thing that happened to me in a long time. Your departed husband was a lucky man to have you. You’ve been alone too long. So have I. I think it is time for our relationship to be....deepened. I won’t take no for an answer, my friend, comrade and...well, you know.

Sincerely,
Doc Henry

The chickenscratch was a masterful forgery. Terri looked up to see if Norma had been watching her. The ‘Old Maid’ who only grew more energetic with each passing year could see if Terri was lying before the words came out of her mouth.

Norma’s radar was, as usual, on target. “What’s going on up there?” she yelled up to the rafters, where Terri pretended to unload the dog food into the appropriate bins.

“Just doing my dharma,” Terri replied, her back turned to a woman who meant more to her than her own mother, perhaps because Norma meant nothing to herself.

“Her own what?” Henry asked Norma, maintaining the two feet of distance that was always kept between them on the bench, every day, for the last 12 years.

“Her Calling, Henry.”

“She’s a good shit. A good worker. Someone who gives you what you want, and need.”

Terri smiled. Henry called it right. And there would be a lot more ‘right’ to come when Norma would find his love letter in her mailbox.

CHAPTER 13

"You know more than you think you do," Dr. Dan van Roode would say to his fourth year vet students around the table in the four by six conference room, during their large animal rotation at Saskatoon University. "When you go out on the road, leave the textbooks at home and bring your common sense," he'd finish the 7 AM briefing with, just after he assigned readings in four textbooks, one being his own.

Professor van Roode was a political contradiction. His short hair, 'proper' English walk, and ridicule of Socialists as "Communists when their bank balance is down, and Capitalists when they have some bucks in their pocket," branded him as the man's man of Western Australia and South Africa. It was not outside his realm of expression to gay bash the 'pufter poodle practitioners' in a manner as witty as it was biting. He also had little sympathy for Aboriginals on any of the six continents who demanded to own land forfeited, sold or lost by their great-grandfathers to White pioneers, such as his own, who had the balls to claim and develop it.

Yet it was von Roode who instituted the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy into academic practice when the admissions committee had to face the gay and lesbian issue. Von Roode was also on record as saying that "Injuns" are under-represented in veterinary medicine, the only faculty member who noted that point, though he affirmed that no Affirmative Action Policy be put in place to give them preferential treatment. Most importantly for Roberta, it was von Roode who allowed her to question the biological 'laws' of veterinary science in the textbooks and as they emanated on the podium, from the mouths of the those who escalated hypotheses to theories to facts by democratic vote, as opposed to scientific experimentation. To question a Saskatoon Veterinary fact was to make questionable your graduation from the program, which was 'about the process, not the product'. On more than one occasion, von Roode would interject on Roberta's behalf when she dared to do the thing she was trained to do, but discouraged to put into practice - to think critically. Thinking critically nearly cost Roberta an expulsion from the program. Thanks to the political contradiction who enjoyed frowning more than smiling, she only had to do two extra months of 'supplemental rotations' to meet her quota for graduation.

Roberta quoted von Roode maxims to herself like a Buddhist monk would re-cycle sayings from the Bhagavad Gita. Like the one that said "your first two weeks in the real world is when you'll make most of your mistakes."

Roberta's first night at Knife Bend was hardly restful. The "Big K" Motel gave her a good rate and allowed for pets, but a wolf cub yapping for its pack and deciding to test the sharpness of its new teeth on the furniture was not in the deal. Still, having this four legged 'Daniel' eased the pain of not having her own, very human, child with her on the first night in a very strange, and scary, town. "Just a month and we'll all be out of here," she whispered to Promethius, rocking him in her shaking arms while re-runs of "Grizzly Adams" came over the tube. "We'll all be in a better place, in only 30 sleeps." Sleep indeed was a luxury, and an impossibility.

Mahegan barked at each truck that pulled up, and each intoxicated guest who walked past the door. "It's not Kurt!" she'd assure her canine protector, and closest friend, hoping to herself that her most dangerous enemy, and once trusted husband, hadn't found her.

Morning came early, the air feeling cold and unusually damp. The two hours of shut-eye between 5 and 7 were welcomed, but came at a cost. Prometheus had his first taste of electrical wire, and seemed to like it. Luckily, the lamp and radio connected to the chewed-up mess of rubber and metal still seemed undamaged. "Another two sleeps," Roberta calculated in her head. The parts and supplies for the pups had already indentured her to Doctor Steiner's Shop for ten days, nearing the number of days she'd have to log in with the logger-head crankster, who seemed to have stopped reading newspapers in 1973 and veterinary journals in 1979.

But the look in the full-length mirror was worth it, on her first day when she was legally paid for her veterinary services. Around her neck, her Grandmother's Canadian Cree choker. Under her denim shirt, an American Indian Movement promo teeshirt. On her shapely, sexy legs, plain jeans, the 'good pair' with the holes that no one could see. Enveloping her size 5 feet, size 7 moccasins, washable as needed. It was the first time that the entire ensemble could be worn for legitimate clients. Doc Henry would probably insist that she wear a clean, white lab coat, but it would only accentuate the political and cultural statements that had become her personal statement. And that statement was honesty. Clients, and their animals, were entitled to that. They were also entitled to a physician who was all knowing and no fear.

"Every new patient, when you get down to it, is a new medical experiment," she remembered from the von Roode manual pages flipping around in her head. So far, Roberta had been a very fortunate experimenter, her track record of successful diagnoses and treatment choices rivaling any of the Faculty at Saskatoon Veterinary College. Maybe it was smarts, maybe instincts, or maybe just dumb luck. On mornings like this, she thought that good fortune had merely allowed her a rash of good guessing, armed and ready to turn the tables and deliver her fair share of bad luck, destined to cause her to do much harm to good animals.

As for what mantra to take into the mediation that was to be her first trial by fire as a professional, who was supposed to know all the answers, and not need to ask any questions? "Never let them see you sweat, or hear what you're really thinking," echoed through. Roberta hated it that von Roode was right. Grandmother Collineur's guidebook said the same thing. Roberta had no choice but to confidently obey her two mentors-in-absentia. Fear was something one had to deal with quite alone.

Roberta walked her first day to work, declining Henry's offer to pick her up. For Mahegan it was an outing. Her bodyguard loved nothing better than to hold her medical bag in his mouth, proudly prancing down the street, showing off his companion human to any other dogs who passed by. "She knows everything!" he'd seem to say, proudly. "We've been everywhere and done everything. 'Cause she's da man, da boss, da big

kahuna who's rich enough to eat dog biscuits! She calls me Mahegan, Cree for Wolf. And I call her a name in dog talk that I know she can't pronounce, but I might tell her what it is some day when she learns enough dog talk."

Upon arrival at Henry's clinic, Roberta was shocked. The parking lot was full, clients having arrived an hour early with dogs, cats, chickens, ferrets, and a snake or two... three, if the female was indeed pregnant. "Where did all of these people come from?" Roberta asked herself as she entered through Henry's back door that said 'staff'. "He must have a good tech staff," she thought. A clinic this crowded had to have at least one Mother Hen who knew how the clinic worked, and how the Doctor did. One trusted assistant below her, at least. Another girl who handled the appointments out front. Make friends with the Mother Hen and you'll always lay the golden egg when it comes to the clients, and the boss.

Roberta noticed two parking spots in the back, marked "Technicians". All were empty. Henry stuck his head out the door, paternal rage coming out of his mouth, a vulnerable kind of compassion from his eyes. "You're two minutes late. Not quite up to your professional standards, young lady."

"And you're a hundred years behind, you pretentious Dinosaur," came to Roberta's lightning-quick mind. "The directions they gave me at the motel weren't so good," she said, eyes turned downward, walking into the backroom, already counting the minutes till her 30 day shift was finished.

The receptionist was a local girl, "Kathy" by name, just Kathy. At least she wasn't another Henrietta or Harriette. A woman of no more than 18 years of reasonably-comfortable living, Kathy was just passing through. Her blonde hair fell to the middle of her back, her figure slender and her eyes a cold steel blue. Doc Henry introduced Kathy to Roberta by saying that his receptionist was "a member of the family," but nothing could have been further from the truth.

Kathy was in charge of the appointment books, logging people as being in, late or canceled. She also managed the phone calls that came in every three minutes. Her voice and tone said "I'm on my way to someplace else," if you listened hard enough, not unusual for most Knife Bend 18 year olds who weren't "Henrys" or "Henriettas". Fortunately for Doc Henry's clients, and Doc Henry, no one listened that hard. Once your animal was Doc Henry's patient once, that creature had a caretaker for life. The sixty-something emigree to Knife Bend used every means at his disposal to keep his clients connected to him, and their animals. Maybe it was the way he cajoled, reasoned, yammered about small talk, smiled, or conducted their minds with that right index finger. Or maybe it was because he was the only show in town, the nearest other vet being at least 15 miles away. So far, he was a big fish in a small pond, and lots of aquatic life needed his doctoring. Most particularly, Roberta noted very privately, the doctor himself.

CHAPTER 14

Grandma Collineur said that time was measured by experience, not the ticking of the White Man's clock, or even the rising and setting of Mother Nature's Sun. According to "Grandma" time, the morning was three years long for Roberta, Doc Henry's vintage "Love America or Leave It" clock looming at 11 AM.

At the Saskatoon Veterinary College, students had 15 minutes with each client to ask about the pooch, kitty or moo-moo. The standard forms for each of the seven body systems helped organize the data, and the time. Blood, urine or fecal samples were sent in one door and within 10 minutes, state of the art machinery delivered the results through another. A Monkey in a lab coat could do it and, as Roberta often mused, often did. Thankfully, most animals got better on their own anyway, and most clients over-estimated severity of symptoms. Roberta, indeed, was bored. But now she was experiencing the other end of the spectrum. Way past challenge, the needle registered 'terror' with each new "you have another client" Kathy flippantly announced through the door as she was midway through yet another 'last case before lunch'.

Henry's open door walk-in policy did that. The books would say one patient every half hour, the reality being far more frantic. The paucity of modern lab tests available in house, and the enormity of outdated ones, was scary. Whereas the modern world used bile acids as test for liver function, Henry still used BNP clearance. No Veterinary Board questions ever included anything about BNP, though research labs in the 70's and 80s derived stackloads of valid hepatic data from BNP clearance as an indicator of drug A vs. drug B's level of real-world toxicity. Doc Henry's in house 'chem panel' included ALT, creatinine, urea, glucose, lipase and, on a good day, calcium. He still called PCV's hematocrits, even though the textbooks didn't anymore, but 'Doctor H' was better at doing a blood smear and interpreting the results than "any tech, any where, any time." His EKG (not ECG) machine contained lead one and two, ignoring the 'high tech' aVR leads which were commonplace in any North American teaching institution. The X-ray machine has three settings, the rest of the options dysfunctional due to neglect and outdating of the supplies that could fix them. The Tesslian 'ultrasound machine' was built by Terri, results only interpretable by Steiner's 'third eye', the one between his Neanderthal-wide eyebrows.

Professor von Roode had noted on more than one occasion that a patient's history is more valuable than any lab test, X-ray or ultrasound. Grandma Collineur emphasized that a clinician's intuition is her greatest gift. But had Roberta received it from the Great Spirit yet? Perhaps yes, perhaps no. Only her living, or dying, patients knew for sure.

By the time Doc Henry's miniature "Old Heinrick" clock ticked to eleven thirty, she had seen four 'animal with lumps', two blocked cats, three skin cases with multiple etiologies, a hyperthyroid cat, a hypothyroid dog, a ferret with pyometria, a male rabbit which she finally diagnosed as being pregnant, and done ten 'routine' vaccinations which uncovered the possibility of non-routine diseases in at least two cases. The next 'last case before lunch' came in, Missy.

Roberta felt like she had done a massive review of every veterinary course she had ever taken, or been inflicted with. Something happened, a strange feeling that pulsed through her arms, down into her legs, releasing the knot in her belly, opening up into her chest. Roberta felt like she wasn't Roberta anymore. Mass seemed to be converted into energy through the exhaustion, the entry level healer feeling like she was floating on air, becoming the Spirit of Knowledge, and Fire.

"Missy" was an 8 year old Chocolate Lab, presenting for her yearly vaccinations with signs of fatigue, intermittent reluctance to exercise and, as her owners reported with no firm data, weight loss. Temp normal, gums normal, neuroexam normal, cardiovascular exam normal, ocular exam unremarkable, body condition fine. The most notable feature was an enlargement under the left jaw, possible inspiratory wheezes.

At the Saskatoon Veterinary College even the most favored student would get shit unless he or she put SOMETHING down on the card that wasn't normal. "Better to err on the side of caution than slipshod laziness," said the credo around the Small Animal Clinic, which kept people coming in again and again. It assured that practice patients kept coming through the door for students, and their dollars would keep the College Faculty well funded.

"What's up, doc?" Hank Tomkins asked Roberta, noting her excessive writing on Missy's card, going way over the five lines Henry allocated for each exam.

"Everything's fine," Roberta noted. "I just noted a soft-tissue enlargement under the left mandible. It's probably nothing to worry about."

"What kind of 'probably nothing' are we talking about, Doctor Collineur?" worry-wart Harriette Tomkins inquired.

There was something about the sound of those words - "Doctor Collineur." From Doc Henry it was professional courtesy, or an emotional ploy. But from this 42 year old, overweight, overworked woman who had nothing but her dog to remind her of the children she'd never be able to have, it was the highest honor. She needed to be assured that all bases had been considered, and covered.

"My thinking is that Missy maybe has a touch of kennel cough, which we can treat with antibiotics or just leave alone. I'm not worried, but I'd like to see her in two weeks, just to be sure."

"Be sure of what?" Hank challenged, his chin lifted up in Clint Eastwood-like manner, his thin, paradoxically sunbaked red neck bulging.

"That it's not..." Roberta stopped, sensing that the reflexes that kept her academically alive at Saskatoon Veterinary College would make her a dead duck out here. "Something else, that we don't have to worry about," she continued with a warm smile,

taking out her acupuncture needles, inserting them into LI 11, LI4, GV14 and St36 with a quick and efficient action.

"If there's nothing to worry about, why are you putting them needles into her?" Hank barked out.

"Routine stimulation of the immune system," Doctor R countered. "Proven in lab tests to elevate the efficiency of the body's immunity to many diseases, and to improve the effectiveness of vaccination by 35 to 60 percent."

Harriette looked at the medical scribbling on the card. Though she couldn't read any of the words, and make sense of less of the penmanship, she shuddered with fear. "What's wrong? Why do you want to see Missy in two weeks?"

Roberta smiled. "To rule out things that are extremely unlikely."

"Like what?" Hank blasted back, patting Missy.

"Like a sialoceal. That's when the duct to the salvary gland gets blocked by a piece of wood or fragment from a bone she got into. And if so, a simple procedure to remove it."

"What else?"

"Another HIGHLY unlikely possibility is an abscess, ruled out, right now, by normal temperature and appetite."

"And..."

"Going down the list of things that she MIGHT have, but most probably doesn't, impacted tooth, a clogged nasal cavity on one side, a hematoma..."

"A what?"

"Hemotoma. A blood bleed that works itself out. Or a fibroma."

"A tumor?"

"A mass, a benign tumor, biologically speaking. Which I don't think it is."

"A tumor!" Harriette screeched out, hugging her hound for dear life.

"I didn't say Missy had a tumor, but if it is a tumor..."

"She's got cancer and she's gonna die, like my brother did," Hank surmised.

"No, Mister Thomkins! Missy doesn't have a..."

Harriette let loose with a river of tears, a sigh of bawling that could be heard across town, and into the other exam room. Hank consoled her, preparing for the worst. "Whatever happens, we're ready to go the distance for her, Doc," Hank confided. "Of if you think she's gonna suffer..." he started to choke. "How much time do we have left?"

Doc Henry knocked on the door. "Doctor Collineur."

"I'm okay! Missy's fine. No problem. All of us are going to live long, happy lives."

Henry entered the room, a phone number in his hand, sense of urgency in his eyes. "A GDV just came in."

"Is that the kind of cancer Missy has?" Hank asked Doc Henry.

Henry's eyes met Roberta's. "Is there a problem here?"

"No," Roberta affirmed.

Doc Henry knew he would have to do some damage control on the area of client relations. But taking care of the emergency walk-in gastric volvulus and dilatation came first. So did the call Roberta had to tend to on the road.

"Colic? Is it surgical or medical?"

"You up to taking it?" Henry asked, honestly ready for any answer he would get.

"Sure, no problem," Roberta shot back with affirmation. True, she had seen only two cases of colic in Vet School, but she had treated seven others in the field on her unlicensed calls to friends, neighbors and others who would pay her in chickens, eggs and truck repairs. Her success record with this number one killer of horses was nearly 85%. Respectable by any practicing veterinarian's standards. Unacceptable to the clients, and the animals who she couldn't save, and the one that died an ugly death because she was a half hour too late upon arrival and ten cc's short of Banamine and Bute. "Horatio" had been a noble beast, and deserved a better ending than to have his guts strangulate inside of him for three hours before his misery was ended with a bullet. Roberta wished that bullet was put into her own head for not being perfect. One day, ironically, she felt that would be her own end.

Such were the thoughts going on in her head behind the blank stare, in the presence of her new clients and boss.

"The keys to the truck are out front," Henry interjected before the nightmare could go too far.

How much Roberta wished those keys were to her own vehicle and that the directions were to “Elsewhere.”

CHAPTER 15

Doc Henry's farm vehicle was as cracked as his view of the world outside Knife Bend. The windshield looked like a spider's web, begging the gravel roads to throw up one more pebble to smash the whole thing to bits. The seat covers were littered with syringes, needles, and vials of medications labeled with chickenscratch, that would be a field day for Cops looking to work their way up the Law Enforcement ladder with a quick drug bust and secret sale of some of the booty to the Hell's Angels.

The dial on the radio had a one track mind, and channel. Every third song on Doc Henry's ONLY radio station was the "Hearty Party," a contest being set up around it. For any clues as to where the mysterious Hearty Party guy 'up an' disappeared to', the listener got a free CD. A sighting would get you on the radio, and there were no shortage of listeners who called in to report how he was playing the new mantra of the Newest Country Hit to ET's dropping into crop circles from Lethbridge to Prince George. But for the car to go, the radio had to stay on.

Mahegan and Promethius shared the ride. It was part of the deal, as long as Roberta paid for any bodily excretions that wound up on the V6's seats, or on the clients.

Mahegan could teach his new little brother how to 'behave' in modern society, but a wolf is still a wolf. Roberta knew that as soon as the cub was within a whiff of a hen house, he'd come back to her with eggs and feathers on his face, an owner behind his shit-eating grin requiring payment from the novice veterinarian - up front.

But for the moment it was about getting from A to B, B being 'horse with colic' at the Wellington-Jones ranch. Henry's directions that promised to be 'the straightest way there' turned out to be a convoluted circle into less and less populated areas, the cell phone registering nothing but static whenever she tried to dial out.

There were other things wrong with this day of minor nuisances and major phobias. A Transam with "WIN" seemed to be around every corner, hovering behind her, ducking into a backroad every time she had the courage to slow down to get a closer look out the rear view mirror. Perhaps Kurt 'the Suit' was out of the joint, and wanted to have a 'making up' meeting with her. He'd apologize for the 'inconvenience' he caused her over the years, and not leave until she accepted his apology, his way. Maybe she could pretend to be the 'good little wife' again - until she could make another getaway, change her name again, and build another life someplace else. "Someplace else" wasn't a bad idea, anyway, since there were still those charges for drug dealing, embezzlement, fraud, and murder hanging over Roberta. Never mind that killing her father in self-defense of her battered mother was morally valid. Unless her mother woke up from the 15 year coma, and told the REAL story, the judge would believe any story Kurt, "Daddy Dearest's" best buddy, provided. Eventually, there would be a match made with her fingerprints, maybe obtained for some government job, military clearance or overnight arrest on a misdemeanor, such as getting to where she had to be by the fastest way possible.

“What the hell is...” Roberta said to Mahegan, noting a flashing light atop a Blue and White in the rear view mirror. “Shit,” she muttered, noting that her rush to get to colic, and to escape THIS town’s phantom, pushed her pedal to the metal, the speedometer hitting 145 km/hr. A hundred and fifty dollar ticket

She slowed down and pulled over, preparing to unbutton her shirt. “He looks like a two button, hair down kind of guy,” she noted. The five-foot-ten sunglassed man with the grade three Bubba belly waddled out of the car. And he was alone.

Shaking her head, she fixed her hair in the mirror, quickly touching up her lips with gloss. A hot bod was currency, as valid as a charming disposition, and as a woman of no charm and all fire, Roberta had learned to use whatever she had to get what she wanted. Everybody else did.

Officer “Offy’s” gait became firmer, his stride wider, his height apparently taller than projected. Roberta reached behind her waist, “Maybe a hip-hugger Shania Twain look for this good ole guy. He looks like a sorry sap who like getting stomped on by bitches like her, because one day she might give him ‘one a them special country smiles’”....Roberta ceased her biting country act-out when her fingers felt what wasn’t in her back pocket.

“Fuck!” she grunted.

“License and registration, please,” Officer Offy, in reality Constable Whiteman, asked in a business-like tone.

“I got it right...here..” Roberta assured him with a warm smile, eyes turned away so he wouldn’t see her apprehension for leaving her ID at the clinic. Her fear of what he’d think when he put that together with the drug-mobile that was Doc Henry’s mobile hospital. Her terror when the routine background checks on her would reveal a non-routine life which would land her straight to jail, or worse, into the arms of the Suit’s Lawyer when he posted her bail.

“Step out of the car, please, Ma’am,” the officer commanded.

“No way I’m going to argue with this Hank about being ‘Ma’amed’,” her thoughts as she exited the vehicle, looking up. The eagle hovered above. Was it smiling, laughing or crying? Maybe all at once. Maybe this was the time that it would let go with a big shit, landing flat on her smart-assed head, deflating every dream she had built up as it pertained to the creature in whom she invested so much significance. Maybe there wasn’t any significance in life, Spiritual or otherwise. As her father said, in one of those ‘special’ private sessions, life is about ‘those who do and those who get done to, and the trick is to like being where you are in all of that’. To Grandma Collinear, ‘liking’ where life assigned you was the first step to the White Man’s death, and an Half-Breed’s suicide.

Mahegan whimpered, then growled as Constable Whiteman rummaged through the back of the vehicle. "Ma'am. Is this your dog?"

"Mahegan! Motts! It's alright," she commanded, assuredly.

The dog curled up. He could see that his human was lying, but he had to trust her, just as Roberta had to trust the Eagle.

Constable Whiteman said nothing, yet seemed to know a lot. His silence said that he knew that Roberta was hiding something, and that he'd get it out of her, on his time.

"I can, eh, eh, call in and get my, eh, license to you," she stuttered. "And the car isn't mine."

"Indeed not, Doctor Collineur," Constable Whiteman commented.

"Huh?" the over-educated, 169 IQ self-taught scholar replied.

"Doc Henry said he'd bring some dewormer out to my place, and..." He hesitated, then pulled out a plain paper bag from under the passenger seats. "There it is."

Roberta didn't ask what was really in the bag, or why Whiteman's no-expression frown had turned into a smile.

"Where are you headed, Doc?"

"The Wellington-Jones ranch?"

"Ranch. That's what they're calling it this month." He laughed, a private that all the Henrys in Knife Bend seemed to know about.

Roberta smiled, pretending to share in the humor. A tool known to every woman by nature, used in the presence of men by necessity.

"You seem like yer in a hurry, pushing this clunker even harder than Doc Henry does," Whitemen commented. "You were clocking 150 klicks."

"The horse that's waiting for me won't be clicking at all if I don't get there. Colic. Can I use your phone?"

"I can get you there faster. Follow me, Doc."

With that, Whiteman ran to his vehicle, put on his siren and whizzed ahead of Roberta, leading the way to the ranch which was her next scheduled, 'unscheduled' stop. As fast as her mind could get into gear, she rammed the rebuilt vintage V6 into fifth gear, bolting through paths through the farm stubble which were, apparently,

negotiable roads. A great honor for a one-day outsider to be guided around in such a manner. A not-so-great omen that the Eagle took off, alarmed - in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER 16

To the administrators at school, she was a nightmare. To the guidance councilor who tried to place her into a 'realistic life plan', she was a challenge. To her classmates, she was known as "Deathhound". By the age of 16, Hillary "Deathhound" Wellington-Jones had tried on most every 'life plan' available on line, and in town, and none of them fit. "Goth" kept her classmates at a safe distance, earning her enough respect to be left alone, a state she required but a fate she feared most of all. Her hair was every length imaginable, all at once. The left profile featured a mane of once-blond hair now dyed fluorescent purple, flowing gently down to her waist with a wave whisked down from Heaven itself. Above her right ear, four inches of scalp shaved to the skin, a snake tattooed over it. Over her ever-watching sorrowfully brown eyes, bangs which could be styled in at least ten different fashions. Behind those eyes, a brain which was smarter than anyone else around her, and a soul that felt betrayal of every political rhetoric knowable to an information junkie who had od'd on data from a very shallow and insane world.

Deathhound's 'day dharma' was to see that the animals got fed on the "Wellington-Jones Eco-Farm and Nature Reserve". It was Deathhound who figured out that something was wrong with "Aurora," the range-roaming Appaloosa-Arab who had the fortune, or misfortune, of ending up being adopted by the most dangerous kind of creature known to thinking man or intuitive beast - the transplanted Yuppie.

Roberta arrived on the Wellington-Jones' acreage, motioned in past the Volvos and the "Ban Lumbering" signs skillfully carved into the planks of freshly-chopped Ponderosa pine by Deathhound's younger brother, Mike. A dumpy-looking kid with baby fat well into his early teens, and a forehead more suited for baseball caps than thinking caps, Mike's less-than average genetics hardly made sense. Then again, neither did his parents, Lizza and Lance, moving to Knife Bend. It was as good a place as any to set up their New Software Company and, besides, everyone on 'the Vinyard' in Massachusetts was 'going up country'.

The chronically-politically correct couple did everything according to the 'hip to be chic and sensitive' James Taylor/Carlie Simon rulebook, even those things that Jimmy and Carlie didn't do themselves. Most notably, Lance and Lizza had stayed together for over twenty years, probably because their accumulated IQ's barely put them over the three digit mark. But being the beautiful people who they were, coming from beautifully-stocked trust funds left by their own parents, it was only natural that they have two clones of their own. The boy named Wellington-Jones, the girl assigned the Jones-Wellington handle, the final decision as to who got what Surname decided by a coin toss with the Susan B Anthony dollar, given to them for their very-tax-deductible contribution to the National Organization of Women.

As Americans, the Wellington Jones were an embarrassment to their own country, a source of amusement for Canadians who could keep things in perspectives. As managers of animals, they were dangerous. Deathhound knew that best of all, insisting that they call up the Vet rather than consult the Very, Very, Absolute Last Whole Earth

catalogue before mixing one kind of species with another and/or deciding on what kind of feed goes into what kind of creature.

Deathhound had made the call in to Doc Henry in Knife Bend rather than the Reke Master in Canmore, claiming that she didn't want to interrupt her parents' "meditation time."

"Is Aurora gonna be okay?" Deathhound asked Roberta, Mike by her side, Lizza and Lance observing from the side, pleased that their confused daughter was developing her "sharing and caring" dynamic, merely puzzled at why Aurora was kicking at her belly.

"Sure she's gonna be alright," Lizza slurred out with a syrupy sweetness. "Right, Doctor?"

"I think so," Roberta commented, noting that the mare's pulse was still under 90, and there were some gut sounds, and the manure in the ten by ten foot 'pleasure pen' was probably 3 hours old. "I hope so," she thought, knowing fully well that the horse could give her a better history of what had happened than the owners. "I'll go with the Western treatment first."

Roberta pulled out the Butorphenol, skillfully injecting it into the horse's jugular, thankfully seeing the opiod in the back of Doctor Steiner's Mobile Medical Kit. Henry's medicine chest had more Rompan in it, and that was probably his preferred drug of choice, but the books warned of hypotension if you gave too much, and the potency of the plasma protein bound alpha-2 agonist was even higher if the plasma protein was too low. As soon as the droop came to the horse's eye, she inserted a stomach tube down her throat. The mare jolted.

"I could use a hand here, please," Roberta asked, hoping that the owner who the animal trusted most would help hold the head in place, and keep her anxiety minimal, so that whatever gut twisting or churning was going on would get untwisted.

Deathhound instantly jumped in, along with Mike. Neither had handled a horse, beyond the halter stage, but both cared deeply for the creature. "Hold the lead shank like this," Roberta gently instructed Deathhound, as she was about to have her wrist torn off her arm by the twisted rope around her hand. The Goth-Whatever didn't share her brother Mike's fear of the 1,100 pound Mustang with twenty-horse power of "unwillingness" if the carefully titrated dose of Butorphenol wore off, or wasn't enough.

Roberta inserted the tube down the back of the mare's throat, listening with her fingers for the right way to turn it. She then pushed it down the rest of the way to the belly of the beast, listening and sniffing for the 'gurgle' that said it was safe to pour down the mineral oil and well-water cocktail that would clear out whatever was obstructing his intestines. "Good Mistatim," she repeated, again and again.

“Her name’s ‘Aurora,’” Deathhound affirmed, proud of the bond she had established with the mare, distrusting anyone who could do potential harm.

“Mistatim is horse, in Cree,” Roberta related, pouring the viscous glob down the tube into the stomach, hoping that it wouldn’t reflux back up. If it did, it was a 96% certainty, according to the most recent report in JAVMA, that it was surgical colic. The prognosis carried a 35% chance of successful treatment, and after a 100 mile trailer drive to a facility that could handle that kind of surgery. Either that, or the advice would be to take out the gun and do the politically- ‘icky’ right thing, to put Aurora out of her misery. Nature wasn’t going to trick Doctor Collineur more than once with the same disease.

Deathhound saw something most unexpected in Roberta as she silently went through the thinking process, mumbling either a medical plan or a prayer in her Native language. Commitment. This Veterinarian was committed to something. It was in the way Doctor R listened to Aurora’s belly. The gentle way she put her finger on the arteries under her jaw. The way she looked into the creature’s eyes. The way the Indian in the White Doctor gear moved her hands down the horse’s back and legs and seemed to know where to plunk the acupuncture needles, channeling something of her self into Aurora as she twirled the needles, knowing when each point had been ‘spoken to’ enough. This was no New Age Bullshit, Roberta’s novelty coming from some connection she had with an Ancient Age.

But as for Lizza and Lance... “Mistatim. I recognize that from Dances with Wolves...It sounds so charming...Is that Indian?” They asked in a ping pong manner, bobbing their head in unison, in the same voice, disconnected from both hart and head.

“Yup, Mistatim is Indian.” Roberta commented. “Same as me.”

Mike and Deathhound did an eyeroll to each other, dulling the painful embarrassment of their parents in the bond they had with each other.

“Can you say something in ‘Indian’?” Lance inquired.

The smartassed, politically-incorrect answer was astute, ending with “Munios”, a word the Cree had accurately assigned to their Paleface Brothers, dating back all the way to the Hudson Bay Years of the eighteenth century.

“Those who have gone mad in the pursuit of money?” Deathhound inquired of Roberta, audible only to her.

“My not-so-better other half,” the Doc offered by way of sorrow, and apology.

Roberta’s eyes met Deathhound’s heart. Maybe a student-mentor relationship that can be trusted by the 16 year old burn out too intelligent for anyone else around her? Someone who could indeed show her how compassion and intelligence could be combined into something that worked in the world of “Earthlings.” Someone who could

be trusted to teach you how not to need a teacher. Someone who spoke what they felt, and didn't believe their own bullshit, perhaps. Even that would be a workable enough comfort to make living bearable, until the relief of death came to end it all.

"Hey, I got a great idea!" Lance interjected. "You could teach Hillary and William to speak your Native tongue."

"Yes," Lizza added. "It would be so..."

"Lovely," Lance added.

"Yes, quite," Roberta concluded. She carefully noted how 'Hillary' and 'Michael William Jefferson' hated their politically-hip Democratically-derived names, and how they cringed away from any circumstance which incorporated them.

"I'm only here temporarily," Roberta added.

Mike breathed a sigh of relief, thankful that he would be spared more mis-informed 'ecology' lessons, so that he could survive his adolescence and move up the ladder to become a cook or chainsaw operator in a logging camp.

Deathhound felt disappointment along with the relief, until she heard - .

"We'd pay you," Lizza offered.

"Twice what you're getting now," Lance added.

"By the hour," Lizza backhanded into Roberta's court.

Deathhound could see it now. The Good Doctor would make a great deal, and with the wampum, buy herself a better truck. Everyone was in it for the bucks. Even the Enlightenment and Caring business was a business.

There was so much Roberta wanted to teach Deathhound. So much to pass on. "So important that every healer have a student and a teacher," Grandma Collineur had said.

"Please," Lizza and Lance sung out of their mouths, arm in arm.

Deathhound resolved herself to another year of 'tutorials' at home. It beat being bored at school, perhaps.

"We'll pay you four times what you're getting now," Lizza offered through the smile that seemed fixed on her face by the three plastic surgery operations, and what Deathhound swore were the lobotomy scars under her ever-so-perfect blonde bangs.

"By the hour," Lance affirmed.

Roberta hesitated. "There's just one problem." Above her, the eagle squawked. She looked up. "I'm on Indian time, and when that time comes to teach Hillary and William what I know, we'll all know it."

"That's..." Lizza was at a loss for words, yet again.

"Lovely," Lance interjected in a soft tone, not quite going over the line to effeminate, dancing dangerous close to it.

Aurora seemed to agree. The range-raised mare nuzzled her head toward the hay, nibbling at the flakes put into her padded pen, decorated with all manner of playthings bought at Horse Boutiques from Santa Fe to San Francisco.

"Is that good, for her to eat like that, so soon after she's been sick?" Deathhound asked.

"Yeah. It is," Roberta concluded, doing her once-over exam twice, pleased with the progress according to the Western and Eastern diagnostic techniques. "But Aurora would be better off in that field of grass you have out there." The Wellington-Jones' had no idea of what riches were on the land they bought from a catalogue in a Toronto real estate agent's office. There it was, Native grass, just as the buffalo left it. And a whole 100 acres of it, untouched, thankfully. Such a site was rare indeed, in a country that had been transformed from naturally-sustainable wild grasslands into plowed and deforested farmfields within a period of ten years, with the opening of the West following the defeat of Louis Riel and his Metis Alliance in 1885. "Freedom is always the best medicine," Roberta recalled, and reminded herself.

The words and sentiments hit Deathhound where she lived, or wanted to.

CHAPTER 17

Doctor Henry Steiner had strong opinions about everything, including Bill Shakespeare. "I'd rather watch Gary Cooper sleep than see the best of Shakespeare." Surprisingly, he did "Lady MacBeth" quite well, and often. A Taurus by birth, an earth sign by temperament, he was obsessed with two things - water, and clean. Kathy, the receptionist, found it odd the first week of her employment, interesting for the next month, and disturbing as the time clock ticked down to her giving notice.

The finale of every farm call or office visit involved an intensive 'afterscrub' at the nearest faucet or water pump, supplemented with thorough use of betadine scrub. Years of exposure to the iodine based detergent shriveled his fingers to the bone.

It had been a long day with the apprentice veterinarian with the upitty political attitude, and the exceptional medical abilities that permitted her some liberties in expression of such. Henry had asked Roberta to dress in more of a 'professional' manner for the next day. The upstart Young Turkette replied that it would be no problem, reminding the Old Redneck that a Traditional Native Healer wears moccasins with fringe, bead work on her wrists as well as around her neck, and adorns herself with smudges of sweetgrass on every 'smoke break'. Therefore, she was obligated to be even more 'ethnic' in appearance.

It all seemed quite amusing to Kathy, certainly a break from the boredom that had become her job as Henry's receptionist, and her 'life' in the dying economic town in which she was born and raised.

Doctor Roberta had fulfilled her quota, and earned the right to be called such by at least ten locals, an honor bestowed upon an veterinary physician only after years of service. The "Wolf Doctor" had scored high points on a 30 patient day. Zero clients lost, no animals dead, and more appointments on the books for the upcoming weeks for re-checks. Those re-checks would give the final word as to whether Roberta was lucky or skillful, or that special combination of both known as 'talented'.

Part of Kathy's job was to 'swab the decks' at the end of the day, 'squaring away' the supplies and then 'cleaning the galley'. To Kathy it was cleaning the floor, putting away the bottles, and doing a once-over on the 'kitchen'. She was hardly impressed with the land-locked veterinarian's fascination with everything Navy, and American Navy at that. Though he never cursed, at least in the presence of a lady, his hidden rage was most evident when he said 'darn this', 'freakin' that' or 'heck of a' whatever. But the man of many secrets was good at his trade, good for Knife Bend, and good for her bank account, two paychecks away from a one way ticket to someplace REAL, like the West Edmonton Mall or Los Angeles. A job as a travel agent, with a hubby who's a pilot, who's away a lot, who you could show off to your girlfriends. Or maybe a dancer in a Broadway Show somewhere. Or a model in Japan. The stories about how blonde haired, blue-eyed White girls get 'owned' by slant-eyed black-haired Chink businessmen didn't scare Kathy none. She was third generation Knife Bend stock. It was her strength, and her weakness.

Henry yelled out his orders from inside the 'head', the echo making his baritone voice sound even more robust, and lonely. "Exam tables?"

"Done," Kathy noted, taking off her white lab coat.

"Operating kits?"

"Squared away," she 'smiled back' with an eyeroll, grabbing her imitation-Rhinestone studded Wrangler jean jacket.

"Drugs."

"Logged in and locked away," the volley back, as 'Just Kathy' pondered yet again what the ketamine would get on the streets as 'Special K', and how much human body builders would overpay for the Winstrol formulated to put weight on old mares and dogs emaciated by cancer or liver disease. And so many other street drugs in the 'controlled substances' box, converted into easy dollars once she could find a street where they could be moved. Like everything else in Kathy's life, it was a fantasy in which the benefits were imagined, the consequences never even considered.

"Bandages, gauze and vaccines," Henry barked out, interrupting Kathy's daydreams of returning to her old boyfriend in Calgary, or that Antonio Banderas Nicaraguan who left his number with her when she waited on him in Henrietta's Cafe.

"Kathy," Henry growled.

"Yes, Doctor Steiner?" she asked, a blank stare on her face. Inside the jacket was an envelope, and inside the envelope-

"A bonus," Henry bolted out. "Our ship's coming into port, and on this boat, we share the rum."

"I don't know what to say." Indeed, Kathy didn't. Ever since she was an underage waitress at 15, she was two paychecks away from putting a down payment on her dreams. "Why?"

"We have a new partner, and new prospects," Henry related. He popped his head out of the head, his face freshly shaven in preparation for any after-hour calls. "Great new days ahead, if we keep our nose to the grindstone and our eyes on the horizon."

"Yeah. Horizons," Kathy noted, holding the economic key to her future in her hand, in hard cash. Four month's pay for one day's work.

"See you tomorrow, Kathy," Henry proclaimed.

“Yeah, Doc...Tomorrow.” The subtext of ‘tomorrow’ was never more appealing and obtainable. And as a bonus, the key to the drug box. She had no real family left in Knife Bend, anyway. A distant Uncle who tried to be a father after her parents died. An Aunt with Alzheimer’s Dementia who lived far more happily in the past than the present. A boyfriend who was, after all, just a boy. A friend, if he had the balls to follow her to... tomorrow, someplace else.

Doc Henry came in early to work the next day. It was business as usual. Drive in from his trailer across town to his office behind the kennels. Pull up to the door an hour before sun-up. Push the keys into the keyhole, jimmy the lock, curse the door, curse the day he was born, curse himself for cursing. Push the door, go to the cash register, and smile.

“Empty, just the way I came here,” he commented. The drug cabinet had been selectively emptied as well. “Not again,” he growled, clenching his fist. To add insult to financial and pharmacological injury, the floor was caked with fresh brown material, a mixture of dried mud with splatterings of manure, by the smell.

Roberta sauntered in, smelling of sweat from another uneasy night of ‘dreaming’ about her not-so-dreamy past.

“What the hell...?” she inquired.

“Mice.”

“More like rats. The two legged kind.” Roberta examined the debris, the fringes on her buckskin jacket flapping in the stagnant air and into Henry’s angry eyeline. “You call the Cops?”

“Should I?” Henry inquired, doing the mental calculations, considering a most frightening possibility. If it smelled like a duck, quacked like a duck and fucked you over like a duck, it was a probably a duck. Roberta Collineur, Ph.D., D.V.M. had one primary objective - get out of town, to somewhere else, and probably somewhere expensive. As a ‘hippie vet,’ she was probably into drugs, and maybe into women after enough drugs. Her talents were vast, and her secrets just as deep. Probably just as dark. Yet there was still something about her that was very familiar to his inner eye and intuition.

“What are you looking at?” Roberta asked.

“You tell me, Doctor.” The tone was direct, the accusations clear.

Roberta had been there before. To be accused is as good as being guilty. To offer alternative hypotheses would be futile. Doc Henry would really believe that his ‘trusted’ Mall Rat in training, Kathy, would steal money and dope from him! Crimes done by

others fit around Roberta like a picture perfect frame. The worst kind of offenses done by men like her father in Montreal Lake, the junkie in Winnipeg, and the Suit in Calgary had been thrust upon Roberta so often that she accepted doing other people's penance as a karmic privilege. But after Grandma Collineur's funeral, no more.

"I have to ask you where you were last night," Henry asked, fully prepared for the truth. He extended his hand to her shoulder, in a tone that was surprisingly fatherly. "Roberta, if you need money, I'll see you get a chance to earn it. And if you have a problem with drugs or drinking-"

"I'll deal with it myself!" Roberta blasted out, pushing the Old Man's arm off her shaking shoulder. "You want to know where I was last night? I'll show you."

Doctor R whipped loose papers from every pocket on her hips, belly and breast. "Seven thirty calving, nine-twenty insecticide ingestion, eleven thirty five laceration, two AM almost-C section on an emaciated Dalmatian that nailed me on the wrist, then on the way home, a stray hit by car cat on the road that I had to-"

Roberta's face turned deep red.

"It's okay to cry," Henry said. "As long as it's not in front of the clients."

"Which is what you are," Roberta shot back, determined to hold it in, no matter how much it hurt to put the kitty with the busted leg, the torn out eye and eviscerated colon out of its misery. "You, Doctor Steiner, Sir, are a client. Who gets his cut of the money."

Roberta produced the fees for the night, in cash. She put them into piles in the cash box, the portraits of the English Lords and Ladies on the Canadian bills saying "he who has the money makes the rules, and for now, this White Man rules you."

Henry's eyes spotted something else outside the cracked side window. Red, flashing and new. Indeed the world had come knock-knock-knocking on his door, the metallicallly-handsome man inside emerging. He never took off his Sunglasses, but merely smiled.

The Old Doc had seen his likes before. "If this guy wants gold out of this town, he's gonna have to dig it out of the creek himself."

"That's 'panning'," Roberta interjected, remembering her two summers in the bush asking the mountain for 'yellow rocks' when the creditors in town tried to bust her balls for winter debts. "You pan for gold, and even if you do strike paydirt, the only winner is the Mountain."

"An interesting hypothesis, Doctor." Henry watched the thousand-dollar suit man watching him.

“My experience of it,” Roberta commented. “And what the hell are you looking at?”

“‘Heck’,” the Good Doctor flung back in a not so good-natured tone. “Cursing is a sign of a lazy mind.”

“Or a tired one.” Roberta unpacked her bag of private meds and scientifically-blended herbs, laying them out on the shelves in the space allocated to her. To the best of her knowledge, and experience, she divided them into categories of action. Some would be best classified as anti-inflammatories, some as anti-biotics, some as anti-parasitics, some as pro-growth of liver, kidney or some other organ. But some wound up in the controlled drug cabinet. She pondered what Grandma Collineur would think, her formulated Traditional medicinals sitting in a White Redneck’s Controlled Drug Substance vault. They had been either ridiculed, discredited or destroyed sometime in the Old Woman’s nearly century long life. Had it not been for Roberta’s ‘independent study’ projects at the University of Saskatoon, they might not have been granted the approval of scientific testing, and when the birchbark was boiled down to the bone, Roberta was a scientist to the core. Indeed, some of Grandma Collineur’s med’s didn’t work. Maybe a magic touch of the healer was the special ingredient in them. And, as such, such treatments never found their way into Doctor Roberta’s treatment kit.

Two agents in particular had sedative effects on the Central Nervous System, enough to do male neuters over the kitchen table or hood of a pick up and, on a calm female, a spay. They came in very handy on her pre-licensed days of farm calls, when she was low on ‘burrowed’ drugs from the lab, and absent of medical qualification certificates. Four bottles remained, fourteen surgeries requiring something stronger than what Doc Henry had left in the vault after the Candy Man, or Woman, made an unanticipated midnight withdrawal.

“I’m not sure of the mechanism of action of some of these, but I know they work. May have something to do with sigma opiod receptor binding, with, I suspect, activation of alpha 2 pre-synaptic receptors that lower CNS norepi release. Both agents are off label, but separately, have been approved.”

The stare-down kept going on. Henry ran the rolodex in his mind. Who could it be? He had made many enemies, all in the same Army, all wearing the same ‘uniform’, polished shoes, fashion suit, matching tie and socks that matched.

“Doctor Steiner?” Roberta inquired. “What the ‘heck’ are you...”

By the time Roberta got to the window, the TransAm had zoomed down the dirt path masquerading as a road, the “WIN” license plate glowing arrogantly in the dust.

Henry looked at Roberta, her face pale white, arms shaking. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” he concluded. “Is there something you’d like to tell me?”

“Yeah,” Roberta slurred from her mouth. She ran through the options and possibilities in her racing, yet still logically-based, brain. One final conclusion was inevitable. “We’re both fighting the same battle, Doctor Steiner.”

“Yes, I sensed that from the first time you-.”

“-But it’s a whole different war. And after this round is over, I AM leaving. I have to.” She looked up to the sky, the Eagle making its morning rounds, squawking a ‘howdy do’ her way. A confirmatory message this time, maybe. “I pay my debts to you, and this town, and I have to move on.”

“As you should. And as I always intended.” Henry smiled one of his ‘business as usual’ grins. “Now, let’s get this ship ready to cast off. We’ve got a lot of sailing to do today.”

Henry noted Kathy’s locker empty, and grabbed a mob. His turn to swab the decks, singing “Anchor’s Away” with glee and abandonment.

Roberta had learned lots of truths about liars, even more than Grandma Collineur or Professor von Roode. The first was that if you lie long enough, even to yourself, you forget when you’re telling the truth and when you’re lying. The second was the old maxim “When do you know when a liar is not telling the truth? When his lips are moving.”

CHAPTER 18

Time passed, as well as the multitude of experiences. Roberta's politics could best be described as Democratic Socialist. Most every non-science elective she took in college had something to do with Revolution, or Revolutionaries. The Russian "Rebs" of 1905 and 1917 were the ones closest to her heart. There was something in the Bolshevik credos that reflected what she believed and lived. "Each gives according to his needs, and takes according to his abilities." One of the things on her A list was to ride a horse, or failing that, a vintage 1968 Indian Motorcycle, across Siberia, feeling the vastness of it all and the infinite possibilities for a grand, Utopian Society. Then there was the Russian Reality. "One step forward, two steps back."

Late fall leaves gave way to the Winter snows. Prometheus was well on his way to wolf-hood, missing no opportunity to live up to his name and genetics. As "Prometheus", mortal who couldn't just leave things the way the gods left them, he found his way into every nook and cranny containing things edible

Mid November was the chicken house behind Harry Tompson's dairy barn. Amount owing - three free health checks, two calvings, or one prolapsed uterus. A week later found the cub dining on a freshly roasted 30 pound Thanksgiving turkey Henrietta cooked at her cafe, for Knife-Benders with American roots who decided that home cooking was more of a risk than her own. Amount owing - two cat spays, and a dog neuter - along with a firm 'request' to chop off the family jewels of the growing wolf cub, who had aspirations of assertingly courting the Cafe owner's pet poodle.

Late November was kind to the farmers and ranchers, Chinooks from the Pacific edging in and treating all manners of hoofed beasts to two weeks of unexpected green grass and afternoon sunbaths. Mechanically, the gods were less kind, focusing their wrath on Roberta's truck. Every time she drove it out of Cowboy Hank's garage with a "she's ready to roll now," something would break down three days later. But Terri's craftsmanship beat any man's, even Cowboy Hank's. By the time everything had been patched up, replaced or rebuilt, Roberta had herself a top of the line clunker fully able to go anywhere she needed - as long as it wasn't more than 20 miles away from Knife Bend.

With Kathy's exit out of town, and local gossip, and new partner Doctor Roberta, Doc Henry now had assistants with highly undeveloped biological instincts but unexpectedly open hearts, and minds.

Terri became Doc Henry's new part-time receptionist, 'swabbing the decks' faster than any 'mate' to ever serve on the "Good Ship Henry". Terri knew how to hold most of the medical instruments if instructed veerrryy clleearrly, and keep the talkative clients talking about themselves, while Roberta conferred with the animal regarding said creature's own ailments with diseases, or human owners.

Deathhound chose to go on the road with Doctor Roberta. It counted towards 'study hours' at school, and spared her those 'caring and sharing' nights of hugging and 'group

yoga' with her parents. The Goth teen always had a fascination with Death, understanding little about life, and caring for it even less. But with each medical case, with each listening to Roberta revealing another 'private' thing about what she thought or felt, and with every silent conversation between Souls on the runs from farm A to ranch B to trailer C, something deepened, in both the student and the teacher.

"Win" sightings became less frequent. The million dollar "Mystery Hunk" with the sunglasses made a few appearances in late October, but he seemed to have gotten what he wanted. Rumors floated around the counter at Henrietta's Cafe about what WASN'T coming to Knife Bend. No airport. No ski lodge. No big Hollywood movie. No.... dollars from the part of the world that had money. It seemed consistent with the rest of the data on the landscape.

Mitchell International Enterprises Corporation slowed down development of the new shopping mall and condo center. Some said it was the early winter snap in October, some pondered that it was legal problems in Toronto and Montreal, some speculated that it had something to do with the dip in the stock market after Thanksgiving, and some hoped it was Native Spirits emerging from the earth on the construction sites, telling the Paleface Invaders, "Enough!" in no uncertain terms. The latter was the most liked theory around the lunch counter at Henrietta's Cafe. It explained the breakdown in machinery that bogged down construction, and cut out even more paying jobs for the one-bill-away-from-bankruptcy citizenry. If indeed it was a Knife Bend Patriate resurrecting the Cause of Freedom and Self Determination of town founder 'Old Heinrich' Richter, no one was talking. At least not in public.

One thing never gained or lost ground. Daniel was still out there, somewhere. Every day, without fail, Roberta called her answering service, hoping that Christmas would come early. And every day, without fail, 'no new messages on your machine'. No reunion with her lost son THIS Christmas.

But, slowly, other Daniels came into her life. In vet school, they were patients, cases or opportunities to prove your medical knowledge or academic instincts. Out here, the helpless furry and feathered creatures were the doctor's children, if the doctor wanted them to be.

It all happened that way... slowly.

Christmas Eve is when Roberta noticed something. Cowboy Hank stopped by the clinic after his sunset ride, clocked in on the "Henry Clock" on mainstreet as 3:30 pm. Roberta drew the blood from the horse's neck, the Feds requiring that the Coggins test be drawn by an outside party and submitted by same, to assure the buyers of the three-year old colt that it was free of Equine Infectious Anemia.

"Knife Bend sorta grows on ya," Cowboy Hank confessed to Roberta, squinting at the Western horizon. "You stay a month, you stay a year, ya stay..."

“Forever?” Roberta filled in. The reality hit her. Indeed, her frames of reference had all become very local. It had become part of her routine, including the Navy talk by the landlocked Redneck Boss who was just supposed to be hiring her for thirty days, with an option for every 24 hours period thereafter. She turned to Cowboy Hank, noticing something very handsome, and familiar, about him. “How long have you been here, Mustache Man?”

“Long as my mustache has been with me, Ma’am.”

Roberta knew the “ma’am” was a ribbing, a gentle country dig that never buried you into a black hole. Yet Roberta’s humor was still black, as was her view of herself. Still, she had to ask Hank the question she’d been begging to since she first saw the magic, and secrets, in his baby-blue eyes. “Would you ever shave that overgrown caterpillar off your lip?”

“I thought about it, but I reckon it’ll bleed.”

“If it does I’ll stitch it up for you. No charge.”

From under Hank’s hairy soup strainer emerged something very unusual.

“A smile?” she noted. “Are you smiling?”

“It happens sometimes.” The loner in the Off-White Weatherworn Stetson looked straight at Roberta.

“Yeah, I suppose it does,” she replied, eyes turned downward.

The horse whinnied.

“Home and hay, I know.” Hank stuck his hole-ridden boot into the stirrup, plopped his ever-so-hot, yet non-had ass in the saddle, and picked up the reins. He tipped his hat. “Merry Christmas, Doc.”

“You too, Cowboy.”

Horse and rider clipitty-clopped down the driveway, towards town, and another wintry Alberta night. The wind lay silent, gentle flakes of snow floating down from a gathering of grey clouds with more good intentions than bad.

The Eagle hovered in, moving in toward the pile of testicles, uteruses and other lumps extracted from clinic patients, mixed in with a few partially-eaten bologna and tuna sandwiches. They were tastefully placed in a wolf-proof perch atop the roof overlooking the parking lot.

“Been a long time since you’ve been by,” she said to the bird in English, then Cree. “You gonna come down and get your Christmas diner or what?”

The Eagle hovered, sniffed the offering, then looked up at her.

“You don’t want it, Promethius gets it again,” she warned. “Promethius!” she yelled out.

“Okay, a joke’s a joke,” the Eagle seemed to say, taking the mixed bag of animal parts in his mouth, soaring up to the cloud, disappearing behind it.

Promethius appeared next to Roberta’s side, on cue, love in his eyes, compassion in his heart. “All is well, Promethius,” Roberta said to him. “All looks very well, all in all.” She looked up to the sky, hooking on the bottom line conclusion to it all. “Everything seems good, okay and... comfortable. And that’s scaring the heck... no, scaring the HELL out of me.”

CHAPTER 19

Mahegan earned every morsel of the dog food and table scraps that wound up on his plate. Half the time he was responsible for looking out for Prometheus. The other half was spent looking out after Roberta. Both part-time gigs were full time jobs.

The most important time was night time, guarding the Camper after the bright blue Western skies gave way to an unending canvas of black, illuminated with bright stars and, on occasion, the Northern Lights, which danced for you if you let them. Doctor R loved the sky when the sun went down. You could write any future you wanted to into the stars, and experience any present that suited you. Within the vastness there was a serenity. But there was also darkness when the moon was absent, suggestions of demonic presences when it was full.

It was a still night, Jan 2, year of Their Lord nineteen.... whatever. The Aboriginal Wonder Vet had been on call for ten nights straight, and Doc Henry wasn't real straight about where he had been for nearly a fortnight. To the people in town, he was visiting relatives. To the staff, he was filling in for another veterinarian, an old, dying, school chum who needed his help 'real bad'.

But whatever the convenient lie, or the noble truth, Roberta finally had a night to herself. No clients. No teaching sessions with Deathhound, or Terri. No social 'howdy's' with Cowboy Hank. And no people around her Camper for half a mile, maybe more. Though a technical moron with things metal or mechanical, Roberta did know how to jury rig an 'off' electrical outlet and water tank at summer campsites so they would deliver all the conveniences of home during the dead of winter. "Winter is the time when you get warm with snow instead of sunshine," Grandma Collineur would relate to her on their winter camping trips. At least it felt like winter camping at the time. The reality was that she had been living on the fringe, and perhaps on the run, just as Doctor Roberta was now.

The slumber was uneasy at best. Once again, Kurt the Suit had invaded her dreams again. Another round of ongoing battle in the huya aniya, the Spirit World, which changed consciousness and reality in the 'real world' on the 'awake' side of the Rainbow. "Stand up to your demons in your dreams, and you will never be degraded by devils when you are awake." Such was Grandma Collineur's advice when Roberta revisited nightmares with her father as a young teen, recalling childhood days of active seduction and abuse of her body, mind, and spirit. Sometimes she'd win against her father in the huya aniya. But she never won against Kurt.

Mahegan heard it, again. All he could do was watch, listen, and hope that she'd let him into her dream, so he could take a chunk out of his other foot, as well as the one that sprouted between his legs when he saw anything in a short skirt slink by, male or female. "NO! I only have ninety bucks of my own, but it will take me ninety bucks away from you, this dope pushing, the scams, schemes and...AHHHH!!!...And with what I HAD to do to my father... If you tell ANYone, I'll..."

The shivers turned into shakes as the rest of the movie played out on the screen behind her eyes. “Leave me alone! You’re hurting me, Kurt! Damn you, you’re hurting me!”

From the other side of reality, a knock, squarely on the camper door. Firm and direct.

Mahegan growled at the intruder, calling to bear all the muscle and guts in his 10 year old body.

Prometheus barked, then howled, as if to summon the pack that lay in waiting on the other side of the treeline.

Roberta woke up, reflexively grabbing a crowbar. At the ‘transition’ state between numb and conscious.

Another knock.

More barking, growling...and screaming.

“What the hell do you want! Leave me alone!” Roberta screamed. This time, she reached for the one item that thankfully was not stolen from her truck three months earlier, or found by the Cops when they towed it into town. Her Grandfather’s 38 caliber Winfield, used in the Riel Rebellion against the RCMP, the Canadian Infantry and the Canadian Pacific Railroad. It only fired one round at a time, but once it hit its mark, the animal or person shot never hit back.

“I’ll shoot you dead!” she ranted, meaning it this time. “So goddamn help me. I’ll shoot you dead this time if...”

The door opened, slowly, a hand coming in. With all the precautions, the special guard training, the motion detectors on the side and the roof, she had forgotten to lock the door.

When the hand came in, one finger spoke the intention of the man wielding it. The dogs fell silent. Roberta’s heart raced with a clambering scream of primal fear.

“What the-” Roberta gasped, noting Doc Henry’s index finger, up, and quieting her canine companions.

“Emergency call at the Johansens,” he said in a matter of fact manner, business as usual. “Three C sections and at least two milk fevers. Multiple lacerations, maybe some orthopedic cases. I’ll meet you there.”

With that, the Good Ole Boy Doc strode over to his V6 truck, pulling out of the campsite at a 100 klicks an hour, defying the speed limit signs, as well as the limitations of the outdated truck, to stay alive for another hundred yards. He was lucky that way, or

skilled. People and machines obeyed his commands, the laws of Nature and Physics never vetoing his requests.

Roberta looked up at the stars, held onto her arms, and dug her grubby fingernails into her clammy skin. Yes, she was in the real world, and didn't die in the huya aniya. Such was the way her Grandmother died, in her sleep, fighting a demon of the worst kind, and losing to it. So the Elders said.

Mahegan nudged her under the neck. Promethius snuck under her arm, rubbing his head against her armpit - and helping himself to a chunk of beef jerky in her jacket pocket.

"It's okay, guys. We'll get Kurt next time, and finish him for good. If he has the balls or brains to find us." Being found or not found. To die by ambush or fear. That was the question. But the answer, for the moment, was to hop into the cab of the truck and try to get to the Johanson's farm before Old Doc Dinosaur did.

CHAPTER 20

It took longer than expected to get from Campground A to Johansen Farm B, potholes in 'shortcut C' doubling, maybe tripling the traveling time. Roberta jumped out of her truck, not sure of what she had on under her all-season fringed jacket, the choker around her neck, some kind of mocassins on her feet, appendages that seemed to carry HER at a flat out run in tune with the momentum of whatever was happening, expecting the worst.

The winter storm that spared Knife Bend exerted its effect on the main barn with Biblical vengeance. Every fence, pen or stall in sight had been busted, the pigs, cows and ponies hanging around them, wondering what to do with their newly-provided freedom. Munching on the hay seemed to work for the creatures, and, apparently, for the farmer. Roberta always enjoyed the primal sounds that gave animals the most pleasure. Munching on food, gurgling of stomachs, and crapping out of whatever was left through the back door. Of course, the radio was still playing, the storm mercilessly leaving the musical baby-sitter on. "Hey guys, I'd love to turn that 'Hearty Party' down," Roberta said to the creatures in range of the droning clone music masquerading as melodic and mellow. "But it's not my place, and you're someone else's responsibility, but then again.... you ARE my responsibility tonight."

Roberta tuned down the dreaded happy tune, and listened. Still nothing into her ears except the sound of quiet. She checked the address on the paper given to her by Doc Steiner, confirming the bearings with the Viking-like "Johansen" family signs strewn about the rubble of the barn, thankfully still standing.

"Henry? Heinrich? Hank?" she screamed out to the North, East and West.

She was answered from the South. "Over here, Doc!"

The man's voice had a tone that didn't fit the Apocalyptic decorum. He was confident, calm and.... happy.

Doctor R let her already-heavy feet carry her at a flat out run, medical bag in tow, Prometheus and Mahegan in the cab of the truck, DOUBLE locked in this time. The rule at Saskatchewan Veterinary College was "you walk, the technicians run." But this was Knife Bend, not the Large Animal Clinic at a multi-billion-dollar training center. Besides, it was another opportunity to break one of the rules handed to her by SVC Policy, an experiment in alternative medical techniques.

The hundred yard dash to the treatment barn invigorated Roberta. She was ready for action! Whatever emergencies were waiting, she was ready for them! Come on, demon death! Give me your best shot!

She grabbed the door handle, took her 'moment', said a quick, though intense, prayer to Buddha and the Great Spirit, and opened the door.

From the corner of her eye she spotted the “Henry” who needed to call out TWO vets on a midnight call. He was five foot eleven while walking, probably at least six-two if his crunched up back was straightened out. He wore his CAT hat proudly. It still didn’t hide his fully-advanced male pattern baldness, a genetic curse that he seemed to accept but not identify with. His deep blue eyes revealed that every ounce of freedom he had was earned with a pound of sweat, and tears, a barter he eagerly accepted. Knife Bend fit around him like a size 7 glove on a sized 8 Master Neurosurgeon.

“How can I help you, Mister Johansen?” she inquired of the ‘Henry’.

“Clyde.” He extended his hand out to her in a firm, hard and welcoming handshake. Roberta had learned that White Men show their trust of you by squeezing hard, something Indians never did. Aboriginal handshakes were always gentle. But she grabbed on hard to his long fingers and hard fist, this being about business, not cultural integration.

“Where are the downer cows, Henry...eh...Clyde.”

Clyde pointed to two milk fever bovines, subcutaneous lines laying in the last round of Steiner-special, containing calcium gluconate solution and some other concoction that never made it into any textbook. They seemed as contented as Clyde was.

“The C-sections?”

“A piece of cake, once the first stab went in,” Clyde pulled in the mucous from his cheeks into the back of his mouth and flung a wad of spit to his left. Maybe it hit the mark, maybe it didn’t. But, it was practice, anyway.

Roberta pondered the possibilities. Maybe Clyde was one of those “I’ll take care of it myself, even though ‘the wife’ called in the vet” kind of clients. Such clients were the most frustrating, but also the most respected. Even by Professor von Roode.

“The lacerations? Bone brakes?”

“Bruises.” Clyde let out another projective of salivary secretions to his right. Most of it into the bucket this time, a portion of it sticking to the outer edge.

“Did you?”

“I put in a few stitches, but Doc Henry did the rest.”

The evidence spoke for itself. Henry’s truck was parked out the back, the evidence of his work clearly visible. Three horses with lacerations in the neck, legs and face munched comfortably on sweetfeed put into their new ‘stalls’, rope tied, double-tied, into a mesh held together by bailer twine. Roberta inspected the work.

“Not bad,” she noted to herself. “Maybe I’ve never seen better,” her conclusion after a second and third assessment. At first glance, the suture patterns seemed random. Done to convenience by a farmer who placed the threads wherever the needle took them. But maybe that was the point. Henry’s handiwork was nothing you’d put in a textbook. It lacked the symmetry, the ‘aesthetic’, the ‘professional look’. But it complied with the laws of flesh and skin perfectly. Just enough pliability, just enough strength, minimal dead space underneath and....smiles of approval from the patients.

The just-C-sectioned cows seemed fine - more than fine. Reunited with their calves, sucking on the teat as if Mamas, said mothers bearing no brunt of the emergency surgery except a tattoo on the left flank in a sort-of Ford Interlocking pattern.

“He did all this in....” Roberta checked her watch. “An hour?”

“More like forty-five minutes, give or take.” Clyde let out another practice shot of spit, hitting the rooster on weathervane smack two rungs from the bullseye on its ass. “But he’s still got one more C-section left. He’s a little slow tonight. Saved the hardest for last.”

Clyde pointed to an old garage, converted to an operating room. A set of flashlights tied to the roof illuminated the operating field from four angles. The chute consisted of a rusted bicycle rack from the Heinrich Richter Memorial Library and top-of the line steel railing from “Mitchell Construction,” held together with bailing wire and rusted screws soldered into the metallic mesh.

Also present, Doc Henry himself, his back to Roberta. His eyes were on the open incision, his mind on the cow, the undersized heifer agonizing in pain. His arm was elbow deep into the bovine’s abdomen, listening hard with his fingers, pushing even harder with his arthritic hands whenever Nature provided a clue about how to move the calf that seemed to be doing everything it could to NOT help its mother in the birthing process. Every surgical tool in his kit had been used, blood soaked swabs everywhere. At the very least, another fistful of hemostats would be needed to take care of the bleeders to come.

Roberta unpacked the essentials, and more, taking her ‘moment’, between breaths, and quips. “Okay, I’ll say it for you. ‘I’m twice yer age, young lady, and have four times yer energy, and if ya had any sense of loyalty to yer patients and your clients, and yer country, you’d buy a Canadian truck instead of a vehicle made by Japs or Krauts. And we’re supposed ta look like professionals on farm calls, not like we’re going to a pow wow or a Grateful Dead show or a love in.’ Did I miss anything?”

“Phenylhydron. Ten thousand units,” Henry shot back, gritting through his teeth in extreme pain, and pre-occupation with something a lot more important than ‘professional conduct’.

“Huh?”

"In my bag. Phenylhydron. Ten ccs."

Roberta loaded up the syringe with the yellow glop kept in Henry's neatest compartment. It loaded in slowly.

"Come on," Henry commanded.

"It's thick. And you don't have to talk to me in that tone."

"Come on!" Henry asserted again, with even more force of inner will.

Roberta turned around, anticipating a blow up, but saw that Henry was commanding the cow, and the calf, or perhaps God to spare both of their lives, the bill for Soul Payment to go to himself. Apparently, God wasn't listening, or had other plans. The cow strained, violently and unexpectedly, the uterus contracting from three separate places as if it had a mind of its own. Making matters worse, the calf found another way to twist its mother's uterus in the confusion he, it was experiencing. Henry moved his hand in, keeping the twist from becoming a life-threatening tear, but he couldn't hold it there forever, or, by the shaking of his arm and the pain going down his back, even for a much smaller portion of time.

"Hold on, girl! You kept the calf going for ten months. I can keep it alive for another ten minutes. Let's work together," he pleaded.

Roberta finally loaded the syringe, then remembered something, from a 'special' lecture von Roode gave himself, with firm conviction and hard data to support everything he said about the pharmaceutical at hand. "Phenyhydron's illegal in the US AND Canada. A guy up in Peace River was shut down for just having it on the shelves."

"We're injecting saline, here. Right, Clyde?"

Clyde stepped up to the plate. "Ten cc's of saline, as ordered, Doc." This time, his spit hit the mark on the Weathervane Rooster's ass, only one rung from the bullseye this time. Two or three twirls around the center rod. "How does that Cowboy Hank do it?"

"Immaculate Conception, and too much clean air," Roberta quipped from the right hemisphere of her brain and the left side of her mouth. As for the matter at hand, Roberta quickly pulled out any and all appropriate options she could find amidst her supply, and his. "Doctor Steiner, maybe we could use some clenbuterol, or some other beta two agonists I've worked with that I know—"

"—Load that syringe with another 5 ccs, phenylhydron. Stat!"

The uterus convulsed another two spasms. The cow bellowed out a moan well beyond pain. The calf kicked out another foot into the uterine wall, the 'thump' saying 'help' in a language even a veal farmer would feel.

"But, all the published data says that-" Roberta stammered out.

"-Animals don't read textbooks! Inject that fifteen ccs into her jugs."

"But..."

"AHHH!!!" Henry screamed out, his hand deeper into the mass of contracting uterus.

"Your hand!" Roberta screamed out.

"Is fine."

"His back." Clyde noted.

"-Is fine!" Henry barked back. Doc Dinosaur's back arched up like a Tyrannosaurus Rex who just got zapped by 38 caliber laser into his spine.

"What should I do?" Roberta asked Henry, Clyde, herself and, if He/She was still on speaking terms, The Great Spirit.

"Decide if this animal lives or dies!" Henry asserted, not knowing the depth of the command, and its ramifications.

Roberta took her 'moment', as private as it was intense. Inject a drug that science said killed animals? An agent that carried the most gruesome side effects both in emergency situations and, if the animal was lucky enough to survive, a few days later. The delayed neurotoxic effects were the worst, loss of hindlimb function, loss of balance, and inevitable loss of vision. It was bad enough the food animals were blinded by the reason for their existence and what happens after their death. But to deprive an animal of the ability to see? To say nothing of the GI tract convulsing effect, kidney shut down, and other effects reported in at least seven species of lab animals.

What would 'live by your convictions' Grandma Collineur say? What would 'above all do no harm' Professor von Roode say? What would the veterinary board say if they knew Roberta did one of the only 'no no's' in the books? Her license was Provisional, and at that, it was under an assumed name. If her past was fully investigated, she would have to do hard time in the slammer. A place without sky, open space, and animals.

And it was about animals, and....the hands. "The best pair of hands West of Winnipeg" took over, Roberta's mind watching them push the neck of the cow, push the

air out of the needle, and inject the phenylhydron into the jugs. Then, she stopped, short of the line

“Ten more cc’s!” Henry commanded.

“But...”

“Ten more...”

“To effect?” Roberta asked. Maybe the five ccs would be under the toxic dose. Five thousand units did permit some animals to survive short term and long term toxicity. “I’ll keep going, one cc at a time.”

“Two!” Henry blasted out. “She can handle it.”

Clyde slapped on a pair of gloves, holding onto the uterine walls as Henry reached down, deep, between and around the twists and possible tears to get the calf.

Roberta proceeded with the syringe on the jugular, assessing pupil size and location, going two cc’s before each “is she okay?”

Henry’s answers started as provisionally positive, then turned emotionally optimistic.

Roberta saw it in the cow’s eyes, and in the limited view of the open left abdomen from the right side of the neck. The Old Girl gave a sigh of relief, its warm and rumen-tainted breath only mildly ketotic, and to anyone not familiar with bovine biology, putridly disgusting. Uterine motility had ceased as well, the ‘monster inside the myometrium’ quieted by the highly illegal elixir.

“Is she gonna make it?” Clyde asked Henry.

“Mother and son,” Henry replied, pulling the calve out of the uterus, a strapping young calf with a bright, yet mischievous eye.

“Thank God,” Roberta said to Mama moo-moo.

“A fine young steer,” Henry added, holding his bovine godchild in his proud hands. “No limp-wristed genes in your biology, Son.”

Roberta gave the cow an eyeroll at yet another Steiner-special homophobic dig. One of those ‘looks’ between women about men of any species.

Henry handed the calf over to Roberta. “He’s a keeper.”

“No,” Roberta countered. “He’s a Sigmond.... Or no... I’ll ask him.”

Henry went into business as usual mode, relieving Clyde of his post.

"A Clyde? After his Dad?" Henry mused.

"Me and the Mrs. are away from each other a lot these days, but our marriage ain't that bad," Clyde shot back to Henry, feeling his appreciation for the joke, wondering why the very maternal Doctor Roberta didn't connect to his wry, survival based humor.

The picture mother veterinarian and bovine child re-union seemed odd, but special to Clyde. A sentimentality well beyond any woman's soft spot for "walking hamburger" that he'd ever seen.

Henry proceeded with the stitchery of the cow's 'innards', answering the question so many clients asked since Roberta's arrival. "With all the calves she's been delivering, she's running out of names to-" The suture holder fell from his hand onto the concrete floor.

Henry stopped everything in mid jolt, that jolt to his back._
A paralyzing pain this time

"Doc?" Clyde asked.

"I'm okay," Henry insisted. "I just need another-." This time, Henry's eyes were closed, his breath stuck in his chest.

"I'll take over," Roberta offered, moving in with lightening speed.

"No!" Henry insisted.

Sparing the 'this is about saving lives, not egos' prelude, she got right to the matter. "I've done C sections before. My success rate is a hundred percent."

"Not on a uterus like this one. Twisted in three places, dorsal and ventral tears, and who knows what else at the base of the horn when-"

"I'll be careful."

"And take three hours to finish the job. This is MY patient."

"And I'll treat her your way."

The contract was re-written in 'the moment' shared by both Roberta and Henry, but not finalized. Terms, counter terms and counter proposals flashed from Roberta's young, eager eyes and Henry's old, painful ones. Clyde watched, waited and asked the

person he trusted most. “Doc?” he asked of his old buddy, the friend who in the last ten years had become too busy to come hunting, whoring or drinking with him.

“Doctor?” Roberta asked Henry, his hands still holding onto the uterus, as if he was holding onto his own life, slipping away from him.

“Follow the curvature of the uterus,” Henry related in “business as usual” tone between clenched teeth. “Simple continuous with inverted Cushing’s pattern, Ford interlocking if you have to. And for God’s sake, don’t leave any devitalized tissue between the suture lines.”

By the time Roberta offered a highly co-operative, and respectful, “You’ve got it, Doc,” she was elbow deep into cow ‘inards’, whipping suture loops into fragmented uterine tissue with a precision she never knew she had. And a speed Doc Henry didn’t know was in her.

No more voices of Professor von Roode giving her a step by step instruction manual. No more Grandma Collineur offering metaphysical advice to that physiological laws would be obeyed in the cause of healing. Even the Eagle remained silent, as Roberta found a new depth to her medical voice.

CHAPTER 21

Clyde learned how to be quite independent in the kitchen with his wife working out of town during the week. The way it turned out was that 'the wife' turned out to be the main bread winner, the farm having lost money in the last two years. But it would turn around one day. And the land was theirs. Clyde lived for the day when he, with his wife, could cut down the electrical wires and water pipes to his house and declare himself independent from the world. He learned to merge tenacity with freedom over many years. But for now, he learned how to whip up a wicked omelet that would warm your tastebuds, and a cup of coffee that would put fire back into the belly. Complemented by sausages of untold origin that tasted so good that the diner didn't want to ask too many questions.

Such was the 5 AM breakfast shared on the haybail between Clyde and his new trusted veterinary friend, Doctor Roberta. For Clyde, it was just business-as-usual. For Roberta, it was anything but. Within the space of an hour, she realized that her hands were smarter than her head. Cow and calf were doing "Steiner-fine", no uterine tears, no gut problems, no-nothing wrong except that someone had to 'swab the decks' of Clyde's floor.

Professor von Roode would have called the RCMP's on Doc Henry for even possessing phenylhydron, and had Roberta rushed to emergency for even handling it, and then sticking her hands into a cow in which it was injected. But, contrary to the hard evidence everyone else believed, it worked. No neurological, GI or kidney problems evident after three hours, and it looked like smooth sailing.

"Maybe Professor von Roode is wrong?" she pondered to herself. "And I was basing most of my biological knowledge on what he said," she elaborated inside her head. "So, therefore, does this mean that I can't trust, at the 100% level, ANYthing in my head, always open to Nature for a lesson in what IS rather than what we say things are?" The next conclusion was even more frightening. "It's just you and me now, Mama Nature? No more Mentors or Masters except myself?" And for reaching this liberating and frightening conclusion, she could blame, or thank, one man.

"Doctor Steiner okay inside?" she asked Clyde.

"He's resting up."

"But is he okay?" Roberta insisted.

"His body and back is broke. That's no new news. But he'll be hobbling around in a few hours, just like he always does, I suppose."

"How does he do it?"

"He makes hobbling look like running. Finds pleasure in the pain. I suppose." Clyde sipped the black brew with some added ingredient that was perhaps legal, perhaps not.

But even when he was miserable, Clyde was happy, in a way that was healthy for the Soul. He had never been West of Kelowna, or East of Brandon, Manitoba, with an occasional visit to Montana during his rodeo days, now twenty years in his past. Or were they still in his present? With a vocabulary of a 6th grade drop out, he seemed to know more about the core of the human condition than any Ph.D. in philosophy, literature or journalism.

The focus of the breakfast and experience, though, were the animals in the barn. Doing no more, or less, than just being... Alive.

"The eight years of training," Roberta commented. "The books that would fill a two car garage. The academic hoops that break your neck and almost your backbone. After all of that, it's about this... life."

The chirping of a bird, flying in for an offering of toast and jam, echoed the confirmation. Clyde did the offering, his eyes revealing the Ancient and Childlike, both at the same time.

"Life," Roberta continued, watching it. "Does it ever lose its sense of wonderment for you out here? Does that scientific obsession that makes us dissect and define everything ever find its way here and put a dagger through YOUR soul?"

"Don't understand what yer tryin' to say, Doc." his reply.

"Better..." she concluded. Apparently Clyde's wisdom was protected and nourished by a LACK of intellect, and the active Connection to... Something Else. She took another sip of coffee, noting its viscosity.

"Thick, like you can eat it with a spoon."

"A fork," Clyde concluded. "Henry likes it that way. Grew on me, too. Like Knife Bend seems to be growing on you."

"No," Roberta gently asserted. "I'm temporary."

"That's what Henry said he was, too. Back in the seventies. Fresh from being chairman of Medicine at Wyoming Veterinary College."

"He didn't tell me that."

"Guess he didn't want to sound like he was braggin'."

"Sure," Roberta countered, reserving the sarcasm for her own reflection. "What made him come out here, anyway?"

“Wound up on the sharp end of the stick in Wyoming. University eggheads with their head stuck up each other’s butts. Had some bigger problems with his family. Guess he was looking for a fresh start.”

“A lifetime ambition,” Doctor R related into the mirror of her soul. There were probably other details, maybe important ones. But there was enough data in the soup, the metaphors already mixed up. “Physician, heal thyself,” came back from the bubbling ooze.

Clyde glanced at his watch, seeming to already know what time it was already. “Yup, milking time,” he concluded, standing up, revealing the full height of his lean, clean body under the ratty overalls and manure-stained work-boots. “See ya again, Doc.”

“Yeah. See ya, again, Clyde,” she answered in rhythm, wondering how that rhythm, and the song underneath it, had changed, and was changing.

CHAPTER 22

Terri had the good sense to post-pone delivery of Henry's love letter to Norma for a week, then a month, then a season. "It should read right." the neo-Hippie kept thinking, as she perfected the language and penmanship, adding some metaphors of her own. Checking them out. "I'm port, you're starboard, and without each other, none of our ships will be sailing into happy waters. And without you, my heart's in dry-dock. We sail TODAY, or pay the consequences forever," read the Christmas addition to the Fall Love letter.

Norma found the letter, still dated October 2, on January 3rd. She brought it into the barn, opening it slowly, reading it four times.

"Whatcha reading?" Terri interjected, peeking over Norma's long white hair, standing on end.

"My mail."

"A double meaning there, Norma?" Terri edged her way in for a look.

Norma folded up the letter, pushing it into her jacket pocket.

"That's cool," Terri volleyed back, with a sing-song voice that brought shivers to Norma's already cold body. She looked up, as Norma looked down. "Hey, Doc Henry's here!"

Doc Steiner hobbled out of his truck, limping his way to the barn door, medical bag in hand, prepared for another day of vaccinations, health checks and, of course, 'thick as stew' coffee and 'hard as rocks' oatmeal cookies.

Norma anticipated his agenda, retreating into her desk drawer, and scribbling something of her own feelings.

"What do you have for me today, Norma?" Henry asked in a big, bold, baritone boast with the warmest of smiles.

"This!" Norma asserted, handing him an envelope of her most personal stationary, the signed terms of endearment crumpled inside it.

"A check?" Henry noted.

"For everything I owe you for the last six months."

"Norma?"

"I'm an independent woman!" Norma asserted with the last reserves of her courage. "I don't like ultimatums. In business or other affairs. I only ask one thing. Just one thing!"

“What?”

Norma retreated into herself, forced to come back with her next inescapable condition. “Don’t cash that check till Wednesday.”

Norma turned away, tending to feeding the critters, bandaging the creatures and assessing the damage done to her heart while defending her independence.

Henry followed, medical bag in hand. Terri noted, privately, that the Old Roaring Redneck was a little boy, the child in him asking what he had done wrong. “Norma, what’s going on? We’re friends. Talk to me.” He extended his hand towards her shoulder... Touching her for the first time in... forever... until Norma pulled away before he could establish ‘tactile contact’. “Talk to me, Norma.”

“And which side of your mouth will you answer me with?” Her eyes were red, fiery and firm. Apparently, Henry had seen this look before. Maybe in another woman, maybe in another wife.

“I’m not going to cash this check, Norma.”

“I really wish you would, Doctor Steiner.”

Norma reached for a bag of grain twice her size. Henry made a grab for it, then felt the pain in his back. He continued the gentlemanly gesture as quickly as his slowed reflexes allowed. Norma latched onto the forty pound sac first, turning her back on Henry’s confused mind and aching back.

Henry said nothing. He left the vaccines on the treatment table, the bandages on the straw bail, the antibiotics on the ‘oatmeal cookie’ bench. He walked out slowly, his mind confused, his heart empty, perhaps. The workaholic savior of animals in distress had always found a way to make physical exhaustion numb personal pain. The Constellation of Life was changing, and Henry always navigated his life according to the stars. Only now, those bright dots in the sky seemed to be changing position.

Terri watched from the barn rafters. With pen in hand, she connected the rest of the dots as she saw them, living on Cloud Nine. “My dearest Henry, How do I explain my behavior today? The words from my mouth were not the feelings in my heart. Your First and Only Mate, Norma.”

This time, the letter would be delivered without delay.

CHAPTER 23

A chilly January gave way to a warm February Chinook. The blizzard that dumped two feet of snow on the ground yielded way to mudpiles. In town, it was an early spring.

Out on the ranges and the ranches, it was a prelude to ice season, once the next inevitable Arctic Cold Front would come through. But it was all part of the cycle.

Roberta had found her own niche in the cycle that was Knife Bend, sort of. A business as usual day led to a business-as-usual night. Of course, there were the usual medical surprises. The emergency GDV on Rocky stabilized without having to do much more than inserting a stomach tube, the Great Dane resting comfortably in a cage in the back room. Mookie had mooched a stick of butter, his 'simple' pancreatitis requiring a triple dose of steroids, a second round of antibiotics and another night of IV solutions at Chez Steiner's Hotel for Four Legged Creatures.

Two orthopedic bone repairs. One hopefully benign mammary 'lump' removal. And the usual seven elective surgeries, four males and three females being assigned to the 'third sex', as Doc Henry put it, privately, when the clients weren't listening. Roberta was able to whip out a pair of ovaries and uterus, or a duo of testicles, faster than any vet West of Winnipeg, including Doc Henry. Still, she regretted the outcome. True, it would keep the number of unwanted and uncared-for animals under control. But after giving birth to Daniel, and finding out that she could give birth to no more children, Roberta felt barren, and empty. To be childless, or never able to have children again, was a sadness.

Yet, 'managing sadnesses and making them blissful' was what life is about, according to Grandma Collineur. Doctor Roberta always did what she could for guests at the Veterinary Hotel, and when it came her turn to 'do the evening duty', it was a pleasure, not a chore. Each critter would get its ration of food, water and affection. Then a cage check, to be sure that the 'rooms' were secure from escape, or manipulation of the locks. Hopefully, Prometheus and Mahegan hadn't taught any of the guests the tricks of the trade in getaways. Tonight, at least, it was impossible.

The half-dog ten year old and the all-wolf cub were 'at camp' with Terri. The NeoHippie was hiking around the Mitchell Development Site, feeling for vibrations in the Earth from Ancient Spirits that would channel answers to the "world problem" to her. Deathhound joined her. It beat hanging around her parents 'Eco House', a dwelling built with redwood chopped down from at least 5 acres of virgin rain forest. And maybe Terri's prediction might come true. Deathhound could meet her Spirit Animal on the twilight to dusk hike. And, who knows, it might be something other than a cockroach or stinkbug.

The last part of Roberta's routine when 'doing the duty' was to put on the radio, ensuring that the animals' attention was on matters other than medical mending. When putting the radio on, it was the usual warfare in absentia. Doc Henry had 'done the duty' the night before, the dial firmly on '95 Classic New Country'. "I don't think so," she said to herself. She turned to the animals, edging the tuning knob further up the dial. "I don't know what genius thought that animals in the country liked country music, but he, or she, was probably tanked on Moose Drawl, Seal Swill, Toe Jam, or..."

Before Roberta could run down the rest of the indigenous brews meant to attract tourist and intoxicate locals, the radio blasted out "Come on Pretty Barbie, make my Party Hearty."

With the lightening speed of an alchymist grabbing for his drink at the first rumbling of a bar brawl, she whipped the volume control to 'off'. "Sorry, guys," she said to the whining and whimpering beasts. With the volume on low, she proceeded to search for something else that would soothe the savage breasts, and beasts. Perhaps the all night blues and early morning classical station out of Red Deer. "I looked around for CDs, at Henry's Tape and Record Store, but they were out of 'Mozart' and the 'Beethoven' was on back order. Tomorrow, I'll pick up Richard Wagner, spelt with a 'double ya'. As for the Fritz Chrysler, when I asked, they thought I wanted to see a car. And as for Bach's Brandenburg's, the clerk thought I was talking about..."

Over the static, was a sound far more deadly than the "Hearty Party." Footsteps from the back door, facing east. Firm, determined, and in control. A look through a mirror revealed "NIW", the license plate in reality reading "WIN", the red Transam shining against the darkly moonlit night with a demonic hue of 'terror'.

Roberta froze, expecting Mahegan to be ready at the growl, Prometheus waiting to grab a mouthful of seconds after her trusted ten year old champion devoured the intruder.

She assessed her situation, minding the Four Directions, but they all said 'no'. The North exit was loaded to the roof with cat litter, the Western Exit with twenty pound sacs of dog food. To the South, a wall of rotted wood re-enforced by fresh two inch plywood.

But to her side, hanging next to the Betadine and the boxes of surgical gloves, a Bowie knife. The handle ancient, the blade freshly sharpened. The one Doc Henry shaved with every day. The Arkansas toothpick given to him by his father, and to his father by his father, all the way back, so the little kids said, to the Alamo. The scalpel that could rid Roberta of the cancer that ate up her childhood and haunted her adult life wherever she went.

The intruder knocked. "Doctor Collinear?" The voice was like nothing she'd heard in Knife Bend. No Hank, Henry or even Clyde. It was clear, refined, and quietly confident - too quietly confident.

Roberta backed up behind the door, salty taste in her dry mouth, blood-stained knife in her shaking hand. "No more running from Kurt, or anyone else who wants me to be a whore, dooper or boozier," she pledged to herself, and the Spirit of Grandma Collinear. "No more running away from men who make me a terrified squaw everytime I go to sleep," she promised to her dead mother, dead from the moment she let her father have her way with her. "No more letting someone else control my life, and the lives I care about most," she vowed to her son Daniel, wherever he was. "No more..."

Roberta edged her way to the door, moving her now-firm hand to unlatch the door, prepared to do battle with her worst nightmare. Kurt might have a gun, but she had a knife, and the determination to use it this time.

“Doctor Collinear,” he asserted, bringing back all the nightmares that robbed her of sleep nearly every night for 8 years. His knock was soft, but felt like gunshots, pounding into her chest, belly - but not brain, and the Nucleus Couragicus, firing active signals to all areas visceral and otherwise saying, “Now or Never, Asshole!”

Roberta braced herself, but was too late. The latch was open already, the stranger strolling in, helping himself to a look.

From the back he was... big. But vulnerable. Roberta braced herself, with the left hand, prepared to slice his throat with the right. But when he turned around, his full features revealed by the moonlight, she froze.

“Who the hell are... you?” Roberta slurred out of her sweatsoaked lips, recognizing something unexpected, yet very familiar.

The stranger was taking off his sunglasses. His hair was Antonio Banderas, graying at the temples in a distinguishingly handsome pattern. His eyes were Jimmy Smits, warm, brown and seductive. His body was a prime-Brad Pitt special, made firm by nearly twenty years of healthy living and upscale lifestyles. The package was wrapped in a two-thousand dollar suit worthy of Alec Baldwin. He was effortless success personified. Not a hair out of place. Not a thought out of line with a very determined, and secret, agenda he had in mind for a long, long time. “I remind you of someone else?” he asked, helping himself to a self-guided tour of Henry’s veterinary patients, supplies and shop.

“Yeah. Maybe... No...” Roberta concluded. “It’s just that...”

“That what?”

“It’s been a long night, and...”

“The door was opened. You didn’t answer.” He looked down at the Bowie Knife in her hand, her hand still around its handle in a death grip. “And that’s an impressive scalpel there.”

“Right,” Roberta commented, grabbing a bag of dog food, cutting it open, pretending that the deadly looking knife was part of the life-promoting routine of... something.

“I suppose introductions are in order,” the stranger related. He handed Roberta a card, laminated and multicolored.

“Tom Wilson, D.V.M, Ph.D. and LLD?” she read, realizing that the nightmare walking towards her back door would be a dreamboat anywhere else. “What the hell can we do for you in a town like this?” she mused.

“The question is, Doctor Collineur, what can WE do for YOU?” He smiled warmly, with a refinement Roberta had not seen since leaving Professor von Roode’s lab. An ‘energy’ that reeked of the quality she sought most ever since her arrival in Paradise - Intellect.

Roberta pondered the issue. Doctor Wilson invited her to take a ride in his car. It was an offer she could not refuse. And one that would change her life, forever.

CHAPTER 24

The midnight drive took Roberta over the river and through the woods to Tom Wilson's House, or more appropriately, his Palace. It lay on the outskirts of what might have been Knife Bend, or what might have been two towns over. But the ride felt... comfortable. Seats without holes in them. An engine that moved the car rather than rattle the driver's imagination. And a radio playing Mozart, at just the right volume, the base and treble perfectly balanced. Her driver was a man who never carried cash. He didn't have to. He seemed to own the bank, yet didn't boast about any of it. Yet he wore his wealth and family blue-blood lineage with subtlety, and class. And the birthday suit under the Armani jacket and Dockers was probably nothing to sneeze at either.

Upon arrival at the artfully-designed building besides the Condos in Construction, she recognized the logo on the "Wilson Veterinary Clinic" from Vet School, and the 'Exceptional Help Wanted' ads in the Journals. The 'VW' had been designed after the car, but with a price tag worthy of a Mercedes, or a Rolls. Still, Roberta always valued medicine above money, and pledges of loyalty above all.

"I told you, I already have a job," she insisted, for the fourth time, as Double-Doctor (and Lawyer) Tom led her up the marble stones to the door leading to his newest branch in an ever-growing chain of clinics, spreading from Vancouver to Toronto. "The pay sucks, the hours are worse, but it's the opportunity of a-

"Lifetime?" Tom filled in as he flicked on the lights, watching the stars sparkle in Roberta's wide-open eyes.

This laboratory for cats, dogs and ferrets was more impressive than any Roberta had seen for humans, even at the over-funded Research Labs in Saskatoon Medical College and Toronto Medical School. Blood chemistry machines that could tell you everything you ever needed to know about a patient's biochemistry with two drops of blood in less than 2 minutes. ECGs that would give the most accurate reading in the most squirmy patients. An ultrasound unit which could double as a CT scan, and a CT scanner that could be used on its own. All the biochemical tests she had read about, gold standards at the Saskatoon Medical College, merely bronze substitutes here. And some machines still on the drawing board, such as the galvanotropic stimulator and sensing devices, specifically designed to detect disruptions in bio-electric fields and correct them, so that dead tissue could grow back and tumors could be halted dead in their tracts.

"Everything state of the art," Tom explained, revealing even more layers of technical excellence and intellectual possibilities. The main attraction of the show were his research papers, titles thumb printed on the wall revealing that, indeed, he was the 'Wilson' who had published so much, with so many people, all of their names listed on the multi-authored articles in glossy, god-like print. "Cutting edge all the way," he went on. "All we need is a bright, energetic partner. A Saskatoon Veterinary College grad with your impressive academic record and colorful history of run-ins with the old farts there."

"Someone to challenge the system," Roberta concluded, somberly. The price of her Promethian Path in the service of humanity was, indeed, more people difficulties.

"Great Spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds," Tom replied.

Roberta dropped her chin as well as her jaw. "You read Einstein?"

"And your research papers. The ones that got published, and the ones that didn't."

"How did you know that I...?"

"There's a network out there that you wouldn't believe. And it wants rugged individualists like you in it. Brilliant thinkers who can't be bought with flattery."

"Yeah?" Roberta replied, her head swelled with freshly-implanted pride.

"Full insurance benefits. Malpractice and professional fees paid by the home office in T.O."

"Toronto, town 'too cool to sweat'?" Roberta shot back. "I'm sorry," she asserted instantly, remembering that she was talking to a Yuppie in Dockers, not a Rancher in Wranglers.

"Two weeks paid travel to any conference you want for continuing education," Doctor Wilson continued, quietly noting Roberta's rebellious wit, subtly accepting it as an asset. "And if any case interests you, write it up. The editor of the North American Veterinary Journal operates out of one of our branches in Vancouver."

Roberta quickly went through the mathematics of it all, particularly the hundred dollar price tag for clients who could barely scrape up ten bucks. "Why would you come to Knife Bend? On purpose? With all this...this..." She took another round of the room of medical toys with her wide-open eyes again. "this...this..." No words could describe her awe, and expanding daydreams about how to put it all to such global good.

"Why Knife Bend?" Tom interjected. "A very astute question, Doctor Collineur."

From everyone else's mouth in Knife Bend, "Doctor" was a title of respect. But from Doctor Tom Wilson, it was a clear indicator of accomplishment.

"The new freeway," he continued, pulling out a map of mostly empty lots and vacant spaces. "The airport in the fall. Two new fiber-optic companies. Textiles. Ski resort where the old mine is now. An opera house, that does more than one performance a year. The Mitchell family is going to make this cowtown as rich as Banff or Jasper. With a new college, which will be in need of faculty, Professor Collineur."

It was the first time even Roberta dared try those two words together in the same sentence. "Professor Collineur?" she said to herself, peeking into the mirror, seeing that it fit, and it was her ultimate destiny.

Tom smiled, pulled out some papers, putting them in front of her. "For your consideration," he mentioned by comment.

Roberta looked down at the paper with the million dollar deal, the five dollar pen on top of it, then back into the mirror. Or maybe she heard something in the air, or something from the Eagle outside. Her light-headed wonderment got heavy again, her connections back to the world of 'a dollar of effort for every penny of progress' to which she had become so familiar.

"I have to think about it," she replied. "Ask Henry about it.

"Better not take too long. 'Doc Henry' is retiring soon."

"He'll never retire." Roberta grabbed her coat, preparing for a grateful and graceful exit.

"His age. His health. The problems he's having with the veterinary association."

"What problems?" Roberta stopped in mid angst, terrified at what she sensed would be coming next.

"Dispensing prescription drugs through feed stores."

"He knows the storeowners. And his clients," Roberta related.

"Charging his friends nothing. And his enemies full rates, sometimes more."

"He has a flexible fee schedule. Robin Hood economics," she asserted. "Although he keeps claiming that he's not a 'damn Socialist'." Roberta never did a more colorful 'Doc Henry' act out.

"His use of illegal drugs. Like Phenylhydron."

Roberta froze, not daring to let Tom look into her eyes. It was a trick she had learned when working with so many trickster junkies, conmen and extortionists. Never let them look into your face when you've got ANYthing to hide.

Tom moved in to Roberta, getting into her face, from a subtle distance. "You've read about the toxic effects it has on rats and guinea pigs. The delayed effects even if you DO get away with not killing the creature you give it to. The potential danger to humans. The official position of twelve countries that banned its use for ANYthing, including

Canada AND the United States. But 'old Doc Henry' claims that in his magic hands it does miracles."

Roberta said nothing, and thought a lot.

"There's more," Tom continued. "You can fill in the blanks. The Veterinary Board will do what it has to old Doc Henry, for their best interest and the interest of the veterinary profession, and veterinary patients. I assume that YOU have the sense to do what is in YOUR best interest."

Roberta took her 'moment', wishing it could be a year's worth of 'moments'. But Doctor Wilson needed an answer to challenge now. "I owe him," she concluded. "Thanks for the tour."

Roberta prepared for a walk home, down the hill, across the river and through the woods. There was much to think about. But before that, there was something that had to be reacted to.

Tom snickered, then laughed. A ridiculing laugh, aimed at whoever wasn't in the know, or chose not to be. "All that schooling to go down with the Good Ship Henry."

"Hey!" Roberta asserted, the fringe on her buckskin jacket flailing in the wind created by her fiery passion. "Henry Steiner gave me a job! An opportunity!"

"He STOLE an opportunity from you. At the Ribbly Clinic."

Roberta's back was already to Tom's face, but the reference hit at the core of it. And the mathematics couldn't be disputed.

Tom walked up to Roberta, slowly, courteously, and professionally. "A job was waiting for you up there. Three times. Henry had some phone conversations with them. Three times. And as for all those other resumes you sent out that didn't even come back with a courtesy reply."

Could Henry Steiner do it? Be sure that Roberta couldn't get a job elsewhere so she'd be indentured to him? She kept his back turned to Doctor Tom, and Councilor Wilson.

"Don't tell me you didn't know," Tom interrogated, gently. "You're a lot smarter than that."

Apparently, the street-smart scientific genius wasn't.

CHAPTER 25

There was only one question Roberta could ask Doc Henry in the midst of his 'swabbing the decks' in preparation for another 'business as usual' day of always-unpredictable veterinary sailing. "Why?" she blasted at his smiling face and all-knowing eyes.

"The Ribbly Clinic was all wrong for you." The floors scrubbed, he moved to the counters and tabletops, ensuring that they were as 'neat and tidy' as his own freshly-pressed shirt with matching tie. "You're worthy of a bigger challenge than a place like the Ribbly Clinic. Look at all you've learned here already."

"I'm not your student," Roberta asserted, following him from counter to counter, feeling his grin getting wider and wider as her frustration mounted, as if it was part of some 'lesson'. "You are not my teacher." Then, the mathematics kicked into gear, remembering his past, and the digs he kept inserting in the present. "And this is NOT Wyoming Veterinary College."

Henry stopped in mid scrub, daring not look at his face in the steel tabletop. He moved on to the surgical shelf. Loose items to sort out, in more ways than one. Delicate instruments to put in their places, with grips of pent-up rage and decades of unexplained frustration.

"Half the faculty in the department were my students," he finally explained, the White Paleface face turning deep red, his back to his 'Injun' business partner. "I gave them everything! Never asked them to work any harder than I did! They had no right to vote me out of MY department. The one I built for THEM." Finally, he turned around to Roberta. "Like this practice that I built for you, Rita!"

"Rita?" Roberta asked. Another variable in the equation identified.

"I mean, Roberta." He turned around, one deep breath away from 'business as usual'. Three more 'put aways' of spare suture packs and sterile syringes and all would be back to normal.

"No," Roberta interjected, placing herself in direct line of his eyes each time he tried to avoid her. Now the entire equation was solved and it fit the reality, all too clearly. "You mean Rita. The daughter who ran away from you twenty years ago."

Henry stopped in mid 'tidying', confirming the arithmetic in Roberta's mind.

"And the daughter who is leaving you now," her concluding statement and solution to the 'Henry' puzzle.

Roberta always kept her backpack with her. "You never know when a 'forever' is going to end in an instant," Grandma Collineur would say. Indeed, she was right.

It hurt Roberta to take her diploma off the wall and put it into her travel bag. It pained her to put Grandma Collineur's medical potions, and her own scientific concoctions, into the backpack. Doc Henry's clinic had been the closest thing she had to a home since... forever. But maybe Grandma Collineur was right. "Some people only find rest in motion itself."

As for fathers who could be trusted... that was another story, to be kept very closely from the courts. Roberta 'accidentally' delivered the blow to her father that killed him in defense of her mother. Never mind that her mother turned out to be a catatonic witness, still in a coma someplace, her utterances monitored by Kurt and his cronies. Kurt or his druggy lawyers would know how to turn the words around to say that Roberta was guilty. Retribution was only a matter of time. As soon as she could find Daniel she'd find herself behind bars, for any number of offenses.

But business was business, and Roberta had to move on, and up. Tom Wilson's clinic was Banuk from the Great Spirit. A door opening as another was shutting, thankfully not trapping her behind it. A job, a career, and a Calling where she could call her own shots. And legitimacy, something every rebel who wants to change the system needs, at some time or another.

"Roberta!" Doc Henry pleaded, following her around with a paternal rage based in primal desperation. "I was trying to look out for YOUR good. Save you from a disastrous decision."

"I like making my own disasterous decisions." The instant total relocation seemed easier than she thought. Everything she brought in, or created while there, did indeed fit into one get-to-someplace-else-better bag, with room to spare. "You got a chance to mess up your life on your own. Please allow me the same courtesy."

With that, Roberta pushed the Old Dinosaur aside, pushing the door open and leaving. Fresh air on her face, lightness in her feet, for the first time in... maybe forever. Amazingly, she felt calm, collected, and 'forward' again. She drove out of the gravel driveway slowly, with class and dignity.

"You can't talk to me like that!" Henry barked out, loud enough to be heard all the way to Toronto, and Wyoming. "You have no right to talk to me like that!"

The pile of dust behind Roberta's truck gave way to empty, stagnant air. Clear 'nothing'. Such was indeed what Henry saw when he turned around to look at his clinic, the shop he had built for the 'dream' student who would come and vindicate all his nightmares. She was gone, as would soon be many of his clients, as soon would be he himself.

Henry would have to face the financial, professional and legal demons after his ass alone. It was business as usual, what he had been doing for the last 27 years. But as for facing himself in the reflection that wouldn't let him go on the shiny surfaces

everywhere, that was another matter. The cracked mirror over the scrub sink gave the clearest picture of a man who was broken, about to be busted. Above it were the shelves of books.

He grabbed the largest one, a four-inch thick primer in small print. "Large Animal Medicine, edited by J. Henry Steiner, D.V.M. 1971." It was a work of love, painstakingly written over 3 years with every spare moment of time not taken up by clinic duties, teaching responsibilities, or visits to the can. No medical bullshit between the covers, no-frills graphics, cheap newsprint paper, some typos. It was Classic, affordable to most every veterinary student, and on the shelves of every Veterinary Library in North America, except for the Veterinary College of Wyoming.

Betrayed by the present, he turned to the past, and the dedication. "To my wife and daughter." A tear rolled down his cheeks. It was the first time he had cried since he was fifteen, after having lost his dog, his only real friend, to cancer. He vowed that he would become an animal doctor to see that no one would ever lose another dog, cat, horse or goldfish to disease again. He closed the book, remembering their departures from his life. Justified perhaps by the world's perceptions, but not his own.

"My blood is in this book!" he screamed out to the demons around him. They had always been hanging around, but this time he would WIN the argument. To affirm his point, he rammed the book on the surgical table, the force of his convictions breaking it's 'right foreleg', the Volume I of the Classic, now outdated, Text he valued so much slipping down, nearly falling into the urine collection bucket..

He grabbed the next book, "Principles of Small Animal Medicine," co-authored by a Young Turk down the hall from his faculty office who omitted his name from subsequent volumes. "And my blood is in this book!" He blasted out at the demons again, both the human ghosts and the less-corporeal ones who took animals before it was their time to go. His statement of rage was punctuated with a javelin-like throw at the human skeleton besides the anesthetic machine, the Groucho cigar in its mouth and cowboy hat on its head, now a source of mockery from demon death and all of his under-thirty 'state of the art' minions.

Doc Dinosaur could now see his imminent extinction. He grabbed every book, research article and medical tool within reach. "My blood is in this!" he ranted, again and again, vengefully dismantling the 'neat and tidy' Good Ship Henry into a wreck of driftwood.

CHAPTER 26

Winter quickly gave way to Spring. As traditional in days of old, it was the time for blossoming of things green, and 'back to battle' for horse-carried armies. "Beware the Ides of March," said the graffiti on the Mitchell Construction Bulldozers, made by the mysterious horseman, or woman, officially wanted for destruction of private property by Sergeant Klassin when he was on duty, but unofficially applauded after hours when he was bullshiting with the locals at Henrietta's cafe.

Terri bicycled in to Norma's Barn for Wayward Animals and Wayward Optimists earlier than usual. "Terri Time" was usually 30 minutes late, in Earth time, but when she arrived, on time, some explanations were in order.

"They finally paved Highway Four," she related in explanation for her unexpected promptness, picking up a shit shovel to recycle the dog crap as pasture fertilizer. "Can't say I miss the washboard and gopher holes. But the construction guys! Shirtless! Horney!... and married. Mixed karma. They started putting up the walls for that Mitchell Mall for boutiques and gourmet food places. No one has any money to spend here. Don't know what they' be able to sell there."

"Bad karma," Norma interjected, feeding fresh spring flowers to an old cow who seemed only mildly appreciative of the treat. "The construction site was a sacred place for medicine men, and women. For at least five hundred years. A haven for wildlife for as long as I can remember."

"Hmmm," Terri pondered. "Maybe we could dig up some old arrowheads, or put some of our own in there. Make it a monument before they can pour concrete over it. A living eco-museum. Sell tickets."

Norma pushed her glasses down to the tip of her nose, giving Terri the librarian 'that's both a stupid and inappropriate' idea look.

"Sorry," the Purple-haired Green Freak offered apologetically.

"Easy mistake to make." Norma went back to the task at hand, much more on her mind than educating Terri in effective, and appropriate, ways to fight the Aspenization of Knife Bend.

"What are you doing, Norma?"

"Feeding Bessy." Norma pushed the orchids into the cow's mouth, forcing her to enjoy the expensive breakfast treat, whether she wanted to or not.

"But Doc Henry sent those flowers to you. They cost at least..." Terri stopped in mid babble.

Norma threw Terri one of her 'I will make you tell me the rest of what you were going to say' stares, mit full unspoken German accent and determination.

"Doc Henry sent those for you. Not Bessy," Terri affirmed, doing her 'looking busy' thing, her back turned.

"He's a vet," Norma related, attending to her own problems of matching perception to reality. "He'll understand. And if he tries to tell me one more time that we get 'intimate' or else he'll-"

"-Norma, he just wants to get to know you better. You know, so you two can merge souls."

"Merge souls?" Norma's suspicion meter jolted into the red.

"Okay, I..ahh....ahh....ahh..."

Three 'ahhs' in a row meant that Terri was hiding something big. And as for 'merging souls'. "You've been reading my mail, Terri?"

Terri breathed a sigh of relief, feeling it safe to look Norma in the face. "Yeah," she confessed, grateful that her identity as the writer of the Henry-Norma love letters was not deciphered. "Yer generation's so stuck on this ownership thing," she bopped out. "Your letter, my letter. Ownership is such, ya know, bad karma."

"So is lying, Terri."

Terri smiled another apology, which was accepted.

Norma opened another "Henry letter," brought in by Terri with the mail.

The Neo-Hippie Cupid looked on from the rafters, hoping that the words she chose for Henry would match what Norma needed to hear. They were both lonely, as well as alone. "They'll thank me at their wedding," Terri told herself, imagining her favorite Old Timer Veterinarian and her bestest girlfriend smiling. Really smiling, and really happy, like she was.

That picture seemed to come to life when Norma read the latest "Henry" letter, hiding it from Terri's point of view.

"Back to work!" Norma commanded.

"Sure. Okay." Terri tended to her chores, moving on to the water dishes. Through the reflection she saw tenderness in Norma's eyes. "Mission accomplished," she told herself, and Rocky, the a three-legged raccoon rescued from a trap outside the Chinese

restaurant, possibly set by Satanists hoping to get a feline or canine sacrifice for their rituals. She was convinced that the first paragraph of Henry's poem worked. Then, when she heard the ripping of paper, and an angry growl from Norma's gritted teeth, something else. "Wrong kind of words, again, Rocky?"

She petted the raccoon, noting something missing between the back legs, and developing on the chest. "Sorry, Rockette."

Confusing genders was easy. It happened all the time. But confusing messages between genders cost a lot more. "Time to go back to the printing board, Rockette."

CHAPTER 27

The Wilson Veterinary Clinic was everything Roberta anticipated, and more. State of the art everything, including people. Nothing old, nothing slow, nothing restrictive... and nothing Alive. Three veterinarians, four certified technicians, ten support staff. After two weeks, Roberta knew nothing about their lives, habits or neuroses. And wisdom said to not let them know about hers. Still, the clients had to know who and what she was about. As did she herself.

But the money was good, and no one gave her shit about wearing her Grandmother's Native choker and beaded moccasins. Though the dress code for the clinic said 'no jeans', Roberta found a pair of black denim 'pants' that seemed to be okay. At least no office memos were delivered to her mailbox. The rule about no pets of her own in the clinic hit hardest. Then again, Mahegan and Promethius preferred to spend their days in the camper, a place she still called home. The company of the bugs, mice and squirrels was preferable to that of the sterile-in-spirit Staff with the pretty animal prints on their ever-so-tasteful smocks.

Doc Henry had reduced office hours significantly, his most trusted clients insisting on seeing 'Doctor Roberta'. It worked, until they noted the fee structure. Payment up front, with payment fees at least three times what Henry charged them. But Knife Bend was not Roberta's problem anymore. The Wilson Clinic was part of a big chain, connected to several research trials of new drugs and medical approaches. As promised, two of Roberta's ideas were already on the active consideration list for the main office. One was for treatment of soft tissue cancers by interfering with post-translational modification of specific proteins connected to the p53 genome. The other dealt with a liver regenerative extract that also stimulated immune cell function, applicable to cats with FIV, 'feline AIDS' that was on the rise everywhere across North America. Within a month at least 20 patients would be lined up for each trial, and within three months all the data collected and with another thirty days, Roberta's medical ideas and findings would be in print.

All of those globally-directed medical findings would, of course, be co-authored by Tom Wilson. But as for her one-to-one medicine, she preferred single authorship, and far more autonomy than her patron seemed to show. Tom seemed less impressed with her rebellious spirit with every dollar she brought in. It was something that didn't make sense. He wasn't trying to get into her pants. But he was trying to get into something else that intuition said she valued a lot more than her virtue. The key give away was when he invited her out for a drink, and insisted that she share a Brandy with him, from his private stock. When Roberta ordered a club soda instead, the 'you think you're too good to drink with me?' came back at her. Explaining that once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic would not be appreciated or respected. Or maybe Tom did know what Roberta was hiding when she moved away from every glass of booze on the table. Or perhaps he was just a man. Men do that.

One thing that could be said about the practice was that it was busy, and medically challenging. Into examining room 5 limped Bubba, an abandoned pup with a radial and ulnar fracture near the growth plate. Its new owner, protector and friends made Roberta feel at home, and far away from home.

"Doctor Roberta, is that you?" Terri asked, hardly recognizing her under the lab coat and 'professional doo' requested by Tom. "Your hair looks-"

"-Professional," Deathhound noted, feeling betrayed by something Roberta was not saying.

"Up, but not cut," Roberta commented, examining Bubba's left front foot.

"Not cut to regulation Yuppette length YET," Deathhound commented.

Roberta couldn't deny the prospect of her student being right. Surrender to 'the system' or a man happened in stages. Giving up one thing to get something you feel is more valuable till you value nothing at all. But there was still one thing that Roberta valued, noting that the injury was near the growth plate, good for old animals, bad for younger ones.

"Is Bubba going to be okay?" Terri asked.

"You have the most positive vibrations this side of the Rainbow, Terri. I have the best surgical hands this side of the Continental divide. So they keep telling me."

"And?" Terri asked with puppy dog eyes.

"Bubba the Wonderdog is going to get another chance to get himself tangled up in the wire if the garage cats try to move in on his turf," Deathhound translated, cynically delivering another message, and challenge, to Roberta.

"I'd like to get some X-rays now, and another set in a week. Maybe book him in for surgery tomorrow."

"Do you have to?" Terri asked. "It's bad karma to put cash before caring, but people out front wanted sixty five dollars before we even came in here."

"And my parents will spaz out if I ask them for another advance on my allowance," Deathhound added, her mind and heart back on the matter at hand. "We're playing at being poor this month. So we can get 'closer' before our annual ski trip to Aspen."

Roberta assessed the damage with her fingers. Every push, pull or prick rung up a longer surgical procedure and a bigger bill.

"Doc Henry never charged us up front," Terri went on. "And he's never charge anyone 65 dollars just for looking at a dog."

"Except my 'fraternal and maternal caregivers'," Deathhound offered, referring to her parents with yet another label. "Mom" and "Dad" never fit, and were never accepted. "If something costs too little, they figure it's worth shit. I guess that's why you guys here charge so much. Because you do such great work."

"I just work here," Roberta offered.

"For these animals, or for the shitheads out front, or maybe for yourself?" Deathhound offered.

Before an answer could be formulated, or given, Terri brought up a more central issue. "Why is Doc Henry's clinic closed up?"

"Some legal things, I heard." Roberta commented, knowing that Deathhound's eye roll and head nod said 'write off another role model who's either an idiot or an asshole'.

"How much are X-rays?" Terri asked.

"Handable, and necessary. Don't worry about it," Roberta affirmed.

"And the surgery!" Deathhound related.

"I'll do what I can." Roberta calculated the number of volunteer hours she could put in to pay the fee, perhaps the options of sneaking some surgical equipment out the front door, or maybe devising a clinical trial around the wayward pup's injury to lower the cost. Neither calculated out as doable for the resources available, the medical facts saying that there was one other option.

"What about amputation?" Deathhound offered.

Terri shuddered.

"No!" Roberta yelled back.

Stepping in from behind, Tom Wilson. "Anything wrong?" he asked.

"No, nothing."

"Good." his reply. "Carry on."

The door remained partially open. So the cameras on the top of the ceiling would get it all on tape. They were an innovative tool, designed to document all doctor-client

interactions in the event of law suits, or developing 'better models' of client relationships.

"So..." Deathhound challenged, Roberta's eye looking straight into the camera.

"Leave Bubba here. I'll take care of him," she said.

"Or maybe the guys at the clinic in Harrison can," Deathhound offered.

"No... I will. Please! Can you guys come up with this figure?" Roberta wrote the number down.

"I don't know," Terri countered.

"What about this?" Roberta offered another figure.

Deathhound zoned back out, to a low-rent, high crime district of Oz that only she knew about. A comfortable place.

Terri looked at the revised figure and smiled, petting Bubba. "That'll work."

The duo of former comrades went back out to the waiting room. Tom entered the room as soon as they left, in rapid business rhythm. He looked at the price quoted. "Oh, yes that fee will work for us." His tone was sarcastic, crude and direct.

"The difference will come out of my paycheck.... Again." A technician came in, very professional, totally cold. Tom nodded 'yes'.

"Right ulnar and radius. DV and lateral. Please," Roberta requested. "And his name is Bubba!"

After the technician left, the door closed. Tom turned around to Roberta.

"And my name is mud?" she quipped. "Unprofessional attitude and appearance. Hey, maybe I can let my hair down tomorrow, or put it in braids. Maybe with a feather in it."

Tom hesitated, put his manicured fingers up to his clean-shaven, chiseled chin and gave Roberta the once-over, and a pensive, domineering silence. "An interesting idea. I think it'll work. Tastefully ethnic. The upscale clients like that sort of thing. Good idea."

"Sure, chief." Roberta shot back.

Wilson didn't get the dig, or the joke. Roberta grabbed the next file. Two poodles for vaccinations, priced out at \$80 a shot. Fifteen minutes allotted for examination, schmoozing and 'client bonding'.

“Oh,” Tom said, interrupting Roberta in mid visualization. “Henry Steiner’s case is up for review. The Veterinary Association wants you to be there.”

“The deal was that I didn’t have to testify against that old-”

“-All they want to know is the truth. What you saw,” Doctor Wilson asserted.

Roberta braced for the rest of it. Tom smiled.

“And to upgrade your provisional license to full membership in the Veterinary Association and initiation into the Provincial Veterinary Society, Doctor Collineur.”

“Why me?”

“You do great work, and have a promising career.”

“If you say so.”

“We do.” His demeanor was warm, cordial and inviting. “One PM sharp. Tomorrow.”

Tom walked down the hall to his next appointment. Roberta had to say something. Maybe one more day. One more chance to...

“Ahh...I’m booked up tomorrow. I might be late.”

“One PM sharp,” he asserted with his back turned. “I’ll see that the legal problems you’ve got are all straightened out. A future of open prospects, and No Suits.”

Boom! It hit her! Wilson DID know the full story. “Kurt the Suit” was a persona shared with only a selected number of people in Knife Bend. And as for her legal problems, Roberta didn’t even THINK them around the clients who became friends, and the co-workers who had become comrades. Or maybe she had been as free with her mouth as with her heart. “The price of liberty is eternal vigilance.” the globally-accepted credo echoed through. “And the price for forgetting that is worse than death,” the fact-proven reality seemed to be, all too clearly.

It was a damned if you do, damned if you don’t situation. And damned even worse if you let someone else decide which way it would go.

CHAPTER 28

The foothills around Knife Bend could hardly be called Mountains by Western Canadian standards, but they were elevated, barren and isolated. They were also accessible. At least once a week, Cowboy Hank would take the detour up to "Heinrick's Peak", a reasonably flat plateau named after the very NOT flat 19th century German ex-Patriate for whom it was named. The virgin grass amidst the brush glistened as the morning sun rose of the eastern horizon no matter how foggy, cloudy or rainy the sky. There was always some color that a Cowboy could relate to, and sing about.

The audience this morning were gophers, popping up out of their holes to have a peek at the human strumming his guitar, his sidearms for decorations, not target practice on four legged varments. Then again, Cowboy Hank always lured his audience in with some crumbs of bacon, bread or bologna. His songs were anything but bologna, sung for no one in town. His hands strummed the guitar stings like a swan over still waters, his gentle voice able to pierce through the hardest armor of cynicism. The rhythm of his tune defined a beat no drummer could do justice to, intended to fit the beat of the drum in every person privileged to be within ear range. "Conquistador Defeated" was the name of the sweet and sour victory song, his own composition, scribbled on paper in his denim shirt pocket. The most recently written stanza:

My heart is full of sorrow

'bout dreams scheduled for tomorrow

And I know that you're a wanderer, just like myself.

But if my heart could meet your mind,

I won't take up too much time,

Don't want our life to go on wasted, on the shelf.

The words scared even Hank, and got the attention of an audience member he never expected.

"Pretty. And pretty good," Roberta commented, Promethius and Mahegan behind her, fascinating themselves with trying to get their 5 inch faces though two inch gofer holes, the inhabitants at the other side having a giggle at their expense. She walked up the slope, remaining on the incline. "Okay if I come on your power spot?"

"It's about love, not power," he said, strumming out another tune.

"And that's song's about someone you know."

“Or want to.” Hank looked to the ground, then to Roberta, putting his conviction to the test - just as she turned away, blasting into cynical gear number six.

“Whenever you sing in town, you sound like a donkey in heat. But out here you sound like... lemme see.”

“Like what?” Hank pulled back his head. His fingers stopped strumming in mid chord, anticipating another Collineur-special cultural dig intended to make her feel superior. “I sound like what?!”

“Like a man who should keep playing his guitar,” she replied, kindly, but emotionally distanced. “And guard his secrets carefully.”

Hank grinned, breathed in a sign of relief, and breathed out an airful of Cowboy Bullshit. “Don’t know what kinda secrets yer yappin’ about, Ma’am.”

Roberta sat on the ground, cross legged, feeling the vibrations of the earth. As if by magic, she noted the faded lettering on the guitar. “Jack Jackson?”

Hank gazed down at the faded scroll. “I suppose so.”

“The Hearty Party guy?” Roberta asked. There was something about his voice, his tone and his innocence of heart, and mind. Perhaps the reason why she hated the song so much.

Hank stopped strumming.

“Maybe that’s the secret you’ve been hiding behind that poker face and that mustache. Yer the Hearty Party guy his-self.”

“The Hearty Party guy’s dead,” Hank commented back, his fingers rolling out Classical Bach. “Like Elvis.”

“And Paul McCartney was dead in 1969. Although that was a statement of spiritual fact, even before the Sergeant Pepper Album or Wings.”

Hank chuckled, message heard, understood and shared.

Roberta drifted into deep angst, pondering possibilities and plans. “Or dead like Jim Morrison. Phil Ochs. Ernest Hemingway. Vincent van Gogh.”

“Don’t get your meaning, Doc.”

“None of you yokals here would.” Her stare went even deeper, seeking every part of her brain and soul for an answer, or even a comrade who could understand the

struggle. “None of you get it. Or ever will,” the conclusion. She turned around, looking to the Western sky, upward.

“What do you want me to do?” Hank asked, his attention on the Eastern horizon.

“Leave me the fuck alone!” Roberta blasted out. “Stop liking me and for God sake stop loving me!”

Hank stopped strumming. “Sure. You got it, doc.” Without looking back, he set his boots into the stirrups and set his horse on a lope down the hill, and out of Roberta’s life.

Roberta turned around, frustrated beyond exhaustion at not seeing the Eagle. “Hey. Where the hell are you going?” she yelled down the slope.

Hank said nothing. His final answer lay in the dust in front of her feet, the menu with the lyrics to “Conquistador Conquered” ripped and crumbled.

Roberta’s watch ‘beeped’ 7 AM. “Six hours and counting, guys,” she said to her canine compadres, knowing that the future would never be the same as the past, ever again.

CHAPTER 29

There was no real logistical reason for holding an extra meeting of the Provincial Veterinary Medical Association in Rocky Mountain House, ten “Hearty Party” tunes from Knife Bend, 30 minutes for everyone else. It was out of the way from everywhere important, most particularly Edmonton and Calgary. But when Tom Wilson, D.V.M., Ph.D., Esq., snapped his fingers, people jumped.

The Board Members got their airfare paid, a night at a four star hotel, and a free gourmet lunch. Then there was the after-hours entertainment, hiking, boating or sailing under the sheets with ‘buckle bunnies’ from out of town. But it was a business before pleasure morning in the Crystal Room, around the table covered with plastic drinking cups and china coffee mugs.

Around the off-yellow tablecloth at the five-sided table sat the “Posse”, as they called themselves. Each had maintained their position for the last four years, each owning a minimum of seven clinics throughout the Province. No one else in the Association seemed to mind. Veterinarians liked to practice medicine, not administrate policy. Less time spent going to meetings, and more time to spend with clients, patients and family at home.

On the equine side, there was William (Billy) Bob Johnson, referred to as DOCTOR Johnson by his clients, Bill by his friend, Billy-Bob by his mistress and, on occasion, wife. Canine and feline interests were maintained by Chuck Rothenberger, a diplomate of the American and Canadian Academy of Small Animal Medicine and part owner of an emerging pet food company. Herd Medicine was the territory of Herman Engels, a small man who was fascinated with large animals’ ability to breed, his own ‘home herd’ of humanoid ‘steers and heifers’ sitting at ten, with one more ‘in the little woman’s oven’. Rich Rollings was another matter. His former career was as a research scientist in Dirkssen Pharmaceuticals. Shifting over to private practice after establishing world-wide fame as a tester of vaccines and antibody detection methods was natural. As for his life after work, and board room pleasantries, he kept that private.

Topping the list was Tom Wilson, backed by his family money, or the perception of it. Then again, perception became reality enough times so his pull was real, and used for several ‘win-win’ situations, medically and monetarily.

The Early Morning’s Business was about policy. Requirements for licensure of clinics, upping the inspection standards to ‘ensure quality care for clients and their animals’. Never mind that no one every used an oxygen tank to save an animal’s life, but an upgraded brand of tank was now ‘required standard installation’ in all licensed clinics, along with the most expensive anesthetics and antibiotics available.

Late Morning Business was about people policy. Two dates a year for admitting new members to full licensure, no exceptions. NO one to pick up a scalpel or a syringe unless they are fully licensed, even if they are supervised by a licensed practitioner. An

effective way to regulate who is coming into and out of the province to 'ensure that unethical or ineffective practitioners do not infiltrate and corrupt the delivery of top quality veterinary care'. The fees for licensing of new members were to go up 40 percent, 10 for pre-existing members of the Association, to 'cover escalating administrative costs'.

At the stroke of noon, the plates of lobster, steak and asparagus au-gratin were delivered. The feast was enjoyed by all, except Tom Wilson. He nibbled at his fare, spending the rest of the hour looking out the window. Then, the clock stuck one.

"Time we get saddled up again, guys," Big Bob belched out from his Bubba belly. He looked at his agenda, once again. "Henry Steiner's case. Tom?"

"My key witness will be here any minute now," Wilson's claim.

"So we can move on to other business instead," Herman Engels noted.

"No... not yet!" Wilson insisted. "We fry Doc Henry Steiner today, or the old Dinosaur is going to be a thorn in our side for another ten years, gentlemen."

"What's the rush?" Rothenburger asked, stroking the hairs on his balding head to cover the spot that he thought would remain a secret so long as the wind blew in the right direction. "He'll bury himself in his own mistakes one day."

"And that day HAS to be today," Tom noted. "I direct your attention to the specific charges against him. In Appendix 4."

Appendix 4 was five times the volume of Appendices 1,2,3 and 5 combined. Floating fee structures for clients. Discrediting other veterinarians in front of clients. Giving veterinary care to animals obtained under 'questionably legal' means, and hiding, undoubtedly linked personally to the abused Mitchell pets having been kidnapped by Norma and given rightful homes someplace else, with different names and fur colors. Dispensing drugs to clients without ever seeing the animal. Using prescription drugs for horses in dogs, dog meds in horses, and so on. And of course, phenylhydron, illegal to even possess in ANY veterinary law book.

"I see," Chairman Herman noted. "These charges are quite serious."

"So am I!" Tom insisted, loudly and irrationally. "That old man, and his territory, are rightly MINE!"

"By birthright, Lord Thomas?" Rick pointed out. "No room West of Winnipeg for the both of ya, partner?"

The rest of the group had a chuckle. Tom made an excuse about a difficult case last night, a tough drive that morning, and an annoying client yapping into his ear two hours earlier.

A 'smoke break' was requested and granted.

Tom waited for Rick in the lobby. Or maybe Rick approached him. In either case, the men stood against the wall, prepared to stand against each other.

"Is it about that new vet with him, Doctor Wilson?" Rick asked.

"It could be, Doctor Rollings."

"You're interested in her 'mind', right?" the sarcastic dig.

"I know that someone like you would never be interested in her body," Tom darted back.

"Someone like me?"

"You and your technician, Terrence, at the last veterinary conference in Reno. You two made a lovely couple walking down the street together. And I'm sure your wife Rayanna and your two strapping young sons, Sam and Mark, would love to know that is was YOU who insisted on wearing the pantyhose and spiked heels." Tom smirked an 'I gotcha', appending it with a wink, and a mock 'kiss'.

Rick clenched his fist, his dilated, bulging eyes saying that he was one 'quip' away from using it, deep red coming to his pale, White face.

"You could silence me with a punch, or something more mutually beneficial to us all," Tom calmly suggested. "I want Doc Henry out of my territory. And my profession. And permanently this time!"

"So you can boast to your blue-blood family in Toronto and New York that you've tamed the Wild West? That you've proven that you can buy another dying Canadian town's heart and soul with Yankee dollars."

Tom remained silent. His refined mind gave way to the lower emotions of hurt, vulnerability and anger. Relived were the not-so refined moments at home. Coming home from Grade 10 with a hard-earned B plus, rewarded by Father Fearest with a 'Why didn't you get an A!' Accepting admission to Queens University in Toronto rather than getting into Harvard. Thanksgiving where all four brothers would 'compete' for three seats at the table by presenting their father with their bank balances and professional conquests at Labor Day. Christmas' spent... alone, because brothers Frederick, Jonathan and Calvin had built medical and media empires far bigger than any dog-and-pony operations 'horse doctor Tommy' had set up 'in the sticks' of

Winnipeg and Calgary. Then there was the Veterinary Conference in Montreal, attended by everyone in the Wilson clan, where Tom's high-tech presentation about state-of-the-art colon surgery was torn to shit by Henry Steiner's real-life experiences and down-home wisdom. And to top it off, 'Tom-Tom' didn't even have a family, or a girlfriend he could show off with any degree of style.

Tom said nothing, but Rick put together most of it.

"What does Henry Steiner have that you want, anyway? That Indian vet, Rebecca?"

"It's Roberta. And she's mine."

"What if she's his?"

"That Indian bitch is a genius. She isn't stupid enough to make that kind of mistake."

"And if she is, Doctor Wilson?"

"Then, for the sake of the veterinary profession, you'll help me crucify her, Doctor Rollings."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'll crucify you, and Terrence." Tom blasted an 'I own you' stare at Rollings. He adjusted his tie, felt the sweat evaporate on his now-calmed body. With a stretch of his jacket sleeves, he strolled back to the Crystal room, resuming his roll as 'Doctor Cool', and to those who looked closer, 'Mister Cold'.

CHAPTER 30

The day was hardly business as usual, but some things had to be done, as usual. Roberta made the call at 1:10 AM, from the phone booth at the intersection of Highway Something and Route Nowhere.

"You have reached the voicemail for Roberta Collineur, mother of Daniel. Daniel was born on..." The rest of it faded into an auditory blur, overtaken by the Deafening Silence, edging towards her from the woods. The willows beckoned "move on", the pines said "stay the course", the birds atop them relating "what, do we look like we really care?"

But this time, this day, a message DID come through. "Hey doc! Gary Brinkman Investigations, here. Great news. We found your son Daniel." The Edmonton gumshoe went on in his Chicago-tainted, Winnipeg-based Brooklyn accent. "I gave yer number to the family who has him. They should be callin' ya soon. I'll work out the bill and send it to you in the morning. With my personal expenses, time, administrative fees I had to pay my sources, it comes to..."

Roberta didn't care what the fee had come to, moving onto the next message. Finally, Brinkman delivered, and without expecting 120% up front like the rest of the Private Dick Dickheads.

The next message on the machine was waiting. Roberta thanked the Great Spirit, the Eagle, Buddha, Professor von Roode and Grandma Collineur for bearing with her. Finally --the words she had awaited for years!

"Doctor Collineur." The woman said over the phone in a cheery voice. Sophisticated AND caring. "I spoke with our lawyer and we will deny you any access to MY son. You did enough harm to him with all the drugs and drinking you did when you were pregnant. I don't care how drunk your father made you when you signed those papers, or even that your father may be Daniel's...."

The woman sobbed at the other end. No one had done the DNA testing, but Roberta's son was either fathered by Lance the junkie, Kurt the Suit, or her father. Slime, grunge or demon genetics, at best. But blood was blood, and...

"Daniel was drug addicted when he was born and developed many medical problems that WE fixed, or tried to," the lady continued. "But rest assured. We will use the fullest extent of the law to ensure that you will never see Daniel again."

The click at the other end drove into Roberta's hopeful, then open, then broken heart like a cannon blast. She felt nothing. Shock. Despondent. Like everything she had ever really valued was no more. Like people who valued nothing, and because of that, were worse than dead.

No one spoke back an answer as to where to go next, what to do, or what to feel. The woods were quiet, the Silence saying nothing. Grandma Collineur's voice remained

distanced, and inaccessible. Professor von Roode's ghost took a Sabbatical. And the time clock on planet earth was ticking down.

"One fifteen," Roberta noted on her watch. "Seconds ticking down slowly. Or maybe, if I'm lucky. They'll stop ticking, and..."

She looked at her truck, Promethius and Mahegan inside, playing hunter and hunted with each other, each taking turns. Too numb to cry, too smart to feel, she walked over to the four-wheeled clunker that had been her home, and refuge, for the last 3 months in Knife Bend. An experiment in terror, cultural variations, and internal growth that, in retrospect, didn't suck all that much. Until now.

Each step carried with it a different twist of the mathematics of it all. A new look at the equation, and possible solution.

Option one, she could continue on the road to Rocky Mountain House, arrive by 1:45 with a story about being held up by a logging truck, be a 'good little girl' and 'rat' on Doc Henry. He was on his way out anyway. Besides, it would be a career saving move for her. Let someone ELSE battle the system. Time it paid her some benefits. Drawback - security plus comfort equals marked decrease in dignity, and ultimately self-respect. Loss of friends, comrades and a track record of being 'true to the Cause', the only real currency in gaining more friends, colleagues and Causes.

Option two, go down with the Good Ship Henry. Show up, at 2 pm, rested and collected. Tell the Association that the profession needs more rugged individualists like Henry Steiner, and wind up crucified WORSE than him. Loss of license, and loss of freedom. Tom Wilson would see to it that Kurt would be located, somehow. And that Roberta would wind up in the slammer for the rest of her days, on any number of charges. Some of which could be even legitimate, like the murder of her father by her own hand, and the scams when pulled off with Kurt and others to support her own drug and drinking habits. Loss of freedom, access to animals, and the ability to be... useful.

Option three... run away. Wait tables in some logging or mining town under another assumed name, keep the dogs alive on table scraps, and never be able to enter medicine or science again. Remain on the outside, reading about how cancer kills people and heart disease kills dogs, and never be able to suggest the cures for diseases that the world needs to know about! Be an anonymous spectator who does nothing to change the world, but feels every bit of its pain. Hardly a solution for a Promethian who was born to make bad okay, good better, and better beyond what humans, or animals, were Ordained by God to have.

Then again, there was a fourth option, maybe not so smart between the head but it registered right in the gut. "If cow is sick, or diseased, cull it from the herd," she muttered to herself, opening the door to the cab of the truck, and the glove compartment to the hidden compartment.

There it lay, a 38 caliber handgun, with one round left in the chamber. Five of them had been used to put animals out of their misery, a horse, cow, dog and deer. "Not pretty, but effective," she pondered, picking up the handle. "And..."

Her eye glanced over to her medical kit, the sterilization fluid section. "One part ethanol and one part grape soda equals..." She pondered the situation, finding her hands drawn to the alcohol, insuring that it was ethanol rather than methanol. "Wouldn't want to go blind with my first drink in..." She mixed the container of grape soda with the clear, 100% distilled, odorless elixir. "...Five years since my last drink? I can quit anytime, ya know," she said to the dogs. "If not this lifetime, the next one. Which brings me to you guys."

She looked at the woods, noting a group of wolves approaching. They seemed friendly, kind and inviting. Promethius howled. Mahegan barked.

"Hey. Time for you guys to move on with your lives out here. I can't offer you anything where I'm going. On this side of the Rainbow, or the other Side of...ya know..." She hesitated, trying the gun on for size. It fit her hands, like a glove. And the barrel slid into the depression behind her eyes perfectly.

"I know, Professor von Roode," she said. "Wrong trajectory. I'll go blind or go vegetable." She opened her mouth, measuring the angle of the gun at a 50 degree angle. "There, one shot, into the brain stem. That'll do it."

She felt...calm, and vindicated, not knowing why. A sip of the 100 proof grape soda cooler said, "this is okay". Another said "this is good." Another said "go for it."

The dogs barked. "Go!" she said. "Get out of here. Now! Awas! Awas!!!"

The command to flee in her Native tongue was understood and accepted. She smiled, seeing the half-wolf Mahegan and the all-wolf Promethius approaching the pack. Three females in heat, by their profiles and stances. A harem to be had, families of little bow-wows to be born, to live free. Free from people, from hunters, from veterinary administrators, from Kurts, from Henrys and from Robertas.

One more swig left in the soda bottle. She looked at herself in the mirror. "Awas!" she said to herself, toasting herself into the next life. She improvised a theme from a Cree dying song, lifting the gun into her hand. At first it shook, then it didn't. Resting it on her lip, she finished the prayer, and apology, feeling that both were accepted by the Great Spirit, and Grandma Collineur.

She closed her eyes, squeezed the trigger and-

Barking came at her from all directions. A yelping Promethius approached, a limping Mahegan behind him. They jumped into the truck, a painful dig jabbing into Roberta's thigh.

“Quills, Promethius?” she said to the cub, noting freshly implanted spikes from a ‘smiling’ porcupine strolling back to the brush. “You should know not to make friends with the porcupine.” They had found their ways into his jaw, face and near his eyes. And a few in places more ‘personal’. “And if you try to mate with the porcupine, he’ll be sure that you don’t have any oysters between your legs to mate with anyone.”

Mahegon had acquired as many quills as Promethius, but ‘took it like a dog’, letting his little buddy get treated first.

Roberta found her hands holding a pair of forceps, pulling and prodding with a skill and sense of urgency she never knew she had. And, a purpose she never knew she still had left in her. By the 50th quill from Mahegon’s mug, it was obvious.

“I know. You are my Daniels now. And every other dog that gets stung by the porcupine. And even the porcupine is my Daniel.”

The Eagle squawked above. In approval, it seemed.

“Okay,” Roberta conceded. “Which way do I go?” she asked of it. “Left fork to Knife Bend, right to Rocky Mountain House, double back to the North road to LaRange, or...”

The Eagle anticipated her question, and provided the answer. It flew into the bush, West by NorthWest. Roberta’s human eyes saw it.

“A dirt road leading to...”

She looked at the map. No road on it meeting that description. At last, the conclusion was clear.

“We make our own road, and let Life happen FOR us, instead of TO us,” she related to the dogs, preparing to move ahead to destination unknown, as Doctor Collineur, or Doctor whoever she had to be. “We do right by others and Life does right by us. No Tom Wilsons, no Doc Henrys, and no Kurts.”

The truck answered ‘yes’ as well, particularly when Roberta tossed out the remainder of the grape cooler. The gears meshed, the gasline worked, and the direction was ‘Forward.’

CHAPTER 31

By the next morning, the handwriting was on the wall, most prominently on Doc Henry Steiner’s clinic door. “Closed”. Norma never thought she would see those words nailed to the door, and that legally-sanctioned ‘justice’ from the Veterinary Association would have acted so quickly. It was her worst nightmare to find the windows closed up, from the inside. No view accessible from the outside, not even a peephole for a mouse.

A “Out to Lunch” sign would have been ironic, a “Gone Fishing” notice colorful. But the finality of those 6 letters...CLOSED.

Still, a mission started had to be completed, and the stakes had only escalated in the midst of the new infusion of money to the Aspenization of Knife Bend, a Provincial Loan to the Multinational Private Corp having been approved yesterday afternoon. The “Ban Mitchell Development” tote bags were printed on their silk-screening press in the dead of night by “The Ranger,” dropped off at Henrietta’s Cafe for the breakfast crowd. Norma had one in her hand, five over her shoulder.

She knocked once, twice, and three times. Her ears said that the shuffling inside was from the gophers under the floor, but her heart said something else.

“Henry,” she pleaded, her heart open wide, her soft voice connecting to it. “Remember the Wentworths? The tortured cats and dogs we got out of there? The ones we brought back to life. Together. We got ‘em!” She heard something in the silence at the other side of the door. “YOU were the one who told the judge that anyone who tortures animals will torture kids. They caught ‘em! Red handed. The kids are safe with REAL parents now. The cats. And that, now, three-legged dog. He’s with me, eating me out of house and...”

From the other end of the door, nothing.

“Henry!” she screamed. “Damn you, open up! Those animals out there need you!” A tear fell down her face, the words struggling to come out of her tightened throat. “And I need you.”

The silence said nothing again. But Norma came prepared with an answer of her own. She removed the note from her pocket, securing it to the “Closed” sign with a 26 gauge needle. “I’ll pretend you’re not in,” she continued. “Maybe you are. Wouldn’t be the first time I played the fool. And it won’t be the last. Thank God.”

To the note was a small “Ban the Mall” baggie, the Ranger choosing to put a picture of a Wolf on it. Norma’s choice was to insert something special into the bag, a message indicating her final word on the matter felt, but never spoken.

The walk down the driveway was long. The drive down the road harder, but something out her rear view mirror forced Norma to make a sharp, deliberate and long-awaited U turn.

Terri walked out of the woods behind the clinic, her Mountain Bike tethered to a birch which, interestingly, matched its white and brown frame. She tip-toed to the Henry’s door, cringing like a hunched-back cat burglar, thinking that it would make her small enough to not be seen. Not quite the way the Neo-Hippie, Neo-Environmentalist, Neo-Whatever would be coming in to work for ‘business as usual.’

Terri reached into the bag.

“Two oatmeal cookies,” Norma interjected. “One hard and one soft.”

Terri’s eyes were never more open, and startled “Eh...Norma, I...eh...tried to, ya know, like...eh...ya know-”

“Being alone, independent. It scares younger people. It sustains older ones.” She looked at Henry’s clinic. “Most of the time.” The always ‘neat and tidy’ shop that looked like it was ready for the junk heap, attesting to the down-side of rugged individualism. What happens if it doesn’t connect to someone else. What happens if heart, mind and Spirit don’t coordinate efforts.

“Huh?” Terri replied to the axioms, credos and discoveries about human nature racing through Norma’s head.

“Sometimes you can’t manipulate love,” the Old Bird related to the Fledgling Matchmaker, her aging hand on her shaking shoulder. “Even though you need love... some of the time.”

“I don’t understand, Norma.”

“I don’t either, Terri.”

Norma appended the lesson, which she was indeed re-learning herself, with a hug. The rest of the day would be ‘business as usual’ between her and Terri. And as for the oatmeal cookies, they would remain in the bag, for Henry’s mouth only. And as for the note-perhaps it would be read, perhaps it wouldn’t be. It was more important for Norma to write it than for Henry to read it, perhaps. Maybe after the wounded bear was ready to come out of his cave.

CHAPTER 32

Hours passed. Maybe it was hours, or maybe minutes. The transition, whatever it was, had happened. Time for Doc Henry to re-assess, re-arm and, if the world would allow Dinosaurs another stay of execution before extinction, re-build. The first step was to 'square away' the decks inside the clinic. And indeed, the Good Ship Henry was a wreck. Everything that he had valued for over three decades was on the floor, hopefully not broken beyond repair. The books he wrote which educated hundreds of Veterinary Students, whether they wanted to 'smarten up their brain box' or not. The surgical instruments that saved thousands of animals from pain, paralysis or death. The skeleton given to him by his Anatomy Professor at Kansas State, which he used to demonstrate intricate medical principles to clients who couldn't even spell 'orthopedic'.

The entire place would have wound up as land-fill for the New Mall, or Norma's Compost Heap, had it not been for the objects in his finally-steady hands. "Roberta's Leather Vest and Medicine Pouch," he said to a chipmunk who decided to land on the windowsill. Pondering the matter with all of his angst, he finally decided to open the window. It seemed the least he could do for the first of the wildlife around his clinic to brave re-approach after a night-long rant. And perhaps a dialogue with the furry creature might clarify the full significance of the remains Roberta had inadvertently left behind. "Fringes, beads and symbols that are Communist, Pagan or God knows what else. Un-professional. Dis-respectful. In-appropriate. And..."

Henry had never cried for a dead animal for nearly thirty years. He'd be Damned to Hell with dope-smoking Hippie Commie Pagans if he was going to let loose the swells of sorrows for a drifter Injun on her way from one egg-headed think tank to another one. "I'm glad to see her go," he bellowed to the chipmunk. Breaking his posted own rule about not feeding the wildlife, he fed it bird seed reserved for the exotic avian patient. "Don't be taking this as a sign of weakness. Tomorrow you scrounge for yourself in those trees. Get your own nuts and berries. Make your own way. Make something of yourself. Something magnificent. Like she's probably doing...right now."

Henry's eye spotted a feather near the open window. "An eagle feather. Probably from one of her... whatever. I heard that if you hang it up from the ceiling, it brings you good luck. Whether you want it or not."

Doctor Steiner's next gesture was private, unspoken, from himself to Doctor Collinear, wherever she was. What to hang the Eagle feather with would have to be something... significant. A strand of leather. A string of 1.0 nylon suture. Or... "fishing line," he noted to himself, retrieving a strand of thick wire-like nylon from a closet he had never opened until last night.

"Good luck, Roberta." The prayer had to be said. Acknowledgment of its receipt came from a wind coming in from the East Window-then the North door.

“And you palefaces say we’re rotten housekeepers,” Roberta commented, noting how ‘neat and tidy’ had turned into ‘desperate and hungry’ so quickly, and painfully. “Interesting decorum,” she continued, eyes on everything except Doc Henry, her large, mostly empty, napsack over her back.

“You left some medical equipment behind. I put it on the table there. You’ll be needing it.”

“Guess I will.”

With that, Roberta stuck her hand into the napsack. She pulled out her diploma, putting it on the wall, adjusting it so it fit ‘just right’, beside Henry’s. She then adjusted his, ‘squaring it off’ in a perfect 90 degree angle. “You didn’t see THAT coming,” she noted, somberly. “Neither did I.”

While Henry felt a ‘huh’ going through his big, unshaven cheeks, Roberta unpacked the rest of the items from the bottom of her traveling bag, all the way to the bottom. The ‘Doctor R’ brand drug/herbs, notes and hand-tooled surgical implants from her ‘secret’ life at Saskatoon Veterinary College. The Grandma Collineur mandella and hand-carved Cree Healer’s Prayer. The ‘state of the art’ biopsy instruments, stethoscope and suture materials branded “Property of Wilson Veterinary Clinic”.

“I heard you got your license renewed,” Henry noted.

“Provisionally. You?”

“Split vote. Power structure change. I don’t know.” the Old Redneck related like a new student trying to get into an Old Guard Department. “Ten thousand dollar fine.”

“No one said doing the right thing gets you rich.”

“And a suspension.” His tone was somber, multidimensional.

“The mother fuckers! If I get my hands on them, I’ll-”

“-Seventy two hours.” The Old Dinosaur’s roar had escalated to calm and collected. Business as usual, in all ways that mattered, anyway. He strode over to the South closet, picking up a Vintage 19 fifty-something twenty-pound rod. “I could use three days of fishing.”

Henry’s skill with a rod and reel wasn’t anything to get him on a fishing show, but he seemed to know what he was doing. How to snatch the trout, bass or rubber boot from the bottom of the Lake. And more important than the ‘how’ was the ‘where’, leading to the ‘why’.

"Maybe I'll go up to Elkswood Lake. Me and my daughter used to go up there every Spring and Fall. Before the dope, booze, religious fanatics. She said I didn't understand what she was all about. Maybe we both could have listened a little harder." He pondered the issues past, present, and future. "Don't know where Rita is now. Her mother doesn't either. At least that's what she's been telling me. I think I finally believe her because... well... ya know." He put the rod down. Some dreams were best experienced in the past, efforts to resurrect them only making for more nightmares in the present, worst experiences for others in the future.

"My father and me used to go to Casper's Bay," Roberta interjected, picking up the rod and the torch Henry had let drop back into the depths of his despair. "Elkswood Lake was on a list of places to go. A long list."

She pondered her own pasts, presents and futures, to the bouncing ball of the lures bobbing back and forth in front of her tearing eyes. "I never used fluorescent lures. We always had flying flares."

"Never tried flying flares," Henry asserted, his bold business as usual voice back in business. "It might be interesting if we do a comparative study."

Roberta tried it on for size. A size 9 dream for a size 6 head and a size 12 ego. Better mathematics than she'd been presented for a long time.

"And as long as Tom Wilson and his 'Academy' are still around, it'll be a full time collaboration for both of us."

"Probably," Roberta conceded to extension of the proposal. Knife Bend, for all its quirks and troubles, was still the only safe haven for rugged individualists who dared question the ultimate rule of Tom Wilson's Clinic, The Ribbly Clinic, and all the other Clinics that were about putting money first, the profession second, and the dignity of the animals under their care last. It felt normal, natural and appropriate to get caught in a 'we're stuck with each other' arrangement again. At least this time it was by choice, and for the Cause, and two mandates. Rugged individualism. Compassion for animals. The rest was just details. To be ranked up, or down, there with who gets to have the desk by the window or who gets to have to do call NEXT Christmas.

"There's just one question I have to ask, Doctor Collineur."

"Shoot."

"'Promethius', that wolf cub," Henry continued, kind, compassionate and open. "The Johansen calf. Every pup or kitten you get yer hands on. They remind you of someone? Daniel?"

"You have your secrets, I have mine," Roberta delivered back with quiet determination, and ultimate defiance.

“Doctor Collineur!” Henry shot back with a blast.

“What!!” Roberta blasted back with a cannon roar.

“You are stubborn. Insolent. Rude. And have no respect for authority.”

“Thank you,” she smirked.

“And you’re a heck of a, no... a HELL of a vet.”

“Thank you,” she smiled.

“At least you’re not a lesbian.”

Roberta took her moment. “You’re sure about that?” she offered, not wanting to miss a golden opportunity of her new lifetime.

“No...” Henry concluded after an ‘unkempt top of the head’ to ‘rings around the toes’ assessment. “You couldn’t be queer.” Her resumed his part of the clean up, considering new places to put each catheter, syringe and jar of antiseptic.

“But if I was, would I still be a hell of a vet?”

“That’s a stupid question, Doctor Collineur.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re not queer.”

“How do you know that?”

“Queers are, you know, sick people. People who need help!” The blood under his leathery neck turned deep red, sorting through his lab coats, shoes and faded purple shirts. “Emotional misfits! Flakes who fly off the hand and whine about this, and that, and this and-”

“-Me thinks the doctor doth protest too much?” Roberta offered.

“I beg your pardon.”

“If YOU were gay, I’d have no problem with that.”

“I’m no homo!”

Roberta sensed that it was her turn to do the 'squaring away' of the decks to make things neat and tidy, going for it. "It's just that, ya know, you do like things neat, and tidy, and tidy, and neat."

"I'm a professional, not a-"

"And the shirts. They can feel pink from the inside, from the outside they're faded red. Like 'The Duke' wore on... what were those movies? Maybe he was gay, too."

"Gay, too?"

"Like Rock Hudson."

"Ice Station Zebra?"

"Ice Princess, or Queen. But that's okay. He's a great actor, like you're a fantastic vet."

"A vet with lots of friends. Lady Friends. From Vancouver to Newfoundland." He pulled out his black book, noting that the color to his personal numbers' cover was red, or maybe pink as the sun hit it. "Look!" he asserted. "Phone numbers, addresses. See?"

Roberta avoided looking at the book, and at Henry. She'd give it all away, burst out laughing, or in an apology that would probably not be accepted anyway. "No, I don't want to look at your list of Dorothy's, Dots, Susans, Maggies, or even Henriettas. It's Private." Then, something she couldn't resist. Henry's 'going on large animal call' loafers.

"What are you looking at?"

"Tassles. Lovely design. And a tasteful place for the penny."

"I paid a pretty penny for those shoes. Forty bucks back in '75. Very durable."

"And comfortable?" Roberta smirked.

"The last thing Henry Steiner or anyone who works with him is comfortable!" he barked, tossing the shoes into the disposal bin.

"Tell me about it," Roberta concluded, realizing that the road she had now taken would have only hard-earned rewards on it.

"But it beats effortless success," Grandma Collineur's voice echoed through her mind, heart and Soul.

Roberta passed the rest of the hour posing hypothetical questions about Henry and his hunting trips with 'the guys', winding down the joke as tactfully as she could. Tomorrow Henry would 'get' her, of course. But for today, Roberta was in charge of her own life. Confirmation came with the Eagle. It landed on the top of the roof of the clinic. Out of site of Henry, Roberta, Mahegan and Promethius, the most recent 'Daniel' in what was to be a long list of adopted four legged children.

"Hey!" a voice rang out, startling the avian Messenger from the Spirit Realm.

The bird had never been surprised by a human, but maybe this time was different.

"You have a minute to hear something?" Cowboy Hank asked of the bird.

Sensing a 'yes', or at least a curious 'why the f—k not', he laid down the reins on his horse, pulled out his guitar and started strumming, his voice ringing out a new musical variation to a very old and underutilized song.

When you get our selves in trouble,

Don't burst someone else's bubble,

Tryin' sure beats cryin',

That's the song I'm buyin'

I know I've been real tardy,

But I'll be back, with a really hearty party.

Would it sell 30 million copies on the other side of the Rainbow? Who knew? Maybe the Eagle, or maybe the half-breed genius doctor who would, some day, keep it Alive a few years longer. In It's time.