

# ETHICATION

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## CHAPTER 1

It is said that all roads lead to somewhere we hate, love or can't escape no matter how far off the beaten and familiar path we go. The Upstate city of Promethia, New York was such a place for Jack McMillian, who was awarded three hard earned Ph.Ds in engineering on as many continents who applied the skills he learned to make earth a safer and more livable planet for more people than he knew, or was supposed to know about all over the world. While touching down to visit 'home' once every ten years or so, feeling to be more of a foreigner with each visit to family, friends and high school teachers who still called Ithaca home. Politely listening to conversations about their shared past which they remembered with more affinity than he did, taking an early exit out of the city each time using a plethora of faked stories about needing to be elsewhere 'yesterday'.

What brought Jack back to the town that called itself '16 square miles of enlightened pragmatism surrounded by reality' wasn't a sick parent in need of healing of body and soul from a self-sacrificing or unconditionally giving adult who once called said parent Mom, Dad or some variation of such. It wasn't the chance to teach engineering at Kornwellis University after he had built innumerable villages in countries whose names were known only by geography undergrads or history majors for refugees the oil companies he worked for made homeless. It wasn't even the chance to come back home to a location where, in the music world anyway, everyone is a king but no one wears a crown. No, it was something else. Dumb luck, or bad luck. As others could see the shit we are about to walk into better than ourselves, Jack didn't know which was the case. But, as a retired structural engineer he wanted to live the second half of his life less 'linearly' than the first half century of his shift on planet earth. And more effective. On his terms and as defined by the Eternities.

Spring came early in Greely, Colorado that year, the grass deciding it would proudly sprout its green tentacles upward, providing a thick layer of gustatory delights for cattle, horses and goats that had grown tired of dining on hay that had become moldy after late winter rains. Mounted on his mule, 'Festus', a six foot tall, moderately but not excessively muscular 65 year old man with grey hair that still covered his larger sized head and eyes as blue as the big sky above him, gazed at the lush pasture below his private observation post overlooking the river. The early snow melt on the mountains had turned that artery which carried the most essential element to the chronically thirsty land into a torrent of rapidly moving water that overshadowed any conversation between man and man, and man and beast, or beast and beast. "A welcomed sight," Jack said, while stroking Festus' neck, feeling the sun melting the crevices on his wrinkled face, the wind blowing his chin length white hair into an even more monstrously mess than it normally presented itself as when not required to be 'professionally presentable'.

“But as we know from the many years we’ve known each others’ souls, too much of a good thing is a bad thing,” he continued, stroking his overgrown Fu Manchu mustache recalling the flood four years ago that had turned the bone dry pasture into a muddy field. And the bigger one 10 months ago which had converted the normally dry grassland into a lake with more fish in it than fur bearing mammals. Such had the Bible Thumpers looking for a Noah or trying to be such, employing Jack to advise them as to the best way to build Arcs. Life rafts which would of course to carry only their own families to dry land somewhere else.

But echoing in Jack’s head wasn’t the bold expression of the river which had converted a winter desert into a lush Spring paradise. Or the snortling of delight Festus exuded when munching on his first meal of real grass after a long winter of hay. No, it was music playing between his ears. A pop tune that was played for him at his birthday party three painful days ago. The Beatles singing ‘I heard its your birthday...’ etc. and as part of the real message of the song...‘take a look at yourself’. Which Jack did, thanking his stepdaughter and stepson son for giving him a surprize party and NOT inviting his ex-wife, Nadia, to be in attendance. Behind forced smiles to and faked laughter at the jokes delivered to him by local friendly acquaintances who still considered him (as he was I many ways) an ‘outsider’, Jack reflected on a life that was less than stellar according to his metric, made more painful by hearing music from ‘the golden times’ of his youth and that of his contemporaries, which were not so golden.

But there were some things Jack did that were...right, somehow. Most notably, exiting his comfortable job as an overpaid, overqualified and underworked Government Engineer. A gig he took on to try to change the system from within, in Chicago. Where approval of construction plans for wealthy contractors sailed through the red tape, the aspirations of ‘less desirable’ contractors, whose accents were not quite American enough, were denied the imprint of the rubber stamp that allowed them to proceed with bringing into the material world their blueprinted visions. A job he took on so he could give Nadia and his step children, who he first encountered as adolescents, a better life in a city where they could have more cultural and professional opportunities than in the (at that time anyway) ‘hic backwater town’ of Ithaca. Which wound up in divorce due to his being ‘married to his work rather than his family’, according to Nadia’s divorce attorney, therapist and (as it was found out later) Nadia’s first cousin, who was the judge. Particularly when Jack resumed his past activities working overseas for even higher pay for oil companies that (as he found out later) had created war zones wherever drilling was successful. And even more so when Jack signed on to work for the United Nations, building living quarters for refugees in need of food, shelter, water and protection from small time thugs who became powerful warlords because of ‘unavoidable’ wars the oil companies ‘inadvertently’ created.

Greely, Colorado was as far from Promethia, New York, the oil-rich middle East and Chicago for Jake as the ability of Bob Dylan to sing Verdi operas at the Met. But they all came together when Jake upped the ring tone on his cell phone, finally able to hear a call coming in over the raging river below. And the thunderous voices between his ears of his past life accomplishments and miscalculations, sometimes both of them being the same thing.

"Ok, OK already!" Jack yelled to the screaming mini-cyber demon inside his right front jeans pocket. Being slow on the draw, and knowing that his phone often did not record who had called him, he yelled into the device just as the ten second segment from William Tell Overture was about to hit the last note. "Hello...Don't hang up...Who is this?" he frantically screamed onto the phone which no matter how much he reset it, shut itself off to the caller's voice and identity after 10 seconds.

"Are you John MacMillian?" a more male than female voice at the other end of somewhere inquired in a monotone, serious tone.

"Someone has to be, I suppose," Jack mused, conferring humor to the caller who seemed to be more in need of such than the bone dry valley was in need of water.

"So, you are John MacMillian?" the caller continued, dead serious about something.

"Yes, I am," Jack replied, not recognizing the number. He braced himself for less than optimal news from the caller, taking in a deep breath into his chest that he would hold onto once delivered into the base of his lungs. He didn't know if the caller was a friend, foe or, worse, an official who didn't care anything about who or how Jack was. He scanned the possibilities as to what that news was, and considered the various possibilities regarding the caller's identity. From a 'beautification officer' informing him that the grass on his front lawn in front of his overloaded and uninspected home workshop was overgrown. To someone from Air West saying that his name was entered by his ex-wife into a contest in which he won an all expense paid Hawaiian vacation which the workaholic masochist would be forced to 'enjoy'. To the IRS wanting more details about expenses he claimed on the acreage where he raised cattle and his workshop at home that did work for others in need on the basis of barter rather than traceable cash or bank transfers. The answer to those speculations was worse than any of the above. "I'll hand you over to the Head Nurse now," the caller said.

"Jack," the second caller said, her gender assessed to be female, and caring. "It's your sister, Ann. She was found dead by the lake here in Ithaca with a note that said to contact you first. It was in her pocket. Saying, and I quote, 'if anything happens to me, my brother Jack is the first to be notified. For reasons only he knows, God Bless and Help Him.' She put your phone number on it, and on the collar of her dog, Sidney."

Jack's mental reflexes kicked in, overshadowing the wave of shock penetrating through his chest at hearing the news about his only sibling. Such left him as the only member of his over caring but minimally understanding family left on this side of the dirt. He was about to allow the pain developing in his chest drain the 'thinking juices' in his brain, leading to him losing control of everything. But after a

defiant clenching of his teeth and fist, he seized back the steering wheel before sliding into the ditch of helplessness, answering. "Sidney's name is Siddhartha! Not Sidney!"

"Yes, I know," the voice which Jack still could not identify said.

Jack took in a deep breath, attempting to pull in all of the diffusing thoughts and feelings running through and dominating every portion of the cranial vault between his aching ears, and his shivering arms and legs. "Siddhartha, is he ok?" Jack self observed himself asking regarding the only family in his home town he understood, and who he thought understood him.

"He's ok," the caller assured Jack, whose identity he still could not identify, this time due to the static on the phone as well as the loud ringing of brain fog between his ears

"And my nephew, Tom?" Jack inquired as his thoughts shuffled at warp speed between agendas of the present and memories of the past, his face breaking out in a cold sweat. "He and his mother were..."

"---Not on the best of terms," the caller related. Apparently, because the note, written in elegantly written and easily deciphered cursive, she left on Sidney..."

"Siddhartha!" Jack blasted into the phone, pushing the knot of grief in his chest into a fire breathing blast from his mouth rather than a ram rod opening up the tear ducts in his bloodshot eyes.

"Yes," the caller said after taking in a deep breath reeking of emotional exhaustion. "The note Anney tied to Siddhartha's collar, and the emergency contact card in her pocket listed only you as her contact."

"Her name is, or was anyway, ANN! Without an E or a fucking!" Jack blasted at the caller whose attempts to keep forms of address personal made him feel less willing to bond with her. "Who has a husband."

"An ex-husband,:" the caller informed Jack. "Who is deceased. Two months ago."

"And a son," Jack informed the Nurse, wondering how she knew more about his deadbeat, asshole and (because of such) EX-brother in law than he did. "Thomas Smith."

“Thomas Defoe now,” Jack heard under the static and patchy audio. “Who hung up on us when we tried to contact him, five times. Whose relationship with his mother is apparently...”

“In more need of repair than I thought it was” Jack surmised and stated, gaining control of his logical mind rather than being a prisoner to his limbic lobe. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Sooner than as soon as you can would be better, Mister MacMillian,” she said. “Please, Jack!” she continued, her voice sounding painfully familiar, after which she hung up. Indeed it was Carla Ellison. Someone who Jack had had ‘history’ with. Along with many others in Ithaca he had history, and unfinished business with. The list too large and painful to recall with regard to specifics.

## CHAPTER 2

There was one question that Jack had when entering the morgue to identify the corpse putatively named Ann MacMillian-Smith. Aside from wondering why Carla, who had always kept her hair blonde and long to accentuate her seductively moderately overweight body and pleasingly round face hidden, was now sporting a chin length brown bob with a face that was narrow, and a torso underneath it that had become slender bordering on ‘fashionably emaciated’ . “Why was Carla, the head nurse at the ER, the first and only one to call me with the news about my sister’s death and not you?” he demanded to know from the plain clothes Police escort.

“Standard procedure,” Seargent Wendy Jackson replied in a monotoned voice with a Southern accent devoid of any hospitality or gentle kindness that usually accompanied anyone from South of the Mason Dixon line in Jacks’ extensive travel experiences. With the most minimal head nod and the slightest movement of her fingers, the law enforcement officer whose freshly pressed suit, slicked back hair tied into a bun as tight as her lips and perfectly manicured red fingernails instructed the schleps in sweat soaked scrubs and blood stained white lab coats reeking of formaldehyde to pull the body out of its final resting stall in the wall, the tag on it reading Jane Doe 126A.

After putting on two pairs of gloves, Jackson unzipped the most probably used for the 150<sup>th</sup> time body bag just enough to reveal the deceased head. “Like I said to everyone else . That is, or rather was, Ann MacMillian, alright, Seargent?” Carla informed the officer, after seeing and being pulled into the face of the corpse.

“Mister MacMillian?” Jackson inquired, turning to Jack, pushing Carla aside with her arm, keeping her ‘in her place’ physically, and otherwise, with her authoritative stare.

Jack had not seen his sister in years, not because of any resentment that had emerged between them, but for the most common and soul draining reason why family members drift apart...Nothing left in common. Jack’s sister’s complexion was pale under a layer of caked dirt that would have made her seem to be more brown than white skinned. The smell of rancid garbage on her skin was strong enough

to make even the most seasoned trash collector throw up his lunch, and breakfast. Ann's eyes radiated sheer terror on the right side. The left ocular porthole, even amongst the bruises that nearly shut it closed, indicated someone with a giving heart and vulnerable soul. Still, Jack allowed his most trustable memories to let him see her at the last Christmas dinner they shared, argued over and cut short two presidential elections and one pandemic ago. He shifted into a blank stare, seeing events in the past more clearly than those of the present. Maybe more clearly than he had ever seen them.

"Mister MacMillian, Sir?" Jackson interjected after looking at her watch, then checking her phone. "Can you unequivocally identify this corpse as your sister, Ann MacMillian-Smith?" She tapped her foot, waiting for an answer.

"Yes, he does, Officer Jackass!" Carla blasted at Jackson.

Jackson pulled back her lips, lowered her head then delivered her reply after a deep, anger repressing breath, then lowered her glasses. "We need confirmation before the body is processed, Nurse Carmichael," the out of town Cop said with the determination and control of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Alabama schoolmarm.

"Carmichael, Carla?" Jack said, his consciousness back in the present century, his stare directed at the Nurse who he had known in many other capacities for so many life experiences, and years, ago.

"After you left to experiment with moralities, engineering dynamics and, so I heard, and step-fatherhood, I experimented with....people. Taylor Carmichael being the last failed experiment, who left first, leaving me with Carmichael as my legal name. Which made things...legally easier," Carla confessed and related with downturned eyes.

"His loss," Jack said to Carla, as the light above them shone on her face, making it seem to be thirty years younger, despite the shades of grey he now noticed in her hair in hair that was now cut to hide rather than accentuate her natural beauty. Even more attractive in body, mind and soul in the past, somehow. Yes, the one that got away. "Yes, Carla, his loss that he left you."

"HER loss," Carla said, looking at and into Jack. "Times, tastes and sexual proclivities...change."

"Or finally emerge?" Jack inquired, open for any answer Carla would want or have to give him.

The next volley of conversation conveyed with voice or eyes was interrupted at the most intimate moments by Jackson clearing her throat. "Mister MacMillian, Sir. Can you unequivocally say that this corpse is your sister Ann MacMillian Smith?"

"Yes It is, and was, Ann MacMillian," Jack answered with a restrained voice, and hidden clenched fist, just in time to prevent Carla from being arrested.

"Ann-MacMillian Smith, Sir?" Jackson pressed.

"Yes! Ann MacMillian Smith!" Jack and Carla volleyed back in unison.

"Then, our job is done here," Jackson said pulling out a notepad from her breast pocket.

"No, it isn't," Jack blasted out, pushing away the orderlies from pushing the corpse back into the hole in the wall. He unzipped the body bag. "Cause of death. I need to know it. And I'm sure that Ann MacMillian Smith's son needs to know it also."

"She had a son?" Jackson inquired, opening up her pad.

"Who she loved more than her dreamboat turned deadbeat husband, Officer Jackson," the Head Nurse who earned her position in the ER informed the promoted because of her politics, gender or perhaps multiethnic more brown than white skinned inspector. "His name being..."

"Tom Smith, most probably, Detective, Ma'am," Jack responded.

"Tom DeFoe, Wendy," Carla offered, with kindness to the detective in charge of dealing with yet another nuisance case. Another homeless loser who finally was given, or took, an exit from a life of humiliation, torture and pain. "Tom DeFoe as he calls himself now. Who didn't like the way his mother went off grid with her life, and off the reservation with regard to fixing the world." Carla pulled out fistful of newspaper articles from her pocket, throwing them into Officer Wendy's face. "From newspapers and magazines that people like you don't know about and would probably be offended by reading, Officer Jackson. And you probably didn't know about either, Jack".

"Which I did know about, despite your thinking that me and my sister were on opposite political wings of the same grounded bird," Jack shot back. "Some of them anyway."

He and Officer Wendy perused the headlines and first paragraphs of the articles telling tale tales about 'Comrade Annie' investigating corrupt pharmaceutical companies, large multi-billion dollar tech companies, Monsanto, Law Firms and Police departments. Along with her announcing her second book regarding the real causes, anatomy and treatments for the biggest growing problem in North America--- homelessness.

"I see," Officer Jackson conceded. "But, as a mother, what does Ann without an E's kid think about a 60 something woman who has two university degrees who is taking Liberal Revolutionary theories to the streets? What did you say his name was, Nurse Carla?"

"Tom, Officer Wendy," Carla replied, understanding that 'Doc Henry', 'Professor Sam' and 'Inspector Sue' was a Southern form of respect rather than humiliation. "The note Ann MacMillian tied to her dog, who didn't stink as much as she did of poverty and desperation, said that her son Tom should not be contacted before her brother got here."

"And where is Tom now?" Jackson inquired, working with rather than against the common agenda brewing between Carla and Jack.

Carla pulled out another clipping from her pocket, this time from 'Capitalism Now!', displaying a fashionably dressed Tom Oliver in front of his newest store, 'Woodwork for Winners', his likeness as Uncle Sam plastered on the window, every stitch of clothing on him being red, white or blue.

"My lazy, millennial disease inflicted nephew made something of himself," Jack noted.



“Not the kind that any uncle, or father, or mother would be proud of;” Carla replied holding back the details behind gritted teeth. “But first,” she directed to Officer Jackson’s emotionless, offensively ‘professional’ face. “We’ll do a full autopsy on this body. Together! The three of us!”

“A family bonding, investigative reporter experience for you, in exchange for you to give me confidential intel from GSW patients who get brought into your ER without me getting a court order?” Jackson replied without any shortage of sarcasm.

“No,” Carla said, turning to Officer Jackson. “Because doing an autopsy on this finally identified Jane Doe would be...interesting.”

“Yes, it would be...interesting,” Jackson replied, scratching her chin in a professorial manner.

Jack, who was as skilled at reading inner thoughts and feelings about women as Mister Magoo could read the fine print on a legal document or medicine jar containing a miracle cure for bad vision, could see that there was one thing these two women had in common that trumped everything else. A hatred of boredom and rage at their bosses who assigned them simple tasks to do as simple women who were happy with simple lives. A need for getting involved in something....interesting.

### CHAPTER 3

The first order of business, and primary personal importance, for Jack was to connect with the only real family he still had on the same side of the dirt he was sentenced to be on. “I’m here to pick up Siddhartha,” he demanded of the clerk at the SPCA. A 25 going on 15 year old blonde, blue-eyed Barbie wearing a surgical scrubs in charge of a facility overloaded with dogs, cats and horses at the facility that smelled of Lysol drenched manure and urine. “Before anyone thinks of selling him to someone else, or euthanizing common looking old dogs so you can make room for cute puppies,” he asserted, knowing that half of the SPCAs in North America served the interests of stray animals, the other half servicing the smiling staff that made under the table money pretending to take care of them. After delivering that ultimatum, he recognized the smiling clerk as the C minus high school student who he had tutored in math, biology and history, the most neglected subject in even the Ithaca educational system.

“And you are, who, Sir?” she asked Jack.

“Siddhartha’s uncle, who is next in line to be owned by him after his human mother died” he replied, trying to be colorfully practical rather than reminiscently friendly. “I knew him best when he was a pup anyway, and I was....well...” Jack said, putting forth a picture of the canine with him taken seven Christmases ago.

The Millennial clerk looked at the picture, puzzled. “Siddhartha?”

"Sidney, as he usually answers best to now, Ashley," Carla gently reminded the clerk, showing her a more recent picture of the dog with her posing in happy poses by the lake. "Ann MacMillian-Smith's dog."

"Ah yeah," Ashley replied. "Tha dog that was brought in by tha Cops last week," she said, her 'e's converted into more easily pronounced 'a'. While every old fart over 40 said thE.

'And I'm his new father, dad and humanoid servant, Ashley" Jack related, forcing himself into a smile appended with his best efforts to convert shock, sorrow and anger to give way to the best humorous wit he could muster.

"And who are you, again?" Ashley asked Jack, turning coldly and fearfully official. "My boss says I gotta know., Sir."

"A smart boss in these non-smart times," Jack said, after which he presented his Colorado driver's licence, passport and expired Promethia Library card. "Suppose I've changed a lot since I left, and Ithaca has changed and you certainly have, Ashley, I hope for the better, but I fear not," he felt like giving voice to, but didn't.

"I'll go get Sydney, Mister MacMillian," Ashley said after double then triple checking that the face on the ID matched the stranger in front of her. She disappeared into the back room, initiating a volley of ear-aching desperate barks ranging from Jack Russell soprano to Huskey baritones, with a long wolf like howl from one canine. All of which that lingered until someone in the back turned the country rock station to Mozart.

"Maybe more Mozart and less Motown will make for a better working environment in the ER for you on a GSW filled night, Carla," Jack offered, helping himself to a self-induced chuckle. "Even on nights when the cliental are darker skinned than us. Or come from nations that shitheads in Washington say are 'shit pile' countries that are overloading our best in the world American health care system."

"Or our own people who go 'home' to a tent, sidewalk or riverbank after being discharged," Carla added. "A problem that your sister was trying to solve here at home. While you---"

"---I know, Carla!" Jack yelled back at his ex-lover, friend and, most importantly, confidant. "While I went overseas to work with big corporations that aren't going to get any smaller, to work WITHIN the system to change it. Then, yeah, got hitched to families, business partners, fellow professional volunteers and bosses who said we were doing the Right thing when we were doing the wrong things

that....” Feeling himself running out of words to describe his many left turns that led him to numerous dead ends, he held back the rest of the rant.

Carla gently laid her hand on his shaking shoulder. “We both miss Ann, and admire, from a safe distance, the noble work with the homeless that she did, or tried to do anyway,” she offered by way of solution to the many problems Jack now realized that he had, despite his ‘retiring’ to a backwater town in Colorado. “And for the moment, right now, we both have to...”

Carla’s phone rang, putting aside the volleys of would’as, shoulda’s and ‘so what nows?’ going through Jacks head.

“So you did get the key to the old autopsy room, Rhonda?” She said to the caller. “And no one is still using it?...And Doctor Petrovich is off shift in an hour?...We’re on our way.”

Sydney was led out of the back room of the shelter, the leash handed to Jack by Ashley, her saying goodbye to Jack with a dispassionate “Have a great day, Sir”. Like Jack needed another reminder that the town he grew up in, and revisited only very occasionally, was not his anymore. At a time in his life that he needed more than ever, a place to call....home.

## CHAPTER 4

A deserter from the Russian Army, who refused to kill any more Ukrainians or fellow Russians, Doctor Ivan Petrovich struggled very hard to pass himself off as Ian Peterson. But despite his multiple attempts to pass qualifying exams to be certified as a legally practicing doctor in America, his accent, boldness of personal expression, obsession with doing everything with a sense of urgency and habit of correcting American docs when the latter made ‘biological miscalculations’ prevented one of the most intelligent Slavic doctors from being anything except an assistant orderly. He entered America illegally as a stowaway on a luxury cruise liner, knowing that if he entered legally, his bosses in Military Biomedical Research labs back home and a new wave of Capitalistic embracing pharmaceutical companies in what had been the Eastern Block would see that he was sent back. Such was the story he told Carla, in confidence, between the many times they did their best to correct the mistakes their MD bosses made at Cayuga General Hospital by gentle reminder to them, providing meds that were not on the assignment charts or tossing the wrong elixirs into the toilet when necessary.

“So, you want good news, bad news or ‘interesting’ news?” the long haired, thinly bearded semi-legal immigrant with an enlarged Roman nose which was unmatched in its ability to smell bullshit, even if well intended, said to Officer Wendy Jackson, Nurse Carla Carmichael and Citizen Engineer Jack MacMillian.

“All of the above, letting us decide which category it goes into, ‘Mister Petrovich,’” Wendy Jackson demanded of the illegal immigrant who was on the top of her ‘to be investigated’ list, despite the fact

that his 'rude and uncalled for' comments correcting the doctors taking care of her daughter resulted in her surviving a bout of pancreatitis rather dying from it. Something Carla related to Jack in confidence while driving from the animal shelter to the old, about to be demolished wing of the hospital. "Contrary to what the American public wants from political candidates, the naked truth is what we're after," she continued. The hard bitten Cop who claimed that her rise up the ranks was due to her being emotionally detached from both victims and perps turned her stare to face of the deceased. "We ARE after the truth here, Ann," she said to the corpse that became a living soul again. "And if you have a problem with that, well...."

"You have history with this victim?" Doctor Ivan challenged the Cop whose face blasted out to anyone with even half an eye and a quarter of a heart a mixture of pity, admiration, respect, hatred and fear.

"Yes, and no," Officer Wendy blurted out the side of her mouth, still held captive by Ann MacMillian's pale white face and more than ever deep brown eyes. "But the last time anyone saw her alive, she was in a community where all of the citizens die slowly and painfully. The Jungle does that to everyone, no matter how much mosquito netting and bug spray you bring in with you."

"Or maybe what kind of toxins or vaccines you put into yourself," Doctor Petrovich said, taking note of a sheet of paper pushed under the door. "As I thought, and feared," he continued while perusing the lab report from the blood sample Carla had been able to sneak to the lab. "Needle marks on her arms, liver and kidney profiles off roof, and toxicity screen showing...."

Insulted rather than impressed with Petrovich's professional attitude and medical intelligence, Jack snatched the report from the arrogant yet skilled Slavic Doc. "My sister never did drugs, of any kind!"

"And you know this, because?" Petrovitch challenged.

"I know her!" Jack yelled back. "When we were kids, she refused to experiment with weed, booze, coke, acid or even tobacco!?"

"When you were kids, Mister MacMillian?" Officer Jackson put out.

"Yes, and when she became an adult, she said, any time I tried to offer her anything that would make her life easier, the pain of her arthritis is far more bearable than the mental agony her ex put her through," Jack shot back. He recalled past frustrations and accusations between his sister Ann, with NO E or Y, that he was determined would not make it into any Police Report, or newspaper. Even the Ithaca Herald,

a publication which never lied. Or when it did, such was to draw people into a Higher Political and Moral Truth.

Jack pulled back the tox screen before Officer Jackson or Nurse Carla could lay eyes on it. Then he crumbled it up, keeping it hidden within a clenched fist. "If any of you knew Ann, you'd know that she had diabetes. Not that she was a diabetic, but....well, she did require insulin. That is injected."

"Not in the veins, with veins like that," Carla said, pointing to the right and left arm of the corpse in front of her. "The angle of the marks showing that she did it herself."

"No rope burns or signs of restraint," Wendy Jackson noted. "But a bruise on the left side of her neck."

"Which coincides with her fall after she expired, according to position she was found in," Petrovitch noted.

"And the cause of death was, what Mister Petrovich?" Officer Wendy inquired of Doctor Ivan, refusing to acknowledge his professional affiliation.

"Non medical term is stroke. Or as those hiding humanity and dirty pasts behind clean white lab coats would pontificate to make themselves sound like they in control, hypoxia and caseous hemispheric edema, acute swelling in association cortex and limbic lobes. Hard working muscle between ears took lunch break. Grey and white matter in seat of consciousness turned into mindless mush smelling like ...." Petrovitch replied, halting his usual habit of trying to be expressive in mixed medicaleze and literary metaphor in the service of deflecting tragedy into something resembling conscience driven 'comedy'.

Petrovitch's attempts to be a scholar satirist and author of the first medical textbook written with humor, wit and literary artistry were not appreciated by his American audience. Once again, his learned smile was replied to by consternating frowns.

"Brain went bad, then bloody, fast. Gross exam of organs below neck, NSF," Petrovitch explained, in all seriousness, accompanied by emotional detachment that passed as 'professional demeanor' in his licenced humourless medical colleagues, and current bosses.

"And NSF means?" Jack asked.

"No significant findings," Carla translated to Jack, and Wendy.

"Yes," Jack said to the congregation. "But....My sister did have high blood pressure. I did too. Something we did to each other, or to ourselves, but..." He lowered his eyes, staring into empty space. Disallowing him to see Carla grab the tox report, giving it to Jackson to read.

This time it was Doctor Ivan who placed his giant hand onto Jack's chest to prevent his fist from wacking the 'yeah, I thought so' smirk off Officer Jackson's face.

Fentanyl, ketamine, and a generous portion of dopamine agonists with a sprinkling of meth, and some other ingredients that haven't been declared illegal yet.", Jackson noted on the extra copy of the tox report that 'accidentally' fell from Petrovitch's pocket. "In the same proportions that I've seen in last three OD cases due to 'Europic', sometimes called Soma 340.. A drug that gives a break from misery in normal subjects who live in houses. A break from a life of humiliation from those who HAVE to sleep and wake up under the stars," she continued, with a rising of her cheeks and small smacking of tongue. "And the external and preliminary findings of the organs presents an interesting presentation of Euphoria intoxication, which could perhaps have happened if there was underlying kidney and liver disfunction in the subject."

"Ann isn't a subject or an n value or a guinea pig in a fucking case study!" Jack shot back, his fist clenched, his rising it prevented by Ivan's hand grasping his wrist. "She is or...was a human being."

"We know, Jack," Carla assured him. "But she was, well...living in the Jungle. As one of the homeless. To write a book about them that would prevent homelessness for everyone."

"And probably found out something about the Jungle that none of the residents wanted the world of the 'haves' to know," Jackson proposed. "Or something that they needed the world outside of the Jungle to know. But...maybe, Mister McMillian..."

"DOCTOR McMillian!" Jack spat back. "I have two Ph.D.s in Engineering! Unlike the bums, druggies and drunks in the Jungle who did this to my sister. Low lives who..."

"Also have Ph.D.s, some of them anyway," Wendy rebutted in a soft tone which hit harder because of the lack of volume in it. "But...DOCTOR McMillian, maybe your sister confided some of what she saw in the Jungle with her son."

"Who threw her out of the house he rented for her, because of the company she kept there, so Ann told me before she went undercover, or...because...hmmm....." Carla added.

"Or what?" Jack pressed.

“That we may find out from Tom. We have to see what he has to say,” Carla said,

“:Or what he doesn’t say,” Wendy added.

With that, Ann McMillian-Smith’s still shocked brother, perhaps jilted girlfriend and Cop she chronically evaded left the morgue for a ‘family and friends’ reunion.

#### CHAPTER 4

Upon arriving at their next destination, Jack, Sidney by his side, insisted that ‘the girls’ have lunch, on him, somewhere else. He gave Carla a fifty dollar bill, insisting that she buy lunch for Wendy. “Anything she wants,” he insisted. “While me and Sidney take care of some private needs of our own.”

“And you’ll clean up the shit that comes out of Sidney’s ass after you overfed him at Burger King?” Carla insisted.

“And the crap that comes out of my ass,” his reply. “And mouth,” he added, allowing his lips to slip into a smile which, though faked, did have enough sincerity to convince Carla of his good intentions. And was even good enough to convey to Officer Jackson that he wouldn’t get into, or cause, any trouble.

Maybe it had to do something with the natural balance of the color wheel, or maybe it was a sign of patriotism to match the four American flags being blown by the wind on top of the ‘Wood for Winners’ lumber store. Everything in sight, except wood and steel, was red, white or blue. Including the outfits worn by exhausted ‘associates’ whose ID tags displayed their first name only at the store. And whose shoes were more holes than leather. The sign outside boasted ‘the cheapest lumber in town’, though someone had painted ‘only over ‘cheapest,’ a ghost of that appended comment still lingering,

There was one question that found its way into Jack McMillian’s ever racing mind when he lay eyes on his nephew Tom’s second Grand Opening of yet another ‘Wood for Winners’ lumber store. “This is wood you’re selling not fucking gold bars!” Jack said to a five foot four, lightly bearded and very balding senior citizen as that elder ‘associate’ laid a stack of wood behind the store regarding the price of the poorly cut but abundantly high stack of two by four plywood. “Last time I was here, five hundred bucks would buy you enough wood to build a house for a family of four so they could get off the street. Now, it’s barely enough to build a fucking dog house,” he said, while Sidney barked an affirmation to his rage. “What’s the story here?”

"New management," the associate replied with downturned eyes, possessed by more depression than anger. He laid down another stack of the lumber, then tried to lift it up again to place it in its appropriate slot, the lumber falling on his foot. The old, life tired and arthritic before his time workman pushed Jack away as he tried to help him. Then pushed Jack away. "It's against the rules for customers to lift any lumber, Sir, legal rules," he related. "Can I help you with anything, Sir?" he asked with a forced smile.

"I'm a working man, like you, not a 'Sir'," Jack asserted.

"Of course, Sir," the reply, after which the old man took another load of wood into his shaking hands and laid it into its appropriate slots in the overpriced but abundant supply. of building materials.

"With these prices, and I surmise, your boss' monopoly on the price of wood, how is anyone going to be able to build any houses for their family or dog house for his favorite member of such?"

"Someone will," the old man replied, with the clarity of an economic science scholar, and the defeat in his voice of a wage slave. "Like at the clinic I used to work at. The price for a dog neuter, which costs only 15 dollars in overhead, goes from a hundred bucks that 10 out of 10 customers can afford, to a thousand dollar fee, which only one in ten humanoids owned by canine companions can afford. Eventually the customer with a plethora of cash who can easily afford to spend a grand on converting his canine friend into a member of the third gender ambles into the establishment, with an air of cultural superiority that is far higher than his intellect or moral imperative in his fucking mentation," he continued masterfully incorporating Sheaksperian prose with economic fact infused by working man's rage. "The perhaps once idealistic practitioner of the veterinary arts, and sciences, who's now more concerned with 'work life balance' than serving the needs of less fortunate people does a tenth of the work relative to when the price of extracting testicular tissue from Fido, Spot or Prometheus was a hundred bucks, and still goes home with the same paycheck. Paid by a mega Corporation that bought his practice, and pays him a higher salary than he was making on his own, the catch being that he isn't the boss of his own shop anymore. The result being..."

"...The rich get richer, and the poor get more broke," Jack interjected.

"And have to be content to live in dog houses, or structures with walls and roofs such as these," the scholar-schlep said, picking up flattened cardboard boxes. "Which...hmm..." he continued. "If made waterproof on the outside can maybe provide some insulation from the cold and heat on the inside," he speculated.



"Which you will be able to road test in the Jungle or on the streets in some OTHER town very soon," a 20 something boss in a MAGA hat bearing an American flag in the lapel of his spotless sport coat shot in as he appeared in front of the worker. "If you keep talking that Socialist, Bernie Sanders is God, Jesus and Buddha all wrapped into one crap around here, to customers who---"

"Was asking him a question, Tom," Jack informed his nephew. "About the price of lumber and..."

"---How my crusader mother wants me to lower the prices that cuts into my hard earned profits!" Tom barked back. "Or hire more people from the Jungle so they can sneak their homeless buddies into my warehouse at night and rob me blind! Or build houses for refugees who are a drain on our health care system AND economy, who SAY they're here because they'll be killed or worse in their own shitpile countries when hard working Americans like ME are keeping this country safe. To which Mom, who loves the world more than she gave a shit about me, or you, who are family would say, again,---"

"---Nothing," Jack softly shot back into Tom's beet red very White face. "Unless you can talk to the dead. Or hire someone to translate what the dead and dying have to say to YOU."

"Huh?" Tom blurted out.

"Yeah," Jack replied after an angry sigh. "'Huh'. The new North American battle cry which..."

"Which what?" Tom inquired, coming back to something resembling a reasoning and caring human.

"That man I was talking to. Lawrence, as I recall the name on his ID tag," Jack said. "About the Jungle. And other things. Where did he go?"

"EX- professor 'Larry' ...who knows his place," Tom said, pointing towards a new shipment of lumber coming in, the demoted Scholar taking up double the loads of cement bags that workers half his age were assigned to move. "And this is MY place. Paid for by---"

"Your mother, Mister Smith," Officer Jackson informed Tom, moving in between angry Uncle and yet to be questioned Nephew.

"It's Mister Defoe, Officer," Tom spat back. "And what happens between my mother and me is, with respect for your badge and taking into account that my taxes pay your salary, is our business."

"Yours right now," Carla interjected, handing him an envelope. "She's dead."

"When?" Tom asked, his angry red face turning into a shocky shade of pale.

"Murdered, we think," Jackson said. "Three days ago."

"Why?" Tom inquired.

"A question I'd ask you after you hung up on me when I called from the ER to try tell you about it!" Carla blasted at him.

"I was busy!" Tom blurted out, with a studder. "I didn't know who was calling me. And I got these prank calls from wackos lately who...." He took in a deep breath., then several shallow ones.

"We're sorry you had to find out this way, Tom," Carla said, moving her arm towards his shaking shoulder. Which was pushed away. After which Tom shot back, "I told her to not go into the Jungle! But she wouldn't listen! She had to continue her fucking 'investigation'."

"Her investigation into what, Tom, Mister DeFoe?" Officer Jackson inquired, more as Wendy than a Police Officer.

"Eh....I don't..eh know," Tom said, the words and concern behind them reaching something human inside his inhuman persona that he seemed to like, or perhaps need. "I think...that..."

"You think what, Tom?" Carla asked, gently.

Tom remained silent for 5 seconds that seemed like as many hours. He then turned around, facing the trio as if they were all his accusers. "I had NOTHING to do with it!" he blasted out, in desperation. "And it's YOUR job to find out who killed her and why and...." Again, silence overtook Tom, as he faced he lowered his head. Perhaps to hide what he was really feeling, or thinking, to himself, to his dead mother's ghost or the trio who visited him with the bad news. Which perhaps was welcomed news from his perspective. The latter suggested by his next inquiry. "Did she leave a Will, or anything else?" he asked.

"We'll find out and get back to you on that," Wendy, the least emotionally affected by Ann's passing said before anything unproductive could be voiced.

## CHAPTER 5

Ann MacMillian's one room trailer, laboratory and domicile featured a collection of paintings, novels and unpublished investigative non-fiction manuscripts that only those with hearts AND brains could connect to, or understand. The pictures on the wall, amidst weather beaten wall paper, were those of the four dogs she had outlived, her two horses, Tom up till the age of 13, Jack at his graduation from Cornell, and of course Al Einstein. The latter was the one that said 'Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds.' Her bed was covered with clothing, half of which was unwashed. Books by Steinbeck, Dostoyevsky, Chekov, Tolstoy, Mark Twain and Norman Mailer took dominance over volumes written in the current century on her unevenly constructed bookshelves.

Finally, after searching through all of her notes on pads, napkins and manuscripts on the files in her computer for her book about the Jungle, the title reading "The Why and How's of Homelessness", Jack found Ann's Will.

Believing in honor rather than law, Ann hand wrote her will, having two signatures on it that. "It's legal enough, since I know the people who she got as witnesses, and it is in her handwriting," Carla said to Jack while looking over the crumpled document retrieved from an old Express Delivery Envelope reading, in Latin 'When the music's over' next to a picture of Jim Morrison. Whose likeness, wisdom and twisted yet deep sense of morality she could never find in a male or female lover. "And depending on the judge of course," Carla continued.. "And assuming you, and Tom, or your alter egos don't have any arguments, it's straight forward. You, Jack, get Sidney, and you and Tom split all the rest of her personal assets 'which you won't have a problem with since both of you value different things and will distribute them appropriately'," she read.

Jack worked his way through the debris covered floor towards Carla for a closer look at the document himself. "Jack gets my literary and artistic works, Tom gets none of them" he read. "Unless Tom can make money getting them distributed of course, which as we know, is necessary today to spread what you have to say to others since no one values books that are free anymore" Jack then turned to Carla. "But, Ann says me and Tom have to work together because 'half of his genetics are his shithead father's and half of it isn't. Which is why I hope that you, Jack, who built so many houses for people in need overseas, can convince Tom that doing the same here will not only make him rich, but fulfilled and, yes, 'happy', though Compassionately Blissful would be preferred'," he continued.

"Some lawyers would say she was not in sound mind when she wrote that," Carla suggested.

"But the life insurance policy she left, is legal, and binding" Officer Jackson interjected as she walked into the room. "Found it in a box of rice in the kitchen," she said, holding it up.

"Payable to who?" Jack inquired. "I fucking hope it was to a charity she believed in and trusted. And not to the college she went to in Jersey to keep her music, books and paintings on display. They'll just

take the money and build a fucking parking lot. Leave it to Unicef and maybe five percent goes to feeding bread and rice and milk to hungry kids overseas and the rest to pay for oyster and steak dinners at the administrative offices in Manhattan. I hope that she figured that she shouldn't trust the collective beast we call humanity"

"She did," Jackson said. "She left it to...yeah, maybe her favorite and most unreliable charity....You and Tom. To spend on whatever BOTH of you 'gentlemen' agree on."

The sneer on Jackson's face when giving voice to 'gentlemen' clearly indicated that she didn't trust the only blood family left on this side of the veil. An observation that, when Jack considered it, was all too accurate. Particularly with regard to himself. Jack needed to make big changes in the world for the sake of posterity at the cost of being sometimes less than honorable and certainly less than 'loving' with regard to family. Family was of course defined by those who, by marriage or birth, were assigned to him to give special attention, concern and consideration. Yes, Jack considered universal compassion (giving a shit about the world) more important than selective compassion (fucking over the world to serve only 'your own people'). He told himself that he serves 'the Deity and Collective' within each 'one to one' interaction.

But maybe he was lying to himself. Certainly what was ahead of him would be an educational experience, his mentor in that special 'independent study' being Ann's ghost. He could feel her looking at him face to face no matter how many times he turned around, or where he fled to. That ghost had a nasty and colorful habit of waiting for him behind every door he locked behind him. Asking him to continue her work to serve the homeless, and to find out who killed her, making him or her pay, the price for such. No matter who it was, or how deeply Jack had feelings for him, or her.

## CHAPTER 5

There was something about Ann's Will that seemed off relative to the note on Sydney saying that if anything happens to her, to contact Jack and ONLY Jack.

"Ann didn't write this note, saying to contact me," he said.

"How did you know?" Carla asked.

"The handwriting is different than everything else in here," he said of the notes scattered around her 'office'. A small room in a trailer outside of town with crumbled papers in the waste basket that outnumbered the sheets on top of a second hand bridge table converted into a desk. "She considers herself a Hemmingway, maybe?"

“Huh?” Carla said, but with an Educated energy behind that ‘battlecry’.

“I heard that Ernest, when he was trying to live up to his first name, wrote more than one passage in I think it was *The Sun Also Rises*, 37 times before he got the first part of that critical chapter right,” Jack recalled. “Or so said my literature teacher in the courses I had to take when getting my Engineering degree to be ‘well rounded’. Of course, maybe was trying to tell me, like Ann did, that it’s easier to construct a building than it is to write a song, novel or poem about what happens, or should happen inside of it, when....”

“---So, who wrote this note, signing your sister’s name?” Carla interjected, interrupting Jack in the middle of yet another of the memories he had avoided or considered irrelevant when his sister was alive. But they would have to be faced now head on so he could have appropriate conversations with her in his ongoing nightmares, or in the afterlife..

## CHAPTER 6

It was a straight forward plan. Go into the Jungle and ask every resident in that roofless, toilet-lacking, lawless and cash poor collection of tent dwellers about what Ann McMillian was doing there and what was done to her. “What’s wrong, Carla?” Jack asked his co-investigator Carla after getting nothing from the twentieth homeless person in the Jungle regarding who Ann had made an enemy of. “I’m dressed down for the occasion like you told me too,” he said, feeling the scunge on the tattered shirt and pants, along with the hole ridden soles of the mismatched Salvation Army shoes. Smelling worse than the garbage dumps outside of the camp, and brushing his two day beard. “I give these people ten, twenty, then fifty bucks that I said, as you suggested, was from a drug deal or a wallet lifted from a drunk Long Island Cornell student. And they tell me nothing about who my sister pissed off here, or in town. Then I offered them food, that I said I stole from just as the owners of the four star eateries threw into the dumpster, then beer, then dope. Then a promise that I’d get them housed in a new building development on the other side of town to be built with my rich brother’s building supplies.”

“Which Officer Jackson said was not doable now because of the new zoning laws laid down by the City Council of Yuppoid ‘not in my neighborhoods’ shithheads, including faculty who are in the recently overfunded ‘Urban Revitalization Agenda’,” Carla replied.

“Which I also told them! So what am I doing wrong? I built homeless communities in war zones on three continents and with far less angry faces,” Jack countered, taking in small breaths so he couldn’t smell Carla’s ‘outside people’ cologne. “What am I not giving them?”

"Respect," her reply. "Therapists who haven't been addicts make horrible drug addiction councillors, no matter how much reading they do. And listening. WITHOUT the superior attitude you cop when you're with drug addicts while they're stoned or alchies when they're finally having a happy buzz."

"Yeah, I know," Bill conceded, recalling one of the many reasons him and Carla were a desired but temporary item three careers and 30 years ago. "And girlfriends who do...indulge in substances that enable them to have fun...and be happy. Which, yeah, I know, I never really experienced, or trusted. But in my defense of treating alchies, dopers and people who somehow survive well below the poverty line, I..."

"Mahatma Jack," Carla interjected, stopping Jack from yet another 'internal investigation' which was more like indulgence in self-justification of offenses and weaknesses he was quite guilty of. "Did you notice one thing they all did when you asked about your sister?"

"Looking downward in shame, like she was a 'good scout' who they miss, and couldn't help?" he inquired.

"No," Carla replied. "It was where they looked for a few seconds after lifting their heads up," She pointed to a tent in the middle of the jungle, that was elevated above the ground, the 'floor' made of wooden crate planks used to keep hay bails from laying on the ground. The blue canvas bearing a Buffalo Bills NFL logo of the dwelling was intact, free of graffiti and slashes, clean and, as Jack detected when approaching it, reeked of 'new canvas' chemicals. Clearly this dwelling was owned by a 'part time' camper rather than a full time 'outside' person. "Rich Williamson," Carla said regarding the inhabitant of the elevated tent "The 'Mayor' of the Jungle. Elected by a show of the most well armed hands. Who---"

"---My sister Ann would have had a problem with?" Jack interjected, a volcano of anger about to burst open inside of his shaking chest into his mouth, or a hand he held as a fist as he pulled on the tent canvas. "Hey Mister Mayor!" he yelled into the dwelling. "We have to talk about..."

"---Who you are, and what the fuck you're doing here?" a man a foot taller and twice as strong as Jack barked, pulling him away from the triple tied tent flap before he could open it. "State your business, Sir," he demanded of Jack, grabbing hold of the collar of his partially torn shirt, ripping it to shreds. Behind him stood a squad of plain clothes 'deputies', identified by badges obtained from 'toys are us' and others fashioned from pieces of aluminum foil. They were armed with rusty crowbars, blood stained baseball bats and walking sticks as well as determined eyes.

"I'm here to---" Jack pushed out of his nearly closed off throat.

"Do research for a play he's writing," Carla interjected, placing her hand over his yapper. "And acting in," she continued. "And a book about..."

"Someone you don't know!" the absent Mayor's 'sheriff' said though his smelly but well trimmed three inch long 'John Brown vintage' beard, releasing the grip on Jack's throat. "And you'll stop wanting to know. And...."

"Carla, is that you?" one of the deputies called out, in a woman's voice. From a dirt covered mouth and face which seemed more male than female.

"Maddy? Is that YOU?" Carla replied, recognizing the woman. "Why are you here?" she gasped.

"Why's the sky blue?" the apparently once house and full mouth of teeth owning woman slurred out through a mouth containing more holes above her gums than appendages used to chew food. "Why does a bear shit in the woods? Why does the scum of the earth become big shot rulers of the world? Why do 90 percent of elections get won by a 'landslide' of 51 to 49 percent? Why does a Gallus Domesticus cross the road to get the other side when...when...when the food in the garbage dump turns into maggots and maggots turn into caterpillars that turn into ostrich eggs and fried eyes with green eggs and spam, blam, bam.... damn it! Damn them...Damn me..." The seemingly once too brilliant for her own good scholar who was prepared to use her broken baseball bat to wack him in the belly in defense of her 'leader' instantly turned into a self hating 'hurting unit' wacked her needle track covered left leg repeatedly, with the determination of a 16<sup>th</sup> century exorcist to beat the demon out of a medieval witch.

Jack's focus on finding out what happened to his sister turned to trying to figure out how Professor Madeline Garibaldi, the most intelligent, caring and emotionally balanced 'just say no to all recreational substances' teacher who had the misfortune of teaching him English Composition and Literature in the AP class at Ithaca High School, had turned into a self hating junkie. Now bent on destroying the demons inside of her at the cost of her own survival. Carla's attempts to prevent 'Professor Maddy' from beating her own thin leg into a putrid stump were prevented by two of her buds standing in front of Carla, beating their sticks in their hands in the manner of the Patrol Cops who 'requested' they vacate a dumpster behind a food store or alley in town where they sought protection from a late night cold wind. Meanwhile, the most feminine looking 'deputy' hugged Maddy, talking her down from another round of self destruction in a very male voice.

"So," the 'Sheriff' demanded of Jack. "What business do you have with Mayor Rich? Are you a Cop? And if you are, you gotta tell me. That's the law here in our country, and in yours."

"I'm not a Cop," Jack stated, wishing that he was one, with access to back up his partner Carla could call in. Anticipating Carla getting back into the conversation, he put his hand over her mouth, which was promptly bitten. "I'm here to find out what happened to my sister," Jack pushed out of his constricted throat, doing his best to not show how painful Carla's teeth were digging into his fingers. "Ann MacMillian-Smith...who was last seen here before she was killed...."

“Or maybe just died?” the ‘Sheriff’ offered. “It happens a lot around here. And doesn’t get noticed. Especially by those who don’t appreciate Mayor Rich, who isn’t here now, and who was re-elected a month ago! Democratically!”

“It’s not how democratic the vote is, but who counts the ballots,” Jack recalled from ‘Uncle Joe Stalin’, but didn’t give voice to. Clearly, the secrets about how things worked, or didn’t work, in the Jungle were connected to ‘Mayor Rich’. A well liked and feared leader who (according to the history books he had been assigned to read while growing up in America), like ‘Uncle Joe’ maybe did think he was God, taking care of his people after the Heavenly Father up in the sky decided to shut himself off from his most beloved creation. Or who decided to piss down on them. But one thing was sure. Rich Williamson didn’t want to be seen right now. Or perhaps he really was ‘out on a business trip’. Where and what that trip was about being a key to finding out why and how Ann MacMillian had died. And how and why Professor Maddy, and the other demoted from respectable life Maddy’s and Mathews in the Jungle, were dying. Or perhaps finding another way to live without money, housing or respectability from the establishment.

## CHAPTER 7

It was basic logic to go to Detective Wendy Jackson to find out where Mayor Rich lived when he was away from his constituents. Jackson was cursed and blessed with the ability to know secrets about people that they were hiding from not only the world, but themselves. Perhaps that was why she never married. Her explorations into the world to find someone who she could get along with, or whose company she could even stand for more than an hour at a time, wound up leaving living with the company she hated most--- herself. Maybe such was because she had a ‘functional’ value system. Whatever didn’t destroy the world, or the town she was in charge of protecting from itself, would make said world and town stronger, and more interesting. But ‘interesting’ was not what Jack McMillian felt after asking her at her private office as to the off-jungle address for Rich Williamson.

“I can give you many addresses,” Wendy said while seated with her back against the wall at the Dunkin Donut shop table that was always reserved for her whenever she stopped in for a late night coffee to keep her mind from going to sleep. And to keep the unfortunately necessary appendage below her neck fueled with three sugar-crammed crullers and a ‘hold the lettuce and throw on any extra raw red meat you have on hand’ sub. She wrote those addressed down on a napkin, handing it to Jack, avoiding eye contact with Carla. “For your eyes only, Jack,” she said. “I don’t want you putting the most nosey and medically best nurse in the ER AND OR in danger.”

“Thank you,” Jack said to Wendy. “I appreciate---”



“----Your sending both of us on a wild Canadian goose chase,” Carla noted, grabbing hold of the addresses and speed reading their location “This would put Mayor Rich’s legal residence in the river in Albany, three stories above the penthouse behind the Eastmann building in downtown Rochester and in the middle of the lake in Syracuse. Why don’t you want us to find the, so his constituents said, freely elected godfather of the Jungle to not be found?”

“He....serves a purpose by not being found,” Wendy explained to Carla. “He keeps what’s in the jungle .....contained.”

“As the most honorable gangster in town?” Carla put forth. “I see what the dope he distributes does to homeless patients who wind up in the ER.”

“And I see what kind of deaths by mutilation, hanging, stabbing, shooting, badly faked suicide ODs and inflicted diseases happened before he took over!” Wendy blasted back. “And the starvation, exposure to August triple digit temperatures and subzero winds in January that made ‘culling the defective cattle in the wandering human herd’ so ‘effective’ for the comfortably housed people in town!” Wendy protested. “Rich Williamsons ‘private businesses’ keep the drug addicted residents of the jungle, who refused to go to rehab by the way, alive! There are those inside and outside the jungle who would call him a misunderstood Saint.”

“Or an ‘urban Emperor’ on top who knows that keeping people on the bottom a little hungry but not starving, prevents them from storming the castle and taking what they can, no matter who they trample over!” Carla shot back, hushing the conversation amongst the farmers from Interlaken about the latest failure of the Buffalo Bills to beat the Giants at table next to her. “And using the peasants he DOES feed to do his bidding against other Empires!” she blasted out again, hushing the banter from Long Island born and bred Kornwellis U students, and their more modestly clad professors, about whether the Barbie movie marked a step forward or backwards for women’s rights, and male humanoid dignity.

“Hypothesis,” Jack interjected before ALL of the muttering in the donut shop trying to pass itself off as a pastry emporium turned silent. “Saint Rick Williamson is a deluded crusader with inheritance money he had wisely invested was using it to keep his peasants fed so they wouldn’t die, or revolt?” Jack gave voice to. “But my sister, Ann McMillian, was going beyond ‘the Mayor’s’ agenda. Trying to feed them self respect along with food and second hand shelter, so they would figure out how to leave the Jungle, or if they couldn’t or didn’t want to do that, live an ‘outside’ life with dignity?” he yelled out, looking around the room to see who amongst the mixture of Red and Blue voters that populated this facility in Ithaca knew her, or about her. This time, getting the attention of ALL of the diners at the table, and the staff behind the counter.

"To....Ann," a generously white bearded redneck proudly wearing a US Marine CAT hat covering a crown of hairless scalp said, raising his black coffee cup in a toast.

"Who will be missed by ALL of us!," came from one of the 'born again' Hippie professors sporting a tuft of purple hair that made her thinning yet still long white mane look even more 'period' said, raising her glass of herbal tea, clinking her cup with the farmer with a MAGA button on his plaid coat, proudly displaying her own 'I'm still with Bernie' button on her weather worn jean jacket. "Very much including you, after you read the books she wrote which now, after her death, are finally fucking getting published!" she informed her Millennial students, giving them the 'this is going to be on the exam next month and in your life next year after you graduate into the 'real' world, so better listen' stare. All three of them raised their lattes' in what emerged into a toast everyone gave their neighbor.

"Yes," Officer Jackson added, lifting up her coffee up. "To Ann McMillian! Who shall be....avenged!" she declared.

"Honored," the feminist Professor pledged.

"Prayed for," her agriculturally-oriented male right wing political adversary added.

"And studied. Her work continued," one of the male Millennial students, the one wearing the biggest 'Bernie for Philosopher King of the world' button and a cornucopia of WOKE agenda decal, threw in. Jack noted in his yet to be able to grow a real beard face, a soon to emerge oppressive snotty gatekeeper scheming of a king who was already planning how to squash any revolutionary voice that threatened his ascent up the economic, political, social and artistic ladder. One of those "born to dominate others, 'for their own good, of course'" chronically 'too cool to sweat' 'in crowd kids' who Ann claimed ruined the Revolution of the late 60s, and predicted would pop up half a century later. A 'suit' who deceived so many others because he didn't wear a tie, or even a shirt with a collar on it, but who was a master at sedating people into obedience, subservience and dull out disease. The latter entity being that which makes you boring, lifeless, procedural, humorless and expression-less. In Ann's words, "Made for NPR non-jarring, pleasant non-offensive, and 'competitively sensitive'."

Jack reflected on his relationship with his sister, and the different routes they took. That sojourn between his ears brought him to the time when their parents were both came down simultaneously with dementia of the mind and degeneration of the limbs of below the neck. Jack, the technical genius of the family, had already been 'away' in the world, accumulating doctorates in Engineering like hot, horny, gold digger cheerleaders at home were accumulating high school, college and professional quarterbacks as husbands, dumping each of them as they acquired head or debilitating body injuries. The Calling of going out into the world to prove, use or perhaps show off his skills as a geologist and engineer had dominated his life. Eventually, he became one of those people who were afraid to come home. While

Ann, truth be told, was afraid to leave the nest, as all of her adventures were between the ears. Until, as he recently found out, a few years ago when she did get out into the real world that had become all too real.

Reality hit hard when, after the toasting of Ann's memory was done, the Red and Blue voters got back to gossiping about each other. Wendy Jackson leaned in towards Jack and Carla. "So, what makes you amateur sleuths think that finding Rick Williams will lead to figuring out the how and why behind the death of your sister." She directed a laser gaze to and into Carla. "And your on and mostly off again 'friend'."

Jack turned to Carla, wanting and demanding an answer to Officer Jackson's observation, and accusation.

"Mayor Rich may know something about," Carla interjected, holding back a plethora of emotions regarding Ann including love, hate, envy and anger, but not a tinge of indifference. "A hunch, given what every full time resident of the Jungle told us with their eyes, and didn't say with their mouths."

"Which...I suppose is correct, this time," Wendy said. After which she wrote down another address on a napkin, allowing Jack and Carla to see but not touch it. "I didn't say anything to either of you," she said, after which she tore up the napkin. "And if Mayor Rick asks you how you found him....you hired a psychic who actually DOES have connections with the 'beyond world', and the very real 'underworld'."

There was one question Jack still had for Officer Jackson, which Carla gave voice to. "Why did you try to fuck us around with these false addresses?" she inquired.

"Was it a test?" Jack put forth. "To see how worthy we are of being on this case?"

"Yes, and no," Jackson's reply, detached from any emotion except the protocol of efficiency. "But these games which we play."

"YOU play," Carla pressed. "Because....?"

"It makes life more...interesting," the reply, with no emotion behind it. None that Carla could read. And certainly that Jack could assess. Perhaps by design or, divine providence?

## CHAPTER 8

Rich Williamson's 'off campus' shack at 249 Pleasanton Road in Syracuse was a modest dwelling by the standards of the, by 'coincidence', all White or Asian neighborhood's standards. A two story house with tan and brown imitation brick siding, clashing with red curtains closing off half of the view of a living room. That pathologically pristine chamber was overloaded with supersized two white couches and a big screen tv on which there was a football game. Observing and becoming absorbed into the match was a single viewer, seeming to be two sizes too small for a gigantic easy chair. His back was turned as he watched football game with a half finished bottle of imported beer at his side. He toasted the screen as a small framed player in a blue Jersey evaded being tackled by three larger sized defensive backs in helmets bearing the likeness of unstoppable bison.

"Obviously a fan of the downstate New York City Giants rather than the Upstate Buffalo Bills, whose logo are plastered on his 'business office' in the Jungle," Jack noted as the first inconsistency of Mayor Rich. Who, according to the few homeless people who did open up about him, had a reputation of championing the citizens living in the 'sticks' of New York State above the overfed 'rats' living within the confines of the five boroughs of New York or their colonies of 'Vestchester' and 'Longisslanddtee'. Jack turned to Carla, who was motioning him to move his body and eyeline to the closed and locked door rather than the half opened curtains. "Wasn't Rich Williamson quoted in the Ithaca Herald articles you had gathered as calling New York City dwellers elitist, money hungry and money grubbing and money overloaded assholes who should succeed from New York State so they over invest themselves into bankruptcy and not bring hard working Upstaters into the muck of irreversible poverty and perversion?"

"You gauwklng in the window like that is not in keeping with who we're pretending to be here," Carla said, adjusting her calf length brown skirt, pulling her black turtle neck sweater up to the bottom of her chin. "We're supposed to be servants of the Lord, bringing good news to His lost sheep," she said from under a big haired black wig and, squinting her eyes behind the lenses of thickly rimmed 'geeks are us' glasses. "Brother John, have you memorized the script we're supposed to be promoting, and living," she continued, ramming a Jehovah's Witness pamphlet into Jack's hand.

Adjusting to the black suit, white shirt and plain brown tie on his chest, and feeling the tightness of the short haired brown wig on his head, and experiencing a chill on his freshly and completely shaved face, Jack gazed down at the 'subvoysive literashur' he, as an unrecognizable visitor, was supposed to be when interviewing Mayor Rich about events in the Jungle. "Do people really believe all this shit about a merciful God who's gonna save everyone who surrenders him or herself to him?" he commented regarding the 'Live with the Lord Literature.'

"Drug addicts do," Carla said, guiding Jack to the door. "The twelve step recovery programme only works on junkies and alchies who believe in Jesus."

"You mean who have replaced their addiction to being pushy, people abusing junkies to being deadbeat assholes in the service of themselves and Jesus," Jack countered.

"Amen to that, brother," Carla admitted. "But in the meantime...." She rang the bell. Then pushed an upright arch into her back, absorbed in a stance of attention Jack had observed only in military or 'wannabe military again- because they fucked up everything else' personnel overseas. He had also seen no shortage of military bearing in the private armies under the command of bosses who served civilian CEOs in companies which allowed, and encouraged, them to do what regular Army, Navy or Marine' personal were not legally allowed to do. He put such thoughts aside, though, noting that the single football watcher got up from his chair the moment the bell rung.

With each footstep Jack heard and felt in his gut, he self observed his plan of what questions to ask Rich Williamson about his sister become scattered into the winds of inexperience, apprehension and finally, terror. "Courage is doing what you have to do even though you're scared," he recalled from the days overseas when he found himself trying to negotiate on behalf of civilian refugees in his care with armed tribal leaders who wanted them to be dead, or 're-enlisted' in their ranks. "And effective thinking is what happens when you stop 'accepting your mental limitations and level of education'" he recalled regarding the times he had to find brains in his feet to lead the UN employees and first timer Peace Corp workers through the woods at night to safety. And the intelligence in his fingers when he had to apply his engineering skills regarding building houses, wells and latrines into manipulating torn apart flesh into something functional when there were no docs available in the hospitals he had built.

All of that came to mind, and soul, when Jack lowered his eyes as the dweller of the 800 thousand dollar suburban mini-mansion opened the door. "Doctor Jack? Professor McMillian? Is that you?" he heard from the man in front of him. Someone who he recognized, advancing himself into a hug of reunion.

"Achmed? Achmed Ackbas?" Jack exclaimed, accepting the embrace but giving nothing other than respectful acknowledgment to it, recognizing the leader of a once proud and powerful tribe in regions of what North Americans called 'Arabia' that changed hands and religions every six months in the wake of oil and other minerals having been discovered there. "What are YOU doing here?"

"House sitting," the brownish-white skinned man bearing a neatly trimmed now greying mustache, with a topknot that had receded into a thin mop of hair above it.. And some extra weight on his belly which was clearly visible under his 'Ithaca: Fourteen Sq Miles of Enlightenment Surrounded by Reality' sweatshirt. He seemed...shorter and weaker than Jack remembered him. And far more comfortable. Perhaps because he was in a two story house with running water from underground pipes and a toilet rather than in a shack with pipes running overground with a portable toilet outside to relieve himself of

diarrhea which had found its way into his people's water supply, and his own intestinal plumbing. "Come in!" Achmed said with the ease and pleasure of a mid-Western Santa Clause rather than the proud, defiant and heroic mannerism of a former city mayor and, for two months, provisional governor of one of the most populated and literate (with regard to the Koran as well as other books) provinces of what had once been Mesopotamia.

Carla was as anxious as Jack was confused as to the coincidence of seeing Achmed again. One which, perhaps 'the good Lord' had arranged, hopefully for a good reason. And as well by seeing the logo on enough building supplies in the large hallway to put walls on ten shacks, stamped 'Wood for Winners'. Lumber Store company owned, to the best of Jack's knowledge, by his by his nephew, Tom. Who had been 'delayed on business out of town' for his mother's funeral, for which he said he had made and paid for all of the arrangements.

For reasons he could not control, Jack's focus zoomed into situations of the past that had nothing to do with Mayor Rich, or his house-sitter Achmed as the latter led him and Carla towards the living room, humming the Star Spangled Banner with pride, and gratitude. Given the fact that a super-rich 'America First' dictator who put his own interests in front of any of the people he served, or hired to work for him, such was the last tune that Ann would allow to be played at her funeral. Jack's thoughts retreated to that event which happened yesterday in ways he never expected.

The event had been attended by Jack, Carla, Officer Jackson and her only canine child, Sidhartha, and three employees of the Newman Funeral Home as a matter of professional courtesy, for no extra charge. And, so Jack hoped, the ghost of Woody Guthrie, whose music was played during the eulogy delivered by Robert 'Baba' Lawrence, a Catholic-raised, Rochester born immigrant to Promethia whose quest to serve the Lord as a musician led him to convert to Judaism after his two idols, Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen, had turned full circle and adopted a variation of the faith of their parents they had run away from. Lawrence's adding Buddhism to the mix was inspired by George Harrison. It fit very well into working his way into the inner circles of a town that considered its 'native' population to only consist of those born there or imported by being hired as faculty at Cornell U or Ithaca College.

The mixture of Buddhist chants mixed in with verses from Bob Dylan which he sung far better than the composer who wrote them seemed to put Ann's spirit at ease at the funeral parlor. It remained in Jack's inner ears as well when he went to his hotel room. Jack could still hear her voice, no matter how hard he tried to get absorbed into the Silence or let his mind linger on any musical tune on the radio that would block it out. It brought about memories of the bad times spent with her when growing up, and worse ones when, she anyway, according to her, was all grown up. "We'll find out why your noble experiments ended the way they did," he addressed to Ann's spirit as it circled around every corner of the room. Carla nudged him, bringing him back to the present, and the land of the living. He knew now more than ever that the reasons for finding out who killed Ann and why seemed with each dialogue they had about it to be different than his.

Achmed led Jack and Carla to the living room in a house that reeked of lifelessness through hallways lined with nothing but white paint. But Jack's mind went back to pondering what didn't fit about his sister's 'ceremony of life'. He wondered why the funeral of such an admired rugged individualist such as Ann would be so underattended in a town that advertised itself as a community of individualists with open hearts and thinking brains. Independent Upstate New Yorkers who said they valued what you did, and who you are, rather than who you knew like the downstaters from the Big Crab Apple. "Tom must have fucked up the publicity," Jack mumbled softly regarding the lack of attendance of Ann's friends, and what was left of her family, at her funeral, addressing it to the ghost of his sister, who he still did not address by name.

"Or your nephew Tom sabotaged the funeral," Carla said, having heard Jack's thoughts converted into a mumble with better hearing than he remembered her as having. "Tom can't find out we were here," she said in a normal voice to Achmed and Jack.

"No problem," Achmed said, with an understanding smile. "Please, make yourselves comfortable, my friends while I prepare authentic Turkish coffee and a special desert," he said, extending an open hand towards the living room. After which he danced into the kitchen to deliver on that promise with the warmth of Mother Theresa and finesse of Martha Stewart. "Tom will never hear anything from me."

"I suppose that's up to as far as I can tell still hetero Achmed," Jack said to Carla as entered the living room at the request of their host. "Who is...."

"....Someone very different than who he was, a decade ago, last year or maybe even yesterday," Carla shot back, feeling the cushions on the couch before surrendering her ass to them.

"Like the rest of us," Jack added, very much including himself in that number. "And you too, Ann," he said to the ghost of his sister, addressing her by her name for the first time in recallable memory.

Before Jack could ask questions of Achmed about his present knowledge about Mayor Rich, the old-way before-his-time Turk referred the 'I was so much older then I'm younger than that now' engineer-geologist-cowboy to the past. "Jack, remember when's" flooded into the ethers of the living room with as much intensity as than the aroma of Baklava, Kunefe, Lukma and Tulumba from Achmed's old country homeland. "Jack remember whens" which included 'when you told the UN Refugee co-ordinator that the only thing he was qualified to do was to find the best way to OFFICIALLY overspend money on Quonset huts which would become pieces of mud in record time'. And when you told G. Harrold Wentworth, III, head foreign CEO of Americana Oil that 'clean drinking water and crude

petroleum mixing in the aquifer is bad for the oil business at home and relations with the countries here who so far haven't chosen to release the wrath of Allah on your Christian, Jewish and Atheist employees.' Along with of course, 'when you and my daughter Nala's eyes met and couldn't unlock which thankfully, for you, they did, so she could inflict herself on someone else as a wife'. And the time when 'you, Jack, provided me and my family with shelter after my province and country was turned into a war zone, which taught me that it was more important to be a good father and loving husband than a powerful or rich chieftain, king or sultan over a whole lot of other families who were, as you said and finally convinced me, my anything but loyal subjects.'

Jack recalled those memories of 'golden times' while building his career as an unofficial leader in the Peace Corp, self-taught world expert in building homes for the homeless, self-taught medical master with a scalpel, top end sharp shooter 'peacekeeper' against enemy combatants with a gun, official UN employee and secretly contracted geological advisor with a mixture of guilt, pride and regret. There were also memories that Achmed recalled with both accuracy, fondness and affection which Jack didn't want to recall or re-live. For every human being Achmed said Jack had saved during his three year tour of duty abroad nearly over nearly two decades ago, there were two or more who he couldn't. Not a week didn't go by when he saw their faces dying in front of his tearing eyes, heard the death rattles in their lungs and felt their lifeless bodies after another bombing or 'routine industrial accident' at the refugee camps near the oil fields as soon as got to 'sleep'. No matter how many medications the shrinks prescribed, the music he would have played in his bedroom or how tightly the arms of the woman he married and the ones he wished he had were wrapped around him while awake or in 'restful slumber'.

"But, thanks to Allah, and no thanks to YOUR 45<sup>th</sup> and 47th President, I found my way, through 'various means', to this country, making it my own and bringing to it my professional skills in many professions," Achmed finally said to Jack as he entered the living room, carting in a wheeled tray of aromatic coffee and mouth watering pastry. "One who graduated, before being forced by circumstance and my father's death to go into a career in politics, from biomedical universities overseas with higher grades and abilities than you over-privileged Americans and Canadians here," he continued with pride.

"Who can't get a job as an orderly sweeping floors here?" Carla offered, fishing for the lid keeping down the volcanic rage boiling under the smile the immigrant MD and ex-chieftain kept glued on his face, his upturned lips morphing into a bitter grimace, . "And has problems with the Immigration services?" she advanced. "Because of..."

"---Politics, and quotas," Jack offered. "Which me and Carla will do everything we can to put right!" he asserted, putting his hand on Achmed's hot, tense shoulder, giving Carla a 'this is something non-negotiable' stare.

"Yeah," Carla said, pulling back her lips, thinking of her own agendas and strategies regarding the investigation. "We'll do what we can, IF we can, to restore your medical career, and your family's welfare. Including Nala's."



"No need, my friends," Achmed said to Jack, and Carla, gazing at them as if they were, because of the unsaid tensions between them, the most natural of married couples. "Because Rich Williamson has already taken us in. And given me and my family, and even Nala something we never got from anyone else here."

"Respect?" Jack asked, recalling his past. "Which you always had from me, even though truth be told I didn't deserve it."

"No, no, no," Achmed replied between jovial chuckles which made him seem like a brown skin Arab-Kurdish Santa Clause. Or the Jewish version of such who never held it against the children of Nazi officials that their fathers had killed most of his European Hebrew brethren. "Purpose! That is what Mayor Rich has given me, and my family," he exclaimed with pride, his voice louder than even the most excited announcer on the still on football game. "Who still consider you, Jack, a 'second husband and father'," he went on. "But consider Uncle Rich as even more. Because he gave me an opportunity to be appreciated and useful, to people who need it most! Respect!"

Such is what Jack and Carla always wanted and needed as well. To be respected and, if possible, appreciated. But most importantly, to be useful to those who need it most. That 'each gives according to their abilities and takes according to his/her needs' mandate.

It took Carla to remind Jack that their purpose in coming to Mayor Rich's off campus' residence was to find out info about him and Jack's sister. "Ann McMillian," Carla asked Achmed. "What do you know about her?"

Achmed's bright eyes turned sad. Then angry. "A servant of the world who the good people in the world will miss, and the bad ones are glad to be rid of."

"The bad ones being?" Jack asked. But before Achmed could answer, the apparently overqualified-for-any-job-he-had-was-legally-allowed-to-do Turkish house sitter's cell phone rang. He answered in a language Jack didn't recognize, a look of extreme concern overtaking his happy and gracious face. "Excuse me, my friends," he said to Carla and Jack. "I have to take this. Please stay, enjoy my wife's AND MY home made Turkish delights and, if you are a fan of the Giants, the game." He retired to the kitchen, closing the door behind him.

The game Jack and Carla were requested to watch went into overtime, as did the phone call Achmed was involved with in a language neither of the forced to be effective unpaid sleuths understood. And in a voice Jack did not recognize. Finally, when the Bills pushed their way through the Red zone for a game winning touchdown, Jack couldn't ignore something in Achmed's voice that was very definable. "Worry, and fear," he said. "Two things that Achmed said he would rip out his tongue for if they ever found their way to his throat. I have to see what's going on."

"Because it may have something to do with your sister's unscheduled death while she was giving out pizzas, books and battery powered space heaters to the residents of the Jungle," Carla reminded him. "

"Yes, that too," Jack assured Carla, not letting on that old memories of Achmed and his family had infiltrated his recollections about those with familial relations based in blood. After which he pushed himself up onto his feet, feeling the pain of the tight fitting 'Jehovah Witness' shoes purchased from Walmart, rather than the Salvation Army. "We're here for Ann. To..." the rest of the words clogged his throat, tying more knots in his chest.

"Remember who she was," Carla added, laying her small hand on Jack's large shoulder.

"Yes, who she was to me," Jack assured Carla. "And whatever she was to you," he continued. Determined to open doors to secrets he was not entitled to but had to find out about to get to the bottom of the most important 'puzzle' he had ever taken on in his usually successful 'problem solving' life. "I remember that her and you were..."

"What we both have to remember now, Jack!" Carla spat back. "Is remember who Achmed is house-sitting for!" Carla said. "Who..." Carla's phone rang. "Another mass medical emergency at the hospital?" the nurse who was more dedicated and proficient than any doctor at the facility, except for the immigrant physician who still was not granted his licence due to 'language deficiencies', said, slipping into pragmatism mode. "I'm kind a busy now," she informed the caller. "But, go on..." She hid from Jack's range of hearing the details of that one way conversation. "OK, OK! Get the least savable 'expendable' patients to Doctor Igor, let the licenced docs get the glory of treating the easily treated patients." She hung up. "We gotta go," Carla said, slipping uneasily into her coat which was oversized in the belly and tight in the arms.

"Rumble in the Jungle or bad dope going around??" Jack asked, grabbing hold of the keys to the rental car.

“Both, and more, including an ‘industrial accident’ at the newly built, and pathetically few, shelters,” Carla’s reply. “Achmed, we have an emergency in town!” she yelled into the kitchen. “Time and place we can meet again?”

Still on the phone, occupied with emergency matters other than those who took on (as Ann AND Carla reminded Jack, FULL TIME casual jobs in town which didn’t pay enough to provide rent money in the ‘housed’ population of Ithaca) Achmed wrote down a time and place on the board. It wasn’t the name of the eatery or the time that drew Jack’s attention but the manner in which the sharpie put letters and numbers onto the memo board in a hurried manner. As if he had seen it before “His handwriting...it looks...”

“...Artistic,” Carla commented regarding the tear-drop appendages to the tops of capital letters and the quarter moon crescents at the base of each of the numbers. “Like the notes and memos he wrote back in the old country to his wife, his subordinates and maybe to you? If a fond that expressed more ‘interesting brand’ of love than immediately useful data?”

But before Jack could stare at it again, to see what the letters and numbers MEANT rather than what they said, Achmed quickly erased it. He waved goodbye to his football watching guests, still listening to chatterings at the other end of the phone. Which were broken up by loud sounds of gunshots or perhaps bigger explosions.

## CHAPTER 9

House of Zorba was the only restaurant in Macedonus that served authentic Greek food, and the only one in Upstate New York NOT owned by visible, or silent, partners with Hellenic ancestry. But, as chef-owner Achmed said to Jack and Carla when the moussaka, spanakopita and authentically overspiced with oregano souvlaki reached the table, “when our Turkish ancestors ruled Crete, they were masters in all matters over the crude Greeks who all thought they were related to Socrates and Hippocrates except for cooking, truth be told because...”

“....Greeks designed food that, if you make a mistake, is something even the dogs won’t eat. But if you follow the recipe on paper and in your heart, it is magnificent,” added a five foot nothing 60 something brown skinned woman behind Achmed. Though her face was more wrinkles than smooth skin, her hour glass shaped body retained the better part of her youth, its shape showing itself proudly as she put down several bowls of soup on the table.

“Yes, I know, “ Jack said helping himself to a spoonful of the orzo enriched cream soup/stew. “Your wife’s avolemino soup has never copsied,” he said to Achmed.

“Copsied?” Carla inquired, smelling the very different cream of chicken soup in her spoon before giving her tongue a chance to sample it.

“Sour, if you mix the cold lemon and hot broth too quickly, or slowly, or in the wrong proportions,” replied Elfesya, whose name meant ‘beautiful princess’. She still lived up to that handle, save for burn scars on her cheeks and left arm acquired when branded and temporarily ‘owned’ by her husband’s tribal enemy and their ‘international associates’. Jack caught a glimpse of her left leg under a loose knee length skirt adorned with Greek and Turkish designs. She was dragging it less than the last time he had seen her.

“Your leg, what happened?” Jack asked.

“Mind over matter, and some work done by the doctors and bioengineers here,” replied the co-owner of the restaurant and (by the way he gave Jack the ‘your eyes are supposed to lust after women of your own tribe rather than mine, my friend, please’ stare Achmed threw at Jack) owner of her husband’s heart. “And,” she continued, laying out her hand to a fourth diner at the table in the quarter filled eatery laden with art work on the walls. Each one of them, if they were authentic, were worth more than the entire establishment. “I had some medical help,” she said to Jack.

“Doctor AND ‘Mayor’ Rich?” Carla said regarding the man whose reputation she knew all too well, but whose face she was seeing for the first time.

“It’s easy for a rich man to give away wanted goods to less rich people legally. More difficult for a hard working middle class man to provide needed goods to poor people less legally,” the Mayor of the Jungle in Ithaca and, as Jack suspected, other Jungles elsewhere, replied. “And,” the man who had a larger nose, bigger gut, larger ears, less follically enriched head and shorter height than Jack expected continued. Rich Williamson filled wine glasses with full measure of vino for everyone else around the table before pouting out a quarter portion for himself. “The gap between the rich and the poor has to be bridged, starting with the poorest first,” he continued, with a restrained smile and ‘I’ll teach you how to deserve getting an A in my class if you allow me to’ professorial charm.

“And, Professor Williamson, is it not so that keeping the poor in their ‘natural element’ is less dangerous than moving them to other facilities, with other benefactors?” Carla proposed to Mayor Rich while Jack

cautiously looked up from his soup. "There is that matter of the industrial accident at the most recently built shelter for residents of the jungle, and the toxic mold that got into those who survived the falling ceilings and the defective pain relievers the resident medic had in his emergency kit?" she said regarding the emergency room crisis she had worked at prior to the meeting at the restaurant. Which Jack did not experience because Officer Jackson needed him at the Cop Shop to examine some suspicious legal papers regarding his sister's estate. "No one who found there way out of the Jungle to that shelter will ever be the same again, or trust ANY builder who promises them a liberation from being 'outside people'."

"Yes," the Mayor replied, with downturned eyes. "No thanks to 'partners' who cut corners on the construction," he said. "Public and private corrupt thieves who steal from others with a pen rather than outstretched grabbing fist, including," he continued, pointing his finger at Jack while throwing him a stare of pity mixed with anger. "Your nephew Tom! Who said he was contributing the services of his company to the less fortunate 'in memory of his mother' His mother who was talking them into leaving the Jungle, which was far worse before I set up shop there. Tom's mother didn't realize that most of the people in the Jungle can't handle life outside of the haven I set up for them there. But, as for Tom's mother, we wall all miss her."

"Miss as an ally in helping the unfortunate or an adversary taking them away from your "protective custody'?" Carla put forth. Before the Mayor's sorrowful smile could turn into an angry grimace she continued, "An adversary with regard to HOW to help the unfortunate that is, not IF we should help them of course."

Yes, Carla's was well experienced as an intelligent, and caring nurse amidst mediocre and uncaring doctors. She was an expert in angering bulls who had more pull in the herd than she did, then calming them down so that she could rescue more calves from being run over or gorged. It was one of the things Jack always admired in her, and adopted. Though when he himself tried to adapt that strategy to deal with aggressors at home he was accused of being a 'selfish coward who doesn't stand up for those he is supposed to care about' and when at work, so often considered a 'chicken fairy who was afraid of getting his nose bloody like a real man', according to his thankfully EXwife. But the Mayor did buy into the bait as Carla continued in her oscillating game of being good cop and bad cop, her face and tone not revealing which role she was playing at the time.

Though he thought himself, the master of the philosophical and political debate, Mayor Rick did release from his mouth words that, if used by a wise and clever prosecuting attorney, could put him in jail. Or at least fined to a point that he would have to call the Jungle, or the streets around it, his permanent and only residence. Such included:

"Soma 340,352 and 360, my own formulations designed by Ph.D.s who were smart enough to get published but not clever enough to keep their faculty or industry positions, is a medication that keeps

cold people warm in winter, cool in summer and content enough to have nearly empty stomachs so that they don't resort to stealing food from others or, as in other Jungles which don't make it to the newspapers or NPR, cannibalism'"

"When I confer the blessings of Jesus on t the Jungle 'residents' beats them not believing in anything. And besides, the placebo effect works 37 percent of the time."

"Some people can't handle the routine and confinement of walls, always looking at the clock and waiting for the landlord to collect rent every thirty days and bosses at work clocking them every day at 8 AM sharp."

"The agony AND ECSTASY of being addicted to substances you can't get legally is something that you can never appreciate unless you've experienced it personally."

"Some people get overwhelmed with 'reality' of living in town. And the censuses don't record how many kill themselves because of that."

And...finally, as revealed to Carla, leaning in so close to her face that she could choke on his rancid breath....

"Your 'friend' Ann was not who you thought, or think, she was.. She did a lot of bad things thinking she was doing good things. And her blood pressure was sky high. And she had health AND addition problems that made her accidental death inevitable."

When Carla pointed out that a private autopsy by a qualified doc deemed her death as murder, Mayor Rich replied, "Not according to those who are legally qualified and sanctioned, including these people," He presented her a document. "Who signed this document."

Carla and, by pushing his way in, Jack, took note of the signatures. The names of most of them had more letters of verification after their surnames than in those names. Some of those 'citizen letters' the duo recognized, some they didn't. But there was one signed and notarized name which did not have any letters after it.

"Yes, Seargent Wendy Jackson," Rich Williamson said. "Who is now.."

" . a Lieutenant?" Jack noted, but didn't give voice to.

Before Carla could blast out a plethora of angry accusations, and Jack could put forth another round of questions based in logic rather than primal emotion, Elfesya, came to the table of, with the exception of her husband's plates, uneaten food with breadsticks and dip which had an oddly-appealing aroma to it.

“What’s this, Elfesya?” Jack inquired of the woman who, in times of old and when drunk, yearned to be with him. In ways that her loving husband couldn’t or wouldn’t be.

“Maskharfet” Achmed interjected with a wide smile, attempting to convert the clenched fingers under the table of his guests from becoming deadly fists.

“What?” Carla asked.

“Yes, what?” Rich added.

“A...delicate dip made with oregano, basil, butter and legal herbs which are pleasing to any palate, or people of any political persuasion,” Jack said, covering the tip of his breadstick into the dip, then allowing it to enter into his mouth, then churning gut. “Yes, Maskheartfat semi” he said with a smile on his mouth, knowing that it meant ‘toxic bullshit’ in Farci. As Achmed showed Jack and only Jack a finger pointing to the autopsy document then to Rich.

## CHAPTER 10

In her younger and (according to her parents anyway) happier years, Ann McMillian constantly criticized her brother Jack for making more messes than cleaning them up. As she reached and went beyond the ideal age for bearing children herself, she had become someone who was more focused on unfinished manuscripts and legal affairs on every top of every elevated surface, including the stove. But when it came to Sidney, the canine’s eating area and the cabinets above them were spotless.

“Sidney,” Jack said to the growling hound as the dog backed up into a corner, hiding under a couch while Jack withdrew a jar from the front of the medical cabinet. “I have my orders and you have your needs,” he continued, noting the instructions in big bold Times Roman red font on it. “Twice every day, whether Sidney wants it or not. And if he tries to bite you, yes, you have permission to bite him back’ it read beneath the six syllable name which had no reference to any terminology in contemporary ‘pharmacologicaleze” Jack knew. He drew up two cc’s of foul smelling liquid into the last remaining non-chewed up fresh syringes. “We do what we can to keep you healthy,” he informed to the 12 year old Lab cross who, in human years, was as old as Jack and her most probably murdered owner. “You keep us Alive, big A, in ways we only notice when you’re gone,” he continued. “And you will be gone to the other side of the veil if don’t take your medicine, please! And if you are one of those creatures, like me, who go through life because you have to rather than want to....Like, well....”

Sidney could feel Jack thinking about his sister. The hound diverted his attention from his new caretaker, and ward, gazing at the urn containing Ann's ashes on the mantel over the illegal fireplace. Above it were pictures of himself and Ann as teenage brats, young adult experimenters and middle aged old before their time old farts. The smile on Ann was real and glowing. A variety of forced 'happy' expressions were plastered on Jack's 'I really need to be somewhere else' face.

The 'acceptance' stage of the grief process had set into Jack, catapulting him into action with enough anger left over to make that action effective. The jet black canine with the warm brown eyes limped over to Jack as quickly as he could to Jack on his three good legs. Sidney leaned on Jack, opening his mouth, inviting Jack to be an administrator of good health. Or the recipient of a 'love bite' from Sidney that, truth be told, Jack was afraid could break through his thin very human skin.

After ingesting the putrid medicine Jack squirted into his mouth, Sidney looked at the wedding picture of Ann with her ex-husband. The latter's likeness had a large X over it, with a poison sign below it. "Yeah," Jack said, offering Sidney a Nathan's hot dog, one of those dollar store delicacies obtainable only in American cities where there were real Synagogues, as a reward for swallowing Ann's unnamed herbalist's 'special formula' medications. "You deserve this one, and more," he said, retrieving a second hot dog for the hound. "For keeping my sister from getting killed by her 'dream musician' husband Russell. Who, so SHE claimed anyway, turned from being a loving angel into a sadistic demon, when he started playing Satanic music so his band could become popular instead of just 'enlightened'."

While Jack vicariously enjoyed the taste of the third Nathan's hog dog going down Sidney's gullet, he looked around him at dwelling that he, by choice, chose to stay at. Despite the fact that it made the grieving process more painful than necessary, or maybe because it did. The sight of Sidney's collar still bearing his cell number brought back the auditory memory of Carla telling him about his caretaker's demise on the note that was dictated to him word for word. "If anything happens to me, my brother Jack is the first to be notified. For reasons only he knows, God Bless and Help Him.: Jack heard within his head as he read the note, yet again. Louder than anything that could come in from his ears. And in Carla's voice.

Yes, Carla, whose relationship with Ann was clearly something different than he had been told. With no clue as to Ann's side of the many 'stories' between Jack's former lover and dead sister in said sister's diary. Or, as he recalled from a long sleepless night of speed reading, the three latest yet to be published novels laying on the tables, with defective drafts in the four overloaded waste baskets. With passages typed out in French, the only language the multi-lingual Jack could never wrap his mind around. Despite his having worked in Canada and being surrounded by boxes of cereal and technical manuals with English and French. Perhaps, he thought, it was because the language the cultured Normans inflicted on the illiterate Old English Saxons in 1066 Britain was too 'musical'. Or that French was one of those languages where what you see is NOT what you say.



“So,” Jack said as he looked at the urn, finally giving in to the suggestion he had told so many refugees overseas who were survivors of natural, and man-made, disasters that took the lives of friends and family. “We’re supposed to have a talk. Because you are, or were more intelligent than me. And as we both know, or at least I do, if you think about an intelligent person at the other end of a conversation before you open your yap, when the words DO come out, they are a lot wiser, smarter and more creative than they would have been if you were talking to the wall. Or a mirror. Or a...less intelligent life form?” he continued, glancing at Sidney. He felt more wisdom and painful insights coming out of his cranial vault than warmth from the hound’s big brown, and thankfully not too cataract afflicted, eyes. “Yeah, maybe you can shed some light on all of this?” he asked Sidney, beginning one of those conversations he had in words, thoughts and ‘looks’ with Festus. His mule who was, so he was told anyway, enjoying some ‘non-human’ time with a neighbor’s equine herd in Colorado.

The thoughts went through Jack’s brain, mind, then soul. Along with many unanswered questions. Such as why Carla had to put going to do two shifts as head ER nurse at Syracuse Medical rather than ruling the emergency room from a low ranking position at Promethia General. Why Officer Wendy Jackson decided that Ann’s death was due to biological disease rather than the deadly hand of man, or woman. The real reasons why Ann’s only son Tom, and his demon sperm donor husband, didn’t show up at the funeral. And why Achmed greeted Jack and Carla at ‘Godfather Rich’s’ house.

As for why Mayor Rich Williamson was who he was....that was obvious. All too obvious. According to Achmed, his wife, and everyone’s non-spoken ocular commentary when asked, Rich Williamson was one of those men who were more clever than wise. A so called ‘necessary evil and corruption’ in a world where certain things had to be done illegally so that what was morally sound, and required, could be done. So the script for the drama that was ‘Ithacan Jungle Rot’ seemed to be becoming. A work in progress that had to be stopped, or at least figured out BEFORE the end credits. “Yeah,” Jack said to the jar containing Ann’s ashes, allowing himself to be deluded into thinking that she was still hiding out in. “Achmed said that Mayor Rich and the investigation he squirmed himself into was toxic bullshit. And, because he is mysteriously out of town now, along with his family, time for me to figure out what kind of toxin, or bullshit,” he said to his physically departed but still present sister. “Because, as you said, and still believed in even after you gave up believing in Santa, the Easter Bunny and maybe Jesus, ‘nature never gives you a problem without a solution.’”

As for what that solution was, Jack’s eye caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror visible though an open closet. Rummaging through the mess on the floor Ann had made while she lived here and Jack amplified in the short time he was there, he worked his way to that ‘magic glass’ which allowed and required you to look into your own soul. Upon taking the mirror down, his eyes were taken hostage by a ‘kiddy-pirate’ treasure chest. The one he and Ann had played buccaneer with for two golden summers at Lake Champlain. The ‘authentic leather’ casing on it had worn down to paper thin rags, the gold and silver bindings on it giving way to rust. But there was one feature on it which was flawlessly and

artistically perfect. In Russian print, with some mistakes in case that Jack did pick up, it read 'For Jack. To continue what I, and now we, started when we could change the world because we didn't know we couldn't AND weren't allowed to.'

The eight by 18 inch chest was lighter than Jack expected, poured out its contents on the floor as soon as he nudged it out of the tight slot between mold stained volumes by Shaekspeare, Pushkin and Howard Stern. The first thing Jack noticed was a metallic device designed to deliver solutions at lightening speed to those bold enough to use it. "What Ann, a pacifist who would kill anyone wearing a National Rifle Association button, doing with a revolver?" he asked himself. Putative answers raced through his mind. Protection from druggy neighbors in the trailer park coming from town? A quick way to scare off bears, hungry coyotes and rabid racoons coming to the back door from the woods? Or, something she forgot to take to 'work' at her last meeting with, yes, Mayor Rich.

The second thing to attract Jack's attention, and concern, was something straight out of a James Bond for Millennials AND Boomers flick. A recording device with a set of instructions as to how to (as the typed notes said) 'kick it into submission rather than let it linger as a source of frustration'. With lavalieri microphones in the shape of adolescent New York State, but not Texan, cockroaches. And a thumb drive was attached to a folded label which when opened up read 'Mayor Rich's greatest hits, and hitlists. What I got so far, that needs verification. NOT AI generated, this time anyway.'

Jack felt a cold wind going through the trailer. Upon trying to sense it origin, and intension, he noticed that a window had blown open. Such afforded a sparrow on the bird feeder outside a clear view of what was on the 'warm' side of the now open window and access to the breadcrumbs on the ledge. He sho'd the lone sparrow away, locked the window shut, then closed the blinds. He inserted the drive into his sister's surprisingly easily accessed lap top, grabbing one of her pads and his own pen to write down the relevant audio details.

The words said by the 'patron saint' of Upstate New York's homeless community to an interviewer were muffled and distorted. But the voice of the interviewer wasn't. Clearly it was Ann's voice asking the questions. Jack could make out from the interviewee, who clearly was Rich, clear phrases such as 'we all could be homeless one day and have to live in this jungle or worst ones', the subtext of such was that 'if you asked the wrong questions of him, you would be homeless and bodyless pronto.' .When talking about his 'investments' outside of the jungle and investment in the Jungle' Mayor Rich's remarks reeked of confident control and complete lack of empathy. When asked if those investments were legal, his reply was 'well, our greatest American Revolutionary War heroes were considered outlaws at the time.' And when asked 'how far would you go to see that social racial and financial justice were implemented?' his reply. 'As far as I'm pushed to.' And when asked why there are so many homeless people in Ithaca, and America, OFF the record, he sighed, replying with a whimsical tone, 'those losers give winners like me, and you, a chance to be purposeful and to do our jobs, and fulfill our passions'. As for what those jobs and passions were---dead silence. Then 'this interview is over, and your hotel reservation in MY city is cancelled.'

None of it was admissible in court of course, as any lawyer versant in 'Trumpese' could say that it was metaphor. Jack wondered what would have been recorded in Mayor Rich's tent after the interview was officially over. "Yes," Jack said to the picture of Ann and himself as 'hearty Buckaneers' before they were conditioned into thinking that doing the right legal thing was more important than the right moral thing, placing the gun inside his belt, covering it with his coat. "This interview WILL be continued," he pledged

As for the whereabouts of the aforementioned 'saintly Godfather', such was the most required piece of the 'puzzle' which had become Jack's life now.

## CHAPTER 11

Jack had many healthy habits that were toxic. One of them was believing in Shaekspeare's 'suggestion for effective living' that 'if you are true to yourself you cannot help but be true to everyone else'. It had earned him many discoveries from Mother Nature with regard to how to use the laws of physics to figure out how to use the laws of physics to build machines and structures that seemed to defy such with regard to their use. But it prevented him from developing the ability to pretend to be someone he wasn't. Something his thankfully EX wife was very good at, up to and including the point of taking him to the cleaners in the divorce settlement. But as the now absent in body but present via text Carla said, 'to every thing there is a season and we're dealing with intense climate change right now.' And... 'ya gotta be who you is.' As for what Jack had to be now, such required him to expand his boundaries to do what had to be done. Against some hard facts.

Fact one was that Achmed informed him, through his wife's phone, that Rich Williamson was back at home in his Syracuse mansion and have some important business meetings there. To be carried out without Achmed or his wife being there to serve appetizers and 'specially spiced and/or drugged' entrées. Fact two was that Rich had already recognized Jack as 'a man's man', acknowledging such at their last meeting at Achmed's restaurant. Indeed, Rich Williamson looked at Jack rather than Achmed when it came to 'between men' inuendoes considering Achmed as little more than an obedient servant who was as boring and hoaky as he was spineless. Fact, or rather opportunity, three involved the state beyond the art surveillance audio recording devises Ann had hidden in her closet, and the ability to take pictures on Jack's phone. Reality four said that the devises needed to be inserted onto the windows to record what was being said, and not said, inside the house while Williamson was consorting with his cronies, or bosses. And, as Carla suggested, 'experiment five' involved Jack having to pass himself off as a power meter checking woman rather than man. 'You'll be great, as long as you don't talk,' Carla wrote on the note attached to a hastily fabricated ConEd shirt and 'play electrician' equipment in the

pockets of skinny jeans as well as a small gym bag with the ConEd label on it delivered by a very private courier to Ann's house.

Occupied by important business on his cell, Rich Williamson gave little eye contact to Jack as he opened the door. Indeed Jack did feel like Jackie, his brain advised at how to stand, walk and smile by something in the brunette wig that flowed down to 'her' breasts. Which felt real with the super pads inserted into a bra, complimented by 'Kardashian' sized hip extensions, conferring an hour glass figure, giftwrapped for the taking with a tight fitting long blouse.

"I'm here to...check the electrical meters and fuse boxes, a new city ordinance, Sir, and..." Jack whispered from ruby red lips with a smile that felt—different. Like one of the Barbie babes who did the cooking and men did the business, Jack flashed a hopefully well forged document verifying such.

Rich shoo'd 'Jackie' away to take care of the task assigned, as he was on an important call, heading into the kitchen. Allowing Jack the opportunity to put one of mics and cameras INSIDE the house, under the top of a table which contained several civic awards from other cities for 'meritorious service' to Williamson.

Between faking stumbles, 'is this the way to the basement meters and fuse boxes?' inquiries and concerns about meter readings, Jack inserted audio recording 'cockroaches' around the living room laden with comfy chairs on which there were pads, pens, Buffalo Bill mugs and bottles of water. At the exact appointed hour noted by Achmed, four limos pulled up, from different directions. Jackie took a pictures of the business executives and politicians as she approached, then upon greeting Mayor Rich at the door as she made here getaway from the house, scurrying into the van outside.

As with all of the people of power and influence and REAL influence Jack had met, worked under and had to cajole funds from his ongoing quest to make the world a more workable place for the 98 percent of the people who had 2 percent of the wealth, including himself of course, their motions were minimal, their casual semi-formal business wear spotless. Their faces represented the best look of each of their ages. Their smiles carefully contained. And their eyes, when no one else was looking at them, shifting to the right, left, up and down as if a routine surveillance. One of those sets off eyes caught a look at Jack, as Jackie, eyeing his ass then artificially bloated balloons on either side of his chest. Then finally at Jack's transformed shaved and hopefully not too made up face.

"So," Jack said to himself with a pulled back smile regarding the Elon Musk clone, who motioned her to come hither. He motioned with his left fist an open 'hole', his penile process his right index finger making oscillations penetrations into the former, leaving the 'lesser moguls' the tasks of economic

business with Bill . At Carla's suggestion, 'Jackie' lifted his left hand, pointing to a wedding ring around the fourth digit. 'Elon 201' showing it to the thirty something Upstate Rust Belt Elon. The latter removed the ring from his hand, motioning the 'money' sign. With the slightest of nods, he motioned for his chauffeur, a hunched back man twice his age and with half of his physical strength, to approach Jack. With a courtly bow and a 'yeah, we all work for assholes' wink, the driver in the all black suit and matching cap gave Jackie his boss's business card.

For a moment, Jack felt like the opposite end of the various 'relationships' he had set into motion at pick up bars, reflecting on the absurdity and emptiness of such after the 'love juices' were exchanged, for real or vicariously. But, he took the card, knowing that connecting to people of power and influence as a destroyer rather than a scholarly servant would be required if he wanted to avenge Ann's death. And continue the work she had died doing.

With that, the Elon in training dude, or perhaps dud, joined the other men inside, while Jack wiggled his way back to the van across the street, hoping his walk would not give away his real gender or attract more attention as a temporary resident in 'the world of womanhood'.

Jack drove the van around the corner, away from the view of the limo drivers and the, when bored with the conversation in the living room, businessmen and politicians whose connections with Rich Williamson were...as the now absent and probably turncoat Lt. Wendy Jackson...'interesting'. As for the details of what 'interesting' meant specifically, Jack took down notes on paper as well as listening with his ears. A habit he got into when attending university lectures on both sides of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel in North America and across the pond. Yes, Williamson was getting kickbacks from construction projects in town which were disallowed to expand into the Jungle because of conditions of the ground and Aquaphor. Residents of the Jungle would be offered more employment opportunities of course. Including participating in clinical trials with new, safe and brain 'enhancing' medications which could also treat addiction to the street drugs. But, more funding and staff were allocated to insure that the Chinese, Guatemalan and Haitian gangs would be kept out of Ithaca. And jail sentences would be harsher for child pornography, sex trafficking and domestic abuse. Free vaccinations for flu and 'other communicable diseases' would be provided free of charge, along with places to 'self administer needed medications' in lower income areas in town would be provided. Councillors for 'those less fortunate than us who fall through the cracks' would be provided, a new wave of them being AI generated, with, of course, ethnicities which honored the mandate for more inclusion and diversity in the medical system. Figures of financial transactions and companies to which those funds would go to were spoken very clearly.

But....as for the most important issue for the residents of the Jungle when they had to do business or wanted to do something resembling pleasure in town was proposed, and passed. Free use of newly installed toilets, along with efforts to 'discourage' business establishments in town from demanding that bathrooms were for paying customers only. Or available for a dime or a quarter like 'the old days'. 'After

all,' Elon in training reminded Williamson. 'It's not like the number of homeless unfortunates is going to decrease in the next few years.' 'Unless they eat each other,' the beloved Mayor Rich appended as a joke.

But the knock on the window of the van just before the rest of the crew of the bad ship 'Boast' could exercise or show off their skills at humor was no joke. "Miss?" a lightly bearded Officer in a green uniform with what could have been a gun, taser or radio spalled to his waist announced, keeping his reflective sunglasses on. "You're not supposed to be here," he said with the detachment of a Custom's Officer trained to avoid any expression of overt anger or laughter. Upon closer examination of the uniform, Jack noticed that he was from immigration control. Confirmed by his easily expressed and condescendingly toned repeat of what he had just said but in Spanish. Then French.

"I'm...an American citizen," Jack said, sensing the pitch in his voice Jackie dropping one or maybe two octaves, while fumbling with the sound board. "Cutting a musical track for a music video, testing the sound equipment so when the videographers and actors come, we're, ya know," he continued, pretending to cough. "Sore throat!" Jack explained, more like Jackie. "I'm just---

"Your passport, or driver's licence?" the immigration officer requested with a flip of his fingers.

Jack provided his AI generated 'Jackie' ID. "Sufficient?" he said, in Spanish.

"AI generated," the inspector said of the photo. "The shadows on the right side of the face match those on the left sides all too well," he explained. "And, this photo has you SMILING, 'Miss'?"

"Because I'm happy to be employed?" Jack proposed, as a question. Something that he detested in anyone else, particularly those who were trying to kiss his ass. Or beg him for his approval.

"Happy to move along away from this neighborhood, and country, before I take you into the grey barred hotel?" the inspector shot back. "Hmmm....?"

"Si," Jack replied, taking back the ID. "Going now," he continued. He turned on the engine, then slowly drove down the street. The immigration Inspector following him. Meanwhile, the limos that delivered the moguls or minions to Williamson were leaving his 'Uptown' Office. Followed by Mayor Rich, clad in his 'Downtown Jungle' hole ridden fatigues, stepping into the rustmobile buried between his Bently and Mercedes, and heading off to 'work'.

Though following Williamson would be difficult, and dangerous, Jack knew where he was going. The Jungle. A place which would be educated as to who its Mayor really was thanks to tapes Ann had recorded, and he had supplemented. If Jack, or Jackie, had anything to do with it.

## CHAPTER 12

Jack never considered that without his beard, with a little make up and a long brunette wig with purple highlights he would resemble his deceased sister. Such was suggested by the reflective surfaces in the van and in Ann's trailer. And the various photos inside of the latter when he gathered the equipment he needed to enter the Jungle to play the recorded voice of good Mayor Rich. So that his loyal armed and unarmed residents would find out that Emperor doesn't have any clothes on. And that the skin underneath such was of the demonic reptilian variety rather than angelic humanoid. But in case that militia had earplugs embedded into their 'free of charge' walkmans Williamson distributed which played the music HE programmed into them, Jack's taking a firearm that made real noise and that could fire real bullets was also a requirement.

While walking over the boundary behind the grocery store where the housed people shopped into the city into the owned zone where the tent dwellers 'lived', Jack felt the crunch of newspapers, old cans and empty cardboard boxes from "Williamson Pharmaceuticals" with the size 10 cowgirl boots from Walmart that was part of Jackie's ensemble. He then snuck the still painted fingertips of his man-sized paws into the pocket of Ann's favorite all weather, weather beaten imitation once black now off white leather coat, caressing the handle on her revolver. He recalled that he had counted four rounds in it. Three more of that number of 'Hometown Militia' troops swaggered his way. This time, ALL of them were armed with lead projecting weaponry rather than sharpened broom-poles and rusty macho-sized knives that were designed for skinning buffalo rather than cutting stale expired steak. Their leader, designated by a toy sheriff badge larger than the ones on her all male muscle support squad, halted them as soon as her dilated pupil containing eyes met Jack's.

"Praise Jesus!" ex-Professor Maddy exclaimed. This time with a full set of off white teeth in her deformed mout, making her words sound hearable. She laid down her weapon, raising her hands up to the sky. "Sister Ann has returned from the dead! Which means..."

"Resurrection isss rrrreal, Sherrriff Maddy??" a behemoth deputy sporting an a-symmetrically cut mohawk next to her right muttered, his left hand shaking with as much uncontrolled intensity as his quivering lips.

“Yeah, she looks different than when she left,” a smaller framed deputy whose 50 year old shaved face, combed hair and NON-tattooed body could be mistaken for a tax paying ‘housed’ citizen to her left said, as he lowered his head, adjusting his taped together bifocals.

“Yeah....A littttle,” the behemoth deputy uttered, realizing something with the brain cells still functioning in the drug soaked soup that was his cranial vault. “Thissss Ann is...hmmm

Jack edged his fingers towards the handle of Ann’s revolver. He hoped that his drug free nervous system reflexes really were faster on the draw (or more accurate with the shot) than those that had been ‘modified’ by the variety of pharmacological uppers, downers and distractors in the Jungle residents. Pharmacologic agents they found themselves and those provided by Mayor Rich. The leader of the Militia led it closer to Jack, then halted the advance no less than five feet away from him.

“Yeah,” Maddy said, reaching into her pocket, retrieving a rotten tomato. She tossed it at Jack. It landed on his chest, creating a splattering of red that perhaps soon would be his own blood. “This ghost of Sister Anne ain’t no ghost. But she, or it is...” She continued halting the group, terrified more for what would happen to the deputies under her than to herself. “Yeah, she is...”

“Tall, Professor Sheriff Maddy,” the near sited ‘Mister Magoo’ citizen deputy noted, advancing towards Jack on his own. He took out a tape measure from his back pocket, ironically marked ‘Wood for Winners’, featuring a smiling likeness of Tom, Ann’s estranged son and Jack’s disappointment nephew, on it. He asked ‘the ghost’ to hold one end of the tape at her head, lowering the rest of it to the ground. “Yeah....22 percent taller, than pre-resurrected Ann,” he proclaimed. “Who...” the most probable ex-accountant said, looking at and into Jack’s heavily masked and eye-shadowed ocular portholes.

Jack cleared his throat. “Picked up a cold,” he said in his best “Jackie” voice, hoping it would sound like Ann. “With a new voice that needs all of you to hear this.”

Jack pressed a knob sticking out of his backpack. The sound of Mayor Rich’s voice laughing from the ghettoblaster hidden inside the pack startled the ex-accountant, forcing him to pull away, and cross himself. But there was something vibrating inside the backpack Jack didn’t plan on. After hearing the ‘ghost within the devise.’ squeak’, he pulled away his backpack, laying it on the ground, then retrieved the ghetto blaster from it. A rat that had sought refuge in it ran off into the low lying brush.

The first part of the public broadcast of the REAL Ann’s interview of Rich Williamson emanated through the cool air. Particularly the remark about the solution for hunger in the Jungle was for the ‘useless as



tits on a bull' residents to kill each other in their sleep or 'let them die in a toxic zone of strawberry fields' and eat each other. And the boasts about how Rich's most recent concoction of 'mind stabilizing medication' manufactured by the soon to be legitimized Williamson Pharmaceuticals was making 'the guinea pigs in the Jungle happy to live there or anywhere else he assigned them to live, exist or die in the kind of peace they never experienced before'.

Jack considered the problems and opportunities of being a half ghost half man, or woman. Thoughts of the Pugachev revolt in 1774 Russia came to mind. Where a Cossack with at best a mediocre reputation with his buds tried to pass himself off as the reincarnation of Peter the Second, the only Czar in Russian history who actually was serious about liberating, feeding and sheltering subjects, and to abolish serfdom once and for all.. The price for trying to do so of course was to be murdered by the Empress, Catherine, who history would call 'the Great', who took it upon herself to see that freedom for the serfs, Cossacks and anyone else would be quenched. But for a moment or two, Jack did feel 'co-inhabited' by Ann's soul, particularly when he caught a glimpse of himself in no less than five reflective surfaces.

He set up auxillary speakers to the device, accepting help from four unarmed Jungle residents who, gathered around him. By the way they handled the equipment and made it work, they had probably had good paying jobs as roadies or electricians before 'the music died'.

Shock, anger and denial infiltrated the residents of the Jungle as they gathered around the loud speakers. Meanwhile, Rich Williamson's tent-flap in the distance was still closed. With his keen sense of hearing, Jack could hear the television inside of it playing a football game. As for the residents of the Jungle, Jack became irrelevant to them as they conversed and argued amongst themselves regarding the authenticity of the tapes and the real motivation of their Mayor. Except for a seventeen going on seventy woman whose skin was more tattoo than flesh. With a death rattle in her hoarse voice, terror in her eyes, her jaundiced pupils a dark shade of yellow, her hands and legs as thin as broomsticks, she approached Jack and asked, "If we live a good and honorable life, can we be resurrected too?" She hugged Jack like a child would a mother, dislodging Jack's maternal prosthetic breasts. "Please tell me that I can be transitioned to resurrection."

Whether the reference to 'transition' was referring to the soon to become 'gone' teen's experiments with gender identity, or if she detected Jack's real gender seemed irrelevant as the child wanting back into the womb for a second chance at life begged Jack to sing to her. Which he did. The song rapidly appearing at the juke box in his head was a Woody Guthrie song he recalled from 'Bound for Glory', the movie portraying the Dust Bowl economy of the dirty thirties which was on its way from becoming manifest in the High Tech 2020s. "Go to sleep you weary hobo, let the towns drift slowly by, listen to the steal rails humming, that's a hobo's lullaby". The improvised next set of lyrics, with an even more off key delivery that would make even Bob Dylan demand autotuning, put a smile on the girl's face. Afterward which, she kissed Jack on the cheek. Then went on her way, somehow assured that surviving another day would be a gamble that would pay off in the casino of Life, no matter what the house rules were. "Thank you," she said, appended by something that sounded like 'Mom, Ma'am or Mann' after which she kissed him on the cheek. Jack was not sure what term of address was actually voiced. And not caring what it really was.

Jack heard a rumbling in the soon to be dead long before her time young drifter's stomach. He reached into the pockets of his female skinny jeans, noting that they were frustratingly small than the male version of that universal 'uniform' that was worn by every American claiming to be a rugged individualist. He pulled out the cookies Achmed had given him to keep up his strength and so he wouldn't fade into hypoglycemia and ineffective thinking. "These were baked for me, but you need them more than I do," Jack said, as Ann, to the old before her time teen.

"No," the emaciated young woman replied. "Whoever baked these, wanted YOU to have them. But," she continued, pointing to the additional junk food Jack picked up at the gas station so he could use the bathroom en route to the Jungle. "If you aren't eating those wing dings in your jacket pocket, I wouldn't mind having a healthy dose of great tasting chemicals. After all, I grew up in New Jersey, so I've developed resistance to any toxic shit anyone puts into great tasting sugary shit masquerading as food. But..."

Jack surrendered the wing dings to the young woman. He took in the entire contents of Achmed's famous 'organic energy cookies' in stages as the young woman imbibed all of the ring dings in a 'toast' to something resembling life.

Jack's new 'daughter' then held on to him for dear life, closing her eyes, humming the Woody Guthrie tune to herself into a deep and pleasant sleep. With some German words intermingled into such as Jack rocked her towards such. A sleep that, according to her pulse, depth breathing and smile as wide as Cayuga Lake, was one she would wake up from on this side of the veil. "Schlaf gut, meine Freund," Jack whispered into her ear as he gently laid her down on the ground against one of the few remaining trees left in the Jungle. Being sure that her ass would not languish in human or canine manure. And that her head was cushioned by a 'pillow' made of the cleanest plastic and styrofoam immediately available. "Ich musse zu Teufel Richs Haus gehen. Ich zurich zu du bald."

Whether the young and hopefully destined to become old woman understood Jack's wishes for her to have a good sleep free of PTSD 'dreams', and his requirement to confront the devil who moved into the haven hobos of both genders had called 'temporary paradise' was immaterial now. Of paramount importance was if the militia and the now mob with would accept Ann's recordings of Rich Williamson as actual, and if so, what to do about it. Or whether the three hold outs, who seemed to be the least affected by the latest 'miracle drug' Mayor Rick was testing and using on, would be able to convince the congregation that the voice on the ghettoblaster and ancillary speakers was AI generated by 'one of the suits' living comfortably town. Yes, a confession from the REAL Rich IN PERSON would be necessary to incite a rebellion in the Jungle against him. Perhaps the peasants would chop off the head of the beloved godfather, after of course relieving the macho man of his testicular tissue and bragged about penile organ. "Yes, that would be nice," Ann's ghost said to the thought echoing through Jack's spine, head and painted nails. "But bringing him and his cronies to real justice would be better. Even though it would be harder," she continued.

“Yes,” Jack agreed, feeling the time clock ticking louder and faster as the heated discussion of the Jungle residents, who now numbered more than even what Ann recorded in her soon to be converted into a novel diary, seemed to reach a conclusion. Resulting in as many citizens of the tent city looking suspiciously as Jack as gazing up at Rich Williamson’s tent.

## CHAPTER 13

How many people saw, noticed or cared about Jack’s approaching the canvas covered ‘castle on the hill’; seemed immaterial to him now. All he knew with each step towards Rich’s tent was that they had to be ground covering, deliberate, fast and at a non-manly which didn’t break into a run. He concentrated his gaze on his feet, being sure that the path left by the boot-prints was narrow rather than wide. Those boot-prints finally reached the ‘door’ to Williamson’s home and office. A welcome mat lay in front of the closed tent-flap. ‘Please wiggle door three times, clear throat twice or yell colorful obscenities before entering’ the sign on it read.. Jack didn’t have to do either to have a hand reach out from a slit in the closed flap. It motioned for him to enter with a gentle flexing of the fingers. Appended by the aroma of a freshly cooked cheese and pepper omelette.

Jack froze in place, reaching into the pocket of his coat, feeling the handle of Ann’s revolver. The hand motioned ‘no’, then extended its second partner to Jack with a plate containing the omelette. “Your favorite food, ‘Ann,’” Rich said, his face still hidden. “Not as good as how you cooked breakfast for us, but...”

Whatever was beyond the ‘but’ had to be dealt with. Perhaps it was Williamson really believing in ghosts. Hoping that Ann had been ‘educated’ after her death in the necessity to do what had to be done to survive with a set of immutable commandments written by lawyers in purgatory rather than a Heavenly Father atop Mount Sinai . Or perhaps, Jack speculated with the few optimistic brain cells in his large and cynically wired cranial vault, Williamson wanting to bring him into his ‘organization’ as an ally, partner or collaborator. Working towards a mutual end that would satisfy the wants and needs of those who lived comfortably within the legal system and those who ‘interestingly’ thrived outside of it. Something that Jack was all too familiar with in countries overseas which few school teachers could find on a map. And even fewer American politicians gave a shit about. “Please,” Mayor Rich’s voice said from inside the tent. “We don’t have much time to reach a mutual beneficial agreement.”

Feeling the need, and liberation, of being pushed off a cliff before acquiring the ability to fly or an instruction manual as to how to use one's angelic wings, Jack entered the tent, keeping his eyes wide open en route.

"Be it ever so humble, and when the wrong Cops come, crumbled," Williamson said regarding the dwelling which seemed three times larger from the inside than it did from the outside. True to his colorful and probably patented metaphor, it contained an old desk most of the varnish worn off, one of its legs being three pieces of plywood hastily nailed together. The chair behind it and the two in front of it were even more weather worn. They were held together by bailing twine and electrical wire with a skill worthy of Jack's most valued engineering students, or even he himself. A line of old car batteries set up with LED light for power. A small screen TV wired to a satellite dish, which displayed a football game with the score being 29 to 3, which Bill turned off with a disappointing sigh. A double burner hot plate. A Tesla coil, aimed outward so as to be able to spread electrical current without cables, wires of pollution. And bookshelves loaded with books that were untitled, the pages lined together with plastic wiring. And legal books, which were up to date, kept immaculately in a separate portion of the 'library'.

But what caught Jack's attention was a still and perhaps portable chemistry lab. "Better living through Chemistry," Rich smirked, quoting the Dupont Corporation's claim it gave to the world regarding the glues, plastics and other man made substances that made being comfortable in the 1960s that no bacteria could degrade. "Want some, JACK!?" he said, offering a gummy from the most recently filled collection pot. "I would prefer that we have this conversation as we are rather than who we want to or think we should be," he said.

"No, I value my own kind of hard working crazy to the paradise in a pill you're refining here," Jack felt like saying, but didn't give voice to, taking off the wig, then progressively at the request of his host, oversized blouse, oversized artificial hips, bra with all of the stuffing a to be burned barrel Bill had by his desk. After removing the caked on make up on his face, eyes and cheeks he took in a deep breath manly breath and like a rooster claiming back his henhouse to the largest of foxes in the forest, Jack offered a defiant 'I got you' stare at and into Williamson.

"Yeah, I heard that," the Mayor of the Jungle (and most probably other territories that thought they were independent entities) replied, pulling his lips back into a self assured smile. "What do you want from me, Jack?"

"The truth," the reply from Jack's mouth, as himself. Giving a sense of urgency to his request with the business end of Ann's revolver aimed at his host's chest.

"About what?" Rich countered. "Why the tent dwellers I serve are still arguing about what to do about me, Ann's ghost and you, down the hill?"

Jack turned his head slightly, noting the absence of footsteps from the mob approaching the tent, an expression of concern, and doubt taking over his mind, then face.

"Or," Williamson added, with a louder, more confident tone. "The truth about how me being the negotiator those who profit from obeying the rules in these books," he said, pointing to his law book collection. "Co-exist in a sustainable way with those who get through the day, week, year and life by ignoring or defying the 'codes' passed down by men, and women, in black robes and suits who call themselves judges and 'duly elected representatives'. Which replaced the common sense, and flexible, rules for doing business based in what your sister called 'biologically wired in morality'. Your sister who...."

"You killed!" Jack barked out loudly, in his own voice. "Or had killed," he continued, pulling back the volume of the deep baritone voice which he still had to hide from the Militia. "You're coming with me now to face your people and tell them that." He pulled out Ann's revolver, pointing it at his host. "Please." Then placed the Ann wig on his head, supplementing such with her coat.

"With you as Ann's ghost?" Rich mused, after which he broke into mad laughter. "A ghost who, when my people out there hug you to see if you're real, has a penis and two large testacies between your legs that is showing itself now very prominently."

Jack looked down at his crotch, noting that the tight wrapping around his groin had come loose, the biological evidence of his manhood bulging out. "I'll tell them that Ann decided to transition in the afterlife into a body with a gender that, despite women's lib, gets her a better chance to be elected President, or Kingpin." he gave voice to. "And makes it easier to..."

"...Pee, standing up?" Bill interjected, chuckling at the joke he read in Jack's fear and rage infused mind. "And as for you shooting me if I don't say what you want me to MY people down below."

"Your drugged and manipulated slaves," Jack countered through gritted teeth. Holding onto the revolver as firmly as he could.

“Or if you bring me to the Cops who, well, know me better than you,” Jack’s host added. “The ones I...”

“Bought, or threatened?” Jack pressed, recalling Wendy Jackson’s signature on the document saying that Ann’s death was due to natural causes. Brought on by ‘some known and some unknown medications which were toxic due to lingering hepatic and kidney problems’.

“The carrot is always more appealing when it’s offered at the end of a sharp stick,” Williamson said. “And as for you, ‘Jackie’, I know more powerful psychiatrists than you do, who can...well, a locked ward is a locked ward. For someone who is a danger to himself, and others. You remember what happened last time you became too ‘expressive’ in this, your home town.”

Jack did recall the dark 80s in Ithaca when he was between contracts abroad, and had brought back more PTSD than cultural souvenirs from war zones back home with him while visiting family. Along with accidentally acquired residual ‘better living with chemistry’ biowarfare agents and as yet undetermined industrial toxins lingering in his overloaded brain which he claimed made him clairvoyant. And hearing voices that weren’t connected to bodies. Which gave him the impression and confidence that he could fly away from the roof of his parent’s three story house, or at least leap to the neighbor’s trampoline next door, with a flap of his arms.

“I have something to cure what ails you,” Rich Williamson said, offering Jack a gummy. Then snuck his hand to vibrate a bong, behind which a jet stream of sweet smelling perfume filled the air, directed by a fan to drift towards Jack. “Along with my pledge to find out how your sister died, and why. Find out who killed the most worthy adversary and, in some ways closest friend I had here. Someone who I could have a real thought-provoking conversation with. The truth, Jack. The truth which....”

Jack saw then felt his firm hold on the revolver turn into a sweat producing tremor. He grabbed hold of the gun with the other hand. The demon controlling him edged its way up both of his arms, taking possession of them. Then taking captive his ability to see images clearly, then his ability to hear sounds without thundering, haunting echoes. Then his ability to stand on his feet. The world became blank. He felt himself floating, his body and consciousness ‘dancing’ to the erratic sounds of an atonal symphony mixed in with a warped version of Iron Butterfly’s ‘In the Garden of Eden’ sung in Farcie. Appended by a thunderous bang, then....

....Jack woke up from a disturbing sleep. His head and limbs was aching, but they were in his possession again. He rolled to his side as if awaking from a bad dream, noting that the wood palate floor under him was soaked with blood, the thick stream of sanguineous fluid originating in Rich’s dead body. Though the head of the corpse was devoid of life, its left eye said to Jack ‘yeah, you got me, you magnificent bastard,

good on ya.’ The right eye seemed to beg for help, conveying a message ‘hey, pal, maybe you can dig into these law books and get me a good Jewish lawyer so Saint Peter can get a modest bungalow above the clouds instead of burning cardboard shack down below.’ Jack found connection to his hands, then abruptly felt them pulled and locked behind his back.

“You have the right to remain silent,” he heard from a familiar voice. “Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law,” Lt Detective Wendy Jackson stated in an official tone, pulling off the wig from his head, while two uniformed Cops lifted Jack up on his feet. “You have the right to an attorney, Mister MacMillian” she continued looking at Jack with pity in her face..

“Which is ME!” Jack heard from another familiar voice from a short man who pushed aside the tent flap, storming in . Looking to its source, it was none other than Achmed, side stepping the police tape and pools of blood en route to him.

“OR one appointed by the court for you free of charge, Jack,” Wendy said to Jack. “Who is LEGALLY a lawyer! ” she blasted at Achmed.

“As was I, in my country, LEUTENANT Jackson In a country which has had ‘legal statues longer than your country has!” Achmed countered, calmly, presenting to her three diplomas, one in Turkish and two in Arabic. “And this man you are arresting should be given a medal for doing what had to be done.”

“Killing Rich Williamson in cold blood?” Wendy said.

“Defending himself, and the rest of us from this monster,” Achmed continued, spitting on Williamson’s corpse, then cursing him in Arabic. He then attempted to kick the corpse into an even deeper circle of hell, but was restrained by the Cops.

“You’re tampering with evidence there, ‘councillor’,” Wendy informed him by way of explanation. “As a ‘lawyer in three different countries with legal systems older than ours is. You should know that.”

“Which I do,” Achmed replied, calming himself down, after which he crossed himself. “God be praised.”

“A Christian Moslem?” Jack thought to himself, but didn’t give voice to. But such would be yet another attribute Achmed had, amongst the many that Jack missed identifying or just ignored during his associations with him overseas during Jack’s formative years there.

“Well then, Mister MacMillian,” Officer Wendy said to Jack, and Achmed. “Do you understand these rights I have read to you?”

“Yes,” Achmed and Jack stated, in unison. “I understand things now more than ever,”: Jack delivered into Achmed’s caring and, he hoped, legally intelligent eyes.

## CHAPTER 14

Ironically, it felt like a ‘relieving’ experience for Jack as he sat alone, with no phone, no internet and nothing to read except the remnants of graffiti still edged into the wall of the windowless ‘private hotel room’. Relieved of indecision as to what to do about the man who murdered his sister. Relieved of having to fake being his sister to homophobic and anti-trans onlookers. And relieved of his freedom as he was now a prisoner in the Ithaca jail.

But such would be temporary, as Achmed was now his lawyer. And more importantly, his friend. Whose family was taking care of Sidhartha, Ann’s dog, with more walks, better meals and more enthusiastic play time than Jack could provide. Achmed Ackbas, Esq, who had his own habits and talents, including typing in all of the notes about Jack’s case at lightening speed on a mini-tablet rather than by hand on a notepad while still maintaining eye contact with his good friend, and now pro-bono client.

But there was one thing Jack was not relieved of---his ability to hear ‘white noise’. That muffled low volume talk radio jabber which, according to the mystics with extreme political views on the right and the left he got to know over the years, came from dead people. Such was echoing into Jack’s ears in the holding cell continuously in the Ithaca lock up where, so the newspapers said anyway, psychiatrists and social workers intervened before anyone committed suicide.

Jack had been in many ‘killing zones’ before overseas as a scientist who was a master at understanding the workings of Mother Nature. But he was a novice at ascertaining the nature and mechanics of human cruelty. He knew that ‘conversations from the dead’ inviting scientifically skilled curious investigators to amplify and clarify white noise resulted in more than one paranormal truth seeker going mad. Indeed, the only sane investigator of paranormal ‘voices’ he knew shut down his ‘surveillance’ equipment when



he saw and heard something more evil and powerful than anything imaginable by the mortal human brain, or soul, coming through the speakers and video monitors. He refused to tell Jack how he 'connected' to the other world, or worlds.

But there was one voice that perhaps was buried amongst the rantings of the departed that Jack needed to hear again. "Ann, is that you?" he asked in a muffled whisper that he hoped would not be picked up by the guards who passed by the cell with footwear that did not make any noise, at unpredictable times. Or fellow residents of the 'windowless motel' who were in need of hearing another human voice and who would gain favor with the guards if they reported what they heard from their 'neighbor'.

Ann didn't answer, but there was another life form that did. How a roach the size of a date got through all of the sealed, featureless white walls of the cell, or survived the 9 foot jump from the air ducts above him, he didn't know. But he, or she, approached Jack. The hard shelled visitor sat up on its two back feet, saying something with its spindly forepaws that felt like 'I'm hungry, so what do you got'? "OK then," Jack replied to his new cellmate regarding the 'happy meal' provided to him for not resisting arrest. He still felt the sore throat and smelling the odor of what had been in the bong and 'room freshener' Rich had activated just before Jack blacked out. And the headache in the left side of his head which would not go away, or even give him the courtesy of shifting to the right side of his cranial vault. "Grass fed beef, that grass of course being sprayed with Round-up, and Idaho fries which I'm told contain at least 20 percent potato with onion rings that," Jack said while looking at the lunch delivered to him under the door. After which he took a small, careful bite from the largest ring in the styrofoam box, letting it linger on his tongue before entrusting it to his belly. "I THINK those onion rings and potatoes were fried with cooking oil..."

"---That's not 90 percent petroleum," Jack heard from a real human voice at the door to his cell, which was now open. "But which kill you in, say 40 or 50 years," Carla continued, standing in front of the guard. She was clad in a pressed white lab coat with a stethoscope around her neck, looking more professionally medical than Jack ever remembered seeing her. A sharp contrast to the nurse who insisted on wearing black jeans, purple runners and red lumberjack shirts in the ER so that 'the patients won't freak out at seeing other people's, their own or my own blood' and so that patients would obediently respect her as a doctor rather than insult or lean on her as a nurse. "I brought this patient something less interesting," she said to the guard, unwrapping a loaf of banana bread, pulling it out of her pocket. Such caused the guard, a six foot tall muscular twenty something specimen of fitness with stubble over his scalp and a thick foot long beard below his lips to reach for his tazer.. "That did get X-rayed!" she informed him. "Like you did when you got admitted into the hospital on MY shift where the paperwork regarding the fight you started at the bar when you were on probation got shredded, but still linger here," she continued, pointing to her head.

The guard took in a deep breath, looked to his right, then left. He then cuffed Jack's right wrist to a metal ring on the cell wall. "You have five minutes," he whispered to Carla.

"Ten would be better, Officer Jenkins," she replied, gazing at his nametag. "Or as the paperwork that got lost and could be found again said, Mister..."

"Okay! Okay! Ten," he conceded. "But if anything happens to you in there with him, it's on you."

"Yes, I know," Carla replied. "But....there is one thing I'd like you to do first, Officer Jenkins. This patient, who you consider as a prisoner, is left handed."

"Right," Jenkins said, switching the cuff to the right hand. After which he looked at Carla, saying, "Wishing you a happy psych eval or conical visit, McMillian. And if anything goes wrong, I'll be right outside."

"For which I DO thank you," Carla replied. With a tone that she expected something to go wrong.

'Doctor McMillian plopped herself on the cot next to Jack, giving herself a two foot distance from her 'husband', as much fear as pity or caring in her face. She pushed the banana bread towards him. "For you. And, only after I leave, your six legged friend. Since you know that cockroaches freak me out, particularly after you made me watch 'Joe's Apartment' " she said regarding the film that portrayed singing and dancing cockroaches that made Jack laugh and gave her the jitters.. Her raised up shoulders eased into her more easily breathing chest as Jack ate the banana break with his free hand.

"So, how are you Jack," she asked. "Really?"

"Hungry, and scared, until now," Jack's reply. "How did you convince them you were a doctor and that I was your husband?" he whispered to her.

"One's a dream I maybe still can make happen, and the other....something I should have been smart enough to not make happen," she confessed and related, averting her eyes. "But, regarding all those things you did, without asking me to help you do it first!"

"You were away on business," Jack said. "And whenever I did reach someone where you were working, they said you were unavailable, but that they'd give you the message. Messages that...hmmm."

"I didn't get! Not in time to do anything with them," Carla insisted. "Really!"

Had Carla said that to Jack three days earlier, he would have believed it. But now, the cloud of 'reasonable doubt' seemed to be possible regarding Carla, the communication lines with her, or even himself. And he knew from tv shows as well as the procedural drama which was his real life that anything he says can and will be used against him in a court of law.

"Yeah, I know why you're keeping your....distance," Jack said after four large bites of the bread which could be his last Ithaca Pantry delight he had missed more than anything else overseas, or on the other side of the continental divide. "It needed to be done. Someone had to kill Rich Williamson before he killed anyone else," he said, recalling from the tv cop shows he enjoyed as well as the procedural drama which was his real life that he had to find out news ways to endure, that 'anything he says can be used against him in a court of law'. "But there's one question I still can't answer...How did I do it?"

Carla snored,, faining going to sleep. Then abruptly, she then wrapped her fingers around Jack's throat. "In your 'sleep'," she said, after which she opened her eyes, then unwrapped the 'NPR Professional Doctor' scarf from her own neck. She showed him the wounds on her own neck, then lifted up her blouse, showing him fresh scars on her belly. "After we came back from Achmed's restaurant, and you stayed over at my place, you were having a bad dream that I tried to wake you up from. You thought I was some guy with a Persian name who, so you said before I splashed water in your face, who just killed ten children after raping and killing their three mothers."

"No," Jack muttered from shaking lips. "I could never...."

"But," Jack said, in audible word. "Shooting Rich Williamson in the head and heart, and groin, that was..."

Carla shut Jack's yapper this time with a kiss on the lips, then a hug, burying his head between her neck and shaking shoulder. "When you're a sleepwalker, you are a better shot with a gun than you ever were when you were awake," she whispered into his ear. "According to Achmed's stories about you overseas."

"That's impossible," Jack said in a loud voice. "That's..."

"This is how it happened," Carla whispered, pulling Jack into her in a congical hug, forcing his mouth onto her chest. "Williamson snuck some drug into you that turned you into the madman you became overseas when you went to sleep there. You woke up as 'a necessary evil' driven to that illusion by the stress of your sister's death, that you genuinely believed was murder. You did what needed to be done."

That's the defense we're going to go with. Now we can do what's needed to be done. With a new brain operation for you that will..." Carla's voice broke up, tears of grief flowing down her cheeks. "Kill that madman inside of you, and turn you into something that....well is safer to be around. But less interesting. Less recognizable or..."

The rest of the description was related with Carla's tears as Jack heard footsteps approaching the cell. Real footsteps in four-four military time from as many guards. "Ten minutes is up, Doc," the Guard whispered to Carla, after which he whisked her away, locking the door behind him.

"Hey!" Jack said, jiggling his right chained wrist. Looking at the distance from where he was to the crapper. "I gotta take a shit here."

"Take it where you are, shithead!" a gruff voice from the other side of the door yelled in. When considering how to use his left hand to undo his prison trousers, Jack's eyes spotted a piece of paper inside the banana bread. He opened it, allowing his six legged cellmate to indulge in a generous portion of crumbs. 'Before the year is done, you will not be living within any walls. My promise. The calligraphy being very familiar. "Yes, a message from Achmed," he said to the cockroach in Farsi. "For both of us," he related to his new companion. A roach that, unlike the singing and dancing insects in Joe's Apartment, would advise him as to how to get his life back on track, with the girl of his newfound dreams, in a language only he could understand. As long as he didn't fall asleep and do the cockroach in of course.

## CHAPTER 5

Time passed slowly for Jack in the Promethia County jail, as measured by the clock, calendar and his now all white beard which had grown down to his sternum. It was accompanied by a mop of still very thick hair on top of his head which now fell just shy of his shoulders. The walls of his cell seemed to be edging in on him more each day, especially after the one hour of exercise he was allowed in the hundred by 60 foot square 'yard' outside where there was a basketball hoop.

On this day, the early morning frost had now turned into a thin layer of snow which the sun would not melt away by noon. He found a new friend in the basketball who he named 'Wilson' after the manufacturer of such, and when he pounded the ball into the ground, venting his anger, 'Williamson', named after the man who he had killed, and wished to kill again. "There ya go, there ya go, and there

ya go again,” he yelled while dribbling the ball against his invisible opponent, finally letting it go into the air, landing it through the hoops in a back throw which worked.

This time, the applause he imagined between his ears was real. “Good shot,” Achmed said to him. “You’re getting better at this game every day,” he said, after which he ran his fingers through his even more thinning hair, the glare of sunlight reflecting on it making the strands of once thick hair vanishing from sight.

“If you’re not getting good at something every day, you’re getting worse at everything,” Jack said, somehow connecting to the part of himself that was him, as he dribbled the ball past the shooting line in a court where, for reasons the sheriff never gave him, he wasn’t allowed to play with any inmates, or guards. “Come on, Achmed,” Jack said to his lawyer, and the only visitor he had since Carla’s drop in as his ‘court appointed psychiatrist’, as the ball hit and was caught by Achmed. “Five minutes of one on one like we used to do back in the old country?”

“Where I beat you every time, but now...” Achmed said, patting his abdomen, then his arms. “Too much luggage in the stomach, too little horsepower in the arms. And as for the eyes?” He threw the ball back to Jack.

“New glasses?” Jack noted, pointing to the specs resting on Achmed’s large Turkish schnoz which had the hook of a Roman nose at its tip. “And new tablet,” he added, as Achmed sat his now fat ass on the oversized log used as a chair. “To take more notes for the trial you say will go better the longer we wait for it? There’s an old fad that’s coming back. A legal pad and pen,” Jack said as he dribbled Wilson for another round around the court.

“I know,” Achmed said as he put on his thin Plexi gloves, then opened the tablet, fumbling with it.

“And you can hold a pen better than you can type in a key with those oversized gloves,” Jack continued, rounding the corner, preparing for a lay up this time.

“So I am told,” Achmed mused. “Now as for your case, we need more information about the real nature of your relationship with your sister.”

“Which the judge, jury and press will still say didn’t justify me killing the man who killed her,” Jack replied, scurrying towards the net, hunched down, ready for the leap upward. “And that me not

remembering how I killed him is me faking an alibi. Or being too dangerous to be allowed to live around, or sleep near, anyone else?" he continued, making the shot. Then yawning after his feet landed on the ground.

"So they tell me, and so such seems to be," Achmed related, with the same painful realization in his eyes that Jack recalled when he found out that his brother's house and all of its inhabitants, including their dogs and horses. Who had been killed as collateral damage in a raid to protect European and American 'aide and oil workers' from being taken by terrorists.

"And this brain operation they say will help me, and the world?" Jack asked. "What's it called?"

"Median Septal Nuclear Ablation, so they say," Achmed replied, after reading it on the screen of his lap top. "Very easily done. They go through the nose. And don't have to shave ANY part of your head, or face."

"Yeah," Jack said, stroking his newly grown beard, which grew in far whiter than it had been before taking it off during his transformation into becoming the ghost of his sister. "But, one question. Will I still be able to design and build structures that work with and defy the laws of traditional physics at the same time? And for the right people, like I did before?"

"As long as you follow the instruction manual the bosses give you, and work under them as a supervised, and underpaid, ward of the state," Achmed's reply as he shut down the lab top, frustrated, looking at his watch. "And get regular check ups. So the doctors tell me."

"And the doctors are from where?" Jack inquired.

"The...the....Halston Clinic..." Achmed barked out.

"Based in?"

"Saint Paul, Minnesota, OK!" Jack's usually calm and collected lawyer, and friend, shot back. "But we have other things to talk about here, so that may not have to happen!"

“Like how I’ll be living without any walls around me before the year is up?” Jack said, holding up the note that slipped out of the banana bread specially baked by Elfesya, delivered by Achmed on his last visit.

“A promise!” Achmed affirmed, crossing himself then raising his hand to the sky. :”So help me Jesus, and Allah!” He reached out to grab the note.

“Who both blessed you with great and distinctive handwriting,” Jack said, gazing at the note again, admiring the places where tags were put on the letters at just the right places to make the words they spelt out seem beautiful, kind and divinely accurate.” Putting aside the fact that, as he stated when sharing a bottle of rum with Jack many experiences and unreported wars ago, that he was raised by a Moslem father and Eastern Orthodox mom. Parents who didn’t believe anything their followers thought they did.

“And, you say there were witnesses to me doing what I did to Rich Williamson?” Jack continued. “Living ones that is?”

“Unfortunately, yes, this time,” Achmed said.

“Who are our friends or enemies?” Jack asked.

Achmed took in a deep breath, carefully considering what to say, looking upward, to the side, then downward, connecting to events, people and that most evasive of memories, provable truth. Finally he turned to Jack. “I’m delaying the court date for as long as possible so you, and me, can explore other options. Which will become evident on my next visit.”

With that Achmed got off the stump and hugged Jack. “The truth shall set us both free,” he pledged, after which he knocked on the door, requesting entry back into the jail corridor, leaving Jack alone with Wilson, and Williamson. With the five minutes left to him for yard time before the ‘safer and saner’ inmates could experience fresh air and human company, Jack beat the pants off another team of imaginary players, winning the match by 11 points. Then faded into exhaustion, stumbling over to the ‘bench’ with wide yawns, hoping that slumber would take him over. Perhaps to, this time, attack in his sleep his worse enemy---himself.

He was saved the trouble, and opportunity, to strangle himself in his sleep or bash his head against the concrete wall by a guard calling him back into his cell. With walls that, when he was escorted into it, were encroaching closer each time he looked at them. Courtesy of pads that had been glued onto each of them. Riley, as he now preferred to call the perhaps male or perhaps female or (given that it was Ithaca, after all) Two Spirited Roach who found its way through the cushions, motioned with its forelimbs that it was hungry. Breakfast was slipped through the door, on time. A muffin this time, and breakfast sandwich.

Jack reached into the morning meal to see if there was another note, finding it to be a spare piece of wrapping free of any 'fortune cookie note'. "Shit!" Jack grunted. But, for the moment, Riley was there to talk with. As long, of course, as he, or she, knew enough to go back to the hiding place between the cracks in the walls when Jack was 'asleep'.

## CHAPTER 16

More time passed in the cell and outside of it, with more hair growing on Jack's face and head. More hair fell out of Achmed's scalp, the latter happening because, as Achmed related with a scholarly wisdom, 'no grass grows on busy streets'. Still, Jack's lawyer and, as he had no other visitors, only friend came regularly. With each visit, Achmed took more notes about Jack's background, medical state and recently, political views about the latest developments in Washington, DC, New York, Istanbul. And, as both men agreed to the name it, 'Los Angeles'. Fodder for those conversations about 'theoreticals' were the newspapers Achmed's wife had used to wrap Turkish, Greek and American delicacies to keep Jack's body from deteriorating.

As for Jack's mind, it dwelled in the imaginary realm more than the real one, which had its drawbacks and advantages. His requests for historical and legal books to read were answered with overused volumes of literary fiction written by writers (including Poe, Kafka, Mailer, Dickens and Chekov) who, though brilliant, were 'on the spectrum'. Tales about the common man, for the most part. And the fall of those who thought they were important.

Indeed, Jack didn't need to ask for any talking books, as he heard voices of the characters in those works of fiction as if they were actually in the cell with him. And, on occasion, they did make a visual



appearance. But Jack still knew enough to not talk to Two Spirited Riley in Achmed's presence. But he did he raise the issue of cross species communication. Along with whether one should consider gender of the non-humanoid side of the 'telepathically and neuro-linguistically mediated' conversation. Which of course led to asking how everyone else Jack knew on the 'outside' were doing. Top on the list of course was Sidhartha who, he was assured, was as spry as a pup, and who now had two fellow canine girl friends. As for girlfriends, Achmed informed Jack that Carla still needed 'space and time' to process what had happened to Ann, and everyone else, not naming who that 'everyone else' was. Inquiries about once Officer, now Lt. Wendy Jackson, still yielded a 'well, she is who she is,' delivered with averted eyes and a 'it is what it is' face revealing deeper levels of resignation to fate each time related.

At the end of each session Achmed had said the same thing. "Patience, until opportunity knocks, for both of us to figure out a way to get you other options than a rock and a hard place." As for when that opportunity would happen, 'soon', was Achmed's assurance, delivered directing at and into Jack's ocular portholes. But 'soon' became later, or seemed to become 'never'.

Early winter led to deep winter, then an early Spring. Until one day, Jack woke up to a very strange reality in his cell, and not the usual confusion between what was the 'dream state' and what was the 'awake' brand of consciousness. "So, is this from you?" Jack asked the hologram of Oliver Twist in front of his eyes regarding the gym bag in front of his cot below the surveillance camera above which was.... off.

The lad from the Dickens novel who survived hand to mouth, trying to avoid a beating from those who would beat him senseless if he stood up for himself shook his head, saying 'no'. The hologram and/or ghost then disappeared.

Jack turned to the Riley, who squeaked with her forelegs 'not me' to Jack requesting to know who left the gym bag in his cell while he was 'asleep'

"So open it already, and if it is a bomb, your troubles will be over," Kafka spouted out, this time from a bodiless voice pulsing on the wall in front of Jack. Using Riley's yapper as a mouthpiece, in keeping with the main character in 'Metamorphosis' who became a giant cockroach at the beginning of the tale.

"Sure, gotta 'transition to the next dimension' of something," Jack muttered to himself, knowing that if his conversations with ghosts, even his still absent sister, it would lead him into the operating room where surgery would be done on what was left of his brain before the courts decided it was legally sanctioned.

But Jack felt his life time clock ticking, which in reality was real. Upon forcing the zipper of the enlarged gym bag open, he discovered with his REAL ears that it was an alarm clock, set to go off loudly in an hour. Below it, a Correction Officer's Uniform along with weather worn loose jeans, a black tee shirt and an NFL ski jacket with remnants of a now outdated Washington Redskins logo on it. Below all of that, three hundred and twenty dollars in cash, mostly overused small bills. Along with a passport, a credit card for 'James Rolland', along with a nametag bearing that name. And a Driver's Licence for said individual along with a copy of a car registration, and a set keys. The picture on the licence seemed familiar somehow.

Upon focusing his weary and bloodshot eyes, and 'feeling' what they were seeing with the third eye above his nose, Jack's gut confirmed that it was an AI generated image of himself. An image of himself that he always feared he might become from the first time he was shown the picture of the grandfather. Who raised him till he was four, then departed for the afterlife, leaving 'the most interesting parts of him to his favorite grandson'. As evidenced by habits the old fart with the mysterious immigrant past had, such as wanting to eat ice cream in a glass rather than a cup or dish. But with some parts about his appearance that Jack feared as a teen who wanted to grow his hair as long as he could, and an adult feared losing it.

"So," Jack said to the image of himself as 'Officer Rolland' with no beard and not a strand of hair on his head except for a half inch rim around the ears and above the neck with a mixture of fear and fascination. "I don't think this is going to work, unless...."

Riley crawled into the gym bag, sniffing his/her way around it. The cockroach scrounged for food, then settled for tasting and liking a bar of shaving soap. Around which was a clipper, razor, and small vial of hair remover.

"OK to the clip, but not the permanent scalping," Jack said to himself. "Unless..." His eyes were drawn to another item in the gym bag, just before Riley approached it. It was a lollipop, around which was a printed message. "Who loves ya baby? Me". Whoever the 'me;' was, had to be someone who knew Jack very well, and that he was a fan of Kojak.

Maybe the ghost of Telly Savalas was coming to his rescue. Or maybe his 'I came to this country with five cents in my pocket and turned it into a fortune that educated and fed my family' grandfather returning from the dead. Perhaps his sainted grandpa had reincarnating as a roach because of how he turned that nickel into a large enough bank account to become an American success story. As for that who 'me' was, such would be discovered soon enough.

## CHAPTER 17

Logical thought took an exit stage left from Jack's consciousness, as he once again 'became a verb'. Whoever was offering him an escape from his present condition did indeed have more smarts than Carla did when she posed as his court appointed shrink and husband. And most probably had more connections with the world behind bars and in front of them. Someone who valued who he still was, and could be who needed him to become, temporarily anyway, James Rolland. He couldn't pass up the opportunity to become Purposeful to someone and something.

The transformation to such took place below a camera which was not on. But presented some difficulties, such as...."What to do with all of this hair?" Jack asked Riley as he looked at the mound of hair from his now, save for a thin rim around the ears, bald head, and the curly locks from his naked face. "Take it with me to glue on when it is safe to do so, or donate it to a cancer patient?" he pondered, and gave voice to. "If the official guards here find it, they'll make a composite picture of me with an APB in this country and every other one that has an extradition arrangement with the US and..." Considering that a delay in being found to be missing beat trying to astral project out of the cell, he stuffed pillows, books, prison clothing and civilian shirts onto a form that looked human, putting a blanket over it. He glued clumps of his now disconnected hair on Wilson's head, conferring to the basketball the likeness of a strange genius with a bigger head than the world could or should handle.

"Think about this," Riley seemed to say to Jack. "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts, and as for me...."

"...Who I can't take with me," Jack pondered, and gave voice to, noting that the surveillance camera in the cell was.....gone. "Or maybe I can," he whispered, reaching down to allow Riley to leap on his hand. An offer he/she refused, scurrying between the pads on the walls into her special hiding place, or perhaps haven, behind the walls. "Every married man is allowed a Platonic or maybe non-Platonic mistress," he said, thinking about Carla, who he still wished to connect with somehow. "But cross species relationships, gay or otherwise, are still frowned upon by the courts," he mused. "Then there's Sidhartha, my sister's dog who she left to me who may not understand what we've been through but...he shouldn't have to, because..."

The alarm on "James Rollans'" watch gave out a muffled ring, followed no more than five seconds later with the door to the cell opening. "Now, please," a raspy voice which Jack could not identify said. Jack snuck a look on the hallway leading towards a sign pointing to the emergency exit door. He was afforded only an auditory confirmation of his liberator's presence. Whoever it was had a limp, the first beat of his feet around the corner being soft. The second hard. The third 'heart sound' beat being a deep inbreath and outbreath in the empty, abruptly darkened hallway.

Jack did a quick turn towards Riley, and the humanoid imaginary friends who had been more supportive and clear than humanoids in the 'awake/real' world in the last few months. "So long, it's been good to know ya," he whisper-sung to them to the tune of Woody Guthrie's song about once well off ranchers and farmers who left the dustbowl of Texas and less 'colorful' states north of it for the possibility of finding a home, and new life, in California in the dirty thirties. "Now!" the messenger repeated, with a sense of urgency that said it was the last time.

With that, Jack, according to instructions in the bottom of gym bag, left the cell, closing it behind him, placing (as instructed by his new patron) a sign on the door reading "COVID Case. Quarantined until further notice." He then looked at the 'sleeping doll' under a blanket, singing a quick stanza of the Guthrie tune to Wilson. He then arched his back with an authoritative rising of his chin and proceeded down the hallway towards the exit door. The dimly lit corridor lighted up again. With his best 'poker, not allowed to tell or laugh at a joke customs inspector' face, Jack proceeded past two other correction officers and the cells of four other prisoners. None of them seemed to smell the sweat of fear on him, or take notice of his presence visually.

As threatened, and promised, a blue and black 2002 Ford pickup bearing the licence plate on Rolland's registration was waiting for Jack in the parking lot. Freshly washed, relative to the dirt and late winter snowy soot on the other vehicles around it. The gas tank was filled. The radio station on NPR classical. To the tune of the New World Symphony, Jack drove away to his new 'life'. Or provider. But one person in his past had to be contacted first.

After purchasing a burner flip phone at Walmart, Jack lingered in the parking lot, clad in civilian attire he purchased at that establishment, having changed into them in the men's room stall. No one had been following him, and no one at Walmart recognized him. Indeed, he didn't recognize himself in the mirrors placed around the clothing department designed to make shoppers dissatisfied with themselves or their current wardrobe. He after dialing the number on the phone, he was still unsure of what he should say. Three rings, then four, penetrated into his ears, seeming to get louder. Then an answering machine kicked in, with the voice of a computerized female 'secretary' who had an English accent whose age was anyone's guess, or fantasy.

"No, I have to do this in person," Jack told himself, ending the call. "It's the honorable and smart thing to do." He headed up Route 13 for a need for food, and the right person to share it with.

## CHAPTER 18

No one in Achmed's restaurant recognized Jack. Not his nephew Tom, who stopped in see if he needed any construction done in preparation for the surprise inspection from the new building inspector who was elected to City Council. Or the school chums Jack went to high school and some AP courses at Cornell with. Or the handful of students Jack had given lectures to in engineering who represented the 2 percent of the student body whose motivation to get an education was to better the world rather than beat the classmates next to him out of a high paying job. Or, Elfesya, Achmed's wife, who three times called him 'Sir' when checking to see if he had made up his mind regarding what he wanted for lunch, then dessert.

Achmed finally did make his appearance at the cash register. With very slow old man's gait, he placed hand written memos behind him on the wall. The letters, like the menu, were penned with a calligraphy more worthy of an Arab scholar or Irish Medieval monk than a contemporary businessman. Jack approached with a swagger worthy of Correction Officer Rolland to pay with his new credit card. Achmed turned his way to address matters of contemporary business. He took Jack's credit card and swiped it through the machine, discovering after tries that it was rejected. "Do you have any cash on you, Mister Rolland?" Achmed asked Jack.

"Maybe if you insert rather than swipe?" Jack suggested with a gruff voice so not his own that it scared him.

Following Jack's instructions, the card did register, the pin typed on a small scrap of paper inside James' wallet verifying the card. "Thank you, Sir," Achmed said with gratitude and respect, after which Jack inserted the card into the machine again, adding a tip which was twice the amount for the meal. "Thank you," the hard working Restaurateur returned with a grateful smile, looking at his customer for the first time.

"You're most welcomed, Achmed," Jack said in his natural voice.

"Jack, is that you?! Why and how did you get here?!!!" Achmed gasped. "You look....different!"

"And feel different, because I took opportunities offered to me," Jack said. "Offered by someone you maybe know?"

"Eh...no one I know, or know of, " Achmed replied,. "Unless you made friends with one of thankfully the LATE Mayor Rich's cronies, when you planted the microphones in his house."

“With tapes that, maybe you hid?” Jack inquired. “And were they confiscated?”

“Destroyed, so I was told,” Achmed whispered to Jack. “After Wendy Jackson, now Captain Jackson, said were admissible in court. I locked them in my safe here at the restaurant, and....well,” he continued, looking towards the back room. “There was a break in,” Achmed related with tears of anger and fear running down his cheeks. The thugs got cash from the register, my father’s recipe book and the best cuts of meat buyable. And the firearms I had stored to protect this place, and my family and you from...” The usual pillar of mental composure overseas and here took in a deep breath, collected his thoughts, then looked at and into Jack. Particularly as three uniformed policemen came in for lunch, with a well dressed hot looking female administrator and/or ‘compassion for rent’. “I think, Mister Rolland, that perhaps the cure for the exhaustion in your eyes is a good nap, a long shower and a good night with your girlfriend, at your home. And...” he opened the cash register, retrieving a small bills hidden under the cash slot, handing them to Jack. “Lunch is on the house,” he declared. “And dinner, which you should eat somewhere private, or some new home,” he continued, leaning in towards Jack. “That I don’t want to know about!” he whispered in Farci.

As for where that home was, the only address for such was on Rolland’s driver’s licence. Jack, and James’, next destination.

## CHAPTER 19

The Roland residence was a modest, spotlessly maintained two story sterile in spirit and reality dwelling in Elmira. Upon entry ‘back home’ as Correction Officer James, Jack smelled the residual aroma of carpet cleaner on blemish free rugs that with each tuft seeming to have been combed into place. He was greeted by a white cat nudging on his leg. “So,” he asked the feline. “Is anyone else home?”

The cat meowed something that felt like ‘no’, which led Jack to hear with his inner ears ‘you were supposed to feed me two hours ago, so where were you all this time, pathetic human?’. But the cat was not imaginary, and seemed to want something other than to be picked up and petted on its soft, white fur at a pace and place of HER choosing.

“Yeah, I’m hungry too,” Jack whispered to the cat, replying the question from her lingering in his head. He entered the kitchen, which smelled of dishwashing detergent and pine disinfectant. On the counter of the oversized culinary laboratory was a can of cat food. The feline leaped up next to it, pushing it towards Jack. Feeling himself to be the superior species, for no other reason than being able to grab the can with an appposable thumb and open it with a tool rather than his teeth, Jack released the top of the can from its contents. He was drawn to its rather pleasant smelling odor, sensing tuna and turkey as its

main ingredients. "Hmmm....smells good enough for me to eat as well as you," Jack said, thinking about the homeless people in the jungle and refugees abroad who had acquired a taste for expired pet food by necessity, then choice. "But...."

The feline meowed, 'fed me now, stupid and insubordinate human', prompting Jack to pour the lioness', portion of the can into a metal bowl on the kitchen table, catching a glimpse of himself in its reflection. "There but for fortune," Jack said to himself. He tried to recall the other lyrics of the Dylan tune reminding the have's that they could fall into being the 'have nots' for missing one payment on their house. Thoughts of being around the have's who had way too much and have nots who had virtually nothing once again entered his head, mind and soul.

Jack, directly or indirectly, had put bullets into the heads of tribal leaders and soldiers overseas when they attacked the tribes, villages and factories he was charged with defending by, officially anyway, the internationally run UN or the American staffed Peace Corp. Of course, they were "varments" coming over the hill whose face or eyes were all 'blurs'. In the aftermath of those 'victories' over the 'bad guys', the 'remaining guys (and gals), very much including Achmed and his family, were dependent on Jack for the most basic needs. While Jack's bosses, and to be honest, Jack himself, still had access to a plethora of 'wants'.

The cat meowed, interrupting Jack's unexpected and, to be honest, pleasurable in its own way walk down memory lane overseas. Where he was on top of the pyramid, a well off chief engineer, scientific Savior, first class advisor and Philosopher King who was elected to such positions because he had skills that none of the refugees, or fellow workers, had. If he had been able to master the art of keeping 'the masses' and his 'coworkers' entertained, he could have become President for life. It was the aroma of his own body that woke him from the dream about the past before it became a nightmare, the latter occurring to everyone else in the wake of him being called back home.

"Yeah, I smell like I had a roll in the hay with a mangey dog in the garbage disposal area of the Jungle, or wrestled with a pig who decided to dumpster dive into the container I claimed as my own," Jack said as he lifted up his left arm, taking in a healthy whiff of what was under it. "No wonder why at Achmed's restaurant, I was allowed to have a table of my own, and...hmmm....was not told to leave." He turned to walk upstairs towards a bathroom. "Stay!" he said to the guard cat with an extended open palm. "I'll be right back, assuming that there isn't anyone else up there who wants to throw me down the stairs. Either a live human or the ghost of whoever I'm allowed to be now. But hasn't done so yet."

After feeling, then verifying, that he was the sole human inhabitant in any of the other rooms in the dwelling, Jack whipped off his shirt, feeling as much skin as sweat come off with it. He tossed it into an empty laundry hamper. It left a wake of 'grunge' that permeated his nostrils. Such reminded Jack of 'athletic locker room after shave' in high school where his lack of skill in any team sports and actively

non-competitive spirit disconnected him from his fellow students and no shortage of homophobic insults from the gym teacher in his past. Then he considered his present situation. Indeed there was something that he had put on his B list which should have been on the A list in this new 'adventure' offered to him by an anonymous patron.

Jack wondered how long he could be a James Rolland, or another 'free; man' in a country with no extradition arrangement with the US? And what kind of employment was involved in the deal? And if his university taught skills as an engineer who could convert wood, metal and artificially manufactured plastics which thus far were not deemed toxic into structures for living and working as and his self-taught abilities to put together flesh and minds that had been torn apart back into place would be sufficient for him to earn his keep. Or when the jury at the trial for killing a man who was killing so many others in body, mind and spirit, including his sister, would forgive him for doing such or, maybe, reward him. Achmed would intervene as an attorney and wangle the events into a self-defence plea. And Carla could provide medical facts as a psych nurse that would get Jack off for TEMPORARY limited mental capacity plea, without a need for a new kind of lobotomy or being locked up in a funny farm for life. But...there was first the matter of who Jack was supposed to do NOW.

The answer to how long it was possible to be James Rolland without complications was on a calendar hanging on the wall which outlined James' Rolland's activities. It was cluttered with household and money making 'to do's along with reminders to call, and go out with, at least 4 different women filled going back to three weeks ago. Thereafter, 'HAWAIIAN VACATION WHETHER YOU WANT TO OR NOT' was the sole entry for the next month.

Pictures of the man who wrote such on the calendar were next to it. James Rolland, according to those pictures, was a robust 50ish man with a full head of hair hanging slightly below the ears appended with a 19<sup>th</sup> century waxed handlebar mustache which made a wide shit eating grin on his face seem bigger than life. He was experiencing far more happiness than the pleasantly smiling 'beautiful people' companions on 21<sup>st</sup> century yachts on Lake Champlain in summer and in front of chalets in Aspen. Then there were photos of Rolland at play off games with NFL quarterback Eli Manning and Coach Bill Belichick who Jack did recognize, the only faces that were familiar to him.

All of the photos were on a newly constructed wall of sheetrock, the logo on it Wood for Winners. That chain of up and coming stores which was owned by none other than Tom DeFoe. Jack's nephew, who had, according to Achmed, disowned his mother even more after her death than when she was alive. Who also informed Jack that Tom's empire of building supply stores had achieved its first goal of beating out the independent operations by lowering prices and was actively in stage two of the classic Carnegie/Rockefeller stage of upping the fee for all 'common' goods. Tom's stores now featured 'top end high quality' and ultra expensive materials for the richest contractors in the state. Such of course would bring in a healthy and easily obtained profit as getting netting \$5000 with one hyper rich client each day is far less work than obtaining ten \$500 returns on investment from ten commoners.



Commoners who are struggling to build or maintain the ONE house they live in rather than their fourth summer cottage or winter getaway A frame.

The skeletons, secret stash, or rodents behind those walls was James Rolland's business. Right now Jack decided that it was his pleasure, and business, to treat himself to some creature comforts. After bolt-locking all of the doors, Jack took a shower. He spent no less than half an hour washing off the grunge from outside and inside his body. With a towel wrapped around his waist, his attention was held hostage by an image of it in a full length mirror. He had shrunken from a size 34 waist to a 28, the ribs on his chest visible to the eye as well as easily palpable to the fingers. All of such despite the donations of food Achmed's wife had prepared for him, delivered twice a week while in 'temporary' confinement. 'Hmm' Jack told himself. "Maybe I shouldn't have shared so much of that food with my imaginary friends, or... that cockroach who I..." he continued, forgetting the name of his only real life visitor other than Achmed. "Or maybe RILEY", he said, emphasizing the gender neutral name he forced himself to remember, the past, present and future all becoming the same 'blur', "brought in some friends to share the food".

Jack's recalled to the aroma of that food, and its preparer. Elfesya Ackbas. Achmed's wife, who was a master of her craft in the kitchen, even in the 'old country' where the ingredients for meals and their amount were limited. But who, according to Achmed on the night when he and Jack shared a bottle of whiskey, was a 'novice' in the bedroom. Who had over the last ten years gained thirty pounds, all in the least attractive places. But who was still an underappreciate beauty above the neck, to Jack anyway. A mother to three beautiful young adults who had called Jack 'Uncle' overseas, at her suggestion, then prodding.

Jack's thoughts wandered to the Ackbas family. They were the closest thing he could call family when in the Middle East during those challenging times when survival could be obtained by grit and luck, and being Alive big A was obtained only by the most spiritually advanced and emotionally strong individuals. He recalled conversations about non legal matters Achmed related to him while incarcerated, waiting indefinitely for the 'right time and the right judge' to appear before going to trial. Nala, the eldest of Achmed's daughters, once underchallenged, headstrong young nurse and was now a mature medical school in Nebraska. Her entry was made possible in part due to her saying at the interview that she was 'more interested in saving a thousand children in Africa from dying from Ebola than doing a top quality job converting a rich Senator's actor's son into a girl, or making his 60 year old wife look like his 24 year old mistress'. Ceren had decided that she was still determined to become what she always wanted to be, 'the hardest job in the world'. A mother. Who was now pregnant with a child she would name Jack if a boy, and Jackie if a girl. Emir, now a graduate student at Berkley, had been at war with his old school and stagnant thinking thesis advisor for daring to propose a new way to build earthquake proof houses using a fraction of the funds and materials that the San Francisco building codes required. He was able to do so by adopting and advancing Jack's plans for such which had designed after too much horizontal drilling across international borders in Syria had created a hole which was blamed for the ground shaking in Tel Aviv as well as Gaza.

“Yes,” Jack said as he rummaged through the overstocked closets looking for something that would fit him, noting no less than 20 three identical versions of suits, pants and shirts in man’s wear. And, ten that were women’s attire, below which were size 11 pumps, stiletto heels, and pink runners. “I have to call Achmed. The only family I have left. To...” Jack searched his mind to find or formulate an excuse to call Achmed. He would eventually ask, yet again, “So when do we go to trial?” Of course Jack would get the same answer from an annoyed, concerned and hard working Achmed, “As soon as I can make this work for us.”

Jack dialed the number on his burner cell, beginning the conversation with, “So Sidhartha, who sometimes likes to be called Sidney” he said regarding his officially ‘deceased by natural causes or suicide’ sister’s dog. Her only ‘child’, who was in the hands of the best people he knew now, including himself. “How is he?”

“Fine,” Elfesya answered, but with a different tone and intention in her voice than Jack had ever heard from her.

“And you?” Jack inquired, bracing for the worst of news. “You don’t sound so fine.”

“It’s...Achmed,” Elfesya answered after a tense delay “He’s....not here, he’s....”. Jack could hear the tears falling down her cheeks.

“What’s going on?” Jack asked, then demanded to know.

“Where are you, Jack?” Elfesya asked, collecting herself.

Against his better judgement, and Achmed’s unspoken advise, he related James Rolland’s address, rapidly at first, as if a reflex. Then slowly, asking if Elfesya got all the numbers and street names written down.

“We’ll be there in an hour,” Elfesya assured Jack. After a tense delay as to who ‘we’ was, as if reading Jack’s troubled and now conflicted mind, she continued, “Me and Sidney.”

Jack heard every ticking of the grandfather clock in the living room as if it was a base drum, then a bullet, then a bomb. The volume was difficult enough to deal with, but the beats slowing down was even worse. When his ears heard the silence he yearned to hear the ticks, and when the ticks got louder he begged for more silence. But, finally, after an hour and, as promised, 60 or so minutes, he heard a car pulling into the driveway. He carefully opened the closed curtains just enough to see what was going on outside. It indeed was Elfesya, wearing a parka with a hood over her downward deflected head, walking as fast as she could without breaking into a run, that gait having a limp to it. Behind her, Sidhartha, the white and black patches on him contrasting each other very clearly in a world that was becoming more grey by the moment.

Jack released the boltlock on the door, his eye drawn to bandages on her left calf which became evident when the wind separated the slits in her skirt. "What happened?" he enquired as he shuffled her into the house, locking the door behind her.

"Achmed's leg injuries from the thugs he couldn't identify in the restaurant which happened three days ago were a lot worse," she said, hobbling her way into the hallway, letting Sidney enter before she did.

"Which he got, how?" Jack said, while stroking the hound on the top of his head, attempting to silence his bark.

"Mi rotas," Elfesya replied, a Greek expression which Jack knew was 'don't ask'. It was followed by "he who asks too many questions gets too many answers," a Czech saying during the Communist era which prevented one from being informed about new oppressive regulations that were added to the already large lists of 'thou shalt not' rules limiting one's life.

But there was one question that Jack HAD to ask, and have answered, no matter how much danger or distress it would put him into when Elfesya pulled back her hood, revealing fresh red pustules around her averted eyes. "How did that happen? Who did this?!" he demanded to know of the woman whose name meant 'beautiful princess'.

"A common enemy," she related. "Who...." Elfesya broke down in tears, her fear, shame or perhaps anger choking her ability to give voice to anything.

Jack pulled her into his chest. Her tears soaked the shirt he had burrowed from James' closet. Her pain penetrated into his chest underneath it. His comforting hug spurred her into grabbing hold of him with

a tight grip which enabled him to feel her erratically beating heart as well as, truth be told, her shaking breasts. “Come, into the kitchen,” he said, upon hearing the growling in her empty stomach. “I’ll make us some tea and supper. Which I know won’t be as tasty as anything you prepare, but which, so far anyway, hasn’t killed me. Maybe Sidney won’t snub his nose at it, as I know you’ve spoiled him rotten with your cooking.”

Jack’s attempt at delivering a compliment to Elfesya and a dig at himself did elicit a small chuckle from her. Though it was probably the approving bark from Sidney that convinced her to allow Jack to lead her into the kitchen.

Over a meal of partially cooked and partially still crunchy Romane noodles (which Jack named Crackhead soup) and half burnt and half raw burgers, Jack diverted conversation to how his adopted nieces and nephews were doing. He reminded Elfesya that it was HER, not him, who made them success stories that would revolutionize the medical, engineering and family raising world.

“Achmed....exaggerated the stories about Nala, Cerin and Emir ” Elfesya related regarding the tales of accomplishments of her children Jack had heard from her husband, while looking downward at the floor, and sneaking the burnt portions of Jack’s cooking to Sidney.

“Like he exaggerates the odds that I’ll get a fair trial if we wait for the ‘right time for all of it to work for all of us,’” Jack noted.

“My husband is, a....hard working... optimist,” she replied, with averting her eyes.

“And his promise to find a medical solution for the blood thirsty Incredible Hulk I turn into when I sleep walk?” Jack gently pressed.

“Huh?” Elfesya replied, looking at Jack with a clearing visible puzzled look.

“The Incredible Hulk,” Jack explained. “Normal, mild mannered, white man who when he gets angry turns into a big, mean, green giant who tears open whatever he’s wearing. Who has classical metaphysical and physical split personality who...”

“You sleep walk?” Elfesya asked.

“So I was told,” Jack replied, feeling for the first time genuine doubt about that observation. “By Carla. And Achmed, who...”

“...Never loved me,” Elfesya confessed, and related, taking off her wedding ring. After which she placed her shaking hand on Jack’s firm forearm. “Not the way I always loved you.”

“You, who I never loved back, to the best of my memory,” Jack thought but dared not give voice to. “Did Achmed do this to you?” he asked Elfesya, pointing to the red rim around her left eye which was expanding before his eyes, evolving into a black and blue bruise.

“If he did, which he didn’t, I deserved it,” her reply. “For wanting to...” She held back the rest, the knot in her throat so strong one could hear it.

“Wanting to do what?” Jack asked, gently.

Elfesya answered the question with a kiss on Jack’s lips. One which, truth be told, he did enjoy, but dared not return after she withdrew. Trying to hold onto a barbed wire coated cracking branch on the edge of a cliff rather than surrendering to a fall downward into a comfortable trampoline. “When I prepared those dishes he delivered to you when you were in jail, and in the restaurant before the incident with Bill, I put in an extra portion of love, which...when it got to you perhaps also had in it...”

Jack waited for her to complete what she was about to say, but her lips tightened, then quivered, tears running down her cheek again, which were painful when meeting freshly broken flesh. Jack pulled out a napkin and wiped the tears away, then did his best to absorb the blood emerging from her ‘accidental’ wounds. She grabbed hold of the blood and tear soaked napkin from his, throwing it aside, then pressed Jack’s naked fingers against her face.

“I fell, or rather let myself fall, really. And with the cancer that came back two months ago that requires expensive treatment that I can’t afford by myself,” she said, truthfully. Staring at and into Jack soul which, as his mind intuited it, had turned into a lie detector. Whatever Elfesya was hiding, or feeling, was of the utmost importance. Secrets about her self-destructive ‘habits’ due to things she had not done to help others, or she had done intentionally which hurt others. He was determined to find out those secrets. The opportunity to do so knocked on Jack’s door with the strength of a battering ram, and the charm of a singing mermaid.

Jack took led Elfesya gently by the hand to the living room, where he said the seating was more comfortable. And where they both could take their minds off the problems of the 'real' world by getting immersed into the one created on the two dimensional screen. Jack reminding her that 'if you look closely enough, all of the answers as to how the world works or how it should are in movies.' The films being offered on James Rolland's cable guide were mostly medically themed. About doctors who could with the magic of biomedical science, cure any disease. Jack clicked on the most notable and appropriate one of them 'Patch Adams', adopted from a real story about rebel doc who said that laughter was the best medicine, played very authentically by Robin Williams.

"An actor who denied and defied reality who killed himself," Elfesya said as she grabbed the remote from Jack's hand, turning off the television. She then turned to Jack, stroked his chest. "Thank you for not shaving this hair off, Jack. Because if you did, your manhood would be in question, and I know that no matter how well you passed yourself off as being a female electrician to get the goods on Mayor Rich Williamson, you are definitely a..."

Before she could describe the gender Jack was blessed, and/or cursed, as being born into in an age and city celebrating estrogen empowerment, the organ which was, rightly or wrongly, a distinct hallmark of manhood rose up to attention. His attempts to push the woody between his legs aside, or squeeze it into flaccid submission with his legs were unsuccessful.

"I need this now, and I know you wanted it, for a long time," Elfesya whispered into his ear, the first part of her statement being very true and the second not so. "I'm dying, Jack," she said by way of explanation, ripping his shirt open. "And even if you could get me pregnant, I won't survive until the lump of flesh in my womb can form a heart, and will die it forms anything resembling a brain, so..."

Elfesya grabbed hold of Jack, pushing him on his back. Her excess poundage prevented him from standing or even sitting up. She raised up her skirt, under which there was nothing but flesh, then pulled down Jack's trousers. Then ripped open his shirt. She massaged his nipples, picking at them with a vibrating motion. Then she kissed him, again and again. On his nipples, then the chest, then on the underside of his neck, wetting his skin with her tongue until she worked her way into inserting said tongue into his mouth.

Jack's mind observed his body delivering Elfesya what she wanted, and needed, but his brain was still active. Instead of thinking about how to serve, and please, Elfesya's desires, his thoughts opened up other avenues of 'active consideration'. Such put various two and two's together and coming up with interesting varieties of fours which could explain his current predicament, theoretically anyway. Such as the identity of the limping man who freed him from incarceration prior to a court order being Achmed. Who at the restaurant was moving very slowly and who, according to Elfesya, had acquired a bad leg injury three days earlier. And the interesting aftertaste in the food he was served at Achmed's

restaurant just before killing Bill. And the food Achmed snuck into his jail cell having a strange aftertaste and texture, perhaps due to extra ingredients Achmed had put into them along with Elfesya's love.

And, as Jack now visualized clearly in his head, there was the note on Ann's 'killed by herself or by accidental overdose of something toxic to her biology' body summoning him to be notified of her death before any other relative, or friend. Related was told in a font featuring tails and squiggles on the letters which were identical to those on the memos Achmed wrote on his 'to do' board when house-sitting Bill's place. And on the various memos at his restaurant behind the counter that he 'accidentally' blocked Jack from seeing when appearing as 'James Rolland'. And there was the fact that when Achmed visited Jack in the clink as his attorney, he typed everything on his tablet rather writing down anything on a legal pad.

And there was the matter of Achmed's appearance at Bill's tent just as Jack woke up after presumably going into a 'sleep walk' due to something in the tent. And the law school diplomas Achmed flashed in front of Lieutenant now Captain Jackson which perhaps were from an imaginary university. And the energy-conferring organic cookies Achmed gave him to munch on before entering Rich Williamson's tent so he could 'think clearly and effectively'. And...there was the runaway homeless girl in the Jungle who insisted that Jack eat all of them before confronting the Mayor. And...

"And what are you thinking?" Elfesya gave voice to, interrupting the dialog between reason and intuition, paranoia and vigilance, fear and realization going on in Jack's aching head.

"Thinking about what?" Jack said to Elfesya, whose body was as naked as his.

"Us?" she said as a statement and question. "Are we...together?"

"Yes," Jack said, hugging Elfesya with as much love and affection as he could muster, hoping that 'sincerity, if you can fake that' was something that worked in the real world as well as Hollywood. "We are and always have been....yes...connected, in ways that..."

Thankfully, Jack did not have to go into a discourse about the differences between Philos, love of comrades, Eros, love of body, and Agape, love of Spirit big S. Elfesya had surrendered into a deep slumber, her face smiling. Indeed, he was tired as well. Tired of lies, deceptions and being a pawn in games that were not his own. He looked towards Sidney. The hound was sitting up on the large easy chair across from the couch, looking out through an opening in the curtains. Standing guard as, apparently he wasn't able to do, when Ann needed protection from the man who murdered her. Than

murderer being perhaps Rich Williamson , but probably Achmed. Or maybe both of them. In any case, having a guard dog was the best alarm a man, or woman, could have. And, as Jack knew all too well from freeing people from confinement overseas and being confined himself, a man who is sleep deprived, is both ineffective in fighting enemies. And even less effective in determining if such enemies are from the real or imaginary world. "If you see me turn into the Incredible Hulk, you have permission to bite my arm and balls off, my friend," he whispered to Sindey. The canine barked a 'yes' to the request, and command. With that, Jack surrendered himself to the unconscious or perhaps hyperconscious state known as sleep.

## CHAPTER 21

Yes, Jack had made the decision to give a sympathy fuck to someone whose body repulsed him, but whose soul he did value in ways that he still could not define. He found himself for the first time in months waking up the next morning far less tired than when he went to sleep. A restful slumber where he was too content to dream. Not working in the huya aniya, the dream world, in such a way that he changed the awake world, as the Yaqui Indians believed was the case when we actively do things in dreams. But the universe he woke up in was not what he expected.

Elfesya was not in the kitchen making him breakfast. Or in the shower cleaning herself up for the day. Or rummaging through the female portion of James Rolland's closet to find something presentable to wear that would fit her after having ripped asunder the green dress she came in with. She was gone, leaving a note in Sidney's collar. "Thank you for revealing who you really are, " it read in angrily written large caps, slashes abounding. "We do what we have to do," the rest of it read, in small letters which reeked of apology.

"Maybe Elfesya's has two alter egos who express themselves with different calligraphy or different hands?" he postulated. He recalled in the old country observing Elfesya's chopping vegetables with her right hand when contently singing. And preparing culinary delights with her right when the food was insufficient in quantity or being prepared to be eaten by someone she didn't want at her dinner table.

The canine barked a 'fed me, stupid human' into Jack's face, offering his human servant a reprieve from coming up with a solution to the dilemma he now found himself dealing with. Jack walked into the kitchen, pulled out packaged hamburger, then cooked it in a pan, so that it would destroy any medication that would have been put there intentionally. Or bugs that found their way into the discolored meat by accident. "So, what do we do now?" he asked the dog, who barked impatiently for the meal to be cooked, and spiced, to his specifications. "Wait and see what life offers us, or just keep



going, but to go where?" he gave voice to. "But at least we have each other," he concluded, after which he heard a car pull into the driveway. Then a knock on the door.

Instinctively, Jack reached for the largest and sharpest knife on the counter, considering that perhaps he was indeed a different person as sleepwalker than in his awake state. "Mister Rolland, please open the door," he heard after the third knock.

"He's not home," Jack self observed himself saying, straining his voice to sound feminine.

More knocks came to the door, after which the unexpected and unidentified visitor drove away. Jack snuck a look out of a small opening in the curtains, noting that it was a blue and white with a Sheriff logo on the door. In its wake, taped to the door, was a giant sized yellow envelope reading 'Final Notices!' in very official font, the 'final' bolded. He closed then double bolt-locked the door, then made his way to the kitchen. Jack pulled his eyes back into his sockets upon viewing the contents. "An eviction notice? Bank account closed. Credit card cancelled?" he said. He looked to the wall featuring pictures of the million perhaps billionaire owner of the house he was 'looking after' while he on his Hawaiian vacation. "What's up with this, James, or should we say slim customer 'Jimmy'?" he inquired. "With what you're driving...or what I was given to drive," he said, after which he saw a note on the windshield of the Ford pickup which doubled as a getaway for Jack to drive away from the Ithaca Jail without being stopped, noticed, or followed. After checking to see that there were no nosy neighbors looking on, and no other police vehicles in sight, Jack slipped into a sweat shirt with a hoodie on it, and proceed to look at the vehicle. "A Repo notice?" he said to Sidney, who had out snuck out of the house, sneaking his way to the car, pawing at the door to gain entry.

"Which, Mister Roland, will be enforced now," he heard from a hoarse voice of a female officer whose dark blue uniform matched the blueness of her mood. "Unless you can produce some REAL currency that's not bitcoin or Jamescoin to cover your last three unpaid payments," .

"Interesting meeting you here, Captain Jackson?" Jack blasted back at Wendy Jackson, recognizing the voice. With a downturned head, he snuck a look up at her face. It revealed two bruises, one was old and the other probably acquired a few days ago. And as well, her was prematurely aged with wrinkles on an evolving double chin along with extending crow's feet around tired eyes, such due to the most common disease in old age, regret.

"It's Patrolman Jackson, Sir," Officer Wendy said by way of explanation. "And you are..." Wendy raised her jaw, revealing an absence of two teeth. "Bald as a melon, Jack. Did the razor slip?" she continued, finally looking at the civilian who she was sworn to protect and serve.

““A lot more did,” Jack replied, recalling the razor slip remark from a B 1960s movie starring Telly Savalas as Pancho Villa attempting to satirize the previous flick starring Yul Brenner as the Mexican bandit-general.. A film which Jack thought had only been seen by those born before the still unsolved Kennedy Assassination. “I heard you were promoted to Captain,” he sneered. “After signing that agreement sheet that Ann’s death was due to suicide or natural causes.”

“I was busted down to delivering repo notices and giving out parking tickets for REFUSING to sign it, Jack and....” her reply, after which she pointed to the bruises on her forehead and left jaw.. Sidney licked her hand, causing her to kneel down and letting him wash her face with his tongue. Such transformed her dissymmetrical lips into a thankful smile.

“How did you get those....”

“Love taps?” she said regarding the welts on her face, and, as Jack noticed, burn marks on her forearm. “Being send by the bosses of the bosses to answer domestic dispute calls that were supposed to be routine. And other calls that were supposed to be routine. And reminded that I accept my fate. My uninteresting fate of being someone who doesn’t do anything interesting for the rest of my life. And, if I ever ran into you, to deliver this to you.” She reached into the recesses of her trouser pocket, and handed him a gold embedded wedding invitation. “Your new residence.”

“2044 East Erie Street,” Jack read. “Which according to what I remember about street addresses, is...”

“The Jungle,” Wendy said.

“Suite number 42F...” he read.

“It could have been 666, or the river, in a new property managed by non other than....the man you trusted and liked, maybe loved, most,” Wendy pointed out.

“Mayor Achmed,” Jack slurred from his mouth.

“LORD CHIEF Achmed, Jack, who we have to get more goods on, to nail him for murdering Ann, and Mayor Rich.”

“‘We’ being?” Jack blasted at and into Wendy.

“A new team,” Officer but not yet Convict Jackson gave voice to as a new plan formulated behind her oscillating pupil. “With you walking into the lion’s den first, please?” Wendy ordered, and pleaded.

## CHAPTER 22

Jack’s assigned dwelling at Unit 42F in the Jungle was a tent barely large enough to stand in. A door mounted on three and a half logs to try to sleep on. A small eating table forcing the diner to hyperflex his knees to access the grub. An old apple box as a chair still bearing a few splinters. A car battery connected to a string of small LED lights. And a metal bucket smelling of manure and urine underneath the aroma of Lysol spray. All of which reminded Jack’s landlord of...

“My family’s first home,” Achmed said as he walked in, clad in a freshly pressed blue Dockers complimented with a red shirt and clean runners so white that they made Jack’s eyes open another octave, topped off with a brown cowboy hat. . “After you ‘rescued’ us from our village which was destroyed in a war that you made possible.”

“Which was not my fault!” Jack asserted. “It was my bosses who disrupted your political ecosystem.”

“And you, who could have stopped them, but....didn’t,” Lord Ackbar continued, helping himself to a seat on the only ‘chair’ in Jack’s new dwelling.

“Which I COULDN’T stop!” Jack shot back. “Even though I tried, a hundred times!”

“But not a hundred and one times, “ the now back in charge of his life and so many more lines noted. “For which the penalty is...”

“To be your servant like you THOUGHT you were mine?” Jack surmised. “Living here as a your prisoner.”

“Protected potential asset, as long as you remain here,” Achmed replied, pulling out a newspaper article. Its title read ‘Sleepwaking serial killer escapes Ithaca jail’, with Jack’s picture below it. The one with a large beard and full set of hair. “Good thing that I, we, decided that you gave up your hair, which I’ve put to good use,” Achmed continued, taking off his hat. Revealing under it a wig made from Jack’s locks which he has shorn off to make his escape. “Time for payback, Jack.”

“Payback for nature giving me a full head of hair and you being afflicted with less of it?” Jack replied. “When I was on top, I tried to help you people on the bottom! ”

“WE people?” Achmed mused, breaking into mocking laughter that echoed into Jack’s head. Scaring him almost as much as it terrified Sidney. “The first one now will later be last, and it’s time to teach you a lesson.”

“After the OTHER relief workers put you into tents with dirt floors, I built you and your people the best dwellings I could!” Jack proclaimed. “With the best food available. And the best books I could find. And the best medical care I could get.”

“Which were, truth be told, my former friend, not as good as what you and your family back in America had,” Achmed’s reply. “And as for ‘sharing our misfortunes’ when times got hard, last night you shared something I can’t forgive.”

“Elfesya came on to ME! And said she was in need of something you couldn’t and didn’t give her,” Jack replied. “I never loved her the way she said she loved me.”

“She was, and is, my---”

“---Possession?!” Jack shot back. “To do what you want with. Who really DOES love you even though you...” something else went into Jack’s mind. “Did you send her in to see what I would do to and with her?” Jack said, turning to his old friend. “Or did she come on her own?”

“That, maybe you will find out, if you are a ‘good boy,’ Jack,” the promise and threat.

“Or if you let her see me, ‘Barrister’ Ackbas?”

“The truth about that, I will share with you later, if you do my bidding as you ‘allowed’ me to do yours,”

“Your bidding to do what?” Jack shot back, terrified of the answer. “And if I don’t do your bidding?”

‘Mayor Achmed’ stroked his chin, whistled ‘come hither’ to Sidney, then petted the hound, assuring the canine that he was amongst friends. “Animals here in the Jungle have shorter life spans than those who live in town, or the country. And as for Carla, well....”

Jack waited for an answer. And, karma being what it was, he got one.

“She still believes you are dangerous to be around, which is true, my friend,” Achmed said, putting on his hat. “Dangerous to the wrong kind of people.”

With that, Achmed walked out the ‘door’ of Jack’s new rent free dwelling, whistling the theme to the ‘Good Bad and the Ugly’. No doubt becoming the worse elements of the latter two categories.

## CHAPTER 23

After being given notice about his new residence, and protector, Jack went to sleep on the ‘cot’ he had been ‘gifted’. He did his best to avoid slipping his hand through the holes in it and hoping that the ‘lumps’ protruding into him were from glued on fabric rather than recently acquired live rats. There was enough room for Sidney to lay between his shaking and sweat soaked feet. But the canine did wake Jack up whenever he had a nightmare in which he was about to fall into a deep pit, or lose an arm or leg due to an industrial accident or from a terrorist’s machete. The memories of being hired by First World CEOs to make them profits while trying to minimize harm to Third World civilians from ‘expendable’ countries became nightmares. In each of them, he was inadequate for the task at hand, particularly with regard to the latter agenda. After four visits to his glorious past, he woke up in a very much more inverted universe., A list of ‘to dos’ was tacked to the edge of the ‘bedtable’, on which there was fresh shaving cream and a double edged razor blade.

“Item one,” the note read in Achmed’s font, the tear-shaped tags on the Capital letters even more expressive and elaborate than the presumably from Ann on Sidney requesting that Jack return home

immediately. "Close shave on the crown, as the authorities are not looking for an old man who has lost all of his hair on top of the head."

Item 2 read, "Make the rounds in the my, and your new, city. And deliver special gifts with a humble bow to all of my people in the Jungle and outside of it. Being sure that each bag goes to whoever it is supposed to, and no one else, with head bowed, saying 'Ho Ho Ho, from Achmed Santa'." A large trunk containing bags earmarked for specific 'suite numbers' and recipients (most of which were street given to them as adults rather than birth conferred names) lay next to Jack. Sidney edged his way to three of them. Jack pulled his hungry face away since, as he suspected and confirmed at seeing their contents, the 'Turkish delight nutrition cakes' looked and smelled like what he had received in jail. With needle marks in some of the loafs, the remaining portions of the gifts being pills in candy containers along with a small bottle of 'vintage wine'. A few of the cakes had money sticking out of them.

Item 3 read, "investigate or open any of the items to see what I am doing for and TO these subjects and lab rats, or show this note to anyone, and harm will come to those you are stupid enough to care about."

Item 4 read, "Rich Williamson was a sadistic bastard, I am a Philosopher King. Replacing who was popular with another agenda for different goals. This time me getting 90 percent of the popularity and goods, and you getting 10."

The latter remark hit Jack hard, and where he lived. He recalled the proposed 'split of the pie' to Achmed when he enlisted him and his family into endeavors that would benefit the community of desperate for necessities third refugees while still keeping the flow of goods and services coming from over-stocked first world funders coming. Jack had promised Achmed that the lion's share of the benefit from getting his and his people's cooperation would go to him, and them. Promises that often didn't work out after the task as hand was completed, despite Jack's busting ass in ways that he related to Achmed, and those he kept to himself. "Maybe I should have told Achmed how much it cost me to help him and his people," he told Sidney as he petted the still understanding, presumably intelligent canine companion. "But maybe a white man leading a revolution to liberate colored people is a revolting endeavor that doesn't really serve white or colored people," Jack proposed to the hound.

As Jack, due to necessity and he hoped not fetish, lathered the top of his head and shaved off the stubble that had grown overnight, thoughts about how we judge people came to mind, which he related to a seemingly interested Sidney. "The first two things we say about a person describing them deals with race and gender. A black woman, a white man are the first two words our eyes tell our brains. And what we say to a cop, or fellow diner in a restaurant, regarding someone else we don't know," he recalled and gave voice to. "Why not first describe and assess a person as a person, or by something else....a description of their whole soul as assessed by their eyes, the window to such, and what they are doing? Or have done. Like..."

Sidney barked a 'get on with what we have to do today because there's things I want to do, like take a needed piss and enjoy a good, long shit outside' to Jack. Which he heeded, after rapidly removing the hair that still was able to sprout on his head. Preventing him from saying, but not thinking, about using descriptors about people like, 'Santa Monica Suzie with bangs over her forehead which read For Rent' regarding the arm candy of Oil Executives' wives who came overseas for an exotic vacation. Or 'silver spoon stuck up his mouth and ass that has decorticated his brain and conscience' regarding their always erect husbands who looked at everyone with upturned chiselled chins.

Another thought went through Jack's mind, soul and delivered vibrations up and down his body as he stepped out into the colder than normal Spring air as the deliverer of 'Easter Packages' from Santa Achmed, waiting for Sidney to finish enjoying a great shit. "It's not the work you do, but the people you are doing it with," he said to the canine, recalling the bad times he had with coworkers doing the engineering jobs he loved in the Middle East. The 'cowboy smart' ranch hands who he did cattle drives with in Colorado. And the interesting fellow crusaders he built houses with when signing on as a common carpenter working with houses for humanity, in the attempt to meet Jimmy Carter in person.

Sidney emitted several 'yes, I agree with you'. barks back. A young man with a mane of unkempt brown hair and prematurely grey beard sporting a lumberjack shirt three sizes too big and torn jeans a size too small hobbled over to the dog, startling the hound. He sang what seemed to be a composed on the spot symphony.. Sidney responded then added his own notes to the riffs and melodies, in harmony with such. The composer nodded a 'yes' to Sidney, then frantically scribbling down on a weathertorn notebook with a worn down pencil the results of the collaboration. It was then that another thought came to Jack's head as Sidney roamed around the Jungle, perhaps wondering how many other unrecognized Beethovenian composers or BeeGees fans were present.

Jack's mind stumbled on the hypothesis that many of the residents were guinea pigs in Achmed's social/medical experiments. But how many were his voluntarily loyal comrades-citizens and how many were his minions? And who would help him determine who was who, aside from Sidney's sometimes reliable radar to identify and bond best with good people and avoid bad ones?

Jack looked over the cart loaded with Easter goodies or badies he was charged with distributing, wondering which packages would serve the best interests of the recipients and which would lead to their further destruction. But, the answer to that most important of questions such would have to wait, as he was given, free of charge, an armed assistant and bodyguard to escort him on his rounds.

"President Achmed said you needed protection from those who would do you harm," ex-Professor and now, according to her new uniform, five star General Maddy said without distortion or lisps through a

mouth now loaded with new teeth. “Like the serial killer who killed Mayor Rich, who we will kill and I will deball with this!” she continued to Jack, brandishing her machete.

“No problem,” Jack replied in as deep a voice as he could deliver, hoping and praying that General Maddy and her squad of now promoted to junior officer rank Militia would not recall that he first met their drugged into obedience eyes as his sister Ann.

With that, Jack did the rounds at the Jungle delivering Care or ‘I Actively Don’t Care’ packages of cakes, sausages and medications to his fellow residents. He realized that his first attempt to reveal the truth to them about Mayor Rich had backfired. And that merely showing them, and the world, about what Achmed was really about would not dethrone him. Or liberate his subjects. Yes, some other strategy would have to be employed, discovered or formulated.

## CHAPTER 24

A cool Spring quickly devolved into a prematurely hot early Summer. Jack continued to do favors for Achmed, who insisted that he read ‘Professor Jack’, the first portion of it anyway. A novel about an old coot hanging out in the 1995 New Mexican Desert claiming to be JFK, kidnapped by the mob and Illuminati after a double was assassinated in Dallas, given good health and told that if he did ANYthing to try to revolutionarily improve the human, or animal, condition globally or locally, horrible things would happen to people he cared about. “You’re retired now, Jack, enjoy it!” Achmed would almost daily say to the cynical idealist who, despite seeing more bad things in humanity, kept dedicating himself to making them good.

“I’m being benched, and you know it is torturing me” Jack would reply.

“I’m doing all of this for the greater good,” Achmed’s come back.

“YOUR good!” Jack’s reply. “Which you will see is your good also, if you chill out,” the next commandment and assurance. Such was delivered with Achmed’s open palm on Jack’s tense shoulder.



In the same way that Jack had assured Achmed overseas that the changes in his life as a deposed Chieftain and assistant crusader in helping fellow refugees were for the betterment of all, including himself and his family.

Such would be followed now by another list of 'honey, do' tasks put into Jack's hands by Achmed, while looking at Sidney with a 'well, we know where your dog lives, Jack.' Or an update about what was happening to and for Jack's kids in Denver, or Ex-wife wife in Chicago. With Achmed taking credit for one of them winning a lottery ticket, getting a grant from the National Arts Board or scoring a scholarship for their next stage of formal education. Verified by letters and copies of e mails delivered to Achmed, addressed to him as 'Uncle Achmed' of course. 'Good fortune that can turn into bad luck, which befell so many of my people here,' Achmed would say, with variants in the verbiage.

As for the whereabouts of Nurse Carla, and, at last meeting anyway, Patrolperson Wendy Jackson, 'God knows, and if he does, isn't telling me or anyone I know,' the reply from Achmed on those occasions when Jack asked about them. Such was good news for Jack, as there was SOMEONE who was not connected to and trapped into Achmed's spiderweb. A web which kept many of its inhabitants comfortable, and others not so.

"And what would the ghost of Mayor Rich Williamson say about all of this?" Jack sprung on his 'patron-protector' on one not so fine June morning before he was sent to town to get building supplies so that a few more tents could be converted into shacks.

This time, Achmed's face revealed something Jack had not seen in him since their re-union on this side of the Pond---shock, confusion, then terror. "He was a horrible and stupid man, who deserves what's coming to him!" the new Mayor of the Jungle blurted out.

"You mean as a ghost, or in Dante's least favorite circle of hell? Which I am told is NOT New Jersey," Jack delivered, calmly, with a totally-in-control voice. "I wonder, if Rich Williamson saw what you are doing with what was his kingdom, what he would say or DO about it?"

"Nonsense!" Achmed screamed out, sweat pouring down his brow. "I do not believe in ghosts and as for hell...."

"If you can pay a Jewish lawyer, who doesn't believe in heaven, enough money, he can convince Saint Peter to let you into the Pearly Gates and give you a mansion in heaven," Jack proposed with a confident grin, afterwhich he leaned in closer to Achmed's sweat soaked face and averted eyes. "Where you can

have Thanksgiving dinner forever with the friends, relatives and lovers you like rather than the ones you had to tolerate down here?”

“Yes, yes, indeed,” Achmed shot back, after processing that proposition. Then, he abruptly broke into laughter. Laughing at a joke JACK made. A sharp contrast in the new dynamic between the two men from Jack being required to laugh, or at least chuckle, at Achmed’s attempts at humor. “I do not believe in heaven, Achmed related. But I do still believe in...family.” He pointing to a long haired, attractive from the neck up ‘citizen female’ visitor to the Jungle who was allowed entry by the General Maddy pulling a wheeled cart behind her. Maddy’s male militia assistants ordered the newcomer to the haven for the growing population of ‘have nots’ to not stare at her. “Even if they have gained more weight than usual, by eating too much of the food they prepare,” Achmed continued regarding seeing Elfesya uncover the lid on the U-haul cart. Inside of it lay an abundance of fresh food as well as some items marked ‘expired’. Along with clothing, lanterns and electricity-suppling batteries.

Perhaps due to the excessive heat, or for other reasons, Elfesya removed her coat, revealing an enlarge belly accompanied by marginally enlarged thighs. The number and desperation of the hungry and underclothed residents outnumbered the militia guards more than usual, causing Achmed a bit more concern than usual. He shot his gun into the air, which silenced the crowd, and calmed down the protectors of the good. He then shouted out, “Each gives according to their abilities,” the underworld Capitalist kingpin proclaimed, pretending to be a democratic Socialist. “And takes according to their needs” Lord Achmed then proclaimed, retrieving a list from his pocket.

“You will have to excuse me,” Achmed said as he walked calmly towards the congregation before it became a mob. He then took charge of distributing appropriate goods to those on the list. He addressed each of the residents of his ‘city for truly free citizens’ by their street names. And the newcomers to being homeless by new names that he gave them on the spot which seemed to fit their demeanor, appearance and fantasies about themselves.

Meanwhile, from a safe distance, Jack had a non-verbal conversation with Elfesya. With Achmed busy being Santa Clause to everyone else, she pointed to her enlarged belly. Jack pointed to Achmed, to which Elfesya shook her head in a firm and thankful ‘no’, after which she pointed to Jack, with a warm smile. “Okay,” Jack said to Sidney as the hound, yet again by instinct, nuzzled up to him. “So she was lying about not being able to get pregnant,” he whispered in Russian. “And...maybe knows where Mayor Rich is still hiding, or being hid, after I officially killed him,” he speculated given the way Achmed, who did not believe in ghosts, feared his return to the Jungle when the possibility was mentioned. “Maybe setting Hitler against Mussolini would work this time. Rescue Satan from the devil so they can destroy each other, and maybe leave the rest of us the fuck alone,” he advanced in his favorite foreign tongue.

Jack heard a woman's voice repeat the last two sentences he had said, correcting him for using the wrong case in Russian, a common flaw which non-Slavic speakers had with that 6 case poetic yet complicated language spoken by what Westerners thought were a 'simple' people. "Huh?" he said to the five foot nothing still slender forty something woman who, if you ignored her wrinkles, greying and thinning hair, looked and carried herself off as a once prize immigrant whore, or rather courtesan. Doing the work that was too hard and demeaning for American girls to do. A woman who perhaps had outlived her lifespan as a great lay or eye candy for a rich client, and most probably pissed off the wrong super pimp as an indy madamme.

"Is alright," she assured Jack, in English, stroking his shoulders, which had been made more muscular due to his being assigned all the heavy manual work that no one else in the Jungle was required to do. "Men who strong in body sometimes slow in head," she said. "But perhaps look younger shave off rest hair on head. Makes you look even stronger."

"Yes, perhaps," Jack said in Russian, then English, then four other languages, accepting for the moment the offering of friendship from one of the few residents of the Jungle who weren't amongst the greedy or desperate receivers of goods from Santa Achmed. "Your name?" Jack asked, in English.

"Anything you want or need to call me," the newcomer to the Jungle who Jack didn't recognise said, after which she kissed him on the mouth. Then pulled away. Leaving behind in Jack's soul a longing to be with someone from his intellectual and so far drug-free 'Class'. With, of course, the responsibility to see that no collateral damage would come to her, given what he needed to do now.

## CHAPTER 25

There was a very much expected and appreciated intensity about the ex-whore and perhaps former madame who allowed Jack to call her 'Tatiana'. Jack graciously accepted, and enjoyed, her offer to do a slow and sensual head shave on the tufts of long hair around the rim of his ears and the nape of his neck, gently messaging every segment of hairless scalp she exposed. . He absorbed her story about how she came from poverty in war torn Odessa to America. How she taught herself more about scholarly topics than the overly-educated university professors she had to 'service' in her attempt to work her way into the New York Hollywood scene as an actress. How she could write more intelligent screenplays than any of the directors she had to audition for. How she successfully adopted the 'means to an end' and 'hey, it's their fantasy not mine' credos when she worked as an escort and pole dancer. And how she fell from grace after trying to establish a brothel which hired girls who were better at classy emotionally engaging conversation than physical 'bonding' with the clients. How she emulated Aspasia, the philosopher-courtesan who mentored Socrates while being his, despite what his bitchy gold digging wife claimed, Platonic lover.

When pressed for names of people they both could use to pull themselves out of the Jungle and erase any records of criminal activity they had with crooked, or non-crooked, cops, Tatiana would say, 'his mother, buddies or lovers called him so and so' rather than relating real names by which they could be found. But she did say that she still was in love with her father, in a way that perhaps father and daughter normally didn't express affection. Taking note of, after removing the 'old man rim hair' on Jack, resembled the self-educated hard working 'rebel-peasant' who gave her half her genes and all of his love.

"Perhaps such would turn me into as strong Yul Brenner rather than a meek Jason Alexander or Larry David," Jack thought to himself. "But would Achmed approve of such? And is Tatianna a plant which Achmed had put into my life to complicate and control it as Elfesya, perhaps, earlier anyway, was?" he pondered. But such was academic now. After all, allies in common temporary Causes were a lot more effective than friends. Particularly friends such as Carla, and Wendy Jackson, who had not made any contact with Jack in his hours of most need, and want.

## CHAPTER 26

Summer finally reached Ithaca and, a week later, the Jungle. The searing temperatures mixed with the kind of humidity present in Upstate New York but never in Colorado or the middle East brought with it the need for fans rather than heaters. And a paucity of spoiled Cornell and Ithaca college brats of rich Long Islandttee parents who were easy prey for skilled pick pocketers. But there were still enough tourists and non-vigilant house owning citizens at the various street festivals to provide pocket change to homeless buskers adept at playing music that was enjoyed rather than tolerated by passers by. Or residents of the Jungle who were skilled at lifting the wallets and purses from fellow onlookers at outdoor street music festivals. City support for improving rather than shutting down the Jungle became the civic leaders' top priority, officially anyway.

But there was no shortage of medical emergencies in the Jungle. How many were due to Achmed's delivery of medications Jack made to selected residents and how many due to Jack holding back on getting what he thought were toxic to the body and mind meds was anyone's guess. Physical injuries also accompanied those pharmacological 'accidents'. As well, there was no shortage of 'industrial accidents' on the land next to the tent and shack city where Tom DeFoe's lumber company was building proper housing for the homeless, officially hiring residents of the Jungle to pound nails into wood and secure sheetrock onto pillars, with of course kickbacks of city money to Achmed.

To keep a good profile with the city and avoid being sued by any relatives of departed Jungle residents, Achmed bought an expired mobile home, converting it into a hospital. Which, of course, was allowed to have electricity from town brought into it. Which, with Jack's expertise in electronics, provided enough power to selected tents and hastily pasted together shacks due to underground wiring and Tesla coils.

The hospital of course received first priority for electrical power, but as for who would be using it, no established physician or medical student on summer break would work there. As a result, a day after July 4, Police Sergeant Vincent Brigantti, accompanied by his OWN blue clad 'militia' came to the so called 'free-est free clinic', deemed, MUCH 4077, with orders from the City council to put the wheels back on the mobile home and cart it to a parking lot adjoining the Jungle. So that cameras could be legally used to monitor traffic going in and out of it. And any known dangerous criminals, or illegal immigrants, who could cause harm to the staff and patients could be identified before they could do any damage to 'life and limb'

"It's not my idea," the bubba bellied, portly but still muscular fifth generation American said to an angry and frustrated Achmed. "And if you staff this facility with your own people, the best you'll get is a nurse who's good at following doctor's orders but doesn't know how to formulate them. Unless..." Brigantti turned his back to Achmed, wiggling his fingers so that his unseen palm could be greased with a contribution from the 'Mayor'.

Achmed filled that palm with whatever he had in his pocket. A roll of Jacksons with smattering of Benjamins, wrapped up in tickets to see the Bills play the first three seasons of hopefully winning football after Labor Day. "Not close to enough, Sand Nigger," the All American law enforcement officer whispered, then repeated loudly in Mafioso-accented Italian which his 'rainbow Black, Asian and Native American squad of new recruits did not understand. "What else do you have to give me?"

"Eh...." Achmed stuttered. For the first time in months, something he requested of ANYone wasn't gratefully refused. "Her!" the shaken up Turkish Transplant said regarding something else to bribe the head Cop with, pointing to Tatianna. Who was clad in her least weatherworn and bullet torn Ukrainian peasant dress, looking, if your eyes were open enough, like the innocent farm girl she was before coming to 'safety' in America. From her rose red lips, came a Cossack nursery rhyme as she planted flowers outside of the 'MUSH4077' all purpose ER, OR and treatment facility. It was overloaded with surplus assets medical machinery which, with Jack's help and some exceptionally skilled illegal aliens hiding out from ICE, were now working.

Tatiana, looking every seductive inch like the innocent farm girl she was before coming to America, offered a beautify smile to the ugly Cop. "Yes, her," Achmed said, with affirmation, knowing that his continuing connections with legal crooks operating legal pharmaceutical companies and illegal chemists working on new 'misery relieving medications' who never reported any profits on their income taxes depended on keeping the 4077<sup>th</sup> open, and on Jungle property. "Yes, you can have her, Officer Brigantti," Achmed said. "A new girl who..."

"...is not for sale," Jack proclaimed in a Slavic accent, two sandbags on his now even more muscular shoulders as he approached the mobile hospital. "Comrades," he said with a bow, after which he threw

93

the sandbags on the ground, placing them in the appropriate location in the wall being built around the facility.

"And you are?" Officer Brigantti inquired of Jack.

"Doctor Yakov Petrovich," Achmed proclaimed proudly.

"Which translates into Jacob Peterson, here, or Jake Peterson if you West of Mississippi," Jack announced, being careful to not bely his knowledge of English by using articles and 'is, are' in his speech. "Here visiting ex-wife and....hmmm....son I found out about after she...how you say...took 'me to cleaners' in divorce ten years ago. After I did all I could for her. How you say, no good deed go unpunished when fall in love with gold grabbing bitches?"

"Gold DIGGING bitches," Brigantti bellowed from his bubba belly, slipping into his habit of wanting and needing conversation around him to be about him. "And what kind of doctor are you, Comrade, Sir?" he asked, arching his back, becoming militarily official.

"Kind that can see you have tremor in right hand, which means left brain problems. Breath smells of acetone, means you diabetic. And yellow in whites of eyes say better to not drink so much American beer, or whiskey, or liver, it goes..."

"Caput, I know," Brigantti confessed, impressed at Jack's medical insights, and thankful that he was a both compassionate and smart physician. "My girlfriend's a herbalist and my second wife is a nurse. And the medications they say I should have, well, you got any suggestions, Doc?"

It had been months since Jack had been called Doc, or Professor or even 'Mister'. He instantly re-found his way into that role, which he did play in many refugee camps abroad when the bullets were flying and diseases killed doctors as well as civilians. With an authoritative grasp, he snatched a pad of paper from Achmed's left breast pocket, and a pen from his left. "These may help," he continued, being careful to keep his English broken and appropriately, but not excessively, incorrect.. "Will do no harm. Probably do some good." After writing down the treatments for the conditions that Brigantti had, or imagined he had, and handing him the prescription, Jack smiled and said to Briganttti, "One question I have."

"Sure, Doc."

“What is best play to see this week in town?” Jack inquired, noting the MAGA button hidden under Briganti’s coat and extra American flag on his lapel. “Anything not too WOKE. And written in last century? Good American play?”

“Well, Doc, there is a Mark Twain play, in Elmira. Where he did a lot of his writing. The greatest American writer, he was,” Briganti continued. He then looked behind him, being sure that his men’s attention was on Tatiana’s legs and warm smile rather than the business of shutting down or moving the Jungle’s hospital unit. “No matter what the Spics, Spear Chukers and Redskins say,” he continued regarding his non-White subordinates.

“Indeed, yes,” Jack replied, holding back of course the fact that Mark Twain hated racists, and American Colonialism.

. “And immigrant Sand Niggers, who will never measure up to All American Rick Williamson, who was,” the All American Cop whispered with regard to Achmed, being sure that the new Boss of the Jungle was out of hearing range. Briganti went on to describe how Mayor Rich had kept the Jungle ‘in check’ in the service of the ‘good citizens’ around it. All that ‘Doc Petrovitch’ could think about while smiling and nodding was where Rich Williamson was, in the real world, or in the afterlife. And how to get himself off the wanted posters as his murderer.

Finally Brigantti left the Jungle, leading his recruits. Who he warned to ‘not get too close to these people’ regarding the homeless. Who, to most people who did live in or rented houses, had a contagious disease as deadly and communicable as leprosy in time of Yore. .

Jack felt relief at seeing Brigantti leave. He recalled something he had known as happiness when his eyes caught and were accepted by Tatianna, his new nurse,’ who smiled back at him. ‘Doctor Petrovitch’ felt hope when looking at the new medical facility which was not his, knowing that he would be the primary physician there. Then, caution when Achmed snatched his pad from Jack’s hands. “You still work for me, ‘Doc’” he reminded Jack. “Me who, well, you know.”

“Will need more of my help some day, soon,” Jack thought, but didn’t give voice to, hearing a raspiness in Achmed’s breath. And smelling something in the air that reeked of ‘revenge’, to be breathed in when the time was right, and not before.

## CHAPTER 27

More time passed, marked by the ticking of the clock, the flipping pages of the calendar, the number of units built on the Jungle land for the homeless, the number of citizens who became homeless in Thompkins County and the proportion of homeless citizenry downstate who were shipped to the Jungle so they would disappear from the census reporting and the statistics of those unemployed by a Federal Administration that wanted to look good for the next election. So did the number of rumors that the new apartment complex being built on Jungle property would be used 'temporarily' to house rich Asian students and Federal workers hired to build a pipeline. As did the number of industrial accidents in the non-union staffed construction site.

Jack and his nurse Tatiana, who knew more than most doctors did, including self-taught docs like himself, operated the medical facility according to Socialist principles. Those in need got treated first, getting the best medical care available, given confidentially and without expectation of any kind of payment. Those who could wait were allowed to vent their frustrations with as many expletives as they needed to scream at the staff or mumble to each other. Those afflicted with trauma, disease or misuse of mind-altering substances who were beyond being saved by mortal hands or any accessible 'real' hospital outside of the Jungle were 'let go', as New York State finally consented to assisted suicide, Tatiana was very good at convincing those who were afraid to be released from pain God 'willed' them to endure that taking an exit from what some called 'life' and being a burden to others was NOT a sin, but an act of courage. One which Jesus himself took on when he voluntarily allowed himself to be crucified.

But there was one patient who came in on a particularly hot August day who didn't easily fit into any of the aforementioned three categories. "If you can't save my leg, don't save me," Achmed said regarding the bloody and rapidly becoming purulent appendage which the once accomplished soccer player called 'his good leg', which had more brains in it regarding where and how to kick the ball than his head did. "You have to save me, Jack!"

"The specialists in town have better equipment than I do," Jack replied.

"But you have more experience than they do, or will ever have," Achmed screamed out. "You're an engineer of flesh as well as steel, iron and wood. All the people you saved in the camps overseas from becoming food for the worms, and enemy tribes that want to fill their stew pots with human meat and...."

Achmed reminded Jack about the patients he had saved from being butchered by surgeons or taken by the Grim Reaper. He recalled names, places and numbers of patients that Jack had forgotten. And, truth be told, given that all of the surgeries didn't work, didn't want to remember. Afterwards, Achmed grabbed Jack's arm, saying in as loud a whisper as he could muster, "Please, I will give you anything!"



“My freedom?” Jack considered, but didn’t give voice to. Instead, there was another agenda he had in mind. “I’ll see that you get the best anesthetic available, and when you recover....”

“....It will NOT be business as usual between us,” Achmed pledged. “Deal?” he continued, extending his hand in something Jack did not expect from him--- friendship.

“Deal,” Jack said. After which he went to the unit’s pharmacy, and picked out the most expensive and usually not used surplus assets not excessively expired donated by the city hospital in the vault.

“Scopalamine, sodium thiopental and midazolam?” Tatiana inquired of Jack after he retrieved the bottles and did a quick calculation of the amount for Achmed’s now enhanced weight. “Those are used to...”

“Extract truth from the patient, or victim, without using torture,” he replied. “The truth about where Rich Williamson is, if he is still alive. Or how he died, if he’s dead. And....” He continued, drawing up the concoction into a syringe. “Who has your passport and immigration papers so you don’t have to live as a fugitive here, or can go back home to what’s left of your country, farm and family,” Jack said, handing the syringe to a reluctant Tatianna. “You’re better at doing IV injections than I am, with all of YOUR experience...”

“I know!” she blasted back in as loud a whisper as SHE could muster. “Giving mind numbing medications to my co-workers and employees so my bosses wouldn’t put them into me.”

“Who maybe you can find out about if you ask Lord Achmed the right questions at the right time, in the right voice. Perhaps one of the many voices YOU can pull off convincingly, but....I can’t.”

Tatianna considered the proposition. From the corner of her ever scanning eye, she noted that Achmed was doubled over in pain, grabbing onto what was left of his leg. “You know, if you miscalculate his meds, like you do for the terminally ill unsavable cancer patients, we can put him out of our misery.”,

“And get another Lord Achmed or Mayor Rich to take his place?” Jack replied. “We save lives here, remember.’

“Yes,” Tatianna said, with a thoughtful nod. “But there is one question I have?”

“Yes?” Jack replied, impatient.

“What music to put on when he is under?”

Jack pulled out an ABBA CD. “Waterloo, I think,” he said. “Achmed’s favorite song, which he related to me when he was drunk. And to no one else.”

With that, Tatianna injected the concoction into Achmed’s arm, to which he said. “Thank you,” in Russian. “Your welcomed,” she replied, in Ukrainian.

## CHAPTER 28

The operation on Achmed was a success, and the patient DID live afterwards. Such was the required way to handle that half human half demon’s case, since the OR staff in ‘MUSH4077’ would have witnessed Jack ‘accidentally’ injecting strychnine, rather than antibiotics into him which would allow him to keep his leg. But Jack was able to convince the staff that it was best that Achmed stay in a temporary coma so that the concussive injuries to his head would not get worse. Such allowed Tatianna and him some time to talk, alone, in a place where the Cops would be most unlikely to find the two fugitives from ‘law’ enforcers who were operating legally and illegally..

“So, what did Achmed say about Williamson when he was going under, then recovering? The what’s first...” Jack asked Tatianna from the passenger seat of Achmed’s car, while Sidney looked on from the back seat.

“That Williamson didn’t die. And was given special drugs Achmed’s business partners experimenting with, which simulates death. Blood on the floor you and Cops saw was from Donor Clinic. His body taken away by his own Cops for special treatment, entrusted to Tom,” Jack’s new partner in crime, and perhaps social revolution at some time in the future, replied from behind the wheel of the Transam.

“And where he went to after he died? Or was taken to while still alive,” the next inquiry. “Which we won’t be will if you don’t drive on the RIGHT side of the road,” he reminded Tatianna, whose last time behind the wheel of a car was in England. “And if Williamson did die, was he sent to Purgatory, or Hell?”

“Somewhere worse,” Tatianna replied, finally correcting which side of she was driving on but still going over the limit. “Macedonus, New York. Where crows still hang out 200 yards from prison where first convict was fried in electric chair. He was taken to Tom’s new store, about to open next week there.”

“And why didn’t you tell me that when we burrowed Achmed’s half 20<sup>th</sup> century muscle and half sleek 21<sup>st</sup> century hybrid fueled chariot?” Jack asked Titianna.

“I thought that you would call Tom, your nephew, and warn him we coming,” she said, pressing on the accelerator. Startling Sidney and Jack, the hound’s favorite human, with the exception of Titianna of late.

“I wouldn’t have called Tom to warn him we’re coming because,” Jack replied. After a tense pause, initiated in part because Tatianna was going well over the speed limit in a zone infamous for supplementing local Police department discretionary funds with tickets given to Downstate New Yorkers in a hurry to get anywhere they wanted to go. “Tom’s not family anymore. Maybe never was and....” He pulled out his burner cell phone from his pocket. “Someone stole the batteries out of this!” he gasped.

“Someone who saved you more minutes for calls you WANT to make, Comrade,” Tatianna replied with smile that was...playful. And eyes that had more walls within them, preventing anyone from seeing what she was thinking behind them.

The new ‘Wood for Winners’ store bearing Tom Smith’s smiling face as part of the logo. Around it were pictures of sleek upscale homes; boasting that they were ‘built by and for people just like you’. Such was a marked contrast to the drab signs in the rest of the city for print shops, footwear, liquor and generic American culinary cuisine which, like the products inside of them, had not changed in 30 years in a ‘going down slowly so it hurts most’ town. Where finding your way out of town as a driver rivals the difficulty of high school graduates seeing their way to leave to get a life that’s connected to the outside world. And the nearly dead portion of one’s soul that dares to aspire to what is beyond the grey, ever encroaching horizon. An “Opening soon!!!!” sign hung on the door, in eye opening red font which Jack hoped was from Ink, not blood.

“There has to be a back door to this place,” Jack said as he futilely tried to open the front entrance to the establishment. “Come on, open up!” he yelled to a moving humanoid object inside, a young man sporting tastefully asymmetrical purple hair, clad as an established middle aged one with a wide brown tie around the collar of a blue shirt, his back turned. “Tom! Open up! It’s your fucking Uncle, Goddamn it!” he shouted, getting no response from his nephew or any of the assistants wearing ‘Wood for Winners’ tee shirts with name tags bearing their first names.

"Maybe that's not Tom," Tatianna suggested, calmly. "Who you said refused to wear a shirt with a collar because it too '20<sup>th</sup> century'. Rebel with Cause Millennial James Dean Clone who said that wearing tie invites boss or woman at home to use it like leash and pull you around like dog. Who...maybe not recognize your voice."

"Or recognizes it all too well," Jack grunted. He pulled up a portable garbage bin, then lifted it up, preparing to bash through the glass. He aimed it at the picture of the house which Achmed directed him to when investigating his corrupt boss, "Mayor Rich". "Stand back!" he warned Tatianna, pushing her aside with his elbow as she stepped in front of the window. "Sometimes force is needed to get things done!"

"And sometimes other methods best," she said, directing Jack's attention to the front door opening. Then to Tom dismissing his red shirted peons, who went into the back room. Tom slowly approached the front door, opening it slowly. A police car pulled in front of the store.

"It's alright, officer!" Tom informed the moderately obese middle aged Peace officer with a thin beard and oversized double chin head, made all the more ugly by his military crew cut. "Rehearsing for a grand opening before the film crew gets here."

"Okay then, Mister Defoe," the officer said to Tom with the bow of a servant. And the admiration of a struggling check to check over the hill working class stiff to a rich mogul who made it big before his thirtieth birthday. "Let us know if you need anything."

"I will, Officer Bob," Tom replied. "And remember, special discounts for people in uniform who protect and serve us abroad and here."

"I will, Mister DeFoe," the old, career-dead-ended Cop returned. He headed off to the next public display of bottled up frustration, out of town speeder, emergency in progress, donut shop or domestic fight between a frustrated husband and underappreciated wife.

"That Police Officer calling you as Mister, you calling him by his first name," Jack self observed himself saying to Tom as the first words uttered to him in 6 months after his nephew had declared himself 'emancipated' from his for real social justice warrior mother, and everything she stood and died for. "Addressing people who are older and more life experienced than you is..disrespectful. And dangerous if he has more guns than you do."

"But appropriate, if I have more money than he does, or will have," Tom replied, motioning for Tatianna to come in, then Jack. "But, I see you got a new hair don't," the prodigal nephew said to Jack. "And a new girlfriend," he continued, throwing an 'I'm available and interested and can do far more than he can' look at and into Tatianna.

"A woman friend, who is taken," Jack replied, taking Tatianna's hand into his. A show of force, protection and affection which the Ukrainian refugee appreciated from the deepest levels.

Tom invited Jack and Tatianna to sit down at a table prepared for soon to arrive in bulk customers loaded with culinary delights on top of the table. Perhaps, as Jack suspected, there were pharmaceutical goodies in the drawers below them. "So, what happened to...Carly? Carly Carpenter?" Tom inquired.

"Carla! Carla Carmichael" Jack shot back. "Who...maybe you have seen somewhere?"

"I think I know where she is now, which is..." Tom replied.

"...Something we can discuss later," Tatianna interjected, much like a woman who wanted to hold onto her man. "We have not much time and need to know where is Rich Williamson," she said.

Such reminded Jack that Achmed's drug induced 'sleep' after surgery was not as long as a coma. And that if he found out his car was missing, there would be hell to pay by himself, Tatianna, or whoever else he found convenient to blame for 'burrowing' it.

"Sure," Tom said. "But how's Achmed?" he inquired.

"Recovering from an industrial accident," Tatianna replied. "That we have to get back to tend to."

"Which I didn't cause," Tom shot in, defensively. "This time anyway," he mused. After a tense 4 seconds that felt like as many minutes, he broke into laughter. "A joke," he explained, after the reality of a planned 'accident' to Achmed had sunk into Jack, then Tatianna's considerations. "But he deserves a lot of industrial accidents. Karma is a bitch."

“And a bastard,” Jack thought but didn’t give voice to, ascertaining that his self-estranged nephew hadn’t changed, and if he did, such would not be for the better. Perhaps the financially lucky lad who thought himself to be a business smart man aspired to become the new Mayor or the Jungle. He couldn’t be any worse than Rich Williamson or Achmed Arkbas. But for the moment, another agenda hit Jack’s mouth, fired up from his gut. “The whereabouts of Carla Carmichael? Registered and very informed Nurse who was your mother’s good friend once.” he demanded to know.

Seeing Tatianna’s objection to giving voice to Carla’s whereabouts, Tom wrote down the particulars on a business card, then held it up to Jack. It was snatched by Tatianna, who placed it deep between her ample breasts.

“And where Rich Williamson is?” Tatianna inquired. It was clear to Jack that she had very personal business with the deposed Mayor. Business that she didn’t share with her new partner in healing bodies and defective political alliances.

Tom wrote down the particulars, holding the card up to her. “The new whereabouts of Mayor Rich Williamson. Who didn’t kill your sister,” he said to Jack.

“But did worse things to others,” Tatianna said, anger in her normally angelic blue eyes. “Who...”

Jack snatched the card just as it was about to be grasped by Tatianna’s tight fist. He quickly read it, then firmly inserted it into the living space of the organs that, biologically anyway, defined him as a man. “You will see that he stays there, Mister Smith,” Jack informed and commanded.

“He’s not going anywhere, physically or otherwise,” Tom assured Jack. “Achmed and Rich....Them and the way they did things is so..like, ya know...”

“Yesterday?” Jack and Tatianna shot back at the millennial mogul, in unison.

“Fucking yes,” Tom’s reply, delivered with confidence. “Now, I’ve gotta do what I wanna do here, and you two gotta do what you think you have to do. And....fast.”

With that, the twenty something monarch walked slowly towards the back room of his new shop. He began delivering insults, orders and ‘we’re in this together but I’m still the boss’ suggestions to his over

forty servants. While Jack led Tatianna to the Transam at a brisk trot rather than a run so as to not attract any more attention from the good ole boys in blue. "One stop on the way back to the Jungle for a visit to release Williamson from his jailors," he informed Tatianna. "Location to be revealed when we get closer to it," Yes, it was a statement that didn't make logical sense. But logic was now a luxury neither Jack nor Tatianna could afford. Meanwhile, the clock ticking down on the drugs given to Achmed to aid his recovery, relieving him of pain and experiencing the foibles of the realm called 'being awake'.

## CHAPTER 29

Tatianna pressed Jack with 'so it isn't a place where...' questions regarding the whereabouts of former Mayor Williamson with him in the driver's seat, heading towards the destination on the card the lad intended to give Tatianna. To which Jack replied 'no' in as many languages as he had knowledge of with him in the driver's seat, literally and he hoped figuratively. "But," he said after five missed guesses, and exhausting his vocabulary in tongues other than English (as he WAS, despite his rebellious dedication to advance the Cause of International Cooperation rather than Competition, an American). "It's a place where we're going to need Carla more than ever. So, it would be very helpful if you reach down into your cleavage to tell me her location before I snatch it myself, not caring how many layers of clothing and secrets I have to tear apart to get it."

"You wouldn't," Tatianna replied. "Because it is not in your nature."

"It is now," Jack barked. He extended his hand over to Tatianna's chest, snatching the card containing Carla's current location and contact intel from her cleavage.

"You bastard! That was...!!!" Tatianna yelled back, angry and terrified.

"Necessary," Jack replied, looking at the card.

"And it was.." Tatianna volleyed back, edging her way towards Jack, grabbing his collar. "Best pleasure I had from real man in years," she smiled, resting her head on Jack's. "I love you," she said in Russian. Like a daughter would say to a loving father, whose love went beyond having kind eyes, strong protective arms and an ever open wallet. "Sing something, to make monsters under bed and behind my eyes get gone," she continued. "Something... different and familiar."

Having exhausted singing 'Hobo's Lullaby' to Jungle residents who were in want and need of a well deserved night of sweet dreams rather than recurring nightmares, Jack's mind rapidly grasped onto 'Soft Kitty, Warm Kitty Little Ball of Fur. Happy Kitty, smiling kitty, purr purr purr'. Yes, the melody was from 'Cross of Iron', a movie about conscripted German soldiers trying stay alive on the Russian front in WWII. The lyrics were from Big Bang Theory. Which Tatianna started to sing along with, in Ukrainian.

As Tatianna finally sank into a quick and necessary nap, Jack gazed down on her smiling face. In his mind, it morphed from that of an overly experienced 50 year old ex-beauty to that of a child who didn't know how beautiful she really was. Snoring deeply. Conscious of and in another universe.

With one hand on the steering wheel, and the other on his phone, Jack called Carla. "Hey, it's me, letting you know that I know where Richard Williamson is. He's not dead. And he didn't kill your beloved everything, and my sister," he stated. "Achmed did. We have proof but need more "

"First, who is 'we', Jack?" Carla pressed. "Second, what kind of proof do you have, and third...how did you get this number? And fourth, even if what you say, after not contacting me for months is true, what the fuck can I do about it?"

Jack took in a deep breath and pulled over to the shoulder. He looked over to Tatianna, then gently reclined the seat so as to keep her in a well deserved happy slumber. He then exited the vehicle, softly closing the door behind him.

"To the 'we' question, me and a trusted Comrade in a similar situation as myself," he related and shared with Carla. To the 'what' question, we're about to get all the proof we ALL need. To the 'how did I get this number' ....my disappointment of a nephew and your rotten excuse for a common law stepson, who----."

"----Knows more about me than I know about him?" Carla interjected, Jack feeling her jaw drop at the other end of the call.

"And as to the 'what the fuck to do about it' question, we need a female Sidney Freedman at Willow Creek Psychiatric Hospital in," Jack rifled out of his dry lips, after which he looked at his watch. "In an hour."



“Where it is all too easy to check in, but really difficult to check out, and where there are as many Police trained and conditioned security guards as Orderlies who....” Carla gasped. “Whatever you are thinking of doing, it’s crazy, Jack. And undoable!”

“Doable if you can bring Wendy Jackson there,” he replied assured her.

“Captain sell out Jackson?” she barked back.

“Patrolperson now, if they haven’t locked her up in Willow herself,” Jack replied. “Who snuck me her e mail address on a car repo notice she gave me. Asking me to contact her ONLY when I know more than new bosses do,” Jack informed the most savvy and medically brilliant nurse in Thomkins County .and the most self-destructive underachiever in diplomat negotiations.

A long delay ensued. Four, five then 10 seconds, appended with, “Yes, Jack. I’ll be there. But regarding your new Comrade in this Mission.”

Jack gazed at Tatianna, noting, yet again, on her forehead a symmetrical scar. This time getting a better sense of its etiology was than what she had told him about such. “Someone who doesn’t need a lobotomy because the activity behind the eyes is too intense.”

“Her eyes, or his eyes?”

“Carla, wasn’t it you who said that the most important aspect about a humanoid is their humanity, not their race of gender?” he stated, clearly. “And to discriminate on the basis of race, religion, gender, sexual preference and what kind of fucking music they like OR dance to is”

“That was Ann’s line,” Carla replied. “Whose death, yeah, we won’t get over until we avenge the asshole who really did it. Or wanted to do it. I’m in, but how do we get in AND out?”

“The three, or hopefully FOUR of us can and WILL figure that out, when we get there,” Jack said. “The gas station around the corner from the nuthouse,” he continued, not allowing Carla, or himself, doubt their abilities. And counting on the involvement of Whoever was in charge of the Universe that, theoretically anyway, wanted benevolent things to happen for the right people dedicated to the right

causes. “Besides, the Greatest plans come in the urgency of the moment, not the blackboard flowcharts in the drawing room or library.”

“Another Ann line, from someone who is dead,” Carla related.

“Whose ghost we’ll liberate, and Truths we’ll reinstate into the world, in....fifty seven minutes,” Jack asserted, looking at and feeling the intense ticking of his watch. “Right?” he said to the sky, after hanging up.’

“If you say so,” Jack heard inside his head from his sister’s ghost, or his reactivated imagination. After which he heard a knock behind him.

“Jack....you ok?” Tatianna inquired of him, from the other side of the window, intense concern in her eyes.

“We will be, soon,” he replied, opening up the car door, climbing into the cockpit with his aching legs. “But when we get to the nuthouse, we have to listen with as much intensity as we talk. And I promise you that we go there as free people, and will leave as empowered ones.”

“Something was told to me before,” her reply. Appended by the beginning of a long period of silence for the rest of the ride.

## CHAPTER 30

The lack of anything coming from Tatianna’s mouth, the snoring of Sidney in the back seat and the Silence permeating through and defining the hum of the Transam engine enabled Jack to hear and feel the thoughts echoing around his cranial vault. “Why did Tom tell me that Mayor Rich Williamson was alive? Why did that out for nothing but himself nephew move him, without Lord Achmed’s knowledge? And what does my once people’s revolution serving sister’s son, who got more genes from his fucked up father than his mother, want to do with Rich?” Those questions and others shot off from one area of the brain didn’t meet answers from the other areas of his now hurting cerebral cortex.

Jack pulled into the gas station across the street from the Willow Creek ‘Center for Mental Health’, which had not a single willow tree or stream around it. In past decades, it was the hospital where Jack’s

mother got kind and innovative psychiatric care after she fell in love with the bottle, then from a doc who she almost married. The walls of 'the Willow' now lacked the paintings and murals done by patients and enlightened caretakers. The facade of the facility now presented itself to the world with images that were cold as they were sterile, to anyone whose inner eyes were really open.

"Artificial faces generated by AI," Carla spouted off to Jack as she walked up to the Transam Jack had 'burrowed' from Achmed. Carla was clad in a white coat, a stethoscope around her neck, carrying an 'old is new again' vintage medical bag. "Picture perfect formulated technically colored images of the most popular manifestations of what the mass population calls happiness," she said regarding the walls of the Psychiatric facility displaying mindlessly happy faces of people of all races, classes and gender. "Obtained by an overdose of dopamine activating circuits which enable comprehension and acceptances of genetic memories embedded in the most primitive regions of the limbic cortex which ensure unbreakable homeostasis of the pleasure seeking regions of the pituitary with active inhibition of the reticular activating nucleus that is a prerequisite for alpha, beta and gamma activation of the cerebral idea generating cortical areas deep within the parietal lobe."

"What happens to you when you get out of place like after doctors say you ready," Tatianna said, interrupting Jack before he could compliment Carla about how 'doctorly' she could spout out neuropsychological bullshit that would baffle brains of the staff inside.

Sidney, from the back seat of the car, barked a 'got it' to Tatianna. Then a 'hello, where were you all this time, step Mommy' to Carla. The translation of that to Jack was confirmed by Carla opening the passenger door, then receiving a 'welcome home' jump from Sidney onto her chest. With a more intense hug of the hound's forearms and wagging of the tail than Jack ever received.

Tatianna rolled her eyes, in disgust, jealously pulling out a piece of beef jerky. She offered it to the hound. "Sidney, Doctor Carla's coat will get dirty if you keep giving her love hugs," she said, the dog not listening to her. Tatianna's attempts to sweet talk her canine 'stepchild' with whispers and songs In Ukrainian did nothing to stop the bonding moment between Carla and the dog she was bonded to while being part of Jack's sister's life. A part of her life Carla was still was reluctant to tell Jack about.

"And who is this?" Jack heard from the other side of his aching head. He turning around, his stare held hostage by Patrolperson Wendy Jackson's angry eyes. "The more people you bring into this, Jack, the more complicated it is," she noted with no shortage of apprehension .

"This is a complicated situation," Jack asserted, as the thoughts of how to prove to the outside world that Rich Williamson, the man he was supposed to have killed, was still alive as an unwilling patient in 'The Willow'. "Which required, as I asked Carla to convey to you, you to come in uniform, Officer Jackson," he said, noting Wendy's civilian attire.

“Hey, I’m in my blues,” Jackson volleyed back, rubbing her hand across her hole ridden by use rather than design jeans.

“And the recording equipment?” Jack demanded to know, glancing at the shopping bag in Jackson’s left hand covered with fruits, candy and flowers which announced their identity to anyone with open nostrils from twenty feet away.

She reached into the bag, pulling out a small video camera and attached microphone.

“Easier to get through the guards,” she said by way of explanation.

“Including the bag with that logo on it?” Jack grumbled. He pointed to an NPR decal with an X put over it, encircled by a lacework of what could be perceived of as swastikas. And underneath it a smiling face of Elon Musk with a child holding a Pride flag. “Split personality message?”

“Which matches the personality of the head security guard here who’s forming a new political party, that I’m trying to infiltrate, in my very OFF duty time,” Wendy’s reply. “L. Richard Younger. Big guy with mean eyes and baby face. Drag queen in his other life who...well.” She avoided the temptation to indulge in satirical ridicule, continuing with, “He’s the self-elected Fuhrer of a bunch of wackos who have to be stopped, who...”

“That bag, carried by me, is not going to get us in to room 24A or even into wing A,” Jack blasted back, in a loud whisper.

“But if your new girlfriend is carrying it,” Wendy said, pointing to Tatianna. “With you wearing this!” she continued, pulling out an orderly’s uniform from her backpack, throwing it into Jack’s chest. “And Doctor Carla flashing this,” civilian Jackson went on, handing her an ID badge.

“Chief Medical Officer and Level 3 Inspector, Homeland Security?” Carla said, looking at the ID with her picture pasted over Wendy’s. “Carla....eh....” she said, leaning down to read the surname under her stone cold face. “Kirva...”

“Kirvaaakow-Syookiozt,” Wendy said with an authentic accent from a country Jack could not identify.

“And the initials after MD, Ph.D., ESQ?” Jack asked.

“H.B.A.R.M., human being aspiring Renaissance Masochist,” Wendy’s reply. “HBARP, human being, aspiring Renaissance person was taken already. By your sister, Jack.”

“And my....” Carla gave voice to, recalling a plethora of memories, causing her to shed tears. By instinct Jack hugged her. This time she didn’t push him away.

“Das it verboten, Professor Doctor!” Wendy blasted out at Carla.

“But necessary!” Jack insisted.

“Like me staying here, and all three of you going in there,” Jackson informed the trio of NON-professionally self-trained operatives. “So I can get you out? The exit door from wing A, in...” Wendy looked at her watch. “Twenty seven minutes.”

“While you do what here?” Tatianna blasted at Jackson.

“Pray that you don’t fuck up anything in there,” Wendy replied in Russian to Tatianna.

“Pray that we don’t fuck up anything in there,” Jack translated to confused, and fearful ‘master doc’ Carla.

“And to look after the most important person here,” Wendy said, extending her hand to Sidney.

“Who seem to not want you to pet him,” Tatianna said, noting that the dog who normally liked everyone who was good, and shyed away from anyone with ‘issues’ in the Jungle, was pulling his head away from Wendy’s hand.

"I did some bad things. I want, and need, to do some good things now," Wendy said, pulling back her hand.. "Even if they are 'uninteresting' to do. And..." Very OFF duty Patrolman and perhaps FBI Agent Jackson broke down into becoming just...Wendy, tears streaming down her pale cheeks. Sidney edged his way towards her face, licking them away. She hugged the canine, in such a way that Jack's most hopeful thought about her was really true.

"It's not the first time shitheads make you do horrible things to strangers so no harm comes to your family," Jack said to Carla and Tatianna regarding Jackson's motives for having sided with Achmed and his cronies. He recalled some of the deals he made when protecting his loved ones that prevented him from annihilating his enemies. "This will be the last time any of us will do the bidding of evil people so they don't do bad things to those we care most about, but....". He hesitated, looking at the orderly's uniform tossed to him by Wendy. "This seems a bit big, particularly around the crotch."

"For man who grew big muscles," Tatianna replied, stroking Jack's shaking shoulders.

"And bigger balls," Carla added with a warm smile, punctuated by her reaching between Jack's legs, taking a measurement for herself with her fingers. "No...Gigantic balls," she mused.

For a moment, Jack did fantasise about what it would be like being loved by two women at once, in ways physical as well as mental. One being his wife, the other his mistress. And having children with both of them to pass on the best part of himself. Until a large truck zoomed by. And a bark from Sidney, now in the arms of Wendy saying 'get on with it'. Accompanied by Ann's voice, then image atop a bin of firewood for sale, saying the same thing.

"Yes," Jack said to the aging dog who still thought himself to be a puppy. And the ghost waiting for a new womb to reincarnate into so she could continue to heal a sick and dying world. "As we get more life experienced, we fight harder for what seems to be less. But which in actual reality is a lot more than we ever imagined."

## CHAPTER 31

To a naïve or unsuspecting eye, the lobby of the Willowbrook seemed to be your average run of the mill nuthouse. A 'walk in at your own speed' clinic providing patients who are voluntary the impression that they would remain so after they opened up to a shrink who understood their problems better than a family member or friend who was alarmed at some suicidal metaphor they may have blurted out when

asked about how their day, week or month was. Gently played Mozart smoothed the airways with melodies that made worries between the ears hearing it disappear into the ethers. Those ethers smelled but did not reek of lavender, an essential oil which was proven to have calming effects on horses and people in Jack's experiences out West. The imitation prints on the inside walls portrayed the beauty of nature outside. The images were copied from works by classical artists of three centuries with eye pleasing accuracy. Such included one of Van Gogh's paintings, which portrayed the inner magnificence of flowers in a springtime field in a way that revealed an inner kindness that conveyed its message with gentle assurance rather than bold expression.

Upon looking at the reprint of that painting behind the reception desk, Jack wondered what the mentally tortured yet insightful beyond his or even the present time artist would put onto canvas today and from a different continent. What Vincent would put on canvas if his eyes beheld the rugged, magnificent and often cruel to those who invaded or tried to conquer them on their own terms Rocky Mountains rather than the flatlands of the Netherlands and France. How he would have painted the faces of cowboys, Indians and horses struggling for survival seeking a Purpose not assigned to them by Dukes, Barons or successful businessmen who had converted wild grasslands into pastures and clumps of forest into gardens.

Jack wondered how many contemporary Van Goughs were being housed, treated or internally destroyed behind the locked doors in the patients' quarters. Those mental explorations transferring into a mixed musical symphony of various genres between his ears were interrupted when he heard the receptionist's voice.

"Kirvaaakow-Syookiozt?" the short, slightly stout Nurse sporting a shoulder length professional blonde bob with red highlights said when looking at Carla's ID after. "You look familiar," she continued tilting her head and leaning slightly into Carla's face to affirm her suspicions.

"Professor-Doctor and Special Agent Kirvaakow-Syookiozt," Carla shot back, feeling and utilising, while she had it, a bout of courage rather than carefully orchestrated logic, pronouncing her new name differently than the Nurse did. Such made said nurse feel inferior to her, a bit more than Carla intended. "I do not have much time, and I have a patient who needs to be...Interviewed with her husband," she said in a Slavic accent regarding Tatianna, who nodded a too happy to be sane 'yes' with enthusiasm. "Couples counselling between her and her husband, who is a patient here, which will reveal matters of medical importance and national security. Which...."

"A new kind of therapy and secret extracting method?" The Nurse inquired. "You being...yes I know you from somewhere." .

"Everyone who takes continuing education courses that matter knows me," Carla replied from behind her horn rimmed black glasses. She pulled back as much as possible from someone who she seemed to finally recognize as well, turning to the left then the right, to minimize facial contact. Carla then baffled the Nurse with scientific lingo, then some invented and well established acronyms which were, she hoped, beyond the Head Nurse's training. That old trick doctors used to stop nosy patients from asking questions, but which nurses, most of them anyway, were forbidden to utilize.

Finally, after exhausting her ability to spout out believable bullshit about the need for national security and the quest for scientific knowledge, the head Nurse interrupted Carla. "Yes, I see," she said seeming to be convinced of Carla's fake identity, not caring about Jack's. "But I do have one question. If we have to admit this patient, even on a temporary basis," she said of Tatianna, who maintained an asymmetrical dumb as candycane happy face. "Does she have insurance?"

"A stupid and irrelevant question," Jack heard from behind him. From a man who was a foot taller than he was, whose shadow he could feel as a ghost and executioner. Whose main focus was on Tatianna. She smiled back at him with an alluring grin, and bold wink of the eye.

"Mister Young," the Nurse said, addressing the behemoth. "I'm just following procedure."

"It's OFFICER Young, Nurse Rachel," he directed down at her with an upturned chin. After which he looked at the totebag Tatianna was carrying. From which Tatianna took one of the flowers, and placed it gently in the lapel of his paramilitary uniform. He smelled it, then looked at Carla, who nodded a cordial and obedient acknowledgement of his presence. "Professor Doctor," he said to Carla, clicking his heels in such a way that it could be seen but not heard.

"She's just delivering flowers to her husband, Officer Young," Carla said to the Neo-Nazi masquerading as an American Gay Patriot. "We are proceeding with initial stages of her....conversion therapy."

"Yes, conversion. We need as many converts to....sanity as we can get, Nurse Papadapola," Young said to Rachel. "Let them in," he commanded.

It's Papadapolis," Nurse Rachel grumbled, after which she rang the buzzer unlocking the door to the corridor behind her. "Visiting and therapy sessions are for an hour only," she laid into Carla. "Rules we all have to obey."



“Yes, indeed,” Carla conceded, after which she instructed Jack to bring Tatianna into wing A. A for ‘anything can happen and probably will’.

The door closing behind Jack felt like thunder, shaking him from his aching head, down to his sweat soaked face and into his shivering toes. The hallway had featureless white walls and bright lights illuminating the numbers of the rooms, with no view of who or what was behind them. It was a clean and sterile corridor, containing and emanating the most ominous elements of both those qualities, with walls that absorbed every sound. Jack could feel ghosts awakened in the walls to his presence, plotting something involving him.

“Past lifetime memories, James? Mister Jones?” Tatianna asked Jack in her own voice, addressing him by the name on his thankfully not checked ID strapped to his waist.

“Which I promise to NOT tell you about later,” he grumbled. “And what’s with that promise to give Officer Young head after this ‘therapy session’?”

“Many ways to skin cat, so can eat him later, with liver and onions,” she mused.

“Will you quiet down!” Carla pushed through a tense whisper, pointing to cameras above them. “Now where is A 24?” She said, as her new identity.

“Here!” came from around the corner of the corner. A woman’s voice. Coming from a short middle aged patient with a head of long black hair which was partially chopped off, fresh bruises on her face and burn scars on her arms. And a belly indicating another life inside of it that she spoke to. “Say hello to our Saviors,” Elfesya said regarding Carla and Tatianna. “And your father,” she continued, with a warm smile directed at Jack. “Who has forgiven us our trespasses. As we forgive the trespasses he is about to commit and already has.”

Elfesya crossed herself. Jack had no words to the unspoken accusations delivered by Tatianna and Carla. All he could say to Elfesya was “Room 24A. We have business there.”

“That door is locked,” Elfesya said. “But...I have the key,” she informed the trio who had far more than three separate agendas. She pulled out a wooden key from the recesses of the pockets in her calf-length flexi-jean skirt. “And the one that can get us out of here,” she continued, waving the other wooden key like a carrot in front of a hungry horse. “On one condition.”

Who the 'us' was, was anyone's guess. But as for the 'condition', Jack anticipated any number of answers. "Don't tell Achmed about all of this." "Relocate me to where me and my baby can grow up in peace." Or the most feared answer, which came out of Elfesya's mouth seconds after it echoed between Jack's inner ears. "Try to love me like I love you, Jack."

"Done," Jack blurted out. "But...we need to prove that I didn't kill Rich. Rich Williamson."

"To be done," Elfesya replied, after which she hobbled towards door 24A. She opened it up with ease. "Mayor Rich, a visitor," she announced. "Who..." she said to Jack. "May not recognize you. And doesn't recognize himself on most days now," she said of the once great looking, muscular Mayor of the Jungle with a full head of hair and smart brain below it. His head was cropped, accessorized by a lobotomy scar on his forehead, flabby muscles hanging from his arms. His hands shook as he pointed to the image of himself in a full length mirror.

"Who is that, man?" ex-Mayor and now patient-Rich asked Jack. "You said you would tell me," he said, addressing Elfesya. "They tell me he was a bad man. Who did bad things to and murdered good people. And one great person. Sister...." Tears came down his face, as he bowed in shame. "Ann. Without an E," he said, grabbing hold of a New York Yankees bat. "And if thy hand does evil things, thou... shalt cut it off!" he growled, grabbing hold of the with his tightly clenched right fist, hitting his left forearm. The intensity of the self-mutilation escalated with each blow.

"You didn't kill Ann, Bill," Elfesya assured him, kneeling down on the floor, placing her arm between the bat and his arm, absorbing the blows herself. "But we both responsible for her dying."

"But BOTH of you can help us catch the bad man who killed Sister Ann," Carla interjected, inserting placing her hand on the forearm Rich was trying to beat off. She discovered that it was rubber bat in his clenched right hand, but still hard enough rubber to do some damage. She whipped it away, tossing it to Tatianna. Then held Elfesya from snatching it back. She leaned into Williamson's face, gently moving his chin so that he was forced to look at her. "If you tell us all about the ONE man who murdered Sister Ann, and the talks you had with him about her, Mister Williamson. Rich. Mayor Rich, who "

"So that's what I was? A Mayor," Williamson blurted out from the more facially expressive side of his distorted mouth. "But mayor of what? And..." he looked up at Jack. "Who are you? You look familiar." He then turned to Elfesya, asking as a terrified child would to an all knowing, and caring, adult. "Is he a good man or a bad man?" he asked regarding Jack.

“Important but for now irrelevant question,” Tatianna interjected, placing herself in Rich’s eyeline. “But man who says he knows how to operate camera.”

“And does, know how to operate the fucking camera, “ Jack asserted in Russian, pulling the video camera out of the tote bag. “And hoping that the tape in it is fresh, and is time stamped,” he continued with a mixture of Ukrainian, Russian and English. “If I can find...”

“Record button red, is on lower left, standby on right,” Tatianna replied in English with a confident and impatient Slavic tone. “Put camera on devil’s face now, bullets into his head and balls later,” she commanded in German. A language which Jack understood better than Russian which, for reasons she never revealed, she spoke without the slightest tinge of a Ukrainian or English accent.

Elfesya sung a lullaby in Farci to a frightened EX-Mayor Rich, inviting him to sing along with a childlike smile reeking of innocence. Tatianna danced to the tune, distracting both ‘patients’. Carla pointed to the chart in front of Williamson’s bed. Jack aimed the camera, which thankfully recorded footage with timestamp, at the chart bearing Williamson’s name and the date. He put aside, for the moment, the issue of why Elfesya had delayed her own exit from the high security nuthouse till his arrival. Most likely she was waiting for the right rescuer to make her getaway possible. And sustainable. But for now, being an astute cameraman was his job. He aimed the camera lens at Rich, adjusting the fucus to what the eye could see. And the sound levels to the angelic tune Elfesya still maintained somehow with regard to musical tone and emotional texture..

Carla quickly grabbed hold of three vials in her medical bag, drawing them up in equal proportions, and injected them into Rich’s’ ass when Tatianna wasn’t looking.

“What was that!?” Williamson asked Elfesya.

“Mosquito bite,” Elfesya replied. “From an insect who wanted and should have bit me. But for now...”

“I remember now...Remember, a lot!” Williamson gasped. “But....Who are you?” he inquired of Carla, squinting his eyes with a sense of recognition. “A ‘doctor’ who?” he said emitting a death rattle.

With hand signals behind her back, Carla motioned for Jack to turn the record button back on, appending it with that request in German. “Schnell, bitte”

“Your lab tests are back.” Carla said. “And that you are dying, Mister Williamson. ”

“From what, when?” he muttered with shaking and shivering limbs. Elfesya, picked up on the cues, then threw a blanket over his shoulders, being sure that her face was out of camera range.

“A cancer below the neck we can’t cure, stage four,” Carla said. “We doctors aren’t God, but some of us believe in Him. As I see you do,” she said, noting a Bible on next to his night stand. And pointing to a cross around his neck.

“Who are you!” Rich gasped, regarding Carla. “Tell me.”

“A white coated Angel, sent by God,” Elfesya said, taking his shaking hand into hers, still keeping her head out of the camera frame. “Who can save your Soul! If you tell us about the man who killed Sister Ann. He was called Achmed.”

“Yes, and called other names,” Rich related and confessed. While unaware of being administered the other consciousness-regaining-between-the-ears-but-not-below-the-neck meds from Carla’s bag of tricks, he went on to relate the events surrounding Ann’s death, providing enough evidence to convict Achmed. While at the same time relating that as Mayor of the Jungle DID give orders to his cronies to not have Jack’s humanistically revolutionary sister ‘eliminated’ from his kingdom. But not harmed, in body, mind or spirit.

Without a word of prompting from anyone else, Williamson answered all of Jack’s legally formulated and personally emotionally infused questions. Everything from Achmed boasting about how he found out about Ann’s already compromised liver and kidney problems. To Achmed’s formulating the right combination of harmless ‘Soma13’ Jungle produced drugs to exacerbate her condition by spiking the low alcohol apple brew she shared with the residents there in her ‘advisement’ circles. To Achmed, without his knowledge or consent, using a Vulcan stun hold on her to insure that sufficient Soma 13 get into her system. To Achmed writing a note placed on Ann’s dog’s collar summoning Jack to come alone to Ithaca to deal with the particulars of her death. And to finding out the truth behind so many of Achmed’s lies about his education in his home country. And how he would get revenge on the persons most responsible for his demotion from Emperor there to being a Servant everywhere else. And, the last remark Williamson recalled as himself. When the drunk, so-called religious follower of Allah, Achmed said that ‘to enslave your enemy is a far more satisfying and economically profitable than to kill him.’

“Thankfully, Ann MacMillian was killed rather than enslaved by that sadistic and pitiable bastard,” an awakened to his identity Williamson related to Jack et al. as his last remarks. “As long as I am alive, which I am, on this date,” he continued, naming the current month, day and year. “I swear to God, mankind and, as Ann MacMillian insists me saying, womankind, that her brother did not kill me. And that Achmed Arkbas did it. His wife had no part in it. And...” he continued, moving closer to the lens. “Yes, I was a bastard to many people, but what I did to others who have no homes, and to people who I made homeless, is far more forgivable than what Achmed did. And what, if not stopped, Tom Smith, our partner, will do. And this is NOT AI generated.” He looked up to the sky. “This I swear on my Soul and my children’s eyes!”

With that, Carla shut off the record button on the camera,. “Got all of that?” she whispered into Jack’s ear.

“And more,” Jack related..

Tatianna kissed Williamson on the cheek then said something kind to him in Ukrainian. She then patted him on the ass, causing him to smile with the deepest gratitude, then lose consciousness. Elfesya broke his fall, revealing to all present, another syringe sticking out of his butt cheek. Tatianna emptied the rest of its contents into him with a vengeful grin . “After he does hard time in your jails, he does harder time in jails in my country. Assuming my country still there,” the Ukrainian refugee asserted.

“You killed him!” Elfesya gasped, her hand on Williamson’s neck, frantically feeling for a pulse.

“He’s sleeping...Having nightmare, being raped like he raped me,” Titianna assured Achmed’s grief stricken wife, placing Elfesya’s hand on Williamson’s wrist. Jack noticed matching ‘Wedding bands’ made of hospital ID plastic on Elfesya’s and Rich’s wedding ring fingers. “And will never rape you again.”

Matters of what to do with Williamson were secondary in Jack’s mind now. He self observed a personal rather than practical agenda come to his consciousness. Most particularly about Tom, who inherited a portion of his biological father’s toxic genes. Genes which enabled him to enjoy rising up the social and economic ladder while pushing down those below, and above him, into the dirt. Plans as to what to do about, for and TO Tom incubated in Jack’s aching head, interrupted by a buzzing sound penetrating into his ears.

“Our alarm clock,” Carla said, as she found the source of it in the recesses of the tot bag. “Put there by Wendy Jackson. Who I hope and pray is still outside the exit to this corridor,” she said, after which she crossed herself.

"I thought you were a Buddhist atheist who accepted death as part of life," Jack said.

"I thought I was too," Carla related, and confessed. "Now, we all have to get out of here."

"With THIS key," Elfesya insisted, throwing her imprinted key towards Carla. It was caught by Jack. "The key to my now liberated heart," Achmed's hopefully soon ex-wife said as the so called independent woman who could never be without a man messaged the 'patient' wedding band from her finger. She said something to Jack, in Farci, in the form of a question. To which Jack noted 'yes'. Assuring Elfesya regarding her most primal fear. After which Elfesya motioned for Tatianna to help prop Bill up, placing a pillow over his slumbering head.

"The answer to the question Elfesya asked you?" Carla asked Jack.

"We are all in this together, finally," he replied, while packing up the camera in the tote bag. He motioned for a terrified Carla to gather her medical gear. And for Tatianna to help carry a semi-conscious Williamson out of the room. But though there was a common Cause in this grass roots crusade against the underground business moguls who controlled the Jungle as well as most of the town that denied its existence, all involved were enlisted into it for different purposes. Most of which they still didn't share with their Comrades.

## CHAPTER 32

The corridor to the back door of Wing A was empty. The key to open it did work. And without firing off any alarms. The only obstacle left was a metal fence, a hole already cut into it which Elfesya easily opened up with her hands. "I was waiting for the right company to do this with, and for," she said to Jack. "But we have to move fast, before my ex-finds out about it and tells the wrong people," she continued, prying open a three foot hole in the bushes beyond the fence, requesting Jack's help with such.

"The ex who gave you this?" Jack inquired regarding the plastic hand fashioned wedding ring on Elfesya's finger that matched the one on the semi-conscious now blindfolded and gagged Rich, held up and guided by Carla and Tatianna. "Or the hopefully ex who you legally married who gave you this?" he gently pressed pointing to the bruise on Elfesya's face and the burn scars on her forearm.

"It will heal, in time" Elfesya said, the wisdom of the ages coming out of her still middle aged mouth while stroking her bruised and battered jaw. "But," she continued with an asymmetrical smile, each side of her face showing conflicting emotions with merged into an invasion of Jack's innermost soul. "It will heal faster if you kiss it and make it better."

It was an offer that couldn't be refused. One of those 'I love you so much that I will make you mine' invitations to the kind of 'happily ever after' relationships that kept a man at home. And so comfortable there that he eventually gets afraid to and doesn't know how to get out of the 'magic castle'. Jack puckered his lips and kept his eyes wide open, then edged towards Elfesya's left cheekbones. She pulled him towards his lips, locking him into a kiss that penetrated lightening bolts through him. The thunder of such echoed the 'Desperado' song that reminded chronically doomed to accomplishment abroad rather than comfort at home that 'you better let somebody love you before it's too late'. Indeed Jack did envision her at his acreage in Colorado on horseback with a mount he had specifically chosen for her, while was atop Festus, the mule who knew him better than he knew himself.

Just as Jack was pulled into the black abyss or perhaps White Light above, he felt the finger of fate tap him on the back. "We have to go," Carla said, pointing to her watch. "Before she comes to her senses," she whispered into Jack's ear.

"Or he asks where we're taking him," Tatianna said regarding an awakening Williamson, after which she punched him in the belly, then the jaw, knocking him back into unconsciousness. "Where are we taking him anyway, Jack?"

"Somewhere.....interesting," Wendy Jackson said, popping her head through the escape door Elfesya had created through the thick buses. "Until I find a boss, or colleague I can trust. And a judge who I KNOW will dispense real justice on him."

"As do I," Tatianna said. She grabbed hold of a rock in one hand, her phone in the other. "This is old country justice!" she said to the camera on the phone.

Tatianna's attempt to deliver another revenge blow on the man responsible for turning her from being a simple, idealistic farmgirl into a complex, cynical and more rugged than she wanted to be individualist was halted by Wendy's taser. "Sometimes you need technology can control crazy, Jack. And sometimes brute strength is more effective than technology," the restored to her original job by her own courtroom Cop said as she gagged and cuffed Tatianna. With Carla's help, she whisked her away towards the Transam. Reassigned and promoted on her own to being INSPECTOR Jackson, Wendy motioned for Jack

to pull Williamson out of Achmed's burrowed muscle car, assisted by Elfesya, who spit on his body with every painful step on her battered but not beaten into submission legs.

"Gotta move faster, " Wendy informed Jack and Elfesya. "Before bed check in there notes two missing patients."

"Who are, or were anyway, PEOPLE!" Elfesya blasted out, finally arriving at the getaway point to an impatient Wendy.

"And so that we can do something about Achmed. Who is starting to wake up from the long acting post op anesthesia you gave him, according to my informants," Inspector Jackson said as she opened the trunk of her car, dumping Williamson's body into it.

"Your informants being who?" Carla inquired

"Mi rotas," Wendy's reply as she shut the trunk on the rustmobile which would not pass any inspection.

"Mi rotas? Which means?" Carla demanded.

"Don't ask, Carla" Jack said, grabbing the keys to the cuffs from Wendy, unloosening them on a semi-conscious tazer'd Tatianna, who he led gently to the back seat of the Transam. "Don't ask who I love most today, and feel most responsible for. Don't ask how Officer Wendy found us here, with TWO cars instead of just one. Don't ask who her informants are. Don't ask what the fuck we're gonna do if this video tape becomes inadmissible in Court. Don't ask where Officer Wendy is going to 'store' Mayor Rich. But..DO ask...." Jack halted his rant, his gaze drawn into the lost look in Tatianna's eyes. Which revealed through a third brain between them, the next step in the process.

"DO ask what?" Carla inquired. "What Jack???!!!"

"What Achmed is most afraid of?"

"God," Elfesya shot out.



“Or even more accessible on this ‘heavenly plant’, Ghosts,” Jack said, an idea echoing between his ears which was about to become defined.

## CHAPTER 33

The truth was clear as to the hows and whys around and within the Jungle. But as Jack knew, the trifecta of accomplishment regarding such, in science, the arts and the world those two Callings tried so hard to serve required finding the truth, expressing and having it be heard. Of course the next step would be having it believed.

Of the many questions that Jack asked himself, one topped the list when he arrived at the new MUCH4077’s ‘recovery and restore’ post op tent, half which was in the process of becoming a shack. “Why the fuck did I save Achmed’s life and leg after the ‘industrial accident’ at the building site where supplies and tools provided by Tom were sent?” he asked himself outside the tent, as he examined at the portable ‘supersaw’ which caused the accident, a devise that was indeed sabotaged by Tom to slip off any table, cutting open the legs of the carpenter handling it. “Ego, most probably,” he told himself. “A challenge to fix a biologically fucked up leg that no one else could take on. With the same self-serving brain circuitry that Achmed had when he declared himself the ‘super carpenter’ personally building houses for the homeless. While building, of course, more ‘good will’ for the lab rats he called his ‘citizens’ and the already housed and fully employed citizens outside the jungle.”

As to what to do when Achmed finally recovered from the long nap he had been put into so that ‘recovery could be more effective’, that plan had to be put into motion. The first step was established already by Tatianna who, with Carla’s help, was able to convince the other patients in the recovery tent that Achmed had contracted a contagious infection which was worse than covid. Such got half of the patients to feel good enough to become ambulatory again. When the story was enhanced by Carla that their slumbering ‘benefactor’ had venereal disease and Aids, the rest of the cots converted to beds were emptied with alacrity.

“We ready for act five now,” Tatianna said to Jack, carting a surplus army dufflebag. “All supplies in my teepee” she said, pointing to the half shack, half tent which was still private, that she called home.

"Which we don't have to do," Carla advised Jack and Tatianna. "We have video footage, a half alive ex Mayor Williamson, a police officer who now knows who to trust and not to with the evidence against Achmed. Then there is Achmed's wife, Elfesya, who is willing to testify about things which..."

"...can be thrown out of court, if there are higher bosses who have high enough paid lawyers," Jack interjected. "And, besides, sometimes justice has to become....personal," he added, self observing his teeth and fingers clench with volcanic anger.

"Jack," Carla pleaded, placing her hands on his strong-for-reasons-he-never-wanted-them-to-be shoulders. "'Personal' can be very dangerous, and if this plan of yours doesn't work...."

"It will," Jack said. "It has to!" He grabbed hold of the dufflebag, proceeding to Tatianna's tent. "We paid good stolen money and illegal dope for the Greek chorus we hired. And hope that they are on script."

"State of the fart technology," Carla boasted, pointing to the pre-programmed mini speakers buried under whatever excess medical supplies she could muster visible through the slit in the tent. "Be sure YOU are on script, 'Jackie'," she said.

"You mean Ann, without E," Tatianna interjected. "Who.....Achmed has not seen."

"Except in his nightmares," Jack gave voice to, sounding as much as he could as his sister, feeling confident.

"Jack," Carla said, placing a microphone between Jack's very male and small breasts, while Tatianna rotated her head with a frustrated eyeroll. "Speak into this, softly. And let AI do the rest."

"Yeah, even the devil's favorite minion can be of service to humanity," Jack noted.

"And do not let anyone except him see you," Tatianna warned Jack. "And if they do, say that---"

"---I have a cold?" Jack replied, in his best 'Ann without an E' voice.

This time, Jack had two women give him the eyeroll, appended by Carla throwing him a parka with a big hood. “Bis morgen,” Jack said to both of them as he walked, then sashed to Tattiana’ tent.

The plan was simple and as, perhaps soon to be restored officially, Inspector Wendy Jackson would say, ‘interesting’. Looking and feeling like his sister Ann, face hidden by the parka, Jack limped his way to the recovery tent. His attention was drawn to Achmed, who was slumbering. Smiling, as if having a wet dream where after every poke his genitalia and reputation were still clean. “Ok, guys, and gals,” Jack said to the computers and speakers surrounding him, adjusting the newspapers, medical drapes and hospital gear on top of them. “Here’s Aaaaannnnnnn !!!!!” he indulged himself in, with a Jack Nicholson act out. After which he pressed on the remote control button which did...nothing.

Frustrated, and scared, Jack pressed on the on button again, getting nothing from any of his cyber companions. “Come on, please, if just once you give me this...I’ll give you.” he whispered to the cybergods, ETs who masqueraded as gods atop Mount Olympus. And the Creator Who he still somehow had not lost all connection with. Finally, after mentally offering to go on another ‘no chocolate for a month and not to allow himself more than 6 hours of sleep a night for year, the LED lights powered by batteries went came on inside the recovery tent. They flashed their various colors like a Christmas tree which would allow you no more than a second to see in one hue, then force you to see it in another before you were able to name the color. Then voices of angels who sounded like demons rang in. Then a thunderbolt.

“What!” Achmed said as he woke up, his eyes beholding an ill defined universe in front of him. “You....” he said grabbing hold of a dulled autopsy knife next to his bed. “Who are you!”

“You know,” Jack whispered into the microphone, hearing the computers convert it to Ann’s voice coming out of the speakers in surround sound, echoing. “Ann without an E. Who you killed, because...”

“I had to!” Achmed said, pulling back the autopsy knife. “I had to kill you because....”

“You wanted my brother to hurry back so you could enslave him, like he enslaved you,” Jack said as and feeling like his sister.

“Yes. Your brother Jack is no angel,” Achmed asserted, brandishing the blade. He degraded me, so I degraded him, to teach him a lesson. Make him a refugee in his own country, like he did to me, and my

family! My family who...well...." He hesitated, looked around him, and sniffed something in the air..  
"What do I smell?" he said, looking towards smoke emerging from one of the hidden machines. .

"The fires of hell, beckoning you to an eternity in the underworld. Or wandering around this one as a lost and bodiless soul," Jack replied, mostly according to script. Considering at the same time his possible fate after death if he transgressed morality too often in the cause of doing good for humans and a few other species at the cost of every other living thing on the planet. "This is where you will spend eternity for what you did while on earth."

"No, it isn't," Achmed protested. It's..."

Jack quickly pressed another button, signaling incense to emerge from the inside another box of surplus assets surgical gowns. "This incense, sweet smelling, from Heaven," the next volley from Jack, as Ann.  
"Which you will be welcomed in if you tell me how you killed me."

"Sister Ann!" Achmed gasped. "You should know how I killed you!"

"I don't, because I was unconscious for most of it. But I need to know how. How did you kill me, in the Cause of the greater good of course, Lord Achmed," Jack AND Ann's ghost replied, in unison.

"Finally, you address me as Jack never did. And you never did when you were...." Achmed's eyes opened the rest of the way to what was around him, as if he was awakening to the truth. "You who were..."

"Alive!" Jack said, as Ann, without the computer's aid and off script.

"Like I am now," Achmed growled, lunging at Jack with the knife. . "And you won't be soon when I'm..." he vowed, after which he dropped the knife on the ground. He fell to the ground, pulling himself into a fetal position.

Jack glanced at its handle, thankful that the electric shock devised in it finally kicked in.

“Tell me again how you killed me,” Jack inquired, according to script, pressing the code for such onto the remote. “This time, the echo effect worked. “Tell me how you killed anyone else.”

“And if I tell you, Ann?” Achmed asked, respectfully looking upward, his eyes blinded by the lights.

“I will not haunt you in your nightmares, Lord Achmed, And when you die, you can be a Lord in Heaven like you were a Lord on earth.”

“And you can guarantee this?” Achmed inquired, coming up to consciousness. “Now and when I die?”

“Sainted people have connections with the gatekeepers in the afterlife in Heaven and Hell,” Jack mused. After which the ‘Greek Chorus’ programmed into the speakers burst into laughter which alternated between jovial and sadistic.

“Alright, alright! I tell you!”

With that, Achmed revealed the details about how he killed Ann. How he discovered that she had kidney and liver problems. How he was sure that there was an extra dose of his specialized ‘Soma340’ in the non-alcoholic cider she shared with selected members of his militia when she did a reading of Fahrenheit 451 by the campfire at night. How he invited her into his tent to listen to and implement her demands for the homeless in the Jungle and about to be homeless citizens who he was going to make so due to business dealings with moguls from the US, Canada and Mexico. How he grabbed her from behind when she got up to go home, with a Vulcan death grip on her neck that rendered her unconscious but still alive. How he transported her body alone, at night, clad as a homeless drunk, placing it by the lake. How he baited Ann’s dog, Sidney, to follow her and was about to poison the dog bearing the note he had written to summon Jack to come to Promethia, NOW. How he was stopped from poisoning Sidney as well as Ann with an overdose of insulin by a stray crow that landed on Ann’s dead body. How he fled because of his fear of birds, who he prayed would not haunt him in the afterlife. And how he felt that it was a good thing to kill Ann to relieve him of his misery with regard to dealing with over-privileged spoiled brat Americans. And that he was relieving Ann of a life of being a masochistic workaholic in the service of others who didn’t appreciate or didn’t deserve her help.

“That is my story, the truth, which shall set me free?” Achmed asked after providing a level headed, clearly stated confession.

“Free from, the rest of us,” Jack replied, in his best Ann voice. “And free to go to hell, if you don’t do the right thing while you are here,” he continued as the ghost of Solstice past, present and future.

“Which...I will,” Achmed said, taking hold of the autopsy knife. “But not with this...butterknife”, he stated, feeling the blade, which was a dull at a butterknife. “But, with this,” he continued, grabbing hold a large scalpel blade atop one of the speakers. “A Viking who dies in battle goes to Valhalla. And a chieftain who dies fighting for what is rightfully his, goes to...” With that, Achmed slashed his left wrist, then his throat.

Dropping all of the allures of being Ann, Jack did his best to keep Achmed’s blood inside his increasingly pale body, but something other than the laws of physics prevented him from doing so. His eyeline was drawn to the bloody scalpel blade. He heard from behind him, someone saying. “He died of complications from the wounds he inflicted on himself, and others.” It was a female voice. Sounding much like Ann. Feeling like it was anyway.

Jack looked behind him to identify the source, but....there was no one there. Whether that voice came from a machine, a finally satisfied ghost or two very earthbound women with whom he had close connection to, such was academic. Jack checked to see if anyone had taken down the quarantine sign on the recovery tent-shack. It was still there. He could see no one outside, except Carla and Tatianna.

“Where is everyone?” Jack asked Carla.

“Free food down below the hill,” Carla replied, referring Jack to a view of a Jungle and (for now) non-Jungle residents, as well as Sidney and some canine strays he had befriended. They were gorging themselves on drug free delicacies from a food truck run by Elfesya. And an appreciable number of hopefully soon to not be homeless folk of all ages helping themselves to books in a mobile library operated by Wendy Jackson.

“All according to plan,” Carla noted. “Like the dulled autopsy knife you were never slashed with.”

“And that scalpel which Achmed used on himself?” Jack asked Tatianna.

“Sometimes justice doesn’t come from things other than courts,” her reply.

"But for now," Carla added. "This community of to be housed 'homeless' people needs a new Mayor.

"Philosopher King to run things here and in town," Tatianna said. "Am sure that if you run for that office in fair election."

"Maybe, but" Jack said, scratching the beard finally re-appearing on his chin. "Anyone who..."

"...Wants to become president shouldn't be trusted with the job," Jack continued, in unison with Carla, the woman who understood his mind, and tolerated his heart, before he left Promethia. "And," Jack said, turning to Tatianna, the woman who perhaps understood his heart best. "Absolute power corrupts absolutely. With men running the show anyway. But in the meantime...."

Jack pointed to the recovery tent. Clean up, with gloves and necessary discession.

With that, Jack slipped into Tatianna's tent, 'de-Anned' himself, and emerged as a new self. He whistled to Sidney. Thinking of Festus, his mule in Colorado. And considering the old but still perhaps true Cowboy motto. "A man has everything he needs if he has a good dog, a good horse, a good woman and a good gun." As for the woman, that would work itself out. As the gun, perhaps that would be necessary when he took on the next Achmed.