Sandra MacKay (65,000 words)

345 East Woodstock Avenue

Vancouver, BC V5W 1N2

604-321-0778

sandra.mackay94@gmail.com

Chopshtick

A novel by

Sandra MacKay

Writing as Sandra Yuen MacKay

Chapter 1

When planets in the solar system are aligned, some think it can cause earthquakes or tsunamis, but I believe perfection is attainable. It isn't scientifically proven, but I beg to differ. A triple conjunction doesn’t happen everyday and neither do miracles. Today, something in my universe changed, shifting into new territory, opening doors to new beginnings. I had a new feather in my cap.

On a breezy May afternoon in Vancouver, I posed with my artist friends as reporters took our pictures in a downtown plaza in front of a crowd. Six of us snipped a red ribbon to great applause. Pieces of ribbon flew in all directions like startled birds. A driver zoomed by in a blue sporty convertible, honking his horn and waving. Smiles were passed around like drinks at happy hour. A woman sang a heartfelt version of 'O Canada' accompanied by a band. My older brother Leonard shook hands vigorously with the mayor. My proud parents couldn't have been happier if they'd just won ten million dollars. Well, almost.

I looked up to see the accumulation of months of hard work. Had it only been eight months? The sculpture looked majestic, glowing in the sun like knight's armour. A dragonfly buzzed by the edge of the fountain at the base of the sculpture and weaved his way in and out of the sculpture. Water gurgled with the same excitement I felt. A toddler in a pink coat and silver shoes was the first to make a wish and drop a coin into the fountain. Cymbals, paint cans, a wheel rim, basins, hubcaps, pipes and taps held together by welds and screws created a rhythm of shapes and sizes. Reaching ten feet above the fountain, a banana seat bicycle was mounted angled toward the sky ready to take us into the future beyond the confines of physical reality. Its back tire was missing, but that was the way we found it.

We had given birth to this sculpture and nurtured it with love and perseverance. We had found discarded unwanted pieces of junk, molded them, restored them, and given them new purpose. The fire was a distant memory. Homes had been lost and possessions destroyed. But out of the ashes like a phoenix rose this sculpture. It survived. It was meant to be.

No one had expected the murder either but we had endured. Thinking about it put me into panic mode. Taking long breaths, I visualized unwrapping a porcelain doll left by Santa Claus under the Christmas tree, finding a quarter in the lane, cartoons for kids, my favorite shade of lipstick, and movies rated general for all ages—safe, happy thoughts to combat my rattled nerves.

Today the celebration wasn't all rosy. Part of us was missing. During a huge row the night before, Jacklyn had erupted, spewing toxic comments and steam at us, and I had screamed back at her. Strangely, she wasn't there to accept the accolades with us. I was angry and insulted she copped out and refused to return phone calls and texts. She'll come back once she got over herself, I assumed.

We learned much about each other and ourselves in the process of building our monument. I wasn't the same person I was before. Experience makes an artist better. We were at the pinnacle of our project together, living the dream. I wanted to cling to that moment forever. Sometimes magic happens.

Looking back, success didn’t happen overnight. I used to be challenged on a daily basis. I didn't know if it was because I had a tendency to look for problems or if they found me. Insignificant details for others were monumental barriers for me. Waiting for the bus made me distraught. Cold soup made me upset. If something went wrong, I reacted with sarcasm or indignation. Sounds immature but that was who I was. Finicky.

Virgos can be critical. At least, that was my excuse. Call me hard to get along with. That was why for the longest time I had no friends, no life. I took certain things for granted like having a nice family home, an affectionate pug, and parents that loved me despite my faults. At the same time, nothing was ever good enough for me. I would obsess and get mad about the one thing that went wrong versus being content about the ninety-nine things that went right.

For example, there was the time that my friend made these labels for our paintings in an art show at Montagna's Café and they smudged when we put them up. Instead of regarding my first group show as a positive or thrilling accomplishment, I focused on the label deficiency.

"How is anybody supposed to read the prices? Like what the heck is wrong with the ink?" I complained. It was like the ink didn't set properly. Of course, only my labels smudged. Hmm.

I was furious. What the hell was wrong with the printer? My friend wasn’t to blame but maybe the manufacturer of the ink? Maybe the paper? Maybe they didn't want the customers to see the prices because they didn't want people to buy my art instead of the others. Was there some kind of conspiracy?

My psychiatrist Dr. Montgomery told me the use of the word 'they' is vague. "Who are 'they'? Fictitious storytelling is suitable for a child but not a twenty-three year old woman. Wild ideas or explanations will get you nowhere. You need to grow up," he said to me on numerous occasions including the time when I said that I'd been brainwashed into thinking I was mentally ill. I meant by him, but didn't add that detail to the conversation.

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Let me introduce myself. I’m a single Chinese female named Cathy Fung, who is an extrovert wannabe crying out for more. I call myself an artist but it's sort of self-inflicted. I mean who chooses to be exposed to toxic materials, scrape by for a living, and look dehydrated all the time? Why couldn't I have chosen a different career like kickboxing or being an accountant?

Among Chinese Canadians of my generation, studying accounting or engineering was common. We were good at numbers—well most of us. And we reveled in competition. Our parents toilet-trained us early, spanked us until we bruised, and taught us the rules of the house, in case we thought we'd get allowance for nothing. I was an anomaly—a female Chinese schizophrenic artist with no future.

I'm not as Chinese as I looked. Chinese culture and tradition in my family roots had been Canadianized over several generations. Our family watched hockey on television, ate granola, and lived in a largely white neighbourhood. My father was in management at a telecommunication company and my mother a cashier. I don’t understand or speak Cantonese or Mandarin and have no desire to learn. I am a descendant of Kublai Khan, the fifth Khagan of the Mongol Empire who became the first non-Chinese Emperor of China but he had four wives and about seven thousand concubines and has millions of descendants all over the world. Even though, I was immersed in the West Coast lifestyle, one trait I carried was the sense of being displaced, of not belonging like my first ancestors in Canada. For most of my life, I viewed the world as if looking through a distorted green lens. I believed that the world was a sickly place and I a victim of it—until I was thrown into a situation that called upon my dormant inner strength to spring forth and multiply.

#

My brother called me the 'Queen of Clichés' because, according to him, I couldn't come up with anything original. My seventh grade teacher attempted to drill into me the difference between clichés, idioms, similes and metaphors. Unfortunately, the lessons didn't stick and she said I'd never be a writer. As a young girl, I drew my own crime comic strips with balloons that read, "Not the noose, Nick!" or "Say your prayers, sweetheart." My mother thought they were too violent for my age and burnt them in the fireplace, which ended my writing career for good. I guess I wanted to be an artist partly because it didn't involve expertise in grammar, tense or vocabulary.

I think clichés started out as being original, but because they were overused, they became boringly predictable but not to me. I defended the usage of clichés in a class assignment, saying if you 'read between the lines' they were important and shouldn't be 'swept under the rug' and received a teacher's comment that 'she's heard it all before'.

A long time ago, I decided 'things aren't as they seem' wasn’t just a cliché but an insight into reality. Odd things occurred without logical explanations. Was it all a plot to drive me stark raving mad? Why do these things happen? Smudged toner on my painting labels. People who stare and look at me. People who don't look at me and bump into me instead. A police car speeding down the street with no headlights on. A missing price tag on an item I want to buy. Footsteps. Cold hotdogs. Burned burritos. Wrong orders.

One day at the local unnamed coffee bar, I ordered a skinny latte and the woman behind the counter said, "Non-fat?" Ah, didn’t skinny mean non-fat? Like wasn’t that the lingo?

"Ah, yeah." I waited for the coffee and the barista put in two shots, poured in the steamed milk and skimmed off a layer of foam. Did a latte need shots? With the first sip, I tasted hazelnut. Puzzled, I looked at the label. The 'lf' for low-fat, looked like a capital ‘H’. Ah, mystery solved.

"Sorry but you gave me the wrong order. This is supposed to be a skinny latte."

The barista scanned the label. "It says hazelnut café latte right here."

"But that isn't what I ordered."

"Do you want me to make another? You'll have to talk the cashier. It'll be ten minutes or more."

I hesitated, building a coffee conspiracy theory in my mind. Were they trying to make me fat by giving me a high calorie drink? Were they hoarding skinny lattes and didn't want to tell me? Ten minutes would make me late for my appointment. I weighed my alternatives and overcame my paranoia. "I'll take the hazelnut." On the way out, I realized that due to a writing mishap, I walked away with a more expensive coffee. So what if it wasn’t what I ordered. A higher power was on my side. I got a deal, right?

#

Excuse my rambling but speaking of deals, I was at the department store and found a t-shirt on sale. I sort of liked it but wasn't sure about it. If you're conscious of how you look, you know how it is. It fits but does the colour flatter me or vice versa. A voice in my head said, "You can always return it." At least, hallucinations are good for something.

After wandering around the store, looking for a cashier in a desert of clothing cacti, I found one hidden next to a rack of discounted thongs. I counted the people in front of me, looked dubiously at the armfuls of items they were purchasing, and deduced it would be a long wait. But hey, the shirt was a good price and I wasn't crazy about going home to clean the carpet so I waited patiently until I got to the front of the line.

The clerk gave me a curt hello and scanned the tag on the shirt. The price came up at twenty percent off.

"Ah, the sign says it’s forty percent off," I blurted.

"It's not coming up at that price, ma'am."

"The sign is back there. Can you make the adjustment?" I said with a hint of a smile, trying to look congenial.

"You’ll have to take this to children’s wear."

"It's an adult t-shirt."

"I know that but this is the lingerie department." I felt defeated. I'd lost the battle but not the war. "This cash register is closed," she said, putting a sign on the counter. I tried not to bristle. The people behind me sagged in unison and we walked all the way to the other end of the floor like the exodus from Egypt. The waves parted and I took my place in line in children’s wear behind four other customers. The only other option was to take the t-shirt to housewares but there wasn't a cashier anywhere close to China.

Ahead of me, an Asian woman was returning four items and buying two. Her demanding daughter was translating English and Cantonese back and forth between her mother and the East Indian cashier. I thought she was arguing about the sale price. The conversation sounded like gunfire being exchanged in a spaghetti western. There was a pause then the cashier called the manager. My tender tootsies and back ached. I wished for a chair with a pillow. Why don’t they have seats near the cash register considering how long you had to wait? The manager appeared with a huge set of keys in her hand. The cavalry had arrived.

An old man with a grey beard with a cane sat nearby on one of the display platforms. He motioned to an old biddy (I mean 'senior') and said something in gibberish.

"Sorry, what do you want?" the lady shouted.

"Suitcase."

"I think they're past the chinaware to the left." The woman pointed. Isn't everything made in China, I thought.

"I wait here," he said.

"Whom are you waiting for? What do you want from me?" The lady cupped her ear.

"They come." He furrowed his brow.

"Who’s coming?" She stepped back annoyed. "Stop wasting my time," she shouted and walked away.

He motioned and started to talk to another customer. Poor confused bastard.

An Italian woman in stilettos with her pudgy daughter who were ahead of me in line greeted the woman behind me. They hugged and had an animated conversation in Italian. The woman ahead of me looked me in the eye and said, "She’s with us."

No way was I letting her butt in line. I had rights. "I’ve already been waiting twenty minutes." A tear formed in the corner of my eye.

The woman who was behind me melted like processed cheese on a grilled burger and said, "Oh, no. You go ahead. You were here first."

They kept glancing at me anxiously as I must have looked faint, like I was going to fall over or have a nervous breakdown. They kept reassuring me that I’d be next right after Stiletto. I thought they were going to hand me an extra large box of three-ply tissues or call 911.

Finally as I neared death's door, it was my turn to approach the counter. The clerk smiled and scanned the tag on the t-shirt.

"It’s on sale for forty percent off," I croaked. My head listed to the right as the weight of the world crushed down upon my shoulders. Depression was like that.

Petrified by my languishing expression, she stood on her tippy toes to check the sign twenty-five feet away. She proceeded to punch in forty percent off the sale price. Like a candle being lit, an inner warmth made me grin inside. Wow! A bargain and it only took me an hour at the mall. Out of the depths, I emerged unscathed. Forces in the universe were at work.

After the shock wore off, I treated myself to Kung Pao chicken and tofu on rice for lunch at the mall. The Kung Pao chicken was a little overdone but I shoveled it in. One shouldn’t shop on an empty stomach.

#

Naturally, I love Chinese food. It's often high in fats and sodium. What is there not to love? However, I wasn't into tripe or fish head. My dad grew up eating fish head because that was all my grandparents could afford. My grandmother also served a lot of turnips to feed her growing family. Later in life, my father avoided turnips like the plague because they reminded him of those early days when his family didn't have much.

My mother tested a turnip stew recipe and my father got so angry he threw the whole pot out the window, which landed on my school art project left out to dry. My carefully oil painted rendition of the Mona Lisa was destroyed. The next day, I took the bent canvas with dobs of dried turnip gravy and showed it to my instructor without comment.

She said that it was one of my best and gave me a B+.

As a result of my father's turnip aversion, I never have eaten them in my entire life, but secretly wanted to incorporate them into my art.

I enjoy westernized Chinese food like sweet and sour pork, sesame chicken and tomato beef chow mein but I don't know how to make those dishes. (I read an article that egg foo yung inspired the Western or Denver omelet, however, you shouldn't believe everything you read on the Internet.) My mother banned me from the kitchen after the wok incident. I made vegetable stir-fry but forgot to turn off the stove. The bottom of the wok burnt right through and ruined the cooktop. The only reason we were alerted was because of the billowing, black smoke. Okay, there were flames and a burning smell that took a week to go away.

One time at a restaurant, my brother said that I shouldn't eat the prawns because they were bottom feeders that ate the crap off the ocean's floor. I rested my chopsticks politely and resisted taking any. To my dismay, he scooped up the last four prawns from the serving plate in front of me. What a jerk. He had a bad case of food poisoning later, couldn't keep his balance and threw up on his CD player. I had my revenge, saying, "A few too many shrimps, sailor?" Unfortunately, my parents and six guests got sick too. Three days of nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. I was the lucky one.

Speaking of eating out, I have a problem with praying in restaurants. I remember a nervous waiter who hovered with a bowl of soup for ten at our table while my father took the time to ask God to bless the food and everyone at the table for such and such contributions they had made to mankind.

I thought that the waiter hesitated because he didn’t know if he should interrupt us by putting the hot bowl on the table or wait. Finally, we said "Amen" and he plunked down the bowl, spilled the ham and corn soup, burning his fingers. He hopped from foot to foot and sunk his fingers into a pitcher of ice water. He shouted something in Cantonese that I couldn’t quite make out.

Another waiter distributed the soup into individual bowls while Hoppy went to get some bandages. Solemnly, I sipped the soup. Prayer has its place when you really, really need God's help, but sometimes is it necessary if it causes unnecessary pain and suffering?

God bless those who wait.

At home, prayer was also an issue for me. The phone would ring at dinnertime, and I’d jump up to answer it, even in the middle of prayer. I was firmly told to sit down, bow my head and ignore the phone. But I’d get anxious. What if it was an emergency? I didn't have a boyfriend but what if it was someone wanting to be my boyfriend? What if someone was calling long distance? Shouldn’t I pick up the phone just in case? Later on, we did get an answering machine, but I'd still get the urge to check call display.

Now don’t get me wrong, I tried to be an obedient daughter and a good person—emphasis on the word ‘try’. I had heard about people who cheated on their income tax, rode the subway without paying or breastfed in public but I didn’t do those things. I really tried.

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On the topic of beauty and fashion, if God were a She, (which might be true and we don’t know) I think as a female God she would love me for who I am and understand my belief that clothes make a woman thus women need clothes. I dreamt of having enough money to buy something nicer to wear than t-shirts, holey jeans and runners. I splurged on occasion when my parents gave me spending money, but that was more seldom than you'd think.

God didn't waste the concept of beauty on chimpanzees or emus but reserved it for things like stars, sunsets, fine art, the right hair colour, shoes, and the fairer sex. If a woman is beautiful with the right wardrobe, she's sought after by admirers, and often she's hired over her dour opponent with similar credentials. If she smiles, the world smiles with her. If a man is beautiful, people wonder if he's homosexual. A man in a pink shirt is a beautiful thing, because it shows he's secure in his sexual orientation, be it straight or gay. If he has a high voice, I don't have an issue as long as he can carry on a conversation.

I was on the bus and a young Japanese fellow was wearing cotton shoes with no socks. Now that alone wasn’t unusual but it was five degrees Celsius and pouring rain and his shoes were dry. How did he keep his feet warm and dry? It was like people who wore shorts on Christmas in Canada. I know people want to be comfortable, but in a northern climate is it appropriate?

Propriety isn't only for the rich or royalty. I guess if you are homeless, you could get away with wearing anything but if you are going to a fancy dinner party, shouldn't you at least wear casual-dressy attire? Not that I'm ever invited to such events being a starving artist and all.

#

I was waiting at the dentist's office, when I overheard two women talking as they flipped through fashion magazines. One, dressed to the nines, was giving fashion advice to the other who wore oversized wrinkled pants and an outdated plaid shirt. "Jeans are the new dress pants so they're suitable for any occasion, and if you lose a button off your blouse, don't worry, it's 'sexy'. If you don’t have time to wash your hair before cocktails, use gel for the wet look. Jewelry can be fake as long as you let the guests know the real one’s in the safe along with your stock certificates."

"Low-rise super skinny jeans are fine for teenagers or anorexic models but what should a middle-aged woman like me who has borne three children wear over her middle-aged midriff?" said Miss Frumpy to Miss Chic, the fashion guru.

I heard Miss Chic say, "Wear the stomach over the waistband for comfort, or if that fails, go directly to maternity wear."

Pants classified as low-rise, mid-rise and high-rise sound like architectural terms, I mused. One could really *build* a wardrobe around that. I chuckled inwardly.

Miss Frumpy pointed at the magazine. Curiously, I leaned over her shoulder to peek at an ad of a supermodel pranced in a polka dot padded bra and matching skimpy panties in front of a waterfall.

"What do you think about me wearing a bra like that?" asked Miss Frumpy.

"A padded bra is fine if you're an A-cup but for a D-cup or larger, is it really necessary?" replied Miss Chic. "Enough is enough. If you want to wear a padded bra to hide your nipples, use tape."

These two belonged on a reality TV show.

"Susan?" called the receptionist. "The dentist will see you now." A young woman in her twenties rose to enter the inner office. She had long hair, exquisite nails, a generous bust, a tiny waist, and toothpick legs funneled into platform wedge shoes. Because of a high center of gravity, she teetered slightly. She wore a pair of jeggings that showed off her derrière.

After she disappeared, Miss Frumpy said to her friend. "She must have glued her pants on, they're so tight."

"Jeggings were invented to marry jeans with leggings," replied Miss Chic.

"As far as I'm concerned, jeans were made for working and leggings were made for exercise." Miss Frumpy folded her arms like a sumo wrestler in a standoff.

"Excuse me," I said. They both looked down their noses at me. "I couldn't help but overhear. People have the right to wear what they want to wear. I think you both are awfully rude!"

"We weren't talking to *you*! Don't you know it's wrong to eavesdrop!" said Miss Frumpy. They abruptly turned to face the other way and Miss Frumpy made a cuckoo sign with her hand. I felt the hostility and ridicule without even trying.

I boiled in my wool coat as the conversation continued in my head. Even yoga wear to the office is now acceptable, especially if your boss has a fitness area available for staff. Some employers believe physical fitness helps employees to be more productive and efficient. I think it just makes them smell of sweat. Workers are equally happy to take a smoke break.

Diehard smokers face any type of weather to light up outside. In Vancouver, there's a city bylaw about smoking not being permitted within six metres of the entrance to a building. That doesn't deter smokers from carrying on a conversation with non-smoking workers. So yeah, they smoke outside but blowing cancer-causing chemicals into the faces of others is so wrong, I thought to myself.

I suddenly realized that I was being as catty as the two fashion fiends. At least, I didn't say it out loud for others to hear. They had got my ire up and I was steaming. I folded my arms and crossed my legs, tapping my foot impatiently.

When I got into one of my sardonic moods, I ranted in my head where no one could hear. I was a rice cooker ready to pop, but I tried to keep a lid on my emotions. My psychiatrist called it 'latent anger'. I asked him, "What makes me react like that to other people or circumstances?" He answered, "It's a defense mechanism for when you feel threatened." In this case, what was the threat? Certainly, not the two clowns sitting next to me. I stared at the clock, wishing a bomb would go off to reduce the boredom.

Miss Frumpy stopped to take out a compact mirror and checked her yellow teeth.

I mulled over the problem of how to end bad smoking habits. More ads on cigarette boxes or higher tobacco tax? Why don’t we just completely leap over the cigarette problem and talk about the legalization of marijuana across Canada? If people think it’s healthier for them to smoke pot, because it soothes them, that’s their choice I guess. However, I don't want it in my backyard so to speak. As far as illegal grow-ups go, owners or renters can still make money under the table like other home businesses. So what if it causes mould and rots their walls. That isn't my problem.

My doctor told me that smoking marijuana may trigger not only psychosis but if one has a genetic disposition one may develop chronic mental illness. So say, if schizophrenia runs in my family and I smoke pot, I am at higher risk to develop chronic schizophrenia, while others can smoke pot and not have psychosis at all.

I'd done my research. I know that schizophrenia could also be triggered by the use of crystal meth and other nasties. I guess it was dumb luck that I came by schizophrenia naturally without the cost of expensive street drugs. (I'm kidding.) The problem was I could slide into psychosis or obsessive behaviour without even noticing it. One doesn't have the tendency to raise their hand and say, "Excuse me, I'm having psychosis." The reason being psychotics don't always know they are psychotic because they think what they are experiencing is real. People knee-deep in a psychotic episode don't necessarily believe they are ill or incorrect about the event they are experiencing. Makes for great conversation.

Close your eyes and picture a place you've never been, a person you've never met or something that hasn't been invented yet. If your mind goes blank, you're probably sane. If what you picture is sort of fuzzy, you have an average imagination. If you have a clear sense you are on Jupiter, meeting Jesus on Fourth Avenue, or can see twenty million years into the future, chances are you are psychotic.

Welcome to Fantasy Island.

Then there's obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), which I continually obsess about having.

Take for example, compulsive cuticle nibbling caused by anxiety in social situations. Some people fidget, others tap their feet and some bite their nails. If I find an uneven cuticle, I start to nibble. Pretty soon it bleeds and I have a purple mess on my finger. People say that bad habits are hard to break. It takes a short time to develop a bad habit but a much longer time to break one.

OCD isn't only about bad habits but having constant disturbing thoughts like phobias around germs or scary thoughts. For instance, believing that cat scratches left on one's porch steps are a cryptic code used by sleeper spies in the neighbourhood posing as, well, neighbours. Such thoughts can cause deep distress and might make somebody wash their hands continually to prevent contracting diseases in the case of germ phobia or repeatedly sand the said porch to erase the cat code. *Somebody like me.*

Speaking of which, Beasty, our pug, always barked at our neighbours' cat when she was in our yard, but she prowled around anyway, using our porch steps as a scratching post. As for sleeper spies living next door, I was sure of it, because Magic the calico cat belonged to them. They called her Magic because she seemed to appear and disappear at will. One minute she'd be there and the next she'd be gone.

Anyway, her owners the Bentleys were an old couple that turned up their TV really loud every time they had an argument which worked out to three or four times a week. The wife yelled and screamed and threw things during soap operas and infomercials on weight loss products, fitness equipment, and my personal favorite, food processors. I figured Mrs. Bentley already had a food processor because she wasn't interested in the infomercials, but that's beside the point. One day, Mr. Bentley took a rifle into the backyard and shot at the crows in his cherry tree. Also I saw him chopping wood in the rain. Something was going on and it wasn't pretty.

That's what having a mental illness is like. Everything seems plausible. It's like children who believe nightmarish creatures are under the bed. Ideas from the subconscious invade one's reality.

There's also a common belief that people with schizophrenia are violent but that doesn't apply to all of us. Other than the brick-through-the-car-window incident, I've never hurt anyone or anything because of my illness. I admit on occasion I might punch someone in the shoulder but doesn't everybody? As long as I can function and don't injury anyone, can't I believe what I want to believe? Why do I need to conform to the norm in my thoughts and actions? It's my life, isn't it?

I confess taking medication helped me get through the day. Pills subdued my extreme emotions but I still heard things in my head on occasion. My psychiatrist said medications may even cause symptoms. One would think that research scientists would come up with better medications. I believed that my brain is dependent on my medications, meaning I can't go off them cold turkey. The chemical equation in my brain was satisfactory as long as my dosage and stress levels remained constant. If I altered the dosage, I could possibly relapse.

Being overstressed or fatigued causes overstimulation of my brain, which is a bad thing. That's why I can't work a regular nine to five job, because if the workload builds up and I become anxious, I lose concentration and make dumb mistakes.

I worked at an office as a receptionist for two weeks after I was discharged from the hospital. My psychiatrist recommended it would be good for me to try to get a job. My father pulled some strings and got me the job. After awhile, the water cooler started to talk to me and everyone there walked around with auras because they were supernatural beings. I got fired for not being able to record phone messages properly because I inverted numbers and posted notes saying, "Help me! I'm drowning!" on the water cooler.

#

To add another item to my list of personal deficiencies, I went through a period when I obsessed about food. At first, eating chocolate seemed like a harmless indulgence to me. I like dark chocolate and I figured it was healthier than milk chocolate so I indulged. I started out having a piece or two during the day—not the whole bar, mind you. Then Halloween came and I scarfed down a few snack size bars because we had a whole bowl and there weren’t a lot of trick-or-treaters because of the rain, and because you don’t want that stuff going stale because then no one will eat them except the dog. So actually by eating the candy, I was making sure it wasn't wasted and saving the dog from an adverse reaction. How generous and thoughtful of me.

Then there were birthday parties, which we celebrated maybe twenty times a year—big extended family and all that. Birthday parties came with cakes with inches of icing to hide their lopsidedness, and sugar cookies, date bars, and lemon squares. So I moved from eating small dark chocolate squares to standing by the buffet table and stuffing myself with sugar to avoid having to carry on a conversation with that dorky second cousin with the smell.

That smell that reminded me of rotting fish caused by bad oral hygiene. No mouthwash or antiseptic can cure one of that smell, if one doesn’t brush their teeth and floss regularly.

Anyway, after the guests departed after birthday parties or other festivities, I was required to help clean up the snacks. With only two handfuls of cheese curls and the few remains of chips, salsa, a tart, and three cookies, obviously it was better to eat the stuff instead of throwing them out or trying to store the paltry sum. Usually, there was some type of dip leftover. The chips and dip never run out at the same time. It's easy to pop on the lids onto the dip containers and put them in the fridge for next time. Dips don't expire for weeks with all those great preservatives and chemicals that they put in the food. Aren't we lucky?

I'd drink the last inch of punch in the punchbowl to quench my thirst and prepare for bed. Then I'd get sick. The stomach cramps, the flu-like symptoms, rushing to the bathroom all night, and reaching for the pink stuff to make it all go away.

Binging isn’t just for bulimics. Some people gorge continuously without vomiting. Barbecued duck, fried noodles, cannelloni, deep-fried chicken and greasy burgers weren't limited to dinnertime but made great high-calorie, high fat lunches too. They were mine for the taking. Living was good. Sure I exercised by walking around the neighbourhood which included stopping by the gas station to buy pretzels.

Like a cat on a prowl, before and after dinner I was in hunt mode. I looked in the fridge or stood on a ladder to access the top cupboard or any place food was stored. I ate nuts, avocado, bananas, Brie, peanut butter on white bread, leftover pizza (which only takes thirty seconds to reheat) or anything else that caught my fancy. At night, I dreamt about feasting on a whole apple pie topped with six scoops of maple ice cream and five maraschino cherries followed by sundae after sundae, each one larger than the last. I woke up with saliva dripping down my chin. I visited grocery stores and became mesmerized by the deli section and engrossed in the pastries, reading the ingredients with almost sexual desire.

I loved cheese by itself straight out of the package. It was better with pickles on salted crackers. Or on macaroni or submarine sandwiches. For supper, we sometimes had lasagna baked with mozzarella and ricotta with a liberal layer of Parmesan on top. Oh boy.

I always ate a second helping, if not a third. I always made room for two servings of green salad. After all, salad is good for you. I especially liked the dressing and lots of it.

Food obsession grew from just an innocent piece of chocolate to full-blown eat-a-thons. After months of being out of control, I staggered to the bathroom scale. My unsatisfied appetite had made me obese. Horrified, I felt guilty. I made a vow to melt those calories away, to go on a mission to end world hunger by sharing my food and stepping away from the table.

Weeping on the couch, my body trembled in spasms. The rolls shook around my middle like Earthquake Cathy. I reached for a tissue but my hand touched a foil bag caught between the couch and the table. I opened it to find stale barbecued potato chip crumbs. Sobbing, I licked the salt off the inside of the bag, trying to forget my woes. I tossed the bag behind the sofa and lay down to rest. I needed help and I needed it fast.

#

At my next appointment, my family doctor asked what I was eating. I reeled off a list of fifty items. She recommended a stricter diet and more exercise. "It’s not just the bacon, donuts and pop, I see."

"What should I do? I can’t even attempt to count calories."

"I have the perfect diet for you. It consists of two words. EAT LESS."

So like any good patient, I tried to cut back. I cut out some of my dietary staples such as chocolate and peanuts. Instead I made rice noodles, tofu and steamed broccoli. I ate apples, oranges and stopped drinking chocolate milk and eggnog.

Even though losing weight was tough for me, I did succeed, however my success deserved a reward, and that reward was food. So what kind of backward person eats to reward herself after a diet? Call me obtuse but don’t call me late for dinner.

#

"Exercise is what it’s about," said my brother Leonard, wiping the sweat off his brow after a five-kilometre jog. He reached in the fridge for bottled water.

"What?" I said, with my mouth full of mango gelato.

"Look at me." He flexed his arm and pinched his tricep. "It’s all about working it."

Leonard was naturally slim. He never had a weight problem but then again he wasn’t on atypical anti-psychotic medication like me.

"I can’t eat what you eat, bro. Protein shakes and dietary fiber make me want to vomit. And besides I can’t exercise. I have asthma."

He rolled his eyes. "Sis, get with the program. You can walk, can’t you?"

"I do walk. Around the block and—"

"Down to the gas station, I know. I mean come with me. We’ll do the Grouse Grind."

"The only grind I can handle is for coffeemakers."

"Don't be a horse's ass. Everything takes work. You have to try."

"I do try and where does it get me?"

He leaned back on his chair. "You used to be thin."

"Yeah at age twelve."

"How are you going to get married if you don't take care of yourself?"

I stuck out my tongue. "Marriage? Are you blind? I'm a mental patient, remember?"

"Geez, relax. You sound like the voice of doom. You can get out if you really want to."

"Get out of what?"

"Lalaland." He played with a pair of chopsticks on the table. I had set the table for Chinese takeout. It was my turn to cook but takeout seemed so much easier. He spun the chopsticks but caught them before they skittered away.

"And how do I get out of Lalaland?" I folded my arms in a twist.

"You know, you are funny."

"Yeah, I'm a laugh and a half."

"You've got chopshtick." He balanced the end of a chopstick on his finger a second before it toppled.

I chuckled. "Asian humour with a little Jewish thrown in?"

"Jews can tell jokes. Asians are more the academic type. But they both want a bargain."

"You are so racist, Leonard."

"I'm not racist. I'm just putting it out there."

"Yeah, put it out with the trash."

Chapter 2

I arrived at Montagna's on a sunny Tuesday afternoon. Montagna's was an Italian café that served specialty coffees and great pizza, pasta and salads. The owner Gino gave me a wave and welcoming hello. He wore a moustache and was friendly with the customers. Making conversation was part of his genuine exuberant nature. Besides talking to the customers made the work more enjoyable and passed the time.

Rajani Pandit sat at a table outside with a pen in hand. He was constantly drawing or searching images on his tablet. I asked him why he often sat outside without a jacket even on rainy or freezing days. He said, "In India, it's always hot. I like the cool air."

Rajani means 'night' in Hindi. But we call him Raj for short. Raj means 'king' which suited his role in our group. We called ourselves the Big Six. Raj lined up exhibits or shows for us around the city. Strangely, he did most of his business from his cellphone or in person at the café. People would walk down the street and call him by name. I thought he was exceptionally popular and sociable, but he would say he was always working. Raj helped me assemble an art portfolio. He took the group to various places to check out the layout of potential venues or suggest trips to established galleries to critique the art. I called Raj the Big Kahuna.

When he said yes, he meant yes. When he said no, that meant he still might say yes but it was no for the time being. He was pretty honest but also had an eye for art and was building his own art collection. Some of it he acquired at art battles where artists have twenty minutes to create a work from a blank canvas and the audience votes on the winner. After each competition, the art was auctioned for sale. He was shrewd but he had to be. I admired that in him.

If I were to write a book about Raj, I'd describe him as the troubled artist who found his calling in helping other artists reach their goals. He understood the artistic process, the years of struggle it took for some to get anywhere, the temperament and the artist's need to create.

I'd describe him as a troubled artist, because I've never met an artist who wasn't complicated. We had our quirks and manic energy. There were artists who treated their profession like a normal job, involving setting specific work hours Monday to Friday as part of a steady weekly routine. However, for someone like me, I worked in cycles. Sometimes I was highly productive versus times when I didn't work at all.

Raj was the only guy I knew who had the privilege of a running tab at the restaurant. I didn't have a running tab. I paid at the till before I walked away with my order like the regular customers. I guess he was special because he was the Big Kahuna.

I would say he looked out for the Big Six. He started booking us shows at Montagna's originally. Gino was happy to have art in his café and hoped the display would bring in more patrons. He said that it made the atmosphere livelier.

"What's with the lighting, Raj?" I asked at one of our evening gatherings. "See that couple over there? They're squinting at the art."

"So? What do you want me to do about it?" Raj said.

"Could you please ask Gino to turn up the lights so people can at least see the work?"

Raj turned his head and shouted across the restaurant. "Gino!"

"Yeah, Raj?"

"Can you turn up the lights so they can see the art?"

"What degree? I need a number."

"Why do you need a number?"

"I want to be exact."

"Ninety-five percent."

"Okay, but you'll have to pay my electric bill." Gino reached for the dimmer switch.

The lights brightened and I was happy. It's the squeaky wheel that gets the oil or in my case, if you raised a stink, you had a better chance of getting results.

I remember one of our art openings at Montagna's on a freezing December evening in the middle of a blizzard. Three of the Big Six were either out of town or busy working. Raj, another artist named Marco Manicotti, and I showed up for what we called the opening reception. A few people were eating but it wasn't exactly busy. None of the people I invited showed up and we basically were the only ones there for the show except for one guy who scanned the art briefly and asked for the washroom key. Now to be fair, it was damn cold that night and the snow was forming drifts on the sidewalk.

Raj insisted on sitting outside at a table on the sheltered patio. He was like an Eskimo. All he needed was a dogsled and he could hunt for seals without a parka. I watched snowflakes fall outside. I pictured Raj turning to ice or his eyelids freezing.

"Raj, wanna come in?" I said, shivering at the doorway. I was being a concerned citizen. "You look so lonely out there. Is that an icicle hanging from your nose?"

"All I want is some peace."

"Yeah, rest in peace when you get hypothermia and your limbs start to break off."

"Gee, that makes me feel better." He stood and came back in the café. Raj gave me a lemon drop as he passed by.

"What's that for?"

"Eating. What do you think?"

Marco was absorbed in a drawing. He was also one of the Big Six. I didn't know what it was, but he looked like an artist. Or more like a Bohemian like Picasso. His muscular arms and large hands were strong enough to bend a metal bar but he was adapt at fine pencil drawings as well. He had a sense of humour but also a serious side. He had a vision of whom he was as an artist, where he was going and what he was going to do when he got there.

"Cathy, where's your sketchpad?" he said.

"This is an art opening. I'm here to talk not draw." I played with the handle of my teacup. Steam rose from my blackberry tea.

"To whom? It's just us." He brushed his hand over his beard.

"Well, can I talk to *you*?" I asked.

"No need to get uppity." He gave me a fierce look and picked up a pen. "I suggest you draw at openings. It's good for exposure."

"I'll bring it next time."

Raj was sitting at the next table. "Cathy, are you on for Tuesday?"

"Sorry I can't make it to the art battle."

"As an artist don't you think you should go to those events? You paint fast. Why don't you sign up to paint?"

I sank in my seat. "Ah, painting in front of a hundred and fifty people? Not for me."

"It's about getting known. It looks good on your resumé. Besides, Anthony is competing."

"Mr. On the Rise to Fame and Fortune?"

"What are you talking about? I thought you might like to go and see him in action."

"Anthony is going places is all I meant." After unwrapped the lemon drop, I threw it in the air and caught it in my mouth.

"Stop playing with your food," said Raj. "You could learn from him. He advertises, you don't."

"Is it proper for a girl to advertise?" I pursed my lips.

"You need to build a reputation. An artist cannot live on paint alone."

I tossed my ponytail. "I'm not here to argue. I'm here to have fun."

"Suit yourself." He turned on his tablet and scrolled in search of something to draw. "Cathy, you need a tablet to be able to show your portfolio and be more professional. Are you getting one for Christmas?"

"Are you offering?"

Raj was always prodding me to up my game in the art world. He once said, "No one's stopping you from getting your own shows. You need to apply yourself."

Anthony had shared a few marketing ideas with me when I ran into him at an art supply store on Granville Island. "Cathy, you need to draw constantly and think like an artist. Learn from other artists and dealers or collectors," he advised. "Apply for artist grants and exhibitions. Enter art contests. At the very least, get a domain name and a website."

"Anthony, how did you learn all that stuff?" I asked.

"I hired an agent and then realized I could do what he did on my own."

"Thanks for the advice. Raj helps me out but I wouldn't consider him my agent. I'm still learning. Are you saying I should hire you as my part-time agent?"

"You need me," he said with a glint in his eye. "You're talented. All you need is a push in the right direction."

I rubbed my fingertips together as the sign of money. "How much is that going to cost me?"

"Something in a brown paper bag at the end of each week."

"Do you seriously think I can make money at this?"

He rubbed his fingers together, imitating me. "Just remember at the end of the day you owe me." I laughed at his cleverness. He walked off whistling. Some people make things look so easy. He didn't need the Big Six. Anthony was the type of guy that could make it on his own without breaking a sweat. I think he knew that I wouldn't get far without help.

Art school was beneficial to learn basic techniques and understand the history of art. I had some art school training but dropped out because I couldn't hack it. With my medication, I was too sedated to make it to an eight o'clock class so I was late more than I was on time. I hated creating on demand to fit into the lesson or to win the instructor's approval when his bias was so obvious. I disliked competing for grades. I'd be so concerned about the grade that I couldn't relax enough to make good art, especially on a tight schedule. I needed time to develop my own style without the curious eyes and well-meaning suggestions of others. *Why don't you move that line over an inch? Is that the right red for lips? It looks better sideways.* Great advice, huh?

I asked one instructor, "How do I find out the raison d'être of my work?" He said that it could take a lifetime for me to reach that point. Thanks a lot, buster.

Marco went to art school in Montreal before he moved out to the west coast. He was a painter and sculptor. He built sculptures with found items and welded or attached them together. People loved Upcycled art with the current 'conserve the environment' craze. Marco didn't care much about competing in art battles either. He said creation takes time. Why do it on a timer for kicks?

His reliefs were similar to his sculptures. He used mixed media to create reliefs on cradleboard. I loved how he lacquered the surface, preserving the grain of the cradleboard in certain areas. In some pieces, he drilled holes and attached metal objects like a tap, pipes or bicycle parts. He included veneer and magazine images and splattered paint on top to create a visual statement like something by Robert Rauschenberg.

"When I make it, all my past work is going to worth more than it is now," said Marco.

"Newsflash! You are making it. You sell work at every show you have," I said.

"Nah, I mean really make it."

"Everything is relative," Raj said.

"If you make a million, you can't take it with you. But you can will it to me," I chirped.

"Stand in line," said Raj.

Marco lived alone in an artist live/work studio where he could work whenever he wanted to without distraction. He would wake up at three a.m. and start to paint, then sleep in and come to the café at noon.

He made sales from his work, but I didn't ask him about secondary income. That's his business. The artists I knew all took on other jobs to pay the bills. If Marco had a rich aunt or benefactor, I didn't know for sure. Rent was expensive in Vancouver. That's why I lived at home and put up with Leonard the Pest.

#

On a Monday afternoon, skinny Leonard and I were eating teriyaki beef on rice at the mall. I had needed a new battery for my watch. One year and a day after I bought it, the 12-month warranty expired and the battery died. Isn't that always the way? The watchmaker said he'd put a new one in for eighteen dollars, which I thought was highway robbery. Instead, I decided to try the dollar store and see if I could buy one and change it myself.

Leonard tagged along for lunch because there wasn't much to eat at home. The refrigerator had gone on the blink, so our mother did some manic cleaning and threw out almost the entire contents in case of spoilage. I protested but she said, "Eat this food and you'll be sick for two weeks."

"Couldn't we just store the food at Aunt Helen's until we fix the fridge?"

My father rapped his fist on the counter. "I'm not asking any favours from Aunt Helen. She's tighter than a lid on a pickle jar. She'd rent you fridge space by the cubic inch. Listen to your mother."

I did contemplate pulling a container of fried chicken out of the garbage (it was wrapped, wasn't it?) but then thought better of it. Some things should be left as they are.

"You are really needing a new haircut," Leonard remarked, as I polished off my rice dish and a soda.

I gave him the evil eye. "That's interesting coming from someone with less hair on his head than under his armpits. Is that a receding hairline I see?"

"Earth to Mars, it's called a butch cut." He ran his hand over his hair for effect.

"Did you say botched cut?"

"As I was saying, how about a bob?"

"Don't know him. Don't want him." I twirled my fork and thought about aiming it at his forehead.

"How about a pixie cut?"

"Are you insane? What's wrong with my hair?"

"When you pull it back in that ponytail, it drains the colour out of your forehead. Why don't you wear it loose?"

"Listen, Mr. Hair Police, I don't give a damn what you think. And besides, Denise says I should keep it long."

"Denise with the shoe fetish?"

I shook my plastic fork at him. "She doesn't have a shoe fetish. She designs accessories and paints shoes by hand to display with them." With a will of its own, my fork flew out of my grasp and glanced off his cheek. At least, that was my excuse.

The fork landed on the floor. He kicked me under the table.

"The shoes are works of art, Leonard. She sells them individually for fifty dollars each."

"Who would buy one shoe is beyond me. It's non-functional."

"A lot of things are beyond you." I stood up and tossed my paper plate into a receptacle.

Leonard left his tray on the table. I nudged him and gestured he should empty the contents of his tray.

"Cathy, see those ladies over there?" He put a hand on my shoulder. I nodded in response. "If I throw away all my garbage, they won't have work to do and if they don't have work to do, they're out of a job. If they don't have a job, they go on income assistance shouldered on the backs of taxpayers. They might starve or end up homeless. That means they can't feed their kids or buy them computer games for Christmas. Comprendez?"

"You're such a saint, putting the welfare of others ahead of your garbage." I grabbed his tray and disposed of his garbage. I flipped my ponytail and moved toward the exit with Leonard on my left flank, warding off pushy people with large parcels or shopping carts with midget terrorists disguised as angelic children.

#

Denise was another one of the Big Six. She developed a line of accessories including belts, handbags and jewelry using her logo, a stylized "DH", initials for Denise Huang. She sold mostly at craft fairs but was slowly introducing her work into small boutiques around Vancouver and suburbs. She said that her line was too trendy for more conservative buyers thus some stores weren't interested in carrying her designs, but secretly, I thought it was because she didn't have the capital for a larger inventory or the right contacts yet.

She and I first met in the cafeteria at art school. Her studded purple leather bracelet caught my eye. I sat next to her with my paper bag lunch consisting of a ham sandwich and overripe banana. My mom bought discounted fruit and vegetables for a dollar per bag, saying, "So what if it's bruised or brown. It's still edible if you don't look at it.

Denise asked if I had change for a hundred dollar bill. What art student carries around change for a hundred dollar bill?

I said no. "Why don't you ask the cafeteria cashier?"

"They say they don't take large bills because they could be fake," she said.

"Do you have a debit or credit card?" I wanted to be helpful.

"No, I'm strictly on a cash basis these days. Can you lend me a twenty?"

I reached into my wallet and pulled out a bill. "I only have a ten."

"That's good enough." Before I could say a word, she'd snatched it from my hand and was ordering a sandwich and fries to go. She came back to her seat to grab her fake fur vest.

"What's your—"

"Denise Huang."

"How do I—"

She vanished out the door. I was vexed. She'd taken my last ten dollars and I didn't have bus fare. What the fuck had just happened?

#

I don't remember Denise ever paying me back despite my polite hints when I ran into her again. Instead we talked about our dreams and career goals. She was the top of her class and confided she was dating one of the teaching assistants, Jake Priest, as part of a strategy to get a scholarship to a New York design school. School rules state that students can't have personal relationships with staff, however, Jake and Denise kept their romance under wraps. A few of the students knew but turned a blind eye because they didn't want to be labeled tattlers.

I remember Denise called me one night, sobbing. "Jake doesn't love me anymore. I saw him with another girl at a club and they were smooching like the opening scene in a porn movie. I thought they were going to get naked right there. Shit!"

I tried to calm her down. "Come on, Denise. You didn't love him anyway. 'He was your ticket,' you said."

She wailed louder. I could hear Elvis Presley singing 'Love Me Tender' in the background.

"I lied. I wanted to show I was tough. Not some lovesick teenager." She blew her nose.

"Look, you might still get the scholarship."

"I don't care about the scholarship! I want to stay in Vancouver with him."

"Did you tell him that?"

"Are you crazy? Reveal what I really feel?" Her voice got shrill.

"Well, it would be a good idea. Maybe he doesn't think you really care about him."

She blew her nose again. "I hate humility."

"At least talk to him."

A week later, I ran into Jake. "Hi, Cathy. Did you finish your project for drawing class? Everything's due in next week for a final evaluation."

"Ah, almost. Hey, have you seen Denise lately?"

He paused as if he was deciding if I was trustworthy or not. The three of us had spent a few evenings together at the pub. "She hasn't returned my calls. I figured she either has a bad case of laryngitis or is avoiding me."

"She said she saw you locking jaws with another girl."

A couple of students walked past, chattering. Jake hid his face like a shamed criminal. "It's over with the other girl. She didn't tell me she was engaged," he said in a low whisper.

"You're an ass to do that to Denise."

"Denise told me to ask the instructors to write letters to help her get a scholarship. I felt used. What comes around goes around."

I could tell he wanted to end the conversation, but I gently gripped his arm. "She acts tough, but she's in love with you. She doesn't care about the scholarship anymore. Denise doesn't want to go to New York because she wants to be with you."

He looked skeptical. "I doubt that."

However, three days later, I had a phone message from Denise. "Hey Cathy, I don't know what you said to Jake but he asked for my forgiveness and if I'd like to rent an apartment with him where we could both have studio space once I graduate."

"What did you say?"

"Hell, yes!"

If someone has the chance to go the New York and study art and if that's all he or she talks about for months, how does that suddenly take a backseat to a relationship? Is love really the end-all?

Chapter 3

My cousin Kate invited me to dim sum with some of the extended family. I hadn't seen my aunts, uncles and cousins for an eon.

Everyone arrived on time, which I found surprising as usually Chinese time is about being routinely late. Parking meters were fed, hugs exchanged (excluding me for personal reasons), and we ordered chow mein, chicken feet, stir-fried green beans, *siu mai,* and other dishes.

We did a bit of an I'll-pour-your-tea, you-pour-mine dance and my uncle asked for a lager.

"Beer with dim sum, Uncle Blair?" I asked. In his youth, he looked like a young George Clooney or vice versa.

"Cleanses the palate," he replied.

"Nice hat by the way." He wore a fur-lined, black wool trapper hat with the earflaps up.

"I saw a hat like this one for fifteen dollars, but Sophie bought me this one for a hundred and five."

I was impressed. "What a great wife you have." I winked at Aunt Sophie.

The taro root cake and beans were served and we picked up our chopsticks in unison.

"Look, they're eating with their left hands." Aunt Sophie said, waving her chopsticks at three of us including me. I thought if she moved any closer, she'd poke my eyes out.

I glanced at Aunt Janice, one of the guilty parties. Were we going to be indicted at making a Chinese faux pas?

"My brothers and I are all left-handed, but we were forced to use our right hand, otherwise our mother would slap us. That's why I’m so bad with chopsticks," said cousin Stewart.

"I got slapped for other things like spraying the clothes on the clothesline with the hose or putting soap on Leonard's toothbrush," I said. Looks of shock and dismay appeared on their faces. Had I said too much?

Stewart's eyes got big. "You were a naughty kid!"

"What possessed you to do such awful things?" said Kate.

The spicy tofu arrived. "Bean cake anyone?" I spun the lazy Susan. I could change the subject like nobody's business.

"How's work?" Kate asked Stewart.

"The boss hired a newbie who was rolling coins. She had them in those paper rolls with the quarters stacked vertically to the top. I said, 'Did you count those?' She said, 'No'. 'Then how do you know how much is in there?' I asked. 'Because it says ten dollars on the side,' she said."

A few of us giggled.

"Then I said, 'How are you supposed to fold down the top when you stacked them so high?' She said, 'I wondered about that.' "

Silly grins appeared on our faces.

"I had to show her how to balance the general ledger with the bank statement. I had to stay late for an hour."

"Why'd you hire her?" Kate asked.

"The boss did. Needless to stay she didn't last long."

Aunt Janice nudged me. "What have you been up to Cathy?"

"I entered an art competition for a bank. They are looking for paintings to hang at one of their branches. To me, it's sort of like the lottery. The odds are you aren't going to win, but it's the hope that you might win."

She gave me a blank look.

"In November, I was filming with Winston, a film guy, and Caroline, an actress, at Buntzen Lake in Port Moody. It was windy, pouring rain, and so-o cold. We were reviewing a video clip inside the car, when a plastic chair, one of our props, blew off the dock into twelve feet of water."

"What did you do?" asked Aunt Janice.

"There was this lone fellow swimming in his shorts. Caroline politely asked him if he could fish our chair out of the water. He asked us what we were doing and we explained we would doing a shoot for a video on schizophrenia awareness."

"He said, 'Anything for a good cause,' and dove right in."

"How heavy was the chair?"

"Well the water was holding it down, so I think it must have been a fair weight. We were soaking wet by time we left. I caught a bad cold and cough afterwards for three weeks." I scooped some tofu on rice into my bowl. You had to be quick with seven other pairs of chopsticks at the table.

"That's too bad. But it's good you are working on different projects. You must be multi-talented."

"It seems that way, but I don't make any money." I smiled politely.

"Maybe you should get a job that pays better," said Aunt Janice. Kate spun the lazy Susan to reach the chicken feet.

"What are you doing for Christmas, Stewart?" Aunt Sophie asked.

"I'm having Christmas dinner. I bought ten boxes of stuffing mix. They make great stocking stuffers too."

"Do you have enough plates for everyone?" asked Aunt Sophie.

"They're still out from last year. I never put them away."

Aunt Kelly started to talk about her daughters. "My daughters don't know how to cook except for Shelley."

"Cooking is a necessity for some but an art form for others," said Uncle Blair.

"Who can't cook?" Kate asked. Four of us raised our hands including me.

I can't even manage potluck without help, I thought. I usually end up bringing store-bought macaroni salad or potato chips.

Aunt Kelly continued, "My other daughter was invited to an ugly sweater party. She bought a whole bunch of items from the dollar store for me to sew on a sweater for her. It took me two days."

"Wouldn't buying one from Value Village be cheaper?" I asked.

"If I need an ugly sweater, I only have to look in my closet," volunteered Stewart. More chuckles. He should have been an entertainer instead of an accountant.

"Are you still living in West Vancouver, Aunt Janice?" I asked.

"Yes, we finished the add-on but I lost my sunroom," she replied. "I don't have room for all my things now that my son and wife have moved in."

"My parents have so much stuff," I said. "It's good we live in a house with a garage."

"Is anyone here a hoarder?" Stewart asked.

Aunt Janice and Aunt Kelly raised their hands. "Stewart, are you?" I asked.

"Can't afford it," said Stewart.

"So you hoard on a limited budget? You're a part-time hoarder."

He nodded. "I'm working up to it."

An hour later, we split the bill but came up short as usual. Either someone doesn't pay or someone does the wrong math. Stewart and Kate plunked down some extra loonies.

"Cathy, the next time we get together, you should organize it," said Kate on the way out.

"I don't have everyone's contact info and I can't order in Chinese. But I can calculate the bill if you want."

"Until next time." With a wave, she was gone.

The thing about large Chinese families is that you don't always see everyone and there are babies being born every year. I don't remember all the spouses, divorcees or children of my twenty-five first cousins or where they work or live. When I was young, we used to get together every Boxing Day, but not anymore. So dim sum with family is special for me.

#

When I got back home, Leonard was folding laundry while Beasty was chewing on a rubber mouse. Leonard and I had a contract with our parents, "No chores, no dinner" was the Fung family motto. My mom said that it's an ancient Chinese proverb. Leonard switched from folding towels to t-shirts. He asked why he wasn't invited to dim sum.

"Because you weren't here when Kate called," I replied. Automatically, I started to sort the socks.

"You could have texted or called me."

"I don't text and I knew you were busy anyway."

He inflated his chest with a combination of pride and hot air. "Yeah, I guess a job interview takes priority."

"How did it go?" I asked.

"They asked if I could code. I said my skills in that area needed improvement."

"It was a job in electrical engineering. Why the hell would you need to know how to code?" I took a shirt out of the laundry basket and put it aside to iron.

"They are participating in a beta CAD program trial."

"What? How much do they pay?"

"Works out to twenty-five dollars an hour to start," he said, efficiently separating the clean clothes into designated piles. He was faster at folding than I was. I was an exceptionally slow folder.

"You're supposed to help them design software for a measly twenty-five dollars an hour?" I sneered.

"You have to start somewhere. They offer a great benefit program and I need to pay off my student loan."

"Why don't you ask Mom and Dad to help you out?" Isn't that what all indebted kids did?

He furrowed his brow. "They already paid for most of my tuition and I live here for free. I can't ask them to pay for this too. I have enough to get by for now. I want to be the captain of my own ship."

I picked up a sock that had fallen on the floor. "I don't think I'll ever reach that goal."

"What?" he said. "You hide behind your insecurity blanket like you don't have choices in life. Seize the day."

"Look, Dr. Freud. I dropped out of art school and I don't have a fucking ship and I'm not a captain!"

"Cool off. Don't be a coward." He slapped me with a pair of plaid flannel pajama bottoms.

"I'm not a coward. I'm—"

"I've heard it before. You're depressed. So are millions of people living in the northern hemisphere. Do something about it."

I broke into tears as feelings of frustration flooded forth. "I can't just do something about it. You don't understand!"

"I do understand that you haven't got a clue of what you're capable of."

"I’m not standing for this. Fold this yourself!" I grabbed his neatly folded piles and threw them on the floor.

"You little, rotten—"

"What's going on here?" my mother bellowed from the doorway. She held a bag of potatoes in each hand. The dog barked.

"Sibling rivalry. We were just cleaning up, mom." Leonard and I scrambled to pick up the clothes and towels off the carpet.

"You kids need to get along. I won't be here to pick up the pieces when you kill each other. Now apologize and shake hands."

We reluctantly shook hands and Mom left the room to put the groceries away in the kitchen.

"Loser Leonard," I whispered.

"Hag," Leonard replied.

#

I was secretly quite envious of my older brother. He was the dutiful son, whereas I got into trouble five times more than he did. All through school, he was an honour roll student versus my inability to complete homework on time or score high on provincial exams. He had finished an electrical engineering degree with a 3.9 GPA. The reason he didn't get a scholarship in his last year was because his applications were late due to him having a bad case of the flu. He didn't have time to apply for a bursary after that so he got by with a student loan for his final year.

He talked about his future constantly. He had organized a plan for his career and made a mental list of cities around the world that he wanted to visit.

He wasn't really interested in girls so much or maybe they weren't interested in him. He was definitely the nerd growing up and was more interested in numbers and facts than dating.

I teased him about being a wallflower at parties but he insisted that he was waiting for the right woman to come along: a girl with intelligence, goals and similar interests with a nice hiney. I cracked up laughing when he said that.

Leonard had a few male friends from school but also was very competitive and never studied with any of them because he didn't want to 'share his vast knowledge' or let others know his studying tricks.

I argued, "Don't you want to help others? You don't even want your friends to have the privilege of knowing how you get the right answer?"

"No one has entry to that door. I'm beyond trying to explain things to people who do not understand."

"Oh, god. Do you have trouble sleeping at night with that halo keeping you awake?"

"You mean a halo that's on too tight," he corrected me.

At that point in the conversation, he farted. We both cracked up.

#

Despite his nagging and useless advice, he did look out for me. When I was eight, I was doing a wheelie on my bike, trying to show off. I took my hands off the handlebars, the bike went sideways, and I fell and hurt my knee. He helped me into the house and held my hand while I cried. Mom cleansed the wound, which felt like murder and then she bandaged me up. Leonard told her that it was an accident so I wouldn't get in trouble. I hugged him. He pulled my ponytail, I pinched his neck and soon we were back to our usual brother/sister tussles.

Leonard was one of the few people who knew my moods. I'd argue and vent at him when I couldn't hold it together, like when the dog threw up on my painting. For some reason, he never retaliated enough to cause a lasting effect. I didn't understand why he put up with me.

Maybe he was more stupid than I thought.

Chapter 4

I first bumped into Jacklyn literally on the seawall. I was snapping photos, and stepped back, when she ran full tilt into me.

We both fell to the ground. She quickly apologized but we bumped our heads when we tried to stand up. We laughed. I picked up my camera off the asphalt.

"Oh, is it broken? I'll pay for it, if you need it repaired."

"I think it's okay." Secretly, I hoped it was broken, because I saw a better one on sale downtown.

"Are you sure, you're okay? Need an ambulance?"

"I think I need to sit down." I sat on a nearby bench.

"Are you a tourist?"

"No, I’m an artist."

"Really? So am I. Jacklyn Kennedy." She shook my hand.

"You're kidding. That's your name?"

"I spell it with a 'k' not a 'q'. My mother wanted me to run for office, but instead I run for art. I average fifteen kilometres a week. It gives me a high. Your name?"

"Cathy Fung. What do you mean run for art?"

"I keep in shape so I can be a better artist. It really helps."

"What kind of art do you do?"

"Oils mostly. Figurative paintings of people in motion." She reached for her water bottle and took a gulp.

"Like Duchamp? Futurism?"

She shook her head. "More like blurring images. Not so defined."

"I'd like to see your work sometime." We exchanged phone numbers and agreed to meet up at Montagna's the next day.

"I want to introduce you to my friends," she said with a wink.

#

I wore my best pair of jeans and arrived at Montagna's. It was my first time there. As I was early, I thought I'd go ahead and order something. I approached the counter and received a hello I will never forget.

"Ciao bella! Good morning, how are you? What a nice scarf you're wearing. A fine scarf, if I ever saw one." The dark-haired Italian smiled broadly, showing off a nice set of pearly whites.

I grinned. "Fine, thanks. I just want a regular black coffee and a chocolate-dipped biscotti."

"The coffee was freshly brewed two minutes ago. I’m Gino. What's your name?"

"Cathy."

"Welcome, Cathy! Have a seat and Jeanne will bring it to you. Bellissimo!" He clapped his hands. Jeanne wiped her hands on her apron and smiled from behind the counter.

I was so tickled at the grand reception. I expected an orchestra to strike up or a 21-gun salute. Instead, 'Maneater' played in the background from hidden speakers. Nelly Furtado was one of my favourites. Support Canadian artists.

I paid for my order, took a seat and admired some of the artwork on the wall.

A bearded man at the next table motioned toward the work on the wall. "They're for sale." Laid out in front of him, he had an open sketchbook and a tin box filled with pens and colouring pencils. "Marco's the name."

"Hi, I'm—"

"Cathy, I overheard. Nice to meet you." He shook my hand. "You're new here?"

I nodded. "Ah, meeting Jacklyn, an acquaintance of mine."

Jeanne the waitress placed a cup of coffee and biscotti before me. I gave her a thank you.

"Jackie, she's a regular. She's an artist too." Marco sharpened one of his pencils.

"Yeah."

"See that guy out there?" He pointed to an East Indian fellow sitting outside on the patio on the other side of the glass window. "That's Raj. If you want to talk art, he's the man."

Jacklyn rushed in wearing a hot pink jogging suit and sneakers. I guess I didn't have to dress up, I thought. "Hi, Cathy. Nice scarf."

"Thanks, I—"

"I see you've met Marco. I want you to meet Raj."

Did everyone want me to meet Raj? This crowd was almost as weird as I was. Jacklyn left Marco to his drawing and quickly led me outside. I rushed to pick up my jacket, coffee and biscotti to keep up with her. Jacklyn pulled up two chairs so we could sit with Raj.

"This is Cathy. She's an artist I met yesterday."

I opened my mouth to say that Jacklyn hadn't even seen my art and it wasn't any good anyway, but didn't have a chance.

"Hello!" Raj shook my hand. "Beautiful scarf? Did you make it?"

"No my friend did," I said. "Denise has a jewelry and accessories line."

"See what I mean, Raj? Karma," said Jacklyn. They high-fived.

"What gives?" I said.

"Marco, Raj, Nate and I are all artists," she explained. "We come to Montagna's to draw and talk art. Raj is always on the lookout for new artists. He organized Marco's show here and I have one coming up next month. He helps us get shows and we encourage one another."

"Who's Nate?"

"Nate is short for Nathan X. He sells more work than the rest of us combined. He's mostly in school these days." She looked at her watch. "He might come by in about three minutes."

A tall, dark stranger in sunglasses and a black jacket came up to the railing beside the patio.

"You're two minutes early, Nathan," said Raj.

"Who's the girl in the beautiful—"

"Don't say it. I think I know," I said. "Cathy's the name."

"You're in my seat," he said.

The next time I came to the café, I brought Denise. And that's how we became the Big Six.

#

Taylor owned a framing shop two blocks from Montagna's. Some of the Big Six would ask him to frame art for shows. If someone bought an unmounted work, we recommended Taylor's expertise in choosing matting and framing.

He was a true Brit, a polite, talkative gentleman with discerning taste. He didn't like loud colours or the ostentatious but found undiscovered gems to sell at his shop. His store was full of antique furniture, collectibles, and original art—besides frames, of course.

Every three months, he repainted his feature wall. He would roll on two coats without a drop getting on the flooring or any of the collectibles in his shop. A gallon goes a long way. I wondered how many layers of paint were on that wall since he's been there since the turn of the century.

Taylor came by the café to order a macadamia nut cookie. We had put up a group show of the Big Six for the entire month. I was excited to be included.

"Hey, Taylor, in your opinion, do you think the painting on the far right needs a frame?" Raj pointed out the collection of art on the wall.

"Oh, I'd gladly give you a quote." He gently rubbed his hands together.

"Okay, if you buy it, you can frame it for free!" Raj said.

"Aren't we deliciously funny this morning," said Taylor. "I'd like to buy it but I'm not as rich as you are."

"I'm not idly rich, just idle." Raj grinned.

"You have the Midas touch, that's for sure," Taylor said. "You and Donald Trump."

I looked wide-eyed at Raj. Was he as wealthy as Donald Trump?

"Don't listen to those two, Cathy," said Jacklyn. "They're always trying to outdo one another."

"Cathy, have you sold any pieces yet?" Taylor asked, glancing at the wall.

"Yep, three," I said. "But not for a lot of money. It's hard to sell art in the present economy." I was almost apologetic.

"When isn't the economy a problem?" Taylor took a bite of his cookie nestled in a wax paper wrapper. "Paintings sell today for gazillions of dollars. You need the right venue."

"Watch what you say. Gino will hear you and kick us out without doggie bags," said Raj.

"But you don't own a dog," said Taylor.

"It's absurd what some paintings sell for," I interjected, two steps behind the conversation. "You shouldn't have to die for your art to become famous."

"But it doesn't hurt your career, mind you." Taylor checked his watch. "Well, I must be on my way. Got to get back to the shop. I should have returned half an hour ago."

"Oh come on, sit down and join us," said Raj. "Take a load off."

"How's business?" I asked.

"Good. I've had a flood of new business," Taylor said.

"Frames are flying off the shelves?" I said, picturing Taylor at the cash register fiercely punching keys while customers grabbed stacks of picture frames and rammed each other with shopping carts.

"Actually, there's a lot of labour involved. I'm working seven days a week and evenings too. It's so exhausting," he said.

"Couldn't you hire someone?" I asked.

"Quality control, Cathy. It has to be done right if my company's name is on it."

"Framing is an art form," said Jacklyn.

"Yes, listen to Jacklyn. The right mat and frame can make a world of difference. She's related to JFK, you know," Taylor said.

"Really?" My mouth gaped open.

"Taylor, don't spread rumours," said Jacklyn. "He's joking, Cathy. Just because I have the same last name—"

"You're almost like royalty." I looked at her in awe.

"Watch out for the hit man at three o'clock," said Nathan.

"Shut up, Nate," said Jacklyn.

"Can someone order me an Americano?" asked Raj.

#

Nathan wanted to host a dinner party, and it being potluck threw me into a frenzy. I couldn't bring anything I had to cook so I settled on tortilla chips and my favourite pretzels.

When the gang gets together, the guys hug the girls and the guys shake hands with each other and the girls hug each other too. I had a 'no-hugs' policy because I believed I was born autistic. My parents denied it but I was sure they were protecting me. Sometimes if I were caught off guard or if I was having an emotional moment I might hug but it was extremely rare.

So I got to Nate's place and I bent down to pet his black cat that hissed and clawed me until my arm bled.

"Oh, sorry. His name is Darkness. He's usually quite affectionate." Nate carried him into the bedroom and closed the door. The rest of the Big Six and Taylor arrived and hugged each other while I sat on a wooden chair holding a tissue over my cut like a maimed penguin on an iceberg.

"What's the matter?" asked Denise.

"All my life I've been socially inept." I bit my cuticle and hunched over.

She shrugged. "You get along with us okay."

"That's because you guys are all weird."

I must have been complaining loudly because they all stopped talking and stared at me.

"What are you saying?" asked Denise, placing a hand on my knee.

"I'm a mental case." The room started to swell and I saw blinking lights.

"What the heck is she talking about?" murmured Raj to Nathan.

Tears streamed down my face. "I'm a schizophrenic and I can't cook so I brought snack food."

"Snack food's fine with us," said Nathan. They all nodded in agreement. "Would you like a tissue or maybe an upper?"

"What the hell's wrong with you, Nate? She's opening up to us!" said Jacklyn.

"Enough from the Kennedy section," said Nathan. "Let's have some wine."

"I can't have wine!" I cried. "I'm on anti-psychotics."

"Well, this is a fun party," said Marco. "Let me at those tortilla chips." They opened the bag and ate them, commenting on the 'spicy flavour' and 'good crunch'. The ice flow I was on was drifting out to sea. I was having a moment.

"Good gracious, Cathy, we don't care if you sleep standing on your head," said Denise. "Snap out of it."

"I'm nutso."

"My father beat me," said Denise.

"I don't have a father," said Marco.

"Please don't go off the deep end. Otherwise, we'll have to move the dinner party to the emergency ward," Nathan said.

"Yeah, and they don't allow nuts with nachos." Raj's joke hung in mid-air. The silence was deafening.

Nathan clapped his hands. "Okay, let's eat."

They didn't really treat me any different after my confession. In fact, they treated me like true friends.

#

The group liked the café but for a change of scenery, we'd drive to Steveston for fish and chips in the winter or Whistler for beer and chicken wings in the summer. We'd hunt for bargains at used bookstores and thrift stores and check out the art at galleries around Vancouver.

Often we weren't all available, so Taylor might take a rare afternoon off and join us if there was an extra seat in the car.

I believed Taylor knew I was crazy after the episode at the dinner party, so I took the liberty of explaining to him about the life force that guided me and influenced all the creatures of the earth. If he knew I was crazy, it was safe to share my personal insights with him.

"There she goes again, talking about Star Wars," said Raj as he braked at a stoplight.

"It's not a new idea," I said. "There are forces at work bigger than ourselves."

"How does it work? You wish upon a star and dreams come true?" asked Taylor.

"Good and bad energy is all around us and affects what we do and say. It can help or hinder you depending on choices you make in life. I also believe that the Law of Attraction exists. I read about it on Wikipedia. I kid you not," I said.

"Never heard of it," said Marco, from the front passenger seat.

"I'll bite. Tell me about it," said Taylor who was sitting beside me on the backseat.

"If you think positive, it will bring good results. If you think negative thoughts, it will make bad things happen. The universe is made up of atoms and molecules all bouncing around. Therefore if people and thoughts, being part of the universe, are made from energy, theoretically they can potentially attract and repel other sources of energy."

"Causality doesn't work that way. There's a master design at play," said Marco. "Nothing is an accident. We can't predict what's down the road, just by imagining it."

"If someone wins the lottery, they always say that they knew they were going to win. They believed it and it happens," I said.

"Never worked for me," said Raj. The others agreed with him.

"Okay, what about the Big Six," I argued. "You guys wanted to form a group and it happened."

"Predestination."

"Karma."

"Fate."

"We are led by a force beyond our understanding," I said.

"Now she's talking about God and Star Wars in the same sentence," said Raj. "What do you think, Taylor?"

Taylor looked at me. "I don't know about how she thinks but she's cute in that hat."

Chapter 5

Leonard was up to his old tricks of wanting to meet the other members of the Big Six.

"Need a lift to the café? Want me to help you carry art for your show with the others?"

He'd try but I was way ahead of him. I warned the group that if they saw a nerdy Asian that looked like me skulking around the café, to ignore him or call the cops if he started to open his mouth.

"Leonard, they aren't your friends. They're my friends. Got it?"

"I already know Denise. What's wrong with me being introduced? I'm your brother for crying out loud."

"Yes, that's why I need to protect them from you."

"Why? Do you think something's wrong with me?"

"Leonard, you're an engineer. You don't talk art! I don't want to mix family with friends." I pictured Leonard at a dinner party, handing out advice on how to install elevator panels or how to calculate the amount of amperes it would take to stun an elephant heading toward you at forty kilometres an hour. (It doesn’t really matter how fast he's traveling, but it's a time-limited answer.)

"Do any of them smoke weed or take uppers?" Leonard asked.

"What is wrong with you?" I gritted my teeth.

"It's common knowledge that a lot of people are recreational drug users. Especially creative types."

"You're really starting to irritate me." I pushed Beasty off the sofa and turned off the TV as I'd lost track of why *Everybody Loves Raymond* and picked up a magazine. The cover had a picture of one of the Kennedys. Weird coincidence. Anytime I heard or read anything about the famous Kennedys I thought about Jacklyn's determination to keep them and her life separate. I mean aren't all Kennedys related somehow because of their common name?

"You're always out with your friends and I don't have a clue where you go or what you're doing." Leonard peered over the top of the magazine.

"Sherlock, it's really none of your business. Why don't you go pick on someone else, fold your underwear, or get out of my personal space?"

"People with schizophrenia often self-medicate. You're so even-keeled these days. There must be a reason."

"I’m not using!" I abandoned the magazine and looked for something to throw at him.

"You sleep in, you eat at odd times, and brush your teeth three times a day. You don't ask mom and dad for money to buy clothes like you used to. You must be hiding something."

"Yeah, I'm a topless dancer and am studying dentistry for kicks."

"Is that a fantasy or a delusion?"

"Go to hell, Leonard."

#

In my heart, I knew he worried about me because he cared. On the other hand, I was an adult and had a right to my privacy. No one told me what to do other than my parents and Dr. Montgomery. I depended on my own logic to make decisions in my life. I was trying to become independent whereas every time I moved in that direction, Leonard tried to move closer to me.

I knew my parents loved me dearly and they had confided in me that they planned to find a secure place for me to live when they pass on. Because of my 'condition' as they called it, they didn't have high hopes of me finding the perfect mate or being employable anytime soon, so they were building a trust fund for me for the future.

So what was wrong with that? I should have been elated. To have financial aid guaranteed in my later years seemed like a dream come true. The kicker was Leonard was named the trustee of the fund. He alone would have the power to control and administer the money that my parents had deemed to me, and for his services, he would get a percentage of the trust to handle my affairs.

I dreaded the idea of having to beg and cajole in order to buy things for myself like bus tickets, cheeseburgers, or even tampons. How ironic that he would in fact hold power over my life, when he lived a more isolated life than I did?

Sure he was now employed at an engineering firm, but he spent most weekends in front of the TV. I don't remember him ever bringing a girl home or taking a girl out. He didn't go for beers with the boys, or spend his money on cars. Didn't every guy want to buy a spiffy car and show it off as a way of saying, "Hey, look at me. I'm terrific?"

Would I ever be free of him? Would I have to kowtow or lick his boots for the rest of my life in order to eat?

I asked my dad about having a provision in the trust for a weekly allowance for everyday expenses or things that came up like running out of laundry soap or if my TV broke down. But what if I wasn't allowed to have a TV and ended up living in an unheated garage, while Leonard absconded with my money to Africa?

"Dad, why do I have to listen to Leonard?"

"Do you remember summer two years ago? At two a.m., you walked outside and threw a brick through the car windshield."

"I was trying to hit the thief who was inside the car. He was trying to start the engine."

"The alarm went off. You're lucky the neighbours didn't call the cops. There was no one in the car. It was locked."

"He jumped out and ran off laughing."

"You were admitted into a psychiatric ward. Remember?"

"I was only there for two months."

"Seemed like a lifetime for your mother and me. Cathy, I think you should focus on your art and your present activities. Don't worry about the details of the trust. That's our responsibility. The whole point is that you won't have to worry."

I realized then that Leonard's curiosity about my lifestyle was partly because he wanted to be aware of my situation for when our parents were no longer able to care for us. So maybe he was acting responsibly, because he believed I would always need financial and family support.

#

When I spoke to my psychiatrist about my frustration over the trust, he asked, "Could you manage your own money and any inheritance you receive? Do you know how to balance a checkbook?"

"I don't have a checkbook."

"Do you go over your credit card statement to make sure it's accurate?"

I bit my lip. "I don't have a credit card."

"Do you have a budget for what you spend every month?"

"Ah, no."

"Would it be all bad to have someone else worry about investments or rent for you?"

I squirmed. "But it's my money."

"It's not your money to squander. It's your parents' hard-earned income that they are putting toward care for you."

I stared at the light fixture as I felt the walls close in. It was getting stuffy in the office. I needed fresh air. "I guess you're right."

"When you are able to make your own living, I would say you would be in a better place to manage your own funds. You would have a better idea of the value of a dollar. But right now, I don't think you're ready to take all that on." He scribbled on his pad. "How's your mental health?"

I shuffled my feet. "Better. I only have a problem about once a week when my mind goes off into some weird space. I try not to get angry and if I'm feeling depressed I go for a walk or see my friends. I think I'm well most of the time."

"That's good news. Don't worry about the rest."

#

When the doorbell rang, I snapped out of my reverie. It was Denise.

"Ready to roll?" she asked.

"Bye," I called out to mom in the kitchen and rubbed Beasty on the head. "I'm out for dinner."

"Where are you going?" I heard her but shut the door without answering. I was excited about going to play pool with the gang.

"You don't want to tell her where you're going?" Denise asked.

"It's my life," I said. She unlocked the car doors with the remote.

"I know you don't like to be under the thumb of your family, but you're better off than me. I have to fight to get any recognition from my family. They think my accessory designs would be great for sadomasochists because some have spikes and leather. To me, they're works of art. They don't like Jake who I adore. They say he's an opportunist and only wants me for my money. As if I have money. Since we moved in together, we are on a shoestring budget to pay the rent and for food. Having a car is expensive but we need it. My mother says I need a man who can take care of me. Am I so weak to need protection?" She turned the ignition with undue force.

"Let's forget our families and go raise hell." Denise revved the engine and accelerated down the street.

#

When we got to the pub, the party had already started. Denise gave Jake a big kiss.

"Sorry, we're late," she said.

"Yeah, ten minutes is long time to wait but I guess you're worth it." Jake smiled.

Taylor and Nathan were playing pool. Jacklyn was wearing her pink jogging suit and sneakers again. She ran to places instead of taking the bus when the weather was good. She said that it was exhilarating. She had bet Taylor twenty dollars that Nathan would win the pool game. Taylor said if he won, she'd owe him coffee and biscotti for a week.

"I feel bad betting a woman, but she's so beautiful in pink how could I refuse?" said Taylor.

Marco and Raj were sitting on barstools, drinking beer. I went over to join them and ordered a ginger ale. Denise and Jake went over to the jukebox to choose the next song.

"So have you found a place?" I asked Raj. Currently, he was looking to change neighbourhoods and get a smaller apartment with lower rent.

"Looking for an apartment is hard. The good ones are scooped up before they even go on the market. I need more time to decide."

"It's a hot market in Vancouver," said Marco. "I've lived in my place for six years. I'd never give it up."

"Raj, why don't you live at the café?" said Taylor. "You're there almost all the time anyway. You could sleep on the patio under pizza boxes."

"It's a dream come true with all that biscotti and oatmeal cookies at your fingertips," I said.

"I can see the headlines now. Man dies of heart attack, found surrounded by cookie crumbs and mozzarella," Taylor said as he chalked the end of his pool cue. He blew on it lightly.

"Hey, pay attention, Taylor," said Nathan. He sunk a ball into the corner pocket. "Game! Woohoo!" He raised his arms in triumph.

"How about double or nothing on the next game?" said Taylor.

"You're on," said Nathan who started to rack up.

"Hey, I just won twenty bucks and now I might lose forty? Whose bet is this anyway?" asked Jacklyn.

#

Two weeks later, I arrived at Montagna's to big hellos from Gino. "How is Cathy today? You look lovely in those white shorts." I felt self-conscious, but it was nice to be noticed.

Nathan showed up at right after me. He looked more serious than usual. We sat down at a table outside to drink coffee. I took out my sketchpad and a pen.

"I have to tell you about what happened to me," he said. "I was at the Folk Festival in Mission on the weekend. It's an amazing cultural event if you ever want to attend. Anyway, a friend and I stayed overnight on the camping grounds. I woke up at six a.m. and left my tent. Then I saw this huge black raven flying low in the sky. He swooped toward me and landed on my shoulder. At first, I was amazed by his magnificent features and grace, but then he started to peck at my cheek. I stayed as still as possible, hoping he wouldn't peck out my eyes. Then after a few minutes, he flew off."

"Wow, that's pretty weird. Do you think it was an omen?"

"I did consider that a raven does perhaps have symbolic meaning."

"Have you seen that movie 'The Birds'? This has got Hitchcock written all over it."

"I experienced a negative feeling alright. I sense that a dark shadow has been following me ever since."

I gulped. Like an invisible hand reaching down, a sudden cold breeze blew my paper napkin away and knocked over my paper cup, spilling coffee on my drawing. "Holy cripes!"

#

I saw Nathan again a week later. He was reading 'The Raven' by Edgar Allan Poe.

"Hi, Nate. Something on your mind?"

"I don't know what it is but strange events have been happening. My car refused to start this morning. I think someone stole my wallet. The phone rang at four a.m. and the caller hung up when I answered it."

"Bad things come in threes. When did your wallet go missing?"

"Last night I was at the pub where I think someone pickpocketed me. There's something else. For some unknown reason, a vase fell off my bookshelf and broke. I stepped on the jagged pieces and cut my foot. Then the bookcase toppled on me along with three shelves of books. It was a telekinetic nightmare."

"There has to be logical explanations for these things," I reasoned. "Maybe you left your headlights on. The phone call could have been a wrong number and a tremor in the earth's surface could have shifted your bookcase."

"The answer may lie in the raven. Ravens are known for eating the dead on battlefields of fallen soldiers. The narrator in Edgar Allan Poe's poem describes the raven as a 'prophet' or 'thing of evil'."

I gasped. "Oh, so you think the raven landing on you was a bad omen?"

"According to Carl Jung, ravens symbolize the 'shadow self' or in other words the dark side of the psyche. Perhaps the raven represents part of me."

"Could there be some other explanation? According to the Law of Attraction, if you think negative thoughts, bad things will happen. But the opposite is also true. If you think of good things, your life will get better."

"Thanks Cathy, but I doubt positive thinking will reverse my run of bad luck. Sounds like hocus-pocus to me."

He closed his book and checked his watch. "I need to get going. I have some homework to do for painting class. We are learning about the use of egg tempera."

"Check all your drawers. Maybe the wallet will turn up."

As someone with schizophrenia, I have a tendency to see everything as a paranoid delusion. When Nathan told me about his freaky experiences, I played the objective observer, but inside I was sure a force was working in his life. He needed to change the energy otherwise it might get worse.

#

Raj arrived after Nathan left. He unplugged the speaker on the patio, complaining the song was distracting him. He wanted to make a phone call on his cellphone.

"Gino, let's you do that?" I raised a brow.

"What's he going to do? Call the police about an unplugged speaker? I'll hook it up later."

"I happen to like that song," I replied.

"There's no accounting for taste. Don't bug me. I've had a hard day. I dropped my tablet and the screen shattered. It's going to cost over a hundred dollars to get it fixed."

"Get a new one."

"When I want your advice, I'll let you know."

We sat and drew. We were enjoying an Indian summer. Gino chatted with us, commenting on the clear view of the mountains from the sidewalk outside the café. I guessed that was how he came up with the name of his restaurant. Gino went inside to answer a call and then Marco and Jacklyn showed up one after another.

"Hey guys, I want to ask you three and the rest of the group about an artist call for a commission," said Raj. "There's money to be made."

"What kind of commission?" asked Marco. He pulled out his pens to work in his sketchbook.

"A sculpture to be erected in a privately-owned public space downtown, outside the shopping centre."

"What were you thinking of?" said Marco.

"How about a poodle on a stick?" I asked.

"It's been done."

"A man bound on a horse?" I offered.

"Also done."

"A crab made out of steel?"

"Can't you come up with something original?" said Raj. He pulled out a stack of paper out of his attaché and flipped through it. At the bottom, he found what he wanted. "This is the site plan with all the dimensions, along with the submission guidelines. Marco, what about something Upcycled? I know you work well with metal on a medium scale, but I want you to stretch your boundaries. I think it needs to be at least ten feet tall with a base of six feet in diameter."

"Viewable from all sides. Weatherproof." Marco was thinking out loud.

"We need everyone in on it because it's going to take physical work. And then there's the fountain," said Raj.

"Fountain?" I said.

"This is the ingenious part of it. I think it should operate as a fountain as well."

"So if it had a metal wheel, it could act like a waterwheel and the sculpture could have moving parts," I said. Marco nodded.

"If everyone agrees, we need to move on this fast," Raj said. "Proposals are due in ten days."

"What's the budget?" asked Jacklyn.

"The maximum is 100,000 dollars."

Marco whistled.

"How much would materials cost? I'm not good with numbers," I said.

"Denise could work out the math if Marco can draw up a list of supplies," said Raj. "We could use scrap metal or objects people have thrown out."

"What will we call it?"

"That's up to you guys," said Raj.

#

Raj rounded up the Big Six to meet at Montagna's to discuss our options.

"Is this sculpture commission really the right direction for us? I mean we all have different styles and mediums we work in. Denise makes jewelry and accessories and Jacklyn, Cathy, and I are painters," said Nate.

"Artists throughout the centuries have worked in more than one medium. Leonardo da Vinci was a painter and sculptor. Marcel Duchamp and Pablo Picasso too. We shouldn't limit ourselves," said Raj.

"Point taken but this project involves at least six months of preparation and execution. I'm working and going to school so I only have so much time to invest in this venture," said Nate.

Here they go again, I said to myself. It wasn't the first time Nate and Raj dueled in conversation.

"Frankly, I am saddened at your shortsightedness. Surely, this experience will give you more expertise and fluency in the medium and benefit your two-dimensional work," said Raj.

"I am dismayed at your use of the term 'two-dimensional' as everyone knows that visual art functions on many levels including subliminal, spiritual and psychological interpretations. To state that painting, by your example, is two-dimensional is a shallow, naïve remark," said Nate.

"I disagree because that is a term that is used broadly and still pertains to work that has length and breadth but no depth," replied Raj.

"To say my work has no depth is disappointing to hear, Raj," said Nate.

"Can you two quit the repartee and can we get back to the sculpture?" I said. "I think it's a great idea."

Denise and Jacklyn readily agreed. "What do you think, Marco?"

"It's up my alley. I'm in," he answered.

"C'mon Nate. You don't have to be there everyday, but we want you to help us. We're the Big Six, remember?" Denise said.

Nathan rubbed his chin. "Okay, but I'm in charge of cashing the cheques."

I put my fist out and the others each put a hand on top. We raised our hands over our heads. The girls cheered.

"Great. The next step is to check out the site," said Raj.

#

We took two cars and rendezvoused downtown at the plaza outside the shopping centre.

"Do you think ten feet is tall enough considering the height of the building?" asked Nathan, looking up.

"At least, it's the sunny side of the street," said Denise.

"I think it should be about here," said Marco, planting his feet in the middle of the sidewalk.

"How about over here?" Nathan stood to the side where there was less foot traffic.

"I'm making an executive decision. It's best here," Raj stood ten feet from the entrance but to the left to not block people entering.

Denise and Jacklyn started measuring with a tape measure and jotted down notes to layout the potential position of the sculpture. Passersby eyed us with curiosity. A courier on a bicycle drove over the tape measure.

"Can't you see we're measuring?" I yelled at him. He ignored me and rode out onto the street, swerving around cars stopped at the light.

Raj took photos of the site from every angle. "Think big, you guys."

#

The Big Six spent an afternoon at the café, sketching some preliminary designs. Denise worked out a budget but said material costs could vary considerably, depending on how much we could scavenge from junkyards or back lanes.

'Do we need enamel spray to prevent rust?" asked Denise.

"Any metal in the rain is going to deteriorate no matter what you spray on it," said Nathan.

"Rust looks bad," I said.

"Stainless steel would withstand the elements but if we also used copper or brass that would work too. Through oxidation the copper would develop a beautiful green patina," said Nathan.

"Where are we going to build it? We need a big space," Denise said.

Marco stretched and flexed his arms. "My studio is eight feet from floor to ceiling. So if we can build it in two or three sections, my space is available," said Marco. "It'll be tight to accommodate all you yahoos but it's probably our only option money-wise."

"Okay, we've worked out the costs and basic design," said Jacklyn. "Raj, you need to write the artist statement."

"I want each of you to come up with a word or phrase and I'll write them down." He pulled out a blank sheet of paper.

"Upcycled art."

"Rain."

"Sculptural Cubism."

"Playful."

"Reflections of light."

"Ethereal," I said. They looked at me.

"What's ethereal about it? It's made out of junk metal," said Raj.

"Well, it rises up, doesn't it? It's a metaphor for exultation, celebrating creation and renewal," I explained. They mulled it over for a few seconds.

"Okay Cathy, *you* write the artist statement," Jacklyn said.

We refined our preliminary sketches to include with the proposal and each submitted a curriculum vitae, which is a fancy Latin word for a list of one's education, exhibition history, awards, and publications. I handed mine to Raj, embarrassed about how lean it was. I had included two years at the art school and a list of group shows I had at Montagna's and a few other places that Raj had organized for me. I had no awards or publications about my work.

"Sorry, it's so short," I said, pointing to my CV.

"Everyone's got to start somewhere," said Marco. He was so diplomatic but I felt there was a spotlight shining on me with a sign on my head saying, 'Idiot'. I stared silently at my coffee cup, thinking of a standing on a stage naked and people laughing at me, and zoned out of the conversation.

Nathan snapped his fingers and I jumped. "Earth to Cathy. Where are you?"

Jolted back to reality, I sat upright and responded by singing the opening bars of "Somewhere Over The Rainbow" and Denise and Jacklyn chimed in.

The guys covered their ears and Nathan started to cough.

Denise's voice became shrill when we reached a crescendo. I sang with gusto, with my hand over my heart.

"Oh god." Nathan had an expression of pain on his face.

Raj laughed and soon we were all laughing.

"I'm a fledging artist, but I *can* sing," I said in my own defense.

"That's what you think," said Nathan. I swatted him one.

Chapter 6

We were waiting to hear the decision of the judges about the art commission. I thought it was a long shot, but if you don't try, you won't succeed.

Marco called me from the café. "I'm here now, come down for a coffee and we'll chat."

I grabbed my knapsack and headed down to Montagna's. I joined Marco inside and ordered a couple of slices of vegetarian pizza for five bucks.

"Say, did Nathan tell you about the raven?" I asked.

"It's uncanny you mentioned it. I was just thinking about that. In fact, I was on Broadway at a café—"

"What were you doing at another café?" I interjected.

"I'm telling the story. Now listen."

My ears perked up.

"I go to different cafés for a change of atmosphere. Is that a *crime*? Anyway, these two fellows were sitting there. These two native guys."

"They are called First Nations," I corrected him.

"I know," he said. "And one guy said, 'I was at the folk festival, and this raven landed on this guy's shoulder.' "

"Did you know that a raven landed on Nathan at the folk festival?" I asked.

"Of course, I know that! I'm telling the story!" he answered.

"Okay. Don't get your back up." I punched him in the shoulder.

"You're really aggressive, did you know that?"

"Go on." I took a bite of pizza.

He straightened his shoulders. "What is the likelihood that Nate would tell us that story, and I'd run into two guys who were talking about it in Vancouver?"

"Maybe it happened to someone else too."

"C'mon, it doesn't happen everyday," he said.

"I'm sure ravens land all over the place. They have to." I could taste the olives and onions. Good pizza.

"It had to be Nate." He thumped the table with his fist.

"If they were First Nations, did they say if it was a good or bad omen?" I asked.

"They said it was good luck."

"No kidding. Huh. Too bad Nate doesn't know that." I sipped from my water glass.

Raj entered the café. We greeted him. He ordered an Americano. "If you two want to join me, I'll be outside."

Obediently, we gathered our stuff and joined him on the patio. After all, he was the Big Kahuna.

"I'm sorry to say Nathan is out of the gang." Raj threw down his attaché.

"Why?" Marco and I were stunned.

"I caught him cleaning windshields for drivers stopped at the light at Terminal and Main. He was begging for money."

"I didn't know he was broke," I said.

"After he lost his wallet, someone accessed his bank card information and took out all his money. He was kicked out of his apartment and is living in a box."

"Why didn't he tell us? I can give him a few bucks," said Marco.

"I don't get it. Why is he out of the gang?" I asked.

"Because he stole cookies from the café," Raj answered.

"Is that a mortal sin?" Marco said, pounding his fist.

"He reached behind the counter and took them. Gino caught him and when he found out Nate's situation, he gave him a bag of espresso beans as a gift. Nate sold them to some strangers and bought a pack of cigarettes."

"But he doesn't smoke! He must have been at an all-time low." I was shocked that Nathan would do such a thing.

"Speak of the devil," said Raj when Nathan appeared at the railing. I couldn't see his eyes behind his sunglasses. I realized I didn't know him at all.

"What's up?" said Nathan.

"We're so sorry," said Marco.

"About what?" Nathan was chewing a piece of gum.

"About your loss," Marco answered.

"Who died?" Nate said. Marco and I exchanged looks.

"Don't make jokes. We understand," I said in a low whisper.

He eyed Raj. "I guess he told you the whole story."

"Is there anything we can do?" I asked.

"I need four hundred dollars to pay off my debt," he said.

"You owe money too?" Marco and I reached for our wallets.

Nathan started to chuckle. "Got you!" Raj grinned.

"That's not nice!" I complained. "You two pulled this ruse on us? I was prepared to give him a twenty."

"I was going to give him fifty!" said Marco.

I found out later that Nathan had found his wallet in a crevice in the front seat of his truck. I'd seen a whole new side of Nathan and Raj. They were tricksters. No beans about it.

#

"What are you working on these days?" asked Raj. We sat at our regular table on the patio.

"I've been exploring landscape. Want to see?" I pulled out my shiny new tablet eagerly.

"Oh, you actually listened to me and got one of those."

"Yeah, after selling paintings at the last exhibit, I was able to splurge on it." Proudly, I showed him a few of my latest paintings on the tablet.

"Ah, Cathy. They look rather familiar."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

He pointed inside the café. "See those paintings on the wall?"

"Yeah, Nathan's work is really good."

He pointed at the images on my tablet. "Don't you think your paintings look exactly like his?"

I pursed my lips. "They aren't the same. Mine are more feminine trees."

He snickered. "What the heck are feminine trees? You're copying Nate's work!"

"You told me to copy the masters in order to improve my work."

"Yeah, but forging Nathan's paintings is wrong on so many levels. First off, he's your friend. Secondly, he's my friend! It's like stealing his girlfriend!"

"I would never steal his girlfriend," I said in all seriousness.

"Geez, you really are unbelievable."

"I'm not gay," I protested.

"I didn't say you were gay." He roared. "Do me a favour and don't show those to Nate!"

"Why? Wouldn't he be flattered?"

"Oh, yeah. He'd be flattered alright. Then he'd beat you to a pulp."

I put my hands on my hips. "I spent days on these paintings!"

"S-so did he!" he sputtered.

"I know one day I'm going to be a great artist and when that day comes, I will have the last laugh," I vowed.

Raj snorted.

"What's so funny?" Nathan leaned over the railing. He had an uncanny habit of appearing out of the blue.

"Cathy here has been doing some new work. You don't want to see it," said Raj.

"Sure. Hand it over," said Nathan.

I passed him my tablet. He took a seat next to me and thumbed through the images. "This looks like—these are my paintings, Cathy. Are you forging my work?"

"Imitation is the highest form of flattery," I said in my own defense. "They are Nathan-esque yes, but are more feminine than yours."

"What the heck? Raj, are you listening to her?"

"She looks a little ill." Raj looked grim.

"This has nothing to do with me having schizophrenia," I said. "You're getting personal." I punched Raj in the shoulder.

"Cool off," Nate said. "Raj didn't mean anything. Let's sit back and relax."

"I am sitting down!" My core temperature was rising.

"The paintings are fine," said Nate. "Just paint something else next time. Flowers if you like. They're feminine."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you're a woman," he said.

"That's not fair!" I kicked my foot, hitting Nathan's shin by accident.

"Sorry, I was trying to be helpful," he said. "Men paint flowers too. Of course you can paint landscapes if you want to. We all think you're a talented artist. We're all equals. I thought you understood that."

"Nate is right. You need to paint something unique to you. Forgery will get you nowhere," said Raj.

"I would add," said Nate, "the law states if you are charged with forgery you will be tried in court, and if found guilty, may have to endure jail time."

"I would argue that if a painter was that exceptional at copying, wouldn't they automatically be able to use their techniques and create their own masterpieces?" said Raj.

My eyes glazed over. "I don't know if I should be bored or throwing rocks at you guys."

#

On the way home, I got angrier and angrier at Raj and Nate's flagrant remarks about my work after all the hours I'd put into them. Leonard was vacuuming when I got home. He turned off the vacuum to plug it into another wall socket. I slammed the door so hard the room vibrated.

"Why are you so upset? Someone buy the dress you wanted?" he asked.

"Shut up!" I dropped my knapsack at the entrance, kicked off my shoes and slumped on the couch. Beasty ignored the conversation and waddled into the kitchen.

"Bad day at the office? Oh, I forgot you don't have a job."

"I'm an artist. That is my job."

"Having a job means you get paid. All the money you make goes back into paint. You can't eat paint."

"Raj and Nathan don't like my work." I could feel myself starting to lose it. "I'm a failure. I'll never be an artist."

Leonard sat next to me on the sofa. "What did they say?"

"I copied Nathan's work too closely. I'm a forger."

"Well, could you print me some twenties?" he asked.

I gave him a blank look.

"Listen. So you borrowed a few ideas from another artist."

"From one of my best friends, Nate."

"And showed him and he said what?"

"He said that I paint like a woman." I began to bawl.

"You are a woman."

I wailed louder. "That is so sexist." I reached for a tissue.

"It's stating a fact. Now dry your tears and redo your mascara because you look a distraught panda."

#

I visited my psychiatrist to talk about current events in my life. I told him the whole story about being accused of forgery.

"And Nate called me a woman," I reiterated.

"Don't you think he's right? Genetically people have different personalities, characteristics, strengths and weaknesses. We look and act differently. Gender is part of that. Maybe the word wasn't meaning to be sexist. Maybe you feel inferior because of how you perceive your gender."

"Isn't it true that being a painter is a male-dominated occupation and that men see women as less capable than themselves?"

"I don't think that applies today. Women can take on many of the same roles men can and vice versa. Embrace who you are."

"I don't want to paint flowers."

"Then take the emotion you feel and put it into your painting. Let the floodgates open and make it work for you."

After the session, I went home and stared at one of my landscape paintings. I put it on the easel and squeezed different colours of acrylic paints onto my palette. I filled my water jar and took a two-inch brush and started to rework the painting.

#

Denise called me to ask why I hadn't been at the café.

"I've been painting."

"Nathan said you were upset at him. Is everything okay?"

"I’m over it. I overreacted. I'm not good at taking criticism."

"Raj has some good news. The judges like our proposal but are asking for a few more things before they approve our submission."

"Oh, that's great news. What do they want?"

"They are asking for a schematic drawing of the electrical plan with the fountain pump and energy source, the water hookup, and drainage. We need someone with expertise to draw those up with specifications."

"Did you find someone?"

"Actually, I was thinking of Leonard because he's an electrical engineer, but I wasn't sure because you two don't get along."

"This is more important than anything I have against Leonard. I'll ask him. Hold the line."

I rested the handset on my bed and strolled into Leonard's room.

"You know what a knock is?" His head was buried in a book titled, "Archaeology for Beginners."

"Remember last week when I bought you those earphones at the dollar store because you didn't have cash?"

"Uh huh.

"Remember when it was your birthday and I bought you that video game that you played everyday until you mastered it then you told me to return it because it was too easy?"

He put down the book. "What do you want?"

"The Big Six is working on a proposal to build a sculpture with a fountain downtown right in front of the shopping centre and we'd like you to draw up the schematics, including an electrical plan, water hookup and drainage."

"And what are you going to give me in exchange?"

I knelt on the floor. "I'll do your chores for a week. Please help us."

"It will take me some time. I might need my feet rubbed."

"There is a limit to what I can do, Leonard."

"I agree on the condition that I get to meet your friends."

I jumped up. "Okay, it's a deal." Excitedly, I ran back to my room to tell Denise the news. Designing the schematics would be child's play for Leonard. He could have said no but he opted to help us. That meant a lot to me.

#

On Saturday afternoon, Leonard and I walked down to Montagna's. I was nervous about him meeting my friends. He was such a nerd.

"You know I’m not the Hunchback of Notre Dame," he said. "Don't worry. I won't embarrass you."

"I left on bad terms last week. I got mad at Nathan and Raj."

"You're doing this project. I'm sure everything is kosher."

"They aren't Jewish."

He nudged me. "Don't be so serious."

The rest of the group were all sitting outside when we arrived. I introduced Leonard and tried to avoid Nathan's gaze. I ordered two colas for Leonard and me and we took seats beside the others.

Leonard rubbed his hands together and leaned forward to we could all hear. "So I looked over the site plan and got copies of the mechanical and electrical plans of the site from city hall. You have a couple of options. To be environmental, how do you feel about a solar-powered fountain?"

"Solar panels aren't very aesthetic. It might take away from the design," Denise said.

"What if they were mounted on the side of the building or high up on a column?"

We shook our heads.

"Okay, what about water hook-up. Do you need a water supply to the fountain or could a groundskeeper use a hose and fill it up?"

"A hose would be okay," said Jacklyn. The rest of us nodded.

"You don't want the water to freeze or damage the pump or hoses, so I suggest having it operate roughly March to October and drain it in the winter."

"Sounds good," said Denise.

"Okay, here's what I suggest." Leonard pulled out an 11 x 17 inch sheet and with a layout of the footprint of the sculpture basin, the specifications for the pump, and the connection to a secure control panel powered by the same line that lit the lamps on the exterior of the shopping mall entrance. He briefly explained the design to us.

"We'd have to hire a professional to install that," said Denise.

"The water supply and drainage need to be worked out with the maintenance crew. They would have to agree to keep the water at an ideal level. If the water evaporates, you need to be watchful because it can affect the pump. They would need to clean the bottom regularly because of sediment. And they would need to drain it every winter before it starts to freeze."

"How do they drain it?" I asked.

"Attach a hose to a unplugged hole in the bottom and put the other end down the storm drain. The economical solution."

"So it's doable?" said Jacklyn.

"I'm not finished. Ideally, the electrical cable running to the fountain should be housed under the concrete. Otherwise, it's going to have to be protected by a waterproof, insulated housing under a metal strip that runs along the top of the concrete ten feet to the wall."

"How much is it going to cost?" Nate asked.

"To do the electrical installation, you're looking at two or three grand. You'll need a permit. The ongoing maintenance might be negotiable."

"We can afford it," said Raj. "On behalf of the Big Six, thanks for doing that work. What do we owe you?"

"I can't seal these drawings because I'm not licensed yet. But I can ask the senior engineer at the firm where I work to check it and seal it."

"How much will that cost?" I asked.

"I don't set the fees. He does."

"What if we don't pass the test and our proposal is rejected?" I said. "How will we come up with the money to pay the firm?" I feared I'd have to sell off my doll collection to total strangers.

"That is a question for debate," said Nate. "Up to this point, we've only invested time, but who has a money in their pocket right now? If you're serious about this, put bucks behind it."

"That's unnecessary, Nate," said Raj. "If we need money, we'll find it."

"Lives have been lost for poorer decisions."

"What does that mean? All we're asking for is a promise to chip in if we need to."

"It's not a good plan." Nate looked as dismal as the crowd rooting for the losing team at a hockey game.

"Would you rather miss this golden opportunity?" said Raj. "At least, this way we have a chance."

"Guys, think positive. Are we in?" asked Jacklyn. She put a fist out and we all put our hands on top, including Nate with some reluctance. We raised our hands above our heads. Jacklyn and Denise hooted. "Let's have a toast," said Jacklyn.

We raised our cups and Raj said, "Here's to our future."

"And to Leonard," added Jacklyn. They clinked glasses and Leonard beamed.

I was surprised how well Leonard got along with the group. In fact, he got along too well.

Nathan took me aside. "Cathy, no hard feelings about the other day?"

"Everything is fine."

"Do you remember about my dinner party on Friday? Are you still on and would Leonard like to come?"

"Ah, yeah. I'll let you know if Leonard's free." Fear crept into my thoughts. What if they liked Leonard more and ditched me? If I ran out into the street right, would any of the group try to save me or would they laugh and toast Leonard and forget all about me?

"Leonard and I have to go." I tapped my brother on the shoulder. Leonard drank the last of his cola and we departed. He walked with me along the shady side of the street. It was a hot afternoon.

"Why did we have to leave? Do you have a meeting with the President of the United States or are you expecting a phone call from the Queen of England?"

I stopped dead in the middle of the sidewalk. "We're invited to Nate's dinner party on Friday but I’m telling him you can't make it."

"I'm free Friday evening."

"Stop trying to butt into my group. I should have known you wanted to rob me." I poked him in the ribs.

"I'm not trying to rob you of your friends. I wanted to help. It's an amazing project. If you don't want me to go, fine."

"I'll think about it. Are you interested in Jacklyn?"

"What?" he said.

"You were making eyes at her."

"Was not. You're crazy."

When someone called me crazy it triggered me. It's fine if I say it but to hear it from my own brother was treason. I knew then nothing had changed. I was still the most ill person on the earth. No one understood Cathy's chaos. I was alone in a metropolis of millions. Kill me now, I thought. I visualized a bolt of lightning striking my chest. Then I heard something in my head. *Cathy, wake up! Are you okay? I'm your brother. Let me help you.*

Leonard shook me awake. I was lying on the cement. "Cathy, you fainted. You scared me. We'll take the bus the rest of the way home. I think you've had enough for one day."

I knew what the thoughts were telling me. I had to either accept Leonard or live a life of sibling unhappiness. The choice was mine and I didn't want either one.

#

On Friday morning, the phone rang while I was working on a painting on an easel in the backyard. I balanced the brush on my water jar and went inside to answer the call.

"Cathy, we got a reply. They approved our proposal! There are some deliverables we still have to figure out but they project we are within the budget. We're celebrating tonight."

"I can't believe it! Do the others know?"

"The others are happy as the clams we'll be making," Raj said. "See you tonight!"

We said goodbye. I rescued my paintbrush from the dog that was using it as a fetch stick and contemplated the news. Despite the hoopla, I secretly had some doubts about the project. What if we miss the deadline for completion or our design turns out crappy? What if a graffiti artist tags it or it attracts birds? Most of us weren't as experienced with metal work as Marco.

Squeezing a tube, I accidentally splattered cadmium red on the canvas. With disgust, I dipped my unclean brush in phalto blue paint and ran it over the canvas and squeezed mars black and titanium white on top of that. Leonard came out of the house, holding a cup of coffee.

"Who was on the phone?" he asked. Leonard tripped over the rake and his cup flew through the air. Coffee streamed across my painting and the cup shattered on the cement pavers.

"I give up!" I threw the palette on the ground and stomped into the house. Leaving red paw prints, the dog came running in behind me with the paintbrush in his mouth. The paintbrush left blue streaks on the kitchen wall and drapes. For a finale, Beasty jumped on the leather sofa with his dirty paws and dropped the brush, smearing paint on the silk cushions.

"Cathy!" my father yelled.

Chapter 7

Leonard was driving us in my dad's car to Nathan's. He was bringing his homemade chow mein to the party. I brought half a cantaloupe that I found in the fridge. I scooped out the seeds, took off the peel, and sliced it and added strawberries and grapes. Voilà fruit salad. At least I was trying.

It had been a chore to clean up the paint mess the dog left in his wake. Dad ranted about the cost of new silk cushion covers and the fact that the smears on the walls and couch were 'here for eternity'. I was relieved when Leonard came to my rescue, saying that it wasn't my fault and that Beasty needed to be punished and locked him in the utility room without a squeeze toy. All the way to Nathan's, I slouched in the seat, listening to Metric on the radio.

"How in the world did we get this contract?" I asked.

"Stop overanalyzing. Enjoy it for what it is. Don't worry and think about the exciting challenge of doing the work."

"What am I supposed to do for this project anyway? I can't weld or make molds. I can't lift anything over twenty pounds."

"You found someone to do the electrical plan and got it sealed without paying a dime."

"But that's only because you are my brother and you sweet-talked your boss."

"I told him the truth that you were creating a public art piece in the heart of downtown and all he asked was to be credited. I already had done the work. Also you wrote the artist statement. That's hard to do."

"Oh that," I said. Like it was a big deal with five rewrites. I looked out the window I saw fifty or more pink flamingos on someone's front lawn. Must be some mother's birthday. Didn't that tradition go out of style years ago? Why flamingos? Why not pink piglets with curly tails that oink 'Happy Birthday' or sea turtles with eggs that hatch? I dismissed the thought. Sea turtles would blend in too much with the grass.

"The artist statement is the key to communicating the power and intention of a work of art or the philosophy of great artists."

"Don't soft-soap me. I'm not your boss." I folded my arms, refusing to let him get on my good side. I was depressed.

"Don't you have your seatbelt on? Buckle in before your head goes through the windshield."

Reluctantly, I buckled my seatbelt. "You never could drive well." I twisted my body in the seat, trying to get comfortable but it didn't work.

"Loosen up. You are wound so tight, you look like you could explode." After being caught in a traffic jam caused by a stalled vehicle in an intersection, we took a detour. Finally, we pulled up at the entrance to Nathan's apartment building.

"I think this was a mistake. Let's turn around." I wanted to go home and sleep for two weeks straight. This was not a good day.

"If you don't want to come to the party, don't. But I'm going to go in there and talk to people, Miss Anti-social."

"You're a shmuck." Determined to keep an eye on him and forget the dog and paint disaster, never mind my ruined painting, I had no choice but to join the party. We rode up the elevator to the fifth floor. African music streamed from the open doorway to Nathan's apartment.

"Look who's here!" said Nathan. The gang gave a warm welcome but kept their distance. They knew the 'no-hugs' rule. However, the guys did shake Leonard's hand, which I found painful to watch.

Taylor offered Leonard a beer, which he accepted. I'd only seen Leonard drink beer a handful of times. I leaned against the bookcase and felt a sharp pain below the knee. It was Darkness clawing me again. I scooted him away and listened to snatches of conversation.

"She's unusual, but aren't we all?"

"Standoffish."

"Good artist though. One of us."

Were they all talking about me? Might as well enjoy the food. I grabbed a paper plate and started sampling from the buffet. Then it happened.

Jacklyn came up behind Leonard and gave him a hug. Were they secretly involved? I choked on an olive.

I felt strong arms around me. Marco gave me three abdominal thrusts. Like a misguided missile, the olive rocketed out of my mouth, ricocheted off the wall and landed in the fruit punch.

They stood around me with concern on their faces.

"I'm okay," I said, like an injured soldier returning from battle. They breathed a sigh in unison.

Nathan clapped his hands. "Emergency's over. No need for an ambulance, respiratory equipment, or a defibrillator. Let's play charades."

We drew slips of paper and I went first. I read the words, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." This would be easy. I just had to be myself.

#

No one really understands schizophrenia. They think it's all a crock designed to give serial killers a get out of jail free card. Or a split personality. Or fodder for movies or TV shows. Schizophrenia isn't a habit you can kick such as smoking or nose picking. It's pure agony. People are out to get you. You can't trust anyone. There are cameras in the showerhead. You can't sleep because they're out there. Someone's poisoning your food. They are brainwashing you and there's no hope of escape in sight. It's like an alien is living in your head. You can't prevent the ideas once they latch on.

People say 'try harder' or 'don't believe the voices' but it's easier said than done. Pulling up one's bootstraps is futile advice for people who are imprisoned in their cell of insanity.

I worried constantly about the future, conjuring the best and worse of scenarios. I worried about losing my friends, ending my life or someone ending it for me. I went to see my family doctor for a sore throat. She asked how I was.

"Not good," I said. "I feel like I’m going to lose everything I have and die a beggar."

"All we have is the here and now."

I burst into tears. "You're saying there is no future? Why try to accomplish or wish for anything if you're going to die tomorrow!"

She said, "Then you make the best of today. The future doesn't exist."

This is going well, I thought.

"You're an artist. You have a good family. What more do you need?"

How about a reason for living? How about not feeling like I’m the ugliest duckling in Swan Lake? I swallowed my words and wiped my tears.

I must have looked pretty bad because she said, "Do you feel like hurting yourself?"

I said no. All I needed was to be carted off to a psychiatric ward because I opened my big mouth. All doctors are not the same. Lesson learned: for mental health issues, see someone qualified to talk about it.

In regards to auditory hallucinations, they can be strange noises, low whispers or angry shouts. I thought I had a sixth sense to know what people are saying about me via my telepathic messenger service. If I was ticked off, stressed or tired, the messages I heard were negative. If I was relaxed, the messages were positive and my ideas were grand and fulfilling. So what's wrong with having a good fantasy life? It's like tripping without drugs, isn't it? The problem is some people feel they can fly off buildings or are convinced they must save the world by hurting anyone who looks sideways at them. To think one is invulnerable is a dangerous thing.

Passing thoughts are all fine and dandy but when one is constantly bombarded by voices in a slugfest it starts to drive you crazy.

I tried 'stop therapy' which is successful in helping some with obsessive thinking. I wore a red rubber band around my wrist and snapped it whenever I had a paranoid thought. Snapping the rubber band is supposed to remind you to stop a particular behaviour and consciously choose to do something else. After about fifty snaps and developing a painful sore on my wrist, I ripped off the rubber band and cut it into tiny pieces. So much for stop therapy. Then I took the scissors and gave myself bangs. They were crooked but artists are allowed to be different, aren't they?

I believe schizophrenics make great artists because they have experienced Angst and suffering, anger and euphoria. They have that unbalanced artistic temperament, unlimited imagination, and suit the part.

#

With a careful eye, Leonard was cleaning the living room with a feather duster. I pictured him in a little black and white maid's uniform, but it was too funny. He fluffed up the now blue silk cushions. My mother had dyed the covers completely blue to cover the stains. I had promised to do Leonard's chores on account of his help with the electrical design, but he knew me well enough to know I wasn't true to my word all the time.

"If two men each draw a picture of the same room, who is the better artist?" I asked Leonard. He didn't respond, but concentrated on removing lint from the mantelpiece. "The one with a cushy job and no complaints or the psychotic who lost everything and almost died of hypothermia sleeping outside in winter? Don't you think the homeless man is a better artist because he's struggled? Because he has to work so much harder to achieve things that were easy for the other guy?"

"I think it would be the one who did the better drawing," he said.

I ignored him and continued on with my argument. "People are fascinated by scandals and tragedy. Tom Thomson died at the height of his artistic development. The question of how he died has never been totally resolved. Did he have an accident or was it foul play? Think of the tragic life of Vincent Van Gogh. Only sold one painting in his lifetime, cut off his ear, was labeled insane, and died young. Do you think they would have become so famous if their lives were normal?"

"I think they are famous because they were great artists. The myths and stories around them is about other people trying to sensationalize their lives in biographies to make money."

"Not everything boils down to money." How could he be so superficial?

"We live in a system that depends on the flow of money. Do you want to make money with your art?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Case in point," he said.

"I'm not through yet. Andy Warhol was an artistic genius who rose from being a commercial illustrator to becoming an icon of pop art."

"He was a moneymaker who knew how to sell himself and his work."

"As I was trying to say, he was larger than life and that's how he attracted people. He was an innovator."

"And used a projector and assistants to do his silkscreens. He made money by copying. You aren't going to win this argument."

"How do you know all that?"

"I read books."

"I forget what we were arguing about." I felt an itch on my back.

"Bubblegum?" he said.

I scratched and we chewed for a moment. Beasty joined me on the couch and I gave him a rub.

"Are you interested in Jacklyn?" I asked.

"Why? Are you?"

"Look, I'm telling you not to get too chummy with my friends."

"Have you ever thought about any of them as more than friends?" he said.

"Certainly not. They're my good friends. Having an intimate relationship would demolish that bond."

"So now we're talking about you dating one of your friends?"

"No, we're not. I'm talking about you and Jacklyn."

"I bet you've never thought about sex. You're so prissy," he said.

"Takes one to know one." I stuck out my tongue.

"I'm respectful of others and I'm waiting for the right girl."

"What's wrong with dating Jacklyn?"

"Now you *want* me to date her? You're complicated." He looked up at the ceiling where a spider was spinning a web. He pulled a broom out of the closet and took a swing at the spider with the broom.

"There's nothing wrong with Jacklyn. I think she'd be a catch. Why don't you ask her out?"

"And risk ruining your perfect relationship with the group?" He swung the broom again nearly knocking over a houseplant.

"Listen Broom-Hilda," I said, "I didn't say have sex. I said meet her for coffee."

"That would be my decision."

"When you have your own engineering firm, what are you going to do with your evenings and weekends? You're going to be fifty and hanging out with me, cleaning the ceiling?"

"No, by then I'll be so rich, I'll hire you and pay you in compost."

"Oh, wow. I can eat worms and stay warm."

"Jacklyn is attractive in her own way. Athletic too. Why don't we make a deal? I'll ask out Jacklyn if you ask out Phil."

I gaped. "Phil the pharmacist? He looks about eighty years old!"

"No, Phil the neighbour."

"That blue-eyed guy that mows the lawn like clockwork and works at the Chocolate Factory?"

"Note that you knew his eyes were blue and you love chocolate."

"Mom said that he's in charge of marketing. What does he know about artists—never mind one with schizophrenia?"

"I dare you to find out."

I was so miffed. I hated when he dared me. I couldn't ask out a guy. It went against my mantra: I am undesirable.

#

"So does Leonard really like her?" said Denise. It was a cloudy afternoon. We were sitting on a swing on my back porch, drinking the last of a pitcher of lemonade, watching the pug chase a squirrel. The squirrel ran up a tree and Beasty growled.

"Jacklyn is beautiful, athletic and talented. What's not to like?" I said.

"You think she likes him because she hugged him at the party? Didn't everyone hug Jacklyn at the party? We were celebrating."

"Ah, but she hugged him first."

"That's so scientific. It must be true." Denise crunched on an ice cube.

"There's more to it. He said that if he asked her out, I had to ask Phil. It was a dare."

"Phil the pharmacist? He must be about eighty years old!"

"No, the neighbour."

"It's not right to make a deal or dare someone to go on a date," she said.

"That's why I'm not going to do it."

"Who is this Phil guy?"

"He's in chocolate."

"Sounds like he's sweet."

"I'm going to say I did ask him out and that he turned me down." I slurped the last of my lemonade through a straw.

"You're going to lie? Can you show me what he looks like?"

I listened for the sound of a mower. "C'mon."

We put down our empty glasses and snuck along the laurel hedge and popped up our heads to see Phil.

"He's not Chinese," whispered Denise.

"What difference does that make?"

"Does he own or rent?"

"How the hell should I know?" We knelt behind the hedge.

"Don't you do your research on a guy for signs?"

I squatted on the grass and yanked at a dandelion. "What do you mean?"

"Signs that he's the one."

"I don't think there's a man on this godforsaken planet that would want me!"

She frowned. "There are millions of men on this planet and you can't ask out one of them?"

"He's got to be at least twice my age and twice my IQ."

"He's not that old. White people age differently than Asians."

"Leonard told me he has a doctorate."

"In chocolate?"

"No, silly. In English literature."

"Oh, he'll recite poetry to you in the moonlight and—"

"Hit me over the head with his book collection." I tugged on the blades of grass.

"Is he a teacher?"

"No, my mom says that he's a marketer."

"What does that have to do with English Literature?"

"Maybe he writes slogans for chocolate commercials. Anyway, I don't care. I'm not setting a foot on his property."

"Why are you so against even talking to him? Just ask him about fertilizer."

"I don't want to ask him about manure."

"Ask him for advice on trimming the hedge. It's overgrown."

"Oh, please sir, could you tell me how to use clippers, and while you're at it, buy me a candlelight dinner?"

"Why don't you treat him?" Denise poked me.

"I'm not a modern woman. I think a guy should ask the girl out and at least pay for the first date."

"Then drop a hanky," she said. I gave her a blank look. "Give him a hint. Let him know you like him and then ask him if he likes pie."

"Why pie?"

"Didn't you pay attention in art history class? Pie is a symbol of a woman's genitalia."

"I learned about cubism. What class were you in?"

"Talk about the weather if you have to." Denise looked exasperated.

"Oh, don't you think it's remarkably dull out? That's really an attention-getter."

"Okay, smarty pants. Stay single all your life and never experience love."

"Love is as foreign to me as Mars."

"Maybe you should do something with your hair." She gave me the once over. "You can lose ten pounds if you dress right. I'm taking you to Victoria Drive."

"Lunch?"

"No, I am going to show you the way."

#

"When a woman is hungry, she eats. If she wants to date, she shops." Denise opened the door to Value Village and we entered the world of discount used clothing.

"I do know how to shop for clothes you know."

"Yeah, I've seen your wardrobe. Faded t-shirts and jeans that you rotate once a week." She thumbed through the racks, pausing at some strange garments with sides cut out, and see-through lace blouses.

"Grey is sophisticated." I held out a grey turtleneck knit dress. "How about this?" It's on clearance for five dollars."

"It's not you."

Her eyes lit up and she held up a top with silver fringes. "This is it. You can wear this with a mini-skirt or jeans. You can dress it up or dress it down. Do you like it?"

"I don't own a mini-skirt."

She squeezed my hand. "Patience, Cathy. We've only begun."

I was worried about the cost, but didn't want her to know how poor I was. She said that she would lend me some accessories. "Cathy, do you have shoes other than the full-court press special?" She pointed at my sneakers. "You're not doing jump shots."

"I aim high," I said. "You block and I'll go for the rebound." Despite my smartass routine, I was craving chicken soup.

After purchasing two slinky tops, a skirt, a bolero jacket, and a pair of white sandals with her approval, we took the bus to Fraser Street. "So now we go to the next stop. The hairdresser."

"Is that necessary?" I had serious reservations about getting my long locks trimmed any more than an inch and I had run out of cash. She took me by the arm and led me into a small hair salon. Old ladies sat reading magazines under blow-dryers while the essence of permanent wave solution almost made me pass out. Denise spoke to a girl—younger than me—chewing gum at the front counter. Denise pointed at me. The girl popped her gum inside her mouth and led me to a salon chair.

I visualized the haircut from hell and backed away. The girl plunked me firmly into the chair and wrapped a plastic sheet around me, pulling the neckband tight. I could see the headlines: "Bald plastic mummy found in alleyway."

Denise thrust a beauty magazine next to my nose. "This is you!" The vultures were circling. I was doomed.

"I can't afford it," I whispered to Denise, out of earshot of the teenybopper hairdresser.

"It's okay. I have a credit card." She whispered back. Like the last soldier on a battlefield, I surrendered.

Two hours later, I emerged with golden highlights and a modified bob. My head tingled.

"Are you crying because you're happy?" asked Denise, regarding the droplets on my cheeks.

"No! It's because I owe you ninety dollars!" I sobbed.

On the way home, I realized there was no turning back after Denise had gone to so much trouble and I'd spent all my shekels. I had to find a way to get Phil to ask me out. At least for coffee and sprinkled donuts.

Chapter 8

"Okay, we're searching for cymbals, a bicycle wheel, small car parts, and any other metal objects you can scrounge. Copper, brass, steel, you name it," said Marco.

The Big Six were at the café, ready to pounce into action. After java, of course. There had been some delays in getting the contract signed. The six of us had some disagreements about responsibilities. I said that Raj should be in charge but the others said that everything should be a group decision. "It was my idea. I'll decide who gets paid what," said Raj, which ignited a whole other debate. We went around in circles discussing the title of the sculpture but we couldn't agree. After a cooling off period, we decided we'd put off naming it until later. Clearly, we needed to be a chain of command if it was going to work. There were too many cooks in the kitchen and we had barely begun.

We also had to negotiate the cost for electricity and maintenance after it was to be installed with the property manager. After the sculpture was completed, we didn't want any loose ends. I didn't understand the legal jargon in the contract but signed on the dotted line.

After the dust settled, we put egos aside and Marco took the lead. He was the oldest in the group and the most knowledgeable about working with metals. "Everything has to be welded or screwed together. It has to be solid," said Marco. "Nathan, Raj and I will take care of the basin. We’re going to use a hose from the pump and push the water up a pipe to a spout over the waterwheel. Bigger objects at the bottom, lighter objects at the top. Then we'll start adding as we go and end somewhere close to the sketches we provided, okay?"

Marco was more animated than usual. I could see he and the others were excited about the project, but I had a foreboding feeling it wasn't going to turn out. I tried to think positive to change my mind and visualize a successful finish, but I couldn’t shake it. Something will always go wrong. Mistakes happen.

"Cathy, are you going to go with Jacklyn and Denise to the scrap metal recycling place?" Nathan asked.

I snapped back to the present. "I'll ride with them."

"Don't spend anything, unless you think it's an item we can't do without. Here's one hundred dollars." Raj doled out some cash to Denise. "Remember the less we spend, the more we make."

Denise, Jacklyn and I spent a couple of hours visiting scrap metal yards. Most of the stuff we saw was huge, heavy and impractical for our sculpture, but we did find some smaller items with visual and tactile interest. We were ecstatic when we found a kid's bicycle with one wheel.

We filled the back of the van and headed to Marco's to drop off the day's finds.

When we opened the van doors, Marco looked displeased. "Egad, what is all this useless junk?"

"Scrap metal," said Denise.

"What the hell is the tire for?"

"The hubcap and the rim."

"What the hell is this?" He pointed at a porcelain toilet.

"Oh that's for my parents. They need one," said Jacklyn.

Marco grinned. "Good work, girls." He shook our hands. The boys helped unload the van, while I went inside.

Marco's studio was on the ground floor of a complex. His unit was at the end of the building so it was easily accessible from the street. His living quarters were adjacent to his studio. His work area was a good size for one artist, but we were short on space for six. Three plastic drums of different colours sat against one wall. A workbench with tools galore stood against the far wall. There were electric saws, clamps, hammers, drills and more. I could see Marco loved tools. His reliefs hung on one wall. He really was a master.

It turned out some of the items we found, we couldn't use because they were too flimsy or not 'up to par' as Nathan said.

"Okay, girls," said Marco. "Tomorrow think about canvassing the neighbourhood for junk. Back lanes and alleyways. Look in backyards and ask around. There's stuff to be had." We drove around and talked to business owners and knocked on doors. We didn't find anything spectacular. We were driving down a back lane, when Jacklyn spotted an old porcelain sink in someone's backyard. The house on the property looked like it would collapse at any minute.

"Let's knock on the front door."

The street was full of parked cars. Jacklyn found a parking space at the other end of the street and we walked back to the front of the house. There was fencing in the front yard and weeds and vines had taken over the garden and lawn. Jacklyn opened the rickety gate and the hinge broke. We stepped onto the dilapidated porch. On the front door was an old eviction notice from the landlord.

"No one lives here," said Denise.

"I’m getting the heebie-jeebies," I said.

"Let's take the sink and get out of here," said Denise.

"That's robbery plus we'd be trespassing," said Jacklyn.

"Jacklyn, you get the van and Cathy and I will grab the sink." Denise grasped my hand and led me toward the side of the house. I felt a chill of apprehension run down my spine.

"We can't do this!" yelled Jacklyn from the sidewalk.

"Get the car," Denise yelled back.

We walked over rubble and weeds to get to the backyard. A rat ran along the fence and disappeared. I helped Denise pick up the sink. We carried it around to the front and waited at the sidewalk.

"Where do you think you're going with my sink?" A booming voice startled me. I turned to see an old man standing on the porch, shaking a baseball bat.

"Oh, god. Run!" said Denise. We took off down the street carrying the sink. He gave chase. He was quick for an old bugger. (I mean 'man'.)

Jacklyn pulled up with the van and automatically opened the door. We lifted the sink inside and climbed in. We heard a loud thump as his baseball bat hit the back bumper.

"Drive!" Denise yelled, slamming the door and we peeled away.

"He saw our license plate number. Do you think he'll t-track us down?" My hands shook. I was convinced we'd be charged, convicted, and live out our sentence cleaning urinals. The project would be a bust.

"It's my parents' van. If there's damage to the back of the van, I'm in trouble," said Jacklyn. "Do you think we should go back and pay him for the sink?"

"He'll take out our kneecaps!" I was terrified.

"What do we tell the boys?" Jacklyn asked.

"Not a peep, girls," said Denise. "Pinky swear you won't say anything."

The man's face haunted me for days. I dreamt of him hitting a baseball, shattering the window of our family car outside our house. I ran toward him, shouting. I stared at him and his face dissolved into mine. I was convinced that he was the man who tried to steal our car a year before. Surely, he was a member of an underground mafia sent to drive me crazy.

#

I trotted down to the café, and lo and behold, Leonard was talking to Jacklyn, seated at the back of the restaurant. I walked up to their table.

"Hey, guys, why aren't you sitting with Raj outside?" They kept making eyes at each other and their fingers were touching. "Hey!" I said, louder this time.

This time Jacklyn jumped. "Oh hi, Cathy. Leonard was inviting me to hike the Grouse Grind. Want to join us?"

"Nah."

They smiled at each other. Ick.

"Well, come out and join Raj and me," I said. "We're drawing."

They didn't look at me and continued their conversation. I felt like I was in high school again. A third wheel. With my head down I went outside to join Raj.

"What's wrong with them? Are they too good for us?" I said to Raj.

He was drawing Egyptian cats on watercolour paper. "Love is in the air."

"Leonard doesn't love girls." I snorted.

"Well, he was doing a good job of kissing her a moment ago."

I felt a hole open in the back of my throat. Leonard and Jacklyn weren't only talking; they were sucking each other's tongues. Great.

"Don't look so depressed. It makes your eyes droop and your lips sag," he said. "You're too young to need a facelift."

Nathan appeared at the railing but this time he wasn't alone. He had a blonde with him. Her manicured, painted fingernails rested on the rail. What a poser. "Raj and Cathy, I want you to meet Sylvie."

"Bonjour!" She outstretched her hand but I coughed and didn't offer mine. Raj shook it instead. "Finally, we have the honour of meeting your girlfriend." Raj smiled.

"I didn't know you had a girlfriend," I blurted like an idiot. "I mean, you never mentioned Sylvie."

Nathan grinned. "She's been away studying in France."

"What are you studying?" Raj asked.

"Culinary arts in Paris," she said in a thick French accent. I was ready to keel over. I was hanging onto my friends by an unraveling thread. Soon the group would disband and I would be alone in the universe.

"Cathy makes a mean potato salad," joked Nathan. Here we go, I thought.

"Potato salad?" she said, wrapping her tentacles around Nathan's arm.

"She knows exactly what type of ingredients to buy. She's a great painter too, isn't she, Raj?"

"She learned from the best," he replied.

"Why don't you just shoot me now? Why don't you all stop talking and leave me alone!" I wanted to crawl into a manhole and strangle rodents.

"Cathy, I'm joking," said Nathan. "Don't friends kid each other?"

"I deserve respect." I pulled out my tablet and pressed the on switch.

"Cathy, do you have any samples of your art on your tablet or online? May I see your work?" said Sylvie. I tentatively regarded her. She actually wanted to see my paintings? With a touch of the screen, my anger disappeared and I showed her a few of my stored images in my private digital archives with enthusiasm.

"This painting I sold. This one's half done. And this is another painting I worked on. These are all my own ideas." I darted a glance at Nathan, hoping he hadn't told Sylvie about the forgery incident.

"Votre composition est bonne," she said. "Très belles couleurs. You must be very famous."

"Why don't you sit down and look at my sketchpad." I patted the chair next to me and smiled. Nathan went inside.

"How is Paris?" I eyed her jewelry and ruby lipstick. I felt like a bumpkin in comparison to Sophisticated Sylvie.

"Still the best city in the world. Such history, fashion, art and culture. Canada is so bourgeoisie, don't you think? But I mean that in the kindest way." She winks. "I know all about Canada. The beaver fur trade, hunting buffalo, igloos and pemmican."

I tried to keep a straight face.

Then she said, "Did you know I grew up as an only child? My mother died in childbirth. I carry that with me everyday of my life. Last year, my father died of pufferfish poisoning at a restaurant in Tokyo."

She pulled a tissue out of her purse and dabbed the corners of her eyes, without disturbing her mascara. "It broke my heart but I received a large cash settlement and a substantial inheritance."

That must have softened the blow, I thought.

"I want to open a restaurant in Paris one day. That is my dream."

"How did you meet Nate?"

"I was stranded at the Toronto airport changing planes. A snowstorm hit and the planes couldn't leave. I met him at the lounge and we had a few drinks. We have similar interests and as for our intense physical attraction, well, I won't go into that. I want him to come to Paris but I'm waiting for the right moment to ask him." Another wink.

I was puzzled Nate had never mentioned Sylvie. Would Nate abandon us and the sculpture and fly away with her? The thought was more than unsettling.

"Say 'Gay Paris'!" I looked up and Raj took our picture with his digital camera. He showed the image to me. Sylvie's alabaster skin and blond hair and my darker skin and hair contrasted well in the picture. I couldn't explain it, but despite her lack of tact, I felt we had a connection. Diplomacy wasn't her strong suit but she had charm.

Nathan returned with cappuccinos and fig squares for Sylvie and him. Sylvie told me about some of the sights in Paris I must see if I visit.

"So Raj, what are you working on there?" asked Nate.

Raj showed him an ink drawing of a bird. "There's a long history of bird painting."

"Well, that's definitely a bird. What's that in the corner?"

Raj held his sketchbook closer. "That's a coffee stain."

"Ah, I thought it went well with the bird. It gives it a warm feeling."

"No, it's a stain."

"A beautiful stain, I'd say. It's in the shape of a woman."

"I love the avant garde. Sometimes new art, writing, and music are not always readily accepted by the common people," Sylvie said to me.

"I agree that sometimes people don't see the beauty or value in something right away." Nate sipped his cappuccino and looked in my direction. For a second, I thought he was talking about me but I shrugged it off. I glanced at Sylvie as she rubbed Nate's arm. He leaned close and kissed her.

I stopped listening and channeled my energies into a new sketch. The three others chatted as I silently drew an oak tree with bare branches surrounded by fallen leaves. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows and the temperature dropped a few degrees.

Leonard and Jacklyn left the restaurant with a wave. They said they were catching a movie. Nathan and Sylvie caught a taxi to his place.

"A taxi?" I said to Raj. "I guess she's too good to take a bus." I tapped my pen on the edge of the table. "Marco didn't come by. Where is he?"

"Had an appointment," said Raj. He was drawing owls. "Cathy, you have a large heart."

"What do you mean?"

"Your actions speak louder than words. You care too much."

"Why do you say that?"

"In your drawing, the tree has lost its leaves," Raj said. "To me that expresses melancholy. It symbolizes the end of life. Why are you sad?"

"Nate really likes her. I don't want to lose my friends. Do you think our group will end?"

"Not right now. But in the future." Raj adds feathers to his owl drawing.

"What will become of me?" I pictured myself falling off the edge of the world.

"God only knows."

"I wish that He would tell me."

#

I arrived at Marco's studio the next day. The door was open wide even though it was drizzling. "Anyone home?" I said. I rapped on the doorframe and stepped inside. I could feel the warmth of the furnace. A fan was blowing. I saw one of the plastic barrels had been cut length-wise. Other materials were scattered around the floor.

A hand on my shoulder startled me. "Yikes! Marco, you shouldn't sneak up on schizophrenics."

"What are you going to do? Split?"

"Very funny. Schizophrenia isn't a split personality. It means 'split mind'."

"Thanks for the clarification, Dr. Freud. Now tuck your delusions away and tell me what you want."

I ignored his jab and surveyed the base of the sculpture in the middle of the room. It was starting to take shape. "You are doing double duty. Why don't you ask others to help you more?"

"I need time to ponder. You'll all come in handy. Don't worry."

"I met Nathan's girlfriend, Sylvie. She's funny even though she doesn't mean to be. She wants to steal him away to France. Denise is with Jake half the time and Leonard is moon-eyed over Jacklyn. I feel like we aren't a group anymore. We're a dating service. I feel jealous and excluded because I don't have anyone. Is something wrong with me?" I put my hands on my hips and tapped my foot.

"I'm not a psychologist so don't treat me like one." Marco took a soda out of his fridge. He dragged a high stool over to the workbench and perched on it. There was a pop and hiss as he pulled the tab. "I'd offer you a soda, but I only have one." He took a swig.

I sat down on top of half a plastic drum turned upside-down with my hands on my knees. "I came here to help you!"

"Then don't sit on that. It's part of the sculpture."

I jumped, backed up, and knocked over a stack of empty paint cans. The loud clatter echoed in the small space.

"Don't move!" said Marco, with his arms out. He scooped up the cans. "Okay, go sit by the far wall and stop annoying me."

"I'm not a child! I can help."

He grabbed a pair of snips out of his toolbox and pointed them at me. I wondered if he was going to attack me in an act of vengeance for destroying his tower of pails. "Take these snips and you can cut some metal strips."

"Your order is my command. Want some fries with that?"

"Don't mess with McMarco." He passed me the snips.

I spent a few hours at the studio then Marco told me to go home. I left without protest because my fingers were sore from using the snips.

When I unlocked the front door, I could smell food. Leonard had invited Jacklyn for fried chicken and bean salad. My parents were out celebrating their anniversary at a Greek restaurant. Leonard and Jacklyn had already eaten and were drinking wine.

"Does white wine go with fried chicken?" From an open container, I selected a drumstick and a wing and put them on a plate.

"What doesn’t go with fried chicken?" said Leonard.

"You should give me some credit for fixing you two up," I said. The drumstick was cold but I chewed on it anyway.

Jacklyn raised a brow. "Leo?"

"She doesn't know what she's talking about. Right, Cathy?" He eyed me. "In fact, didn't you say you were interested in Phil?"

I made a face and shook my drumstick at Leonard.

"Is he an artist?" asked Jacklyn. I shook my head. "Oh, is he one of your mentally ill friends?"

I spat out chicken bits and threw the bone on my plate. "No." I wiped my greasy fingers on my shirt and put my hands on my hips. "For your information, he doesn't do macramé or paint by numbers in activity group either. Just because I have a diagnosis doesn't mean my boyfriend—if one existed—would have one too!"

"No need to get touchy," said Leonard, protectively wrapping an arm around Jacklyn.

"Sorry Cathy," she said. "Pickle?"

Making an exit, I folded my arms and stomped out of the kitchen, then thought better of it, and came back in to grab some bean salad. Just because I was angry didn't mean I couldn't eat.

Jacklyn went home soon after dinner, claiming she had a headache. Probably from the telepathic arrows I shot at her head. Leonard put the leftovers away and wiped the counter and table.

"Thanks a lot, Cathy." He loaded the dishwasher and hit start. "Remember we had a deal. You need to live up to your end of the bargain. Am I going to have to throw you kicking and screaming over the hedge or are you going to march over and ask Phil out?"

"I am my own master. In due time." I said the words but something was holding me back from even conversing with Phil. After talking to Denise I realized that he could be my meal ticket to a future without dependence on Leonard as trustee of my inheritance. That alone was worth the risk. Was it wrong to think about the financial worth of a potential mate? If one is going to choose a spouse, shouldn't one choose one with dividends? I had watched Phil wash and wax his dark blue sedan until it gleamed and tend his garden of prize roses with pride. Phil had the best flowerbeds in a ten-block radius. He could prune like nobody's business. Certainly, he must own.

"Ms. Procrastination, the ball is in your court," said Leonard. In one smooth motion, he threw the dishcloth in the sink, spun on a dime, and exited the kitchen.

#

Despite my desire to not appear a chicken in the world of dating to Leonard the Leper, I was suspended in a state of neglect and uncertainty. I had failed to develop enough self-esteem to believe a relationship was in my near future. Others connected with strangers at bus stops, the mailman, or dog walkers with ease. I thought about bumping into Jacklyn by chance on the seawall, which had changed my life from living in a coconut to paddling my kayak into unknown waters. The stars must have been aligned that day. Why couldn't I bump into Phil?

Truthfully, I didn't want to move outside of my comfort zone. There's a fable about a baby elephant that is tied by a rope to a stake. When he gets older, the rope is replaced by a string, but he still won't leave the vicinity of the stake because he's been 'conditioned' to stay put. Now I've never been tied to a stake but I do understand that I'm a captive of my own fears and disappointments. If I thought about trying something new, my follow-through was weak. The challenge could be as simple as trying a new recipe or as big as applying for a job or learning to skydive. Either way, I was a basket case because I couldn't force myself to take a chance. Call it inertia.

The only exception was my art.

Feeling hopeless makes attempting any task harder. Being single was easier than trying to be someone I wasn't in order to gain affection. I didn't have to worry about making a good impression, or face awkward moments of silence between a boy and a girl.

Trying to fool myself that any man would have an interest in me was futile. If I were a guy, I wouldn't like me either. However, Denise and Leonard seemed to think it was possible and they both had partners. I knew then what I'd always known in the back of my mind. I had the ultimate curse of the double standard. I judged others differently than myself. Was I was old-fashioned in thinking the guy should court the girl instead of a girl pursuing him? I couldn't act outside of my core beliefs around relationships. That was my downfall. That and insanity.

My brain didn't know up from down and conjured images and ideas that no one else believed. I couldn't trust my schizophrenic mind but depended on it nonetheless. The illogical was logical to me and vice versa. I was a malcontent, bashing my head against an invisible wall that separated me from a better existence.

At the next session with Dr. Montgomery, I spent the whole hour ranting about the idea I had that if the planets started to drift out of orbit, we'd all be screwed. Planets and stars would collide and mankind would be obliterated along with any intelligent alien species in this fucked up universe. He argued that the gravitational pull was enough to keep us on course and the existence of little green men was unproven but plausible.

"The weather's changing. Tsunamis, hurricanes, floods, and snowstorms cut power lines and destroy homes. There are cases of people being stranded without shelter, transportation or food. The end is coming. It's only a matter of time before disaster consumes us. We're all doomed."

"Even if the end came a millennium from now, you can't go through life worrying about things outside of your control." Dr. Montgomery always had an answer even if I wasn't prepared to hear it.

"What am I supposed to do? Not care about civilization? The imbalance is universal. It affects everyone on earth. Take me for example. I can't fall asleep until one a.m. because the clock is ticking. I suspect static on the radio is caused by interference from aliens using radar to track our defense systems. At the café, I'm certain there are cameras in the cookies because they are always looking at me. There's this guy that always hangs around and watches everybody. I think he's a spy because he speaks German and is learning Chinese on his laptop. He must be up to something. I think he's trying to infiltrate the café's records to find out Gino's suppliers because the pizza is too good. If he had the recipes, he could open a dozen pizza joints and take away Gino's business. If he buys a pizza, he wants it in a takeout box and then eats it at the café anyway. Why would he want the box, unless there was a reason? It doesn't help that the Big Six are working on this sculpture and I feel so useless in the process. I get in the way. I know in the back of their minds they are ready to cut me from the project and throw me to the Germans."

"There's a lot going on in your life right now. Is the stress of the public art project affecting you?"

Distracted, I heard a banging at the window. I looked up to see a branch hitting the pane. Maybe the Germans were sending me a message. I stood up and shouted, "The wind is nigh. I dare you to strike me down.”

"Cathy, sit down and calm yourself. This fictional world you are constructing will only give you pain. You don't really believe any of it. You need to come back to the present. You need to find a way to control your fantasies. Can you pinpoint the origin of your fear?"

"I think I’m inferior and will dicker away my life without getting anywhere."

"When you look in the mirror I want you to say 'I love you' five times a day. I want you to practice self-affirmations until you feel better about yourself."

"I don't see how that will help with the Germans."

"No one can make you feel self-love," he continued. "You need to care about yourself then you can learn to care about others."

"No shtick? It's that easy?"

"It won't solve all your problems but it's a beginning," he said. "By the way, I saw that video you made with Winston and Caroline on YouTube about schizophrenia awareness. It was very good."

"Thanks, but I really didn't contribute much, other than tying down the chair in the second take. It was so windy at Buntzen Lake when we were filming."

"Don't sell yourself short. You're the real thing."

I pondered over what he said on the way home. If Dr. Montgomery thought the German wasn't a spy, why didn't he try to convince me? Instead he used distraction and the power of suggestion to make me believe my so-called fantasies were caused by a bad case of self-criticism. My head was a giant panic button. I did the breathing exercises he taught me to calm down.

An hour later, in a more rational state, I was able to focus. Who could blame me for being angry? It was better than indifference. At least I cared, right? In regards, to his other remarks, I was honest about my inferiority complex and that was a step forward. He taught me that recognizing the problem was the first step to solving it.

Chapter 9

BOOM! BOOM! We heard breaking glass and more explosions. The room vibrated. Marco's reliefs fell off the walls and thumped on the floor of the studio. Ceiling tiles fell from the rafters. Black smoke poured through the vents. I choked as smoke filled my lungs.

"Everyone out!" Marco commanded. Raj, Denise, Jacklyn, Nathan and I followed his lead and half-crouched and half-ran outside.

Horrified, we looked back to see a huge, gaping hole in the middle of Marco's complex and bursts of flames.

"What do we do?" cried Jacklyn.

"Save the sculpture!" said Raj. Like soldiers on a mission, we ran back in, hoping the ceiling wouldn't come down. The boys dragged the base of the sculpture and carried it out onto the sidewalk a distance away. We grabbed all the components we could and laid them on the grass outside. We could see flames getting closer to Marco's unit.

Sirens blared and fire engines arrived. Using hoses and extinguishers, the firefighters tried desperately to put out the blaze. The heat was intense. The units next to Marco's crumbled while we stood by and watched unable to help. Neighbours came out of their houses to watch the firemen at work. The fire started to diminish until finally there was only ash and rubble and a few last glowing embers. Marco's unit was the last part of the building to topple. Because Marco's unit was on the end of the building, it was the farthest one from the initial explosion.

"Did anyone get hurt? Is anyone missing?" Jacklyn asked a firefighter.

"We'll take care of it, ma'am. Just keep your distance." He told Marco to avoid trying to sift through the debris as it was unsafe. His belongings had burnt to a crisp.

Marco knelt, rocking back and forth on the ground with his head bowed and his hands clasped together. I'd never seen Marco so shaken. His art, tools, workshop and his home were destroyed in a matter of minutes.

We surrounded him like mourners at a funeral wanting to comfort him, but we knew that the fire had horrific consequences for our friend.

"Do you have insurance?" asked Raj.

"Not enough to buy my life back," said Marco. He pounded the ground with his fists.

I was about to make a joke that Raj meant home insurance not life insurance but then I realized that might not go over well.

Taylor arrived at the scene. "Marco, are you alright? I heard about the fire on the radio at work and rushed right over." He surveyed the remnants of what was once Marco's home. "Look, if you need a place to stay for a few weeks, I've got an empty sofa."

"We can supply you with some food, a toothbrush, and help you find some clothes if you need it," said Denise.

"What about that?" Marco pointed to our sculpture that was presently in pieces strewn all over the lawn. There was silence in the group.

"My parents have a double garage. If we can clear out half, maybe I can ask if we can complete the sculpture there. There's electricity and it's secure," I said. "Do you want me to call my dad?"

#

With a loud creak, Leonard pulled up the garage door manually but the group couldn't step inside because of the mountain of junk filling the space. Denise, Jacklyn, Marco and I started to pull chairs, card tables, boxes, clothes, boots, lumber and other items out of the garage into the driveway at the front of the house.

"We haven't really looked at this stuff in a long time. My advice is to dispose of most of it and only keep things of value like this." He held up a toy gun and aimed it at the light fixture. He pulled the trigger, firing a cork three inches and making a loud pop. He blew on the muzzle like a Chinese action hero.

"Really funny, Leonard," I said. "Why don't we have a garage sale? Mom and Dad don't need this stuff. The only thing Dad really wants is the car. Let me call him and ask." I got on the phone. After I asked, all he said was "good riddance but don't tell your mother I said that."

Inside the garage was an old jeep my father had always wanted to work on but never had the time. We left it there, plus the mower, gardening equipment, tools, and hardware and hauled the rest.

It took two hours to sort the stuff into sections on the cement. There were toys, blankets, and even a broken trampoline. Beasty waddled around watching us with great interest. "We can't leave it out overnight," said Leonard.

"Why don't we put up signs right now? There's still the rest of the day."

Denise and Jacklyn used black ink and cardboard to fashion some signs and went over to a nearby busy intersection to attract drivers and pedestrians to our sale.

"We need a float," I said. I went inside and raided the rainy day jar of coins my mother keeps in the kitchen. I was glad they were at work.

The sale started to attract the neighbours and cars pulled up. Next door, the Bentleys looked out their window but didn't come over for a closer look, however Magic climbed our maple tree to watch. Beasty wouldn't stop barking at her so I put him in the house. Phil didn't make an appearance much to my relief as Leonard would have goaded me to talk to him. He still insisted I keep up my end of the bargain.

Nathan and Raj showed up in the late afternoon.

"You're amazing!" said Raj, surveying stacks of items for sale. "Want to come and clean up my place?"

Satisfied customers walked away with real finds for a fraction of buying them new. We even had a draw for a six-pack of beer donated by Nathan and Raj, promising to call the winner to pick it up at the end of the day.

After six p.m., my mother got home from work. "Leonard, Cathy, what is going on here? You're selling my china and the record player?" She swore in Cantonese. I thought she was going to explode like a supernova.

"Mom, it's okay. We got permission from Dad," I said, trying to quell the impending eruption.

"You can't sell the china! That's our wedding china." She started to pick up a box and strut toward the garage. "Where's the sofa!" Her face was scarlet.

"Wait, Mom. We've made nine hundred dollars so far," said Leonard, taking the box from her and putting it down. "You don't need this china. We have enough dinnerware. Someone else can use it. It's okay."

"Nine hundred dollars, that's all?"

I quickly passed Leonard the money I had collected plus the rest of our cash.

"One thousand fifty dollars, Mom." He held it out to her.

Her eyes lit up. She flipped through the bills and rattled the change. "Well, I guess that's better than nothing." She went into the house, taking the money with her.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I fell to my knees, looked up to the heavens, and clasped my hands. "Thank you God." The others watched me with interest. Leonard checked his watch.

"Let's call it a day," said Leonard with authority. "We'll take the rest to the thrift store tomorrow. It's a wrap." He should have been a movie director.

#

"Hey Cathy, come hear this," Leonard was watching the six o'clock news.

"On Tuesday, near Commercial Drive, a building housing eight artist studios was destroyed by fire. One man is dead, three people were injured, treated in hospital and released," said the anchorwoman. "Investigators state it was arson, caused by a Molotov cocktail which ignited flammable liquids in a chain reaction." A blurred photo of a man appeared on the screen.

"The deceased is 25-year old Rodrigo Ramirez, an Argentinian sculptor who recently moved to Canada. He was already dead by a gun wound to the head, when the bomb went off. Inside his studio, where the petrol bomb exploded, were found traces of crack cocaine inside the hollows of his fake cast sculptures. A safe was found empty. Detectives believe whoever set off the bomb was attempting to cover up the murder and also stole drugs and possibly money from Ramirez who may have smuggled cocaine inside his sculptures into Canada. The police now have a suspect based on a witness who took a photo with her cellphone of a man leaving the scene. The alleged arsonist is known to police as Mark Mahoney." A picture of a man with flaming red hair and a tattoo of an anchor on his neck flashed on the screen. "He should be considered armed and dangerous. If you see or come in contact this with man, please contact the authorities. More news at eleven."

"Holy cow! A smuggling ring in Marco's backyard!" I gasped.

"Ah, he doesn’t have a backyard now," said Leonard.

I punched him in the arm. "Criminals are everywhere. The world is filled with conspiracies. What if he comes after us?"

"Cathy, he's not going to come after us. We're ordinary people."

"Where did he stash the drugs? In the trunk of his car next to his other victims?"

"That would be a pretty large trunk." Leonard shook me by the shoulders. "Calm down. The police will take care of it. Go check on Marco and the others and see how they're doing in the garage."

I strolled out to the garage where Marco and Nathan were examining my dad's old jeep. They were each holding a beer can.

"Guys, I just heard on the news that the fire at Marco's building was arson to hide the murder of a sculptor who allegedly smuggled cocaine. His name was Rodrigo Ramirez."

"Arson and murder? Sensational yet creepy at the same time. Marco, did you know that guy?" asked Nate.

"Met him a couple of times when he first moved in a month ago. He was as fake as his sculptors. His statues were flimsy replicas. He made cheap knockoffs with inferior materials." We shook our heads in disgust. "I can't believe he was involved in smuggling though."

"Any suspects of who killed him and bombed the place?" asked Nate.

"It was none other than Mark Mahoney," I answered.

"Almost sounds like Marco Manicotti," Nate said sternly. "Do you have anything to say, Marco?"

"I didn't do it! You must believe me!"

"Your initials are the same. You could be the infamous Mad Mahoney!" Nate grabbed a hammer. "Ladies, get back! He's a murderer."

Marco slowly crushed his beer can with one hand. "You're going down Nathan X." He gave Nate a fierce look.

Denise and I laughed. We clapped at their impromptu performance. The boys bowed. I was surprised that Marco could joke about it. His resilience was astounding, regarding losing his place not long ago.

"Marco, you're off the hook. We're your alibi," said Nathan. "You're a good man." He ran his hand across the hood of the jeep. "Okay back to business. Cathy, do you have a key for this old jeep? We want to see if it runs."

"Why?"

"The body has a few dents but the tires are in good shape. We're thinking we'd like to repair it as a surprise gift for your dad since he gave us the use of his garage."

I grabbed a key off a hook inside the door of a wall cabinet and tossed it to Nathan. "You can try, but the battery's dead. You need a new one."

"Let's try to jumpstart it with Jacklyn's van." Undeterred, Nathan was up to the challenge. Jacklyn maneuvered and parked her van close enough to attach the jumper cables. They tried a few times but the engine didn't turn over.

"Definitely needs a new battery," said Marco.

"Isn't that what I said? You need money to buy a new one," I said.

"We have cash from the project," said Raj, standing at the far corner. "I think there's enough to fix up the car."

"Let's vote since the money is coming out of our profit," said Jacklyn. "Who says aye?" It was unanimous. We decided we'd let Leonard know but keep it a secret from my parents. "If anyone let's the cat out of the bag, he or she buys two rounds at the pub."

Marco was enthusiastic about investing some of the grant money in new tools including a multifunction plasma cutter-welder that soldered too.

"It's portable, runs on regular household voltage, and can weld and cut steel, aluminum, copper, cast iron, bronze and other metals. A welder's dream." When Marco showed us the online ad, his eyes lit up with excitement. It was expensive, but he persuaded us to buy it.

I sensed a similarity between how guys feel about tools versus how women feel about shoes. Sometimes one needs to have something if it's important to them. The sexes weren't so different on that front. Marco agreed to teach Denise how to use the welder to speed up production. She looked like an intergalactic warrior when she donned the welder's helmet and gloves.

"Isn't that dangerous to use in an enclosed space?" I asked, thinking about the fire that destroyed Marco's studio. "Can you work outside?"

Rain drizzled outside the open garage door. "Not a chance," said Denise. She moved closer to the electric heater that kept us warm in the garage.

"Don't worry, it isn't as hazardous as other torches," said Marco. "It uses a water and alcohol mix and produces oxygen. As long as we use protective gear we should be fine."

Ah, the wonders of modern technology, the Queen of Clichés mused.

The boys fixed some leaky hoses on the car, patched a hole in the muffler with the new welder, gave it a tune-up, and got it running. They were able to repair the dents, sand and spray the jeep with a new coat of red paint a section at a time after masking off the window and trim. They were smart enough to only work on the car when my father was at work and my mother out of the house.

The building of the sculpture was behind schedule. We considered using the car tire rim to make it act like a waterwheel. However, according to Leonard, it was too heavy to turn easily.

"What do we do now?" I said.

"We'll build our own waterwheel with lighter materials," said Leonard.

I didn't appreciate his use of the word 'we'. I felt my role in the group was shrinking faster than cashmere in hot dryer.

"I'm thinking of a kid's bicycle rim with blades along the perimeter to catch the water."

"That's brilliant!" said Jacklyn. She hugged Leonard. "You're so smart!"

Seething with jealousy, I was ready to nail my brother to the garage door. Then I experienced a bubble of inspiration. "I have a great idea. Why not have the waterwheel power the pump? It could run itself."

"Self-generating? What a cool idea!" said Denise. I felt warm with satisfaction but the feeling was short-lived.

"Cathy, it might run for two minutes but no longer. You need external power," said Leonard. "Close but no cigar." Jacklyn giggled and they kissed.

I shot daggers at him, stabbing him with my eyes. He didn't even notice. I might as well be invisible, at least then no one would be able to identify me when I shot him. Where was the nearest revolver store? I didn't know how to fire a gun, but if I heard if you believe strongly enough in something, anything is possible.

#

I saw Nathan sitting despondently outside the café. He hadn't been to the garage for a week. In fact, Marco had been working on the sculpture alone for the most part because of dissension in the group. He had butted heads with Denise over the welding. Raj and Nate spent more time drinking than working. When Jacklyn said something, Nate said, "What the hell do you need us for?" His comment didn't go over well and Jacklyn walked out.

"What's up, Nate?" I took a seat next to him outside the café. It was windy and cold on the patio.

"Hey, remember the raven incident?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I was driving along the highway to Coquitlam, when I had a paranormal experience," he said. "A driver of a huge semi-trailer truck lost control. The transport crossed the white line and crushed a car against a barrier. I braked and moved to the shoulder. There was a 20-car pileup. I stayed at the scene until the traffic cleared. While I was stopped a raven landed on the hood of my car. I think he was watching over me the whole time."

"The raven was a sign. You were chosen to survive."

"You think so? Why me?"

"Because you're destined for greater things."

"I think you're wrong because the same day of the accident, I came home and Sylvie was using Skype to blow kisses to her old flame Pierre."

"Using your computer? How dare they!" I gasped.

"Using my computer isn't the point. They've been communicating the whole time, making kissy faces when I'm not around. Hey, that explains why there are lipstick marks on my screen. Anyway, I confronted her. She said that I should live with her and study art in Paris so we could be together. I said that there was no way I could afford that and I wasn't going to live off her inheritance. So I broke up with her. Then she confessed she was in love with Pierre and said that he was more convenient."

"Convenient? How insulting. What's the heck is that supposed to mean?"

"She had a plan and I didn't fit into it. End of story."

"No raven in sight on that one." I paused. "Maybe you need to think about something else and forget her for awhile. Are you going to come by the garage and work on the sculpture?"

"Maybe on the weekend, when I'm free. At least I have you guys."

I was sympathetic about his break-up but also secretly breathed a monumental sigh of relief he wasn't going to leave the Big Six anytime soon. Somewhere in my sea of doubt was a lantern of hope. I just hoped the light wouldn't go out.

#

Christmas arrived. We decided to present my parents with our surprise on Christmas Eve. The group gathered for the unveiling in the garage. I gave my parents the excuse that they needed to check out the light fixture in the garage because it kept flickering. My parents opened the side door to the garage and flicked on the light.

"Surprise!" The Big Six cheered. A big, red bow was placed on the hood of the jeep.

"What's this?" my father asked.

Raj handed him the keys. "As a token of our appreciation for the use of your garage, we fixed up your jeep and got it running."

My dad was visibly shocked. Leonard opened the garage door for ventilation and he got in the car and tried the motor. It purred like a lion that just ate a good meal of lamb chops. (I'd recommend a restaurant here that serves great lamb chops but I think it's best if you try them out for yourself.)

"We can't thank you enough," said my bewildered father.

"All we need is insurance," said my mother, as practical as always.

My mother invited the group inside the house for wine, cheese and crackers. Leonard played Christmas music on his CD player and cuddled with Jacklyn. Raj and the others sat politely in the living room, admiring the lights on the tree. After awhile, Raj said that he had another party to go to and Denise left to pick up Jake to go to his sister's place. Nate and Marco didn't converse much or stay long either.

The year had passed too quickly for me. I looked back at my accomplishments over the year, but they seemed insignificant in comparison of the work needed to finish the sculpture. The gratification of selling my work had faded quickly. I predicted big, orange detour signs in my uphill battle as I continued to struggle with my art. Not only did I worry about how others perceived my work, but also I was doubtful of my own abilities. I searched for direction and meaning in my work. How did other artists conceive their ideas and arrive at concepts that were universal that they could articulate so well?

Even if I toiled for years and years, there was no guarantee of success. How did one measure success anyway? The number of accolades one receives or the amount of sales or fame?

I was a self-proclaimed artist but it didn't mean that anyone would remember me in a hundred years. The journey ahead of me had no map and the means of how to get there were also unknown. Was being an artist about creating quality pieces that were crafted well or being able to market oneself and be professional? Could you have one without the other?

However, the other problem I perceived was that the building of the sculpture was turning into one headache after another. Some days we tolerated each other but other times Marco or Nate would lose their patience or Denise and Jacklyn would squawk about the design. We seemed to be wasting a lot of time. Morale was down.

New Year's Day arrived but I was melancholy. Dark, cold days made me sad and lethargic. All I wanted was to sleep all day long and wish away my worries about the future.

#

"No, no! That's all wrong!" Marco rarely got his back up but he was practically jumping up and down like a yoyo.

"What's up?" I said as I entered the garage by the side door.

"Give me that!" said Marco, grabbing a pipe in Denise's hand. They played tug-of-war with the metal pipe.

"It belongs on top! I know about design too you know!" Denise said.

"I'm telling you it's not on the plan," said Marco.

"Break it up," I said, separating the two. "What's wrong with having the pipe on top?"

"It doesn't make any sense," Marco said.

"Does any of this plan make sense? It looks like a pile of junk," argued Denise. She kicked the base that Marco and the others had worked so hard on. I could see Marco's face turn a shade of maroon. "You've made a lot of changes, Marco. This is supposed to be a group project, not a dictatorship. I don't work for you." Denise's eyes narrowed.

"Then quit!" Marco pushed Denise with the pipe and she fell back, tripping over tools on the floor. She knocked over some cans and walked out fuming.

"Don't look at me like that," Marco said to me, sensing my disapproval.

I put my hands on my hips once again. "Last week, Jacklyn has a similar issue with you and Nathan and Raj don't even come around because they feel excluded too."

"Look, I'm keeping this project afloat. Someone has to take charge. You said it yourself."

"I know this is tough on everybody and you are trying your best, but everyone wants input. I think we need a group meeting."

#

The café was a neutral place to meet. Everyone showed up but they looked distracted and glum as Christmas without Santa Claus or Easter without the resurrection. Leonard was there too.

"I know everyone is feeling hurt and some of us have been butting heads," I said, "but we need to remember that we are a group and we need to work together. We used to be friends. Why can't we get along?"

"It's not all my fault," said Marco. "No one else seems to know what they're supposed to do. I fell into the role of taking responsibility because no one else would."

"I want to say sorry to Marco," said Denise. "I shouldn't have said what I said."

"I'm sorry about what happened too," said Marco.

"Personally, I wish that I had more say or that my ideas were at least helpful," said Nathan. "I don't feel useful."

"Also if Marco is doing most of the work, he's putting in more hours and gets a larger share," said Jacklyn. "I was hoping for one sixth of the payout, but I haven't worked enough hours to justify that." Nathan and Raj nodded.

"This was supposed to be fun," said Raj. "Maybe we're taking it too seriously."

"But we should take it seriously. Our careers are on the line," said Marco.

"We all want this to work. Marco's right," I said. "We need to respect each other's opinions. We aren’t going to agree on every detail, but compromise in order to get a good result. If there's another dispute, we have a group vote. Okay, tomorrow we all show up at the garage and we'll map out the rest of the project and who does what, okay?"

They nodded. I put my hand out, each of them placed a hand on top and we raised our hands over our heads in a gesture of solidarity.

On the way home, Leonard walked beside me. "You were great today. You could run for city council."

"Gee, thanks." I was surprised he complimented me but even more surprised I responded as kindly as I did. Something was changing in the wind like a horse taking the lead in a high stakes race. We were back in the saddle.

Chapter 10

"Leonard, something's wrong. Magic hasn't been around for two weeks. The Bentleys' drapes are always closed and they leave their TV on when they go out."

"The Bentleys have always been private people. What's the difference if they leave their TV on or not? You're being paranoid."

"I think something is going on. I have a sixth sense about it," I turned to Marco who was drilling holes into a pipe. "Have you seen anything strange next door?"

"If you think there's something fishy, I believe you. Hunches are usually correct. The best place to check is their garbage can. That's where the cops always look."

"That's a great idea. If we go through their garbage, it might give us a clue to what's happening over there," I said.

Leonard shook his head. "No, I absolutely refuse. It's an invasion of privacy."

"C'mon, Marco." Marco and I walked into the lane and alongside the high fence at the back of the Bentleys' property. I took the lid off the neighbour's garbage and we sifted through the bags inside.

"Look at this!" I held up a rag with a dried stain. "That's blood!"

"Could be. Let's check the recycling bin." Marco turned the recycling bin upside down, dumping plastic milk jugs, bottles, and metal cans onto the asphalt.

"Shh! They'll hear you."

"Oh, my!" He pulled a pair of keys out of the pile. "Who would throw out a set of these?"

#

When the rest of the Big Six showed up at the garage that morning, I told them about my suspicions and showed them the keys and the rag. The markings on the keys were defaced as if someone had rubbed a file against them. On one of them, I could barely make out a shape of the number 26.

"Cathy, what do you want to do? Take the rag to the police? It isn't enough to cause me to think anything is wrong," said Jacklyn.

"I've always suspected the next door neighbours were Russian sleeper spies. I think they've been activated."

"Cathy, remember what the doctor said. You make up crazy stories to avoid the truth," warned Leonard.

"What's the truth?" I asked.

"The truth that—"

"That I'm a psychotic nutbar? Listen, bro, you can't handle the truth that I might be onto something."

"Cathy, I think you need to take a chill pill or do I call 911 right now?"

BANG!

"What was that loud noise? I think it's coming from the lane," said Denise.

"No, it's coming from next door," said Nathan.

Immediately my anger was replaced by curiosity. We all left the garage and peered over the hedge. In the Bentleys' kitchen window, I could make out shadows against the blinds. I could hear their TV blaring loudly. The screen on their backdoor banged and I could see Mrs. Bentley walk to their back gate. I heard the latch open. I heard noises as she rummaged through the recycling box then she returned from the lane to the back door.

"George, they're gone! The keys must have been picked up." She went into the house.

"A key drop-off in a recycling bin?" Nathan said, scratching his head. "That doesn't make sense."

"Recycling isn't picked up until tomorrow. They know that," I said.

"What do we do now?" said Nathan.

"Today is Wednesday," I said. "They always do their grocery shopping on Wednesday. We’ll go over there while they're out."

"You mean break in?" said Jacklyn in a low whisper.

"We can't go in there. It's against the law," said Leonard.

The rest of the group looked hesitant. "If you guys don't want to break in, fine," I said. "I'm staying put until they leave, then I'm going over there."

"You can't go over there alone. You won't be safe," said Marco.

"Okay, if we help Cathy and we don't find anything, then it'll be over," said Denise. "Agreed?"

The others nodded but Leonard looked pale as if he was being led to the guillotine. I knew he felt guilty and he hadn’t even done anything wrong yet.

"Leonard, you can be the lookout," I said. "Then you won't be breaking in."

"Okay, I'll whistle if they come back early."

I stood outside for three quarters of an hour. Like clockwork, the Bentleys left the house and drove off in their sedan. I hollered to the others.

Leonard stood guard by the hedge and the rest of us walked single file through the back lane and entered the Bentleys' property by the back gate, hoping not to be noticed.

I opened the creaking back screen door and tried the knob. Locked. Carefully, I felt the sill above the door and checked under the mat for a spare key.

"Allow me," Marco pulled a crowbar out of his jacket and smashed the windowpane in the door. He put his hand inside and unlocked the door. The TV blared as usual.

"That's another way to do it. Good work, Marco." I high-fived him. "Okay, everyone spread out, take a room, and search for anything unusual."

I searched the kitchen cupboards and found nothing but chipped plates, stale cereal and canned chili. I opened the refrigerator door to find moldy cheese and about twenty-five jars and bottles of condiments. "They sure like their seasoning." I checked the freezer above.

"Hey guys!" I pulled out a large, clear bag from the freezer. The others circled. "Sweet Jesus! She's stiff as a skateboard!" Inside the bag, their calico cat was frozen and quite dead.

"Do you think she died of natural causes?" asked Raj.

"Who freezes their pets?" said Jacklyn. "That's plain weird."

"Maybe they're scientists and they want to bring her back to life later on," said Nate.

"Or they can't bury her because the ground is frozen," said Marco.

"Keep looking guys, we don't have much time," said Nate.

I stuffed Magic back in the freezer.

Raj pulled cushions off the couch while Nathan looked through a filing cabinet and the girls ransacked the bedrooms upstairs. We turned up nothing unusual.

"There's only one place we haven't looked. The basement," said Raj ominously.

"I'm not going down there," said Jacklyn. "I'm ready to puke I'm so nervous."

"C'mon, we'll stick together. Big Six unite," said Marco.

The basement door had a padlock. Marco used the crowbar to pry the hasp. He opened the door and we looked down the stairs into a well of darkness.

"Anybody down there?" I called out. I heard a muffled noise. "You guys hear that?" The others nodded.

I tried the light switch but it didn't work. Marco pulled out a flashlight from his cargo pants pocket.

"First a crowbar and now a flashlight?" said Nate. "You come prepared. Were you a Boy Scout when you were a kid?"

"No, ex-military," Marco replied.

"Really?" I gasped.

"Cathy, he's joking," said Jacklyn. "Can we get on with it before I collapse from fear?"

Marco led us down the stairs. The flashlight beam revealed a bare floor, and a washer and dryer. Bras and socks hung on a drying rack. Cobwebs hung in the corners of the ceiling.

"Dead end, guys. Let's get out of here," said Denise, taking a step toward the stairs.

We heard a thump. "Where's that coming from?" said Raj. Another thump.

"This is crazy. Let's get out of here!" cried Jacklyn.

"Listen for it," said Marco. He aimed the beam of light at a long wall with a bookcase against it. There were no signs of a doorknob or hinge. Thump!

"I think it's a false wall," said Marco. "Help me with this." They boys grabbed the bookcase and shifted it to the left, revealing another padlock. "Stand back." Marco ripped the hasp off with the crowbar.

"Wait! What if there's an animal trapped in there?" Jacklyn cried. "It might attack us."

"Or a dead body?" Denise's voice was filled with apprehension.

"Dead bodies don't thump," said Nate.

"It could be a ghost risen from the dead!" Denise look petrified.

"Do you hear a whistle?" I asked.

"I don't hear a whistle. We're going in." Marco opened the door and shone the light into the unknown. "Hey, there's someone in here."

He shone the light on a chair, where a figure sat with a bag over his head. His ankles and hands were tied to the chair. Blood was on his clothes and splattered on the floor. The figure moaned and thumped his heels on the floor.

"He's alive!" I shouted. "Take the bag off!"

"Wait," said Marco, holding us back with outstretched arms. "We don't know what we're dealing with here."

"Marco, I think he's been shot," said Denise. "He needs medical attention."

"Maybe he's the elephant man," Nate said. "All deformed with a weird skin condition. Looks about a million years old."

"Shut up Nate." Jacklyn was angry now.

"He's been kidnapped and tortured by the Bentleys! I told you they were spies," I said. "Look at his bruises too. The poor guy's been left here bleeding to death." With all the courage I could muster, I stepped forward and whipped the bag off his head. Gasping with surprise, I jumped back. "I know this man."

We heard a bang and footsteps upstairs.

"Oh, no! They're home!" Denise said. Jacklyn looked like she was going to faint. "Quick, hide!"

"There's nowhere to hide. We're done for," said Nate. He made the sign of a cross.

"This is your fault, Cathy. We'll be on the six o'clock news as the Big Dead Six," said Denise.

"I'll take full responsibility for this," said Raj. "I'll say I smelled something and was checking for a gas leak."

"Yeah, you and five of your friends with a crowbar," said Marco.

"Anyone down there?" A deep voice boomed from the top of the stairs. I heard heavy footsteps. We were goners and I didn't even have a will. At least my paintings were safe but then again what did it matter if they were worth a total of twenty-three dollars and sixty-seven cents?

A flashlight beam blinded our eyes. If there was a higher power out there, we needed help now. I blinked.

"PHIL!" I gasped.

Phil stood in the doorway holding a gun. He was so tall that he had to bow his head under the doorframe. He surveyed the room. "Hands in the air!" he yelled. We jumped and raised our hands. Marco put his hands up still holding the crowbar and flashlight.

"Phil, it's okay. I'm Cathy. I live next door. We can explain everything. But first, look at who we found in the basement." I stepped aside to reveal the tied figure. His red hair looked dirty and his mouth was bound with tape. He had a full beard but I could still make out a tattoo of an anchor on his neck.

"If it isn't Mark Mahoney and a gang of misfit toys. Amazing what you find in our quiet neighbourhood. I'd never expect to find him here. What is this? A clever coup to capture him or are you all in it together and turned on your ringleader?"

"We had nothing to do with the fire or the smuggled drugs," I said. I lowered my hands and the others followed.

"I'll be the judge of that." He flashed a badge and relaxed his stance. "I'm Phil Johnston with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service."

"Even if he is a criminal, he's been held hostage and beaten," said Denise.

"I can see that. You six are under arrest for breaking and entering and possibly extortion." Phil punched his cellphone. "Hello, Captain? This is Agent Johnston with the CSIS. I need a paddy wagon and squad cars at the following address—"

A loud whistle sounded. This time I was sure it was Leonard. "The Bentleys are home!" I gulped.

Immediately, Phil moved to the doorway, raising his gun, and spoke in a low voice. "Turn off your flashlight and put your backs against the far wall. These are potentially dangerous people. I'll take care of this, but if any of you jump me, I'll shoot you in self-defense."

We all backed up and knelt by the back wall. Mark was silent and didn't move. Phil stood at the doorway beside the bookcase and aimed his gun at the top of the stairs. He turned off his flashlight. Upstairs I heard movement.

I heard a woman's voice upstairs. "George, the window is broken and the place has been ransacked!"

"Beatrice, grab your gun. We'll check on the prisoner downstairs," he replied. I saw an unsteady beam of a flashlight fall on the cement beside Phil at the doorway. Footsteps. Phil leaned forward.

A shot rang out. Phil returned fire. I heard a series of thumps. Then more shots. Phil pulled the trigger again and it was over.

#

Thirty minutes later, we were being questioned. George and Beatrice were taken away in an ambulance, both wounded in the shins but stable. Mark Mahoney had extensive bruising and a bullet in his side and was also sent to the hospital. All three were under custody by the police.

"The police could charge you all with breaking and entering but these are extenuating circumstances. I'll explain to them your part in apprehending Mahoney," said Phil. The sunlight created a halo around his head. With his white hair, he looked like a saint to me.

I couldn't believe this was the same Phil who moved his lawn every week and watered his roses. I thought he was in chocolate. I realized his whole routine had been a front to disguise his true purpose as an undercover government operative. He asked us a battery of questions, stating this case was linked to an international smuggling ring that CSIS was investigating. Unfortunately, we really didn't have much information.

"Where are the keys you found?" he asked.

I pulled them out of my pocket and handed them to him. "We think they were left in the recycling bin for someone to pick up. What do you think they're for?"

"I'm not sure but I'll find out."

Finally, Phil and the cops let us leave the scene without being charged on the promise we wouldn't skip town. I dreaded Leonard telling our parents about our crime. We had been foolish to put ourselves at risk. We could have been killed. The realization made my stomach churn like butter in a blender.

"Hey Cathy, I tried to whistle when I saw Phil kick in the front door but I didn't want him to see me either. He must have seen you in the window and went to investigate," said Leonard. "I’m so glad you're all safe. Don't worry, I'll tell Mom and Dad you were being a Good Samaritan by rescuing that guy's life, even if he was a fugitive from justice."

Despite his reassurance, I knew Mom and Dad would be less than enthused about our venture in vigilantism.

The boys went to the pub to settle their nerves. Jacklyn decided to run ten kilometres to unwind. Denise went home for a hot bath. Leonard poured me a cup of chamomile tea. I sat in the corner of the den, while Leonard sang my praises to our parents. They were surprisingly passive up to the point in the story when the guns went off.

"I can't believe you broke into the Bentleys' house! Your schizophrenia makes you do crazy things. You weren't thinking straight at all," said Mom. "You could have been killed!"

Dad grabbed me by the arm and dragged me into the kitchen. He took a frying pan spatula and slammed it against the back of my hand and wrist. I cried out. I knew I'd have welts in the morning. I bruised easily. He slapped my wrist two more times for good measure.

"Say it!" He held the spatula to my chin.

"Dad, I'm sorry I broke into the neighbour's house but—"

He yanked on my hair, jerking my head back, making me howl. He threw the spatula in the sink and marched out of the kitchen. I rubbed my hand and wrist and found an icepack in the fridge to bring any swelling down. My wrist was extremely tender to the touch. The emotional wound was deep. I felt guilty as hell. I walked with my head down into the den where my mother and Leonard were watching the evening news.

"A CSIS undercover agent was aided by six unnamed citizens in the capture of Mark Mahoney who confessed to the murder of Rodrigo Ramirez in a cocaine and money heist, setting fire to his home and burning down an entire complex. Mahoney was captured and held hostage by George and Beatrice Bentley in their home as they tried to extract the whereabouts of his stash from him by torturing him. Mahoney attempted to escape the Bentleys' home, however, he was recaptured by the dangerous duo. They shot him in the side to prevent future attempts, after which he was found by the six citizens. The Bentleys were injured in a shootout in their home with the CSIS agent who extracted Mahoney. The couple confessed they worked with Ramirez and were trying to regain the stolen goods. In the Bentleys' cellar, agents found a black book of all the operatives in their smuggling ring and their payouts."

"I've got to call my sister Helen. She needs to know what Cathy did and how terrifying it was for me as a mother! Risking her life to catch criminals? How insane is that? And it happened right next door!" Mom clapped her hands in delight and ran to the phone.

I spoke to Leonard who sat on the couch watching beside me. "Dad flogs me in an act of corporal punishment and Mom wants to brag to her friends. What is with this family?" I peeked under the icepack. My skin was red and I could see the imprint of the spatula.

The announcer continued, "The three criminals have cooperated with the police and CSIS, hoping to receive reduced sentences. The drugs and money have yet to be recovered. Next the weather."

"Huh. They didn't even mention our names," I said, "or you as the lookout."

"You should be happy about that," Leonard said. "Other smuggling operatives could come after us and blow us away."

"They sang like a church choir. What a bunch of yellow-bellied sapsuckers," I said. "Mahoney was better off telling the Bentleys the location of the drugs and money. He would have avoided being caught. He could be drinking mai tais on an island off the coast of Puerto Rico by now."

"There's no way he would have made it out of the country without being spotted," he said. "His wanted poster was all over the news."

"I wonder how the Bentleys found him? At the local five and dime, buying money clips?" I said. "Where do you think the goods are?"

"He might have sold the drugs or spent the money." Leonard rested his feet on the coffee table.

"I bet it’s a lot of cash. You don't just put that type of cash in the bank," I commented.

There was a knock on the door. My mother answered.

I heard a familiar deep voice. "Phil Johnston, CSIS. I'd like to talk to your daughter."

#

Phil stood larger than life in our living room. He towered over me, wearing a black suit and tie and a white dress shirt with shiny black leather shoes.

"Cathy, there's something we didn't ask you. How did you notice something unusual next door? I've been living in this neighbourhood for two years and I never suspected the Bentleys of hostage-taking or extortion never mind their involvement in a smuggling ring."

"She has a sixth sense," said Leonard. "She's schizophrenic."

I was ready to sock Leonard one. How dare he embarrass me in front of St. Phil?

Phil took off his sunglasses and raised his eyebrows. Why do agents wear sunglasses when they are indoors or when the sun is down? Some kind of cataract epidemic? "So you heard a voice telling you to investigate?" boomed Phil.

"Actually, no sir. It was because I hadn't seen Magic for two weeks."

Phil pulled his cellphone out of his inside pocket and pressed some keys. "Magic is the name of a suspected operative out of Malaysia. Wanted for racketeering. He's been off the radar for three months. Did he work with the Bentleys?" He showed me a headshot on his phone. "Is this the man?"

"Magic is their cat," interrupted Leonard, standing behind me. I elbowed him in the ribs. He was raining on my parade. I was the one Phil asked to see.

"What's the significance of the cat?"

"They kept her frozen in the freezer," I said.

Phil rubbed his chin. "I'll look into it."

"Did you figure out what the keys are for?" I asked.

"That's classified." Without a wave, he left as quickly as he came.

"Wow! He's so tall and handsome!" I fell back on the couch, still feeling the shock of seeing Phil dressed in a classic suit in our house.

"And you're so short," Leonard teased. He tousled my hair.

"Phil cleans up well. I've only seen him in shorts and sandals. He's a real smooth operator when he wants to be. So debonair and catching criminals without wrinkling his suit and tie. Do you think he owns special gadgets to spy on people and access to a private jet?"

"I see someone's smitten."

"He's a superhero." My eyes glazed over picturing him in a cape and tights.

"He did look rather suave," Leonard remarked. "When are you going to—"

"I'm not asking him out!" I shouted.

Chapter 11

For days, the question of where the money and drugs were stashed bothered me. There'd been no news about CSIS or the police locating them, but they stated the value of the stolen property was estimated in the two million dollar range. CSIS must have had some intel or Mahoney had told them. Certainly, the stuff had to be somewhere.

There was also the question of how the keys got into the recycling bin and who was supposed to pick them up before we intercepted. I put on my thinking cap and asked the universe but received no response.

The Big Six continued work on the sculpture. We were almost ready to test the water flow. I walked down to the café for some fresh air. The crocuses were blooming in Phil's garden and the weather was warming up.

Gino greeted me with a smile and offered a free espresso. "For going above and beyond the call of duty," he said. "People like you keep the world safe for us."

"Shucks, Gino. I'm just an ordinary girl from East Vancouver." Tickled, I giggled.

Placing my bag on the back of a chair inside the café, I sipped the espresso and gazed at the paintings on the wall. Nathan had another exhibit. Instead of landscapes, he had painted a series of fish and water scenes. I thought about my recent paintings. Most of them had been relentless attacks of frustration on canvas. I would paint a scene or figure and then viciously obscure the image out with large angry strokes. I was afraid to show them to anyone in the group. I was a substandard artist. Remembering Dr. Montgomery's advice, I shook off my robe of self-pity and distracted myself by listening to the background music.

Raj walked in and ordered an Americano. "If you'd like to join me, I'll be outside." I trailed behind him to the patio like a follower of Jesus.

"What do you think of Nathan's work?" he asked.

"I haven't seen him paint like that before. They're so realistic. What's with the fish? Isn't tree painting good enough for him?" Jealousy was my strong suit.

"I see your latent anger is still alive and well," said Raj.

The waitress brought him his coffee and a large chocolate chip cookie. "The cookie's on the house." She smiled at him and scurried back inside.

"How come you get such good service?" I pouted.

"If I told you the truth, you wouldn't believe me."

"Are you dating the waitress?"

"No, she's being nice because I bought her a book on Prague. She's from there you know." He shifted in his seat and a girl passing by called out and waved to him.

"How do you know that girl?" I said. He certainly was popular with the ladies.

"My love life is private."

"No shortage of women in your life." I chuckled. I looked through the café window and my gaze landed on the paintings. "Actually, I really like Nate's show. But if he paints everything I want to paint, *how can I be original?"*

"You only want to paint it because he painted it first. Artist by day, forger by night. Why don't you show me your tablet?"

Obediently, I turned it on and handed it over to hear my sentencing. I knew he'd hate my work.

"How big are these?" He thumbed through the images.

"Three feet wide."

He studied them closely.

"Please end my suffering and tell me they stink," I said.

"They are very expressionistic. I see the exploration of negative energy and the use of transparency and glazes to create layers and depth. I see the underlying figures and shapes but they are shrouded in mystery."

"Get out!" I punched Raj in the arm. "Don't try to schmooze me. They're awful."

He stood up. "I'm showing these to Gino." I stuttered but before I could stop him, he was inside at the counter. Gino looked, nodded and smiled. I knew Gino was nice to everybody. He wasn't going to say anything bad about my art. I sighed in my cloak of shame.

Nate appeared at the railing, startling me.

"How's my favourite private investigator?" he said. "Technically, the Bentleys weren't Russian spies like you originally guessed but they were conducting illegal activities." He sucked on a lollipop. I secretly hoped he'd choke. "I heard they weren't Russian either. Bentley is an English name but probably faked to hide the fact they were really Romanian. I could understand why you might have been confused."

"Gee thanks for pointing out I was wrong twice."

"Geez, Cathy, I'm trying to be nice. What gives?" he said.

I gestured inside the restaurant. Raj was now showing my tablet to two other fellows in the restaurant and the waitress. I was doomed.

"Raj, what do you have there?" Nate went inside.

I was frozen to the spot, waiting for them all to come out and laugh at me like I was a sideshow freak. Cathy, the worst painter on the circuit. People would line up to take potshots and the person with the best insult would win a stuffed giraffe and a stink bomb. In desperation, I imagined trying to flag a taxicab and hopping on a plane. I could still run away and join the circus, the Circus of Crabby Clowns and Bad Art. Then I remembered how poor I was in addition to being the worst painter alive.

I peeked inside. Raj showed Nathan the tablet and he pointed and grinned. Raj led Nate and the other two customers outside. Here come the critics, I thought.

"They aren't funny, so you can stop laughing now." I was prepared for the slaughter.

Raj handed back the tablet.

Nate said in my ear, "I see something in these paintings and I think it's money." He rubbed his hands together.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, taking a defensive Cathy pose.

"Hello, I'm Jim Broughton, a stockbroker," one fellow introduced himself and shook my hand. "I like your work. It's so modern, I don't understand it completely but that's part of its mystic. I'm drawn to the strong colours and dynamism of the strokes. I consider you an aspiring artist and judging from the quality of your work, it's worth investing in. I'd like to buy one. Here's my card."

"I'm Dylan Gray, set designer," said the other fellow, reaching out his hand to shake mine." I work on movie sets and we're constantly looking for new art to use on our sets. I'd like to rent your work for an upcoming movie being shot right here in Vancouver. I'll write down my email where you can reach me." He reached for a pen.

I was silent for a moment. I had a feeling of floating in midair as if I was above the situation, looking down at myself. Then I passed out.

#

I woke up hearing Nate say, "If she isn't punching someone, she's fainting."

I opened my eyes and saw Taylor. He was fanning me with my tablet. "I think she's coming around."

I realized I was lying on the patio. My mind was in a haze and the back of my head hurt. How did I get on the floor? "Taylor, what the f—"

"Watch your language. There's company present." Taylor helped me sit up in a chair. He backed away. Bewildered I blinked, focusing on the face of none other than Phil Johnston.

"I'll take it from here," said Phil, removing his sunglasses. The others including Gino receded, giving him room. I tried to remember what had happened before I fainted. The stockbroker and set designer were nowhere in sight, but on the table lay a business card and a note with an email address. Phil held up a photo in front of my nose. "You see this? This is a picture of Mahoney's house. I want you to look at it and see if you can sense any clues to where he's stored the loot."

"You think she has a sixth sense? How uncanny," said Nate. "Are all nutbars psychic? Because I'd like to know the winning numbers on tomorrow's twenty million dollar jackpot."

"I'm conducting an investigation," Phil said to Nate. "I'm in charge here. Cathy, concentrate on this photo." He waved it closer but I felt woozy.

They were all staring at me. I needed to think fast. I thought about Nate's paintings. A thought flashed in my mind. "Does he have a boat?"

"Yeah, we searched it but came up with nothing."

"Maybe the loot is buried at sea," said Nate. "Or packed in tuna cans sold in Third World countries."

"Nate, what use are cocaine-filled tuna cans in Third World countries? They can't afford it," said Raj.

"I was going with a boat and fishing theme. It was a joke, Raj."

"Is this a time to make ridiculous and pointless comments?" Raj retorted.

"You need to work on your sense of humour. Resorting to comedy often reduces tension in any given situation," said Nate.

Phil ignored them. "Cathy, are you getting anything?"

"I see a fish. That's all." I could see Phil was stumped but he wasn't ready to abandon what seemed like an outlandish clue. He got a call and left in a hurry.

"Are you okay? Would you like a glass of water?" asked Taylor, handing me a cup.

"I think I'm okay." I sipped the cold water.

"That's good news. Take some deep breaths." He paused and sat down next to me. Raj and Nate relaxed but kept their eyes on me. "Are you well enough to come to my dinner party tonight? Remember I asked you? It's potluck," said Taylor.

"Sorry, it slipped my mind. Can someone give me a lift to the grocery store and to Taylor's? I can bus home."

Raj and Nathan exchanged looks. "I'll give you a ride," said Nate.

Taylor said that he had to get back to work. I sat quietly while Nate and Raj talked about the stockbroker and set designer wanting my work.

"She's a genius," said Raj. "An absolute genius and she doesn't know it."

"Autistic children can be prodigies you know," said Nate.

"Cathy thinks she grew out of autism, but I don't think it's something you can grow out of. Autistic adults learn acceptable behaviours, that's all. I don't think she's autistic in the least. She keeps her distance because she's afraid of people, being schizophrenic and all."

Nate nodded. "Her new work is so unique. She's a mad artist for sure."

"Okay, that's enough guys! Talk about something else!" I demanded.

Around five, Nate and I left the café. Raj and the rest of the gang planned to meet us at Taylor's while Nate drove me in his truck to the grocery store to pick up something to bring.

"How about a pork roast or rib eye steaks two inches thick?" Nathan jested.

"Yeah, like I know how to broil almost as well as I can bake. On a scale of one to ten, my cooking skills hover around two," I said.

"If you want to buy pretzels, that's fine." Nate turned his head to look at me.

"Stop the truck, Nate!"

He braked so hard, the truck skidded and my head almost went through the windshield. Behind us, drivers honked and swerved their vehicles around the truck, passing us on the inside lane. "I don't see a pedestrian. What are we stopping for?"

"That." I pointed to a Chinese seafood restaurant. On the sign was a painting of a big fish.

Nathan pulled the truck into an empty parking space in front of the restaurant. "What are you going to buy for potluck there?" he asked.

"It's not potluck I'm after. It's two million dollars."

"You think because there's a fish on the sign, that the stolen money and cocaine are in the restaurant? I want to point out that there's more than one fish sign in Vancouver. You don't even know if Mahoney visited this restaurant. Let's go. Otherwise you're paying for the parking."

"C'mon, let's check it out." We got out of the truck and Nate watched me put a quarter in the meter. "Nuts! I only get seven minutes?" I frowned at the meter.

"At least you're frugal. C'mon, we'll have to be quick," said Nate.

We stood tentatively outside the door of the restaurant like performers waiting offstage for their big entrance only we didn't have a clue of who was in the audience or how we'd be received. "Aren't you going inside or are we going to case the joint from the outside?" said Nate. "Are you sure you don't want to call for backup?"

Ignoring his blatant disregard for my sleuthing efforts, I walked around the side of the building. I couldn't believe my eyes. Behind the restaurant was parked a rusty white van, but more importantly, next to it was a boat with an anchor hanging by a rope. This was too much to be a coincidence.

#

Being a true clairvoyant isn't something someone can teach you and if you are a fake, people can tell right away. I wasn't up to guessing lottery numbers or unlocking the secrets of the Bermuda Triangle but I was getting an itch and I scratched.

I was tempted to climb into the boat then and there. However, I suspected there were a lot of people around at dinner hour and no protection if we ran into anyone packing a knife or gun.

"Okay, you found a boat and my guess is you think it should be searched. Look, the sensible thing is to let Phil handle it. That's what CSIS does. Cathy, let's go have a nice dinner okay? We can pick up some pretzels." I could tell Nathan was worried.

I contemplated our next move. After remembering the fiasco at the Bentleys, I was doubtful about snooping around. "You're right. We can't do this alone. Pretzels it is." I surprised myself that I gave up so quickly. But who were Nate and I to take on a boatload of investigation alone?

We drove to a supermarket where Nate bought apple turnovers and I bought pretzels. We joked in the car about the rising cost of potluck to relieve our nervousness.

"It used to be you could make a whole salad for a buck. Now tomatoes are pricey. They cost a lot of lettuce," Nathan said. I laughed.

"When a bottle of salad dressing costs almost as much as a cheeseburger and fries, you know something is seriously wrong," I said.

"Speaking of cheeseburgers, what is wrong with processed cheese? Isn't all cheese processed to some extent?" Nate always had a comeback. "I grew up on processed cheese. Am I marked for life? Will my deceased body decay slower with all those additives in me?"

I giggled. We turned onto a side street.

We drove around the block a couple of times before we found Taylor's building, set back from the street along a private driveway. He was in a high-rise on the fourteen floor. Marco had moved out of temporary digs at Taylor's and was renting a new place but it didn't have a studio. He wanted to raise some funds to afford another studio after the commission was completed. We buzzed the intercom to Taylor's suite and the door lock released. Inside the lobby, I paused to regard an abstract painting on the wall.

"I like it," I said.

"You should. It's one of mine."

"Really?"

"I'm kidding you. It's actually one of yours." Nate pressed the button for the elevator and it opened almost immediately.

"Hmm. Isn't the fourteen floor really the thirteen floor since the thirteenth floor doesn't exist?" I said, on the way up. "It's bad luck."

"By that argument, the thirteenth floor doesn't exist so there isn't an unlucky floor," answered Nate.

"But I just said that the fourteenth floor—"

A tone sounded. "Ah, saved by the elevator. Maybe there is a higher power, eh Cathy?" said Nate. The doors opened. We walked down the hall in a big circle before we found suite 1408. The door swung open.

"Welcome!" Taylor took our coats. "Watch out for Pipsy the Parrot. He likes to fly around. He hasn't been clipped."

I felt a flutter of wings then claws dig into my scalp. "Can you get the bird off me?"

"I think he's after the pretzels. Come now, Pipsy. Like a good boy. I hope he doesn't draw blood." Taylor wrapped his hands around Pipsy and I felt the talons release as I breathed a sigh of release. The Attack of the Parrot was over for now.

We sat down in a cozy room with tapestries over the windows and original art covering every wall floor to ceiling except for three inch margins between the paintings and framed drawings. A picture framer's dream home.

Raj and Marco had beat us there—not that we were in competition like the Amazing Race or anything. Denise and Jacklyn buzzed just as we sat down. Taylor poured the pretzels into a bowl and set them next to the crab dip and carrot sticks.

I took in the ambience. Indian music played in the background and the lights were low. "Where's your bedroom and where's your dining table?"

"This is it. I have a coffee table and I sleep on the floor."

"I slept on that couch when I was here," said Marco.

"I think it's so exotic. I feel like I’m in India!" I felt the energy emanating from the room itself.

"Are there parrots in India?" asked Marco.

"Yes, in fact. I feel right at home," said Raj.

We watched with great interest as Pipsy the Parrot landed in the pretzel bowl and munched on the end of a pretzel. He stepped on the pretzels and dug his head deeper into the bowl.

"It's a beautiful bird. Is it trained?" Raj asked.

There was a knock on the door. Taylor swept across the room to welcome Denise and Jacklyn. They both took off their coats and joined us. We exchanged friendly hellos. "We're all here!" Taylor exclaimed.

"Who's the bitches?" said Pipsy.

We howled. "What are you teaching this bird?" I couldn't stop laughing.

"He has a few phrases but he doesn't mean to be rude. I used to have two dogs. I'm just kidding." Taylor clicked his tongue. He gently wrapped his hands around the parrot and transferred him from the bowl of pretzels to his birdcage. "Now, we're all safe. I have pickles." He put a dish of baby dill pickles with toothpicks stuck in them on the coffee table.

"So is some of this art by your own hand?" asked Raj.

"I don't mean to brag but some are mine. Others I've collected over the years," answered Taylor. "I have a few large pieces by Anthony over there."

I peered at Anthony's work on the far wall, but the light was dim. "They'd be better if you had lights on them. Is that a turkey?"

"It's a rooster, Cathy. Don't you know what a rooster looks like?" said Taylor. The others mused.

"Call me blind." I picked out a pickle, and crunched on it, holding onto the toothpick. "How is Anthony? I haven't seen him at the café," I was always curious about Mr. Fame and Fortune. He was the epitome of the artist I wanted to be.

"Anthony is Anthony. What more is there to say?" Taylor said.

"Is he still around or did he move to Nunavut?" asked Nate. He politely refused a pretzel as Taylor passed around the bowl.

"Why would he move to Nunavut?" asked Raj.

"Because he will have Nunavut," punned Denise and Jacklyn simultaneously. They each refused a pretzel too.

"I was going to say because he has relatives there," said Nate.

Taylor offered me the pretzels but I didn't want one on account of Pipsy eating out of the bowl but then Raj took one. I guessed he didn't mind bird saliva on his pretzels. "I didn't know Anthony had relatives in Nunavut. I didn't realize he was Eskimo," I said.

"Don't you know that Eskimo means 'eaters of raw meat'? It's derogatory to use that word in Canada," said Nate, wagging a finger.

"I disagree. Eskimo is a blanket term for indigenous people living in Alaska, Siberia, Canada and Greenland. It isn't a bad word," said Raj.

"As a Canadian, you should know in 1982, the Canadian government passed an act recognizing the word Inuit not Eskimo in reference to indigenous people of Canada's Great White North," Nate replied.

"However, The Great White North was a sketch starring Bob and Doug McKenzie on SCTV in 1980, preceding the Constitution Act, 1982," said Raj.

"However, if you live in Alaska and were Yupik, you wouldn't want to be called Inuit so thus in Alaska it's okay to be called Eskimo," argued Nate.

"Enough, guys!" I said, covering my ears.

"Did you know that Anthony had a great great grandfather who was an Inuk whaler?" said Nate, without missing a beat.

"Is that why he wears those mukluks?" asked Denise.

"He doesn't wear mukluks. What planet have you been on?" I said. I wanted to punch Denise in the shoulder but she was too far away.

"She's joking, Cathy," said Jacklyn. "Everyone knows Anthony wears high tops."

"Pipsy wants a pretzel. Who's the bitches?" said Pipsy. Taylor fed him a pretzel fro the bowl. The parrot whistled and bobbed his head. Another wave of laughter went through us.

#

We had a fine feast of chicken thighs, samosas to die for (that Raj brought), Greek salad, garlic bread, and chai tea. Taylor served the apple turnovers warm with caramel swirl ice cream.

"Why doesn't Mahoney confess where the loot is? He's going to jail anyway," said Jacklyn. "Or maybe he wasn't working alone and he's waiting for his posse to sell off the drugs and put the money in an offshore account."

"I think he doesn't care and wants to put one over on the cops," said Denise. "If and when he gets out, he'll collect."

"He'll be put away for a long long time. However, I bet that Cathy knows where Mahoney hid the loot," said Nathan, winking at me.

"I'm astonished! Tell us!" said Denise. Her eyes got big.

"It's about two miles from here." My voice sounded far away like I was hypnotized. I refocused.

"C'mon, you're pulling our leg," said Jacklyn. "If you knew, you'd tell the cops and they'd be all over it."

"Maybe we shouldn't tell the cops yet. If she knows, she could make us all rich!" said Denise.

"Cathy is honest. She isn't going to deceive the police," said Raj, the voice of reason.

"Let's go get it!" said Denise. The rest of the group were excited about the prospect except for Jacklyn who cowered in her chair. She had ethics.

"It's like we're pirates out to find buried treasure. Jacklyn, aren't you one of us? Or are you a chicken?" coaxed Denise. Nate made clucking noises. "Are we all in?" asked Denise. We placed our hands on top of each other's on the coffee table. Reluctantly Jacklyn bowed to peer pressure and rested her hand on top of Taylor's. We raised our hands above our heads.

"Okay, we have to be extremely careful," I said. "Remember Mahoney murdered someone to get the loot. He's probably safeguarded it so no one can get at it." We huddled in a circle as I explained to them about the vision I had at the café leading to the Chinese restaurant on Kingsway, and formed a plan to search the boat.

#

Under the glow of a streetlamp in the alley, Nathan stood on top of a concrete barrier, trying to see the top of the boat. It was close to two a.m. I wore my black hoodie. We wanted to be discreet.

"All I see is the vinyl cover and some wires," said Nate.

"They could be trip wires linked to explosives," Marco warned. "Or trigger an alarm system if you touch them."

"But they are exposed to the elements. If a bird landed, or if it snowed a lot, that would set them off wouldn't it?" argued Denise.

"If the loot is in the boat, I doubt he'd chance the money and drugs being blow up by rigging it," said Nate.

"Shall we dive in?" I said.

Raj, Jacklyn, and Taylor stood guard while the rest of us started to loosen the ropes that kept the tarp down. We eagerly pulled away enough of the tarp to glimpse a truckload of cardboard boxes inside.

"Do we need to check all of these boxes?" asked Denise. "Cathy, are you getting a reading?"

I closed my eyes and rotated my palms over the boxes, but all I felt was Nate breathing down my neck. "Nate, back off!" I elbowed him in the ribs for standing too close. "Sorry, Denise, my ESP isn't working right now but there could be rolls of thousand dollar bills stashed in here. Let's dig!"

Marco ripped the cover off the closest box. "Lookyhere. There are kids' toys in this box."

"Check the stuffing for drugs," said Denise. Nate pulled out a Swiss army knife and selected a double-edged blade. The steel glinted in the light from a streetlamp. "Is that legal, Nate?" she asked.

"It is in Switzerland." He used it to slash a hole in the fabric of a stuffed dog. He stabbed one furry toy after another, checking them too. Foam and filler created a dust storm. We started ripping open boxes and found board games and road race sets. I went through the contents of the boxes within the boxes but found nothing unusual.

"Rats, nothing there. This is taking too long. We need a strategy," reasoned Marco.

"These could be decoys. The good stuff might be buried under these boxes," Denise said.

"Or we could be barking up the wrong tree altogether because Cathy's messaging service needs a reset," said Nate.

"Don't tease Cathy," said Denise. "She's trying her best."

"Shouldn't we be asleep in our little beds right now instead of investigating an ardent collector of fine slightly-used commercial products for children?" said Nate.

"You were the one who said Cathy knew where the loot was!" Denise was angry now.

"Hey, I thought she knew what she was talking about. I didn't think we'd run into Humpty Dumpty and all his friends," he said, pointing to a box of stuffed creatures with their innards splayed. "Taylor, you're an antique dealer. Is this stuff worth anything?"

"You might have gotten a few hundred bucks but now that the toys have been sliced and diced by Nate and his machete and Cathy has successfully mixed up the games, they aren't worth even that."

"Let's regroup. We need to call Phil," Jacklyn called out.

"Not so loud," Nate said. A light came on inside the back of the restaurant. I heard the sound of the latch opening.

"Retreat!" yelled Jacklyn. We charged down the lane with Jacklyn taking the lead. Nate was right behind her. I glanced behind to see a Chinese woman shouting to two Chinese men. They gave chase. Huffing and puffing I fell well behind the others and I felt a hand grip my arm. I tried to call out but my assailant covered my mouth. I struggled to try to free myself but he was too strong. I caught a fleeting glimpse of the others rounding the corner and then I passed out.

Chapter 12

Cold water splashed in my face made me sputter and open my eyes. I tried to move but I was bound to a metal chair with thick ropes. The Chinese woman and two men surrounded me, glaring with icy suspicion. Her black nails matched her embroidered black silk cheongsam. Definitely a bunch of imports. I deduced the two Chinese men took orders from her and if she told them to kill me they would without hesitation. Had the plot thickened to include the Chinese mafia as well?

All I wanted was to crawl back in time to when we were building our sculpture before all this happened. The memories of fighting over pipes, stealing a sink, and even watching Marco's home burn down seemed blissful compared to my current situation as a captive of possible terrorists who had set up shop to brainwash children through board games. Ignorance was bliss.

This wasn't a case of my gang being caught like at the Bentleys but me alone. I was on my own without the protection of my friends. Nice trick by the forces of evil. Of course, I was the one that they snagged as I'd always been the slowest runner in high school on account of my asthma. Now I was to face the consequences of my brash decision to search the boat. At first, it seemed like an adventure such as going on a safari or a scavenger hunt. I never thought I'd get caught by three Chinese gangsters, but then again I thought about a lot of things that were the opposite of reality. Like boats that fly or dogs that talk. This was bigger than anything I'd ever been faced with in my entire life.

If I saw my psychiatrist again, I was going to tell him all about this and let him figure out if I were hallucinating or not. Maybe it was all a nightmare and I'd wake up in my room, staring at the crack in the ceiling. The said crack had been gradually getting bigger over the past few months. I had asked Leonard about it and he said the house was settling. I didn't think a three-foot long, inch wide crack was normal. One day, I expected an immense storm would descend causing the roof to cave in and the rain would wash me away down the river into the Pacific Ocean to Hawaii where I'd live out my days, sitting on the beach reading Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing. That was if I made it out of this crisis alive. I bit my lip. The evil hand of fate had dealt me a losing hand. I wondered where the higher power was now.

I squeezed my eyes shut and thought real hard about escaping but when I opened them, the three were still glaring at me. So much for positive thinking.

I swore, if I saw Leonard again, I was going to hug him and never let him go. I actually missed the jerk on account of my dire circumstances. My future was dimmer than the thirty-watt bulb above my head. I prepared myself for the Chinese water torture, sticks under my fingernails or being acupunctured to death.

The bald man said something to me in Cantonese.

"English?" My voice sounded small and foreign to me.

"Name?" said the other man who had a goatee.

"C-cathy Fung." I could have lied but was too scared of them beating me up.

"Cathy, what were you doing in our boat, tearing up our toy collection?"

"I-I—"

"You were putting your nose where it didn't belong," said the stern woman. "Give it to me."

"What?"

"We searched her. She doesn't have the key," said the bald man.

"What key?" I was confused. The room started to turn.

"Clearly, Mahoney sent you. No one's interested in an old boat with a leaky hull. You were looking for his belongings. Where's the key?" The woman slapped me across the face.

"Hey, I don't know what you're talking about." My face felt hot from pain and the tears that started to stream down my cheeks.

"He said he'd get it to us. Let's strip search her."

"No, please! I can tell you where the key is," I said. I'd say anything to avoid getting hurt. "My neighbour has it."

#

"It doesn't add up, why would Mahoney work with a juvenile princess?" I could overhear the trio murmuring in the next room.

"She lived next to the Bentleys. Maybe he gave her information when he tried to escape. We need to dig the truth out of her, and get our money. I'm sick of Mahoney sitting in jail while we wait."

"Who's this neighbour of hers and who's the gang she's running with? There were at least five or six others with her. We don't have enough numbers to take them all on. If they come for her, we only have three guns."

They reentered the room.

"Can I have a drink of water?" I felt dry spittle on my lip.

The man with a goatee pulled my hair, jerking my head up.

"Ow!"

"What's the name of your gang?" he demanded.

"The Big Six, but they won't come after you! I swear!"

"Shut up, swine." He hit me hard on the cheek with the back of his hand. I tasted blood. So much for me entering the Chinatown beauty pageant. The bruises might fade, but the psychological scars will last forever. "You're taking us to your neighbour's house, you'll get the key and then we'll think about letting you live," said the woman. I wondered if she actually was a man with her chiseled features and trace of a moustache above her upper lip.

They kept talking about a key, but the set Marco and I found had two different keys. What was the other one for?

They turned off the light and left me there. My mind drifted. I pictured Phil mowing a huge lawn in a big estate with a Victorian mansion on a hot summer day. Children laughed and chased one another in a game of tag. Phil smiled and plucked a daisy, handing it to me. I held it gently but it turned into a green snake that crawled under my skin and squeezed my heart until it burst. I sobbed. Hope was as distant as the Antarctica. Climbing Mount Everest was easier than what I was facing. How did I get myself into this serious mess? I had created my own disaster. What kind of artist did that?

I wondered what my friends were thinking. They would probably contact Leonard and tell him I'd be caught. The evening had started out as a game. We thought we were smart. If the Chinese trio went after my friends or family, I would live out my afterlife, burning in hell for bringing harm to them because of my mistakes.

I prayed hoping to get a sign of what was to come but my senses came up empty. I had fallen into a hole so deep that no force could reach me. Everything seemed so far away. Maybe I should end it now. I envisioned biting my tongue until I bled out or holding my breath until I suffocated. I was so stupid, believing I had any abilities of extrasensory perception. Perhaps my so-called premonitions had all been lucky guesses. The rational reason I thought of the boat and fish was because of Nate's damn water paintings. They were on my mind because they were at the café. The rest had been coincidence. Sadly now I was paying for my idiocy. I was terror-stricken and helpless, facing bodily harm and quite possibly death.

#

Phil was a big question mark in my mind. If I led the Chinese to him, would he be able to take them all on? Three to one wasn't good odds and they had guns. But Phil was my only chance of coming out of this alive.

After sitting in agony for hours, I saw morning light filter between the venetian blinds. I was stiff and cold. The trio from hell returned.

"You think we're so stupid to not check out your neighbourhood?" accused the bald man.

"We found out your neighbour Johnston works for CSIS. You were going to send us into a trap. We can still succeed but it will be more of a challenge. You're going to make a call and tell his people we want an exchange. Your life for the key," said the woman who might be a man.

"They aren't going to give you the key for me," I said. "I’m a nobody! I'm an artist and a bad one at that!"

"An artist? They don't make money. You need a new line of work." The bald man laughed. The man with the goatee did too. I saw my chance and leaned forward on my feet, lifted the chair off the ground with me, and rammed my head into the bald man's abdomen. He fell back but the man with the goatee grabbed my hair.

"You're a dumb ass too!" He spit on my face. He held out a phone so I could reach the buttons with my index finger. "Make the call, swine."

Trying hard to think straight, I dialed Leonard's cellphone. I didn't want to involve my parents and I didn't know Phil's number or CSIS's either. Sure, I'll just call CSIS and ask for Phil's boss or better yet the Minister of National Defence or the Prime Minister himself. What was the difference? I was dead whether they got the key or not.

"Hello?" I could tell I had woken Leonard up. I was glad to hear his voice.

"Don't say anything, just listen," I warned. I didn't want them to know I was talking to my brother. "I’m being held for ransom."

The woman snatched the phone. "In exchange for Cathy Fung's life, we want Mahoney's key. In one hour, go to the train station and leave the key in an envelope in the men's washroom, behind the toilet in the last stall. Once we retrieve the key, we'll set Cathy free." She clicked the phone.

"You're going to kill me, aren't you? Because I know who you are!" I cried.

"Cathy, if you give any of our descriptions to the authorities, your family will start to die off prematurely." The woman sneered.

I hoped that Leonard would figure out a plan in time. Certainly, he would contact Phil. But what if Phil was out of town or he couldn't get access to the key in time? Time was ticking. By my estimate, I had about an hour to live.

#

I sat and waited. It was a thousand times worse than waiting for a cashier at the department store or a table at a good restaurant as if those examples compared at all. My previous experiences were nothing close to this. The woman and the bald man left me with the man with the goatee. He sat across from me and drained a beer can. He made me feel thirsty.

"Can I use the bathroom?" I said.

He crushed the beer can in his hand and threw it at me. "Pee in that."

I watched him drink another beer and another. He got up to use the toilet. I slid the chair over to the door but couldn't reach the deadlock with my fingers because the ropes were too tight around my wrists.

I slid the chair over to the window and pushed the venetian blinds aside with my head to look out. There was no one in the lane. All I could see was the boat. I heard the toilet flush and the bathroom door squeak. I slid back to my original position.

A ringtone.

"Did you get it?" Pause. "Okay." He stuffed the phone in his pocket and a gun in his belt. "We're going for a ride. The restaurant will open soon and we need to be out of here, in case you get any ideas." With his rough, calloused hands, he clamped a piece of tape over my mouth. He shoved a wide-brimmed straw hat over my head to hide my face. With my hands tied behind me, he led me outside and lifted me into the truck of a black sedan. He slammed down the lid. I heard the motor start and felt bumps in the road as he pulled out of the lane. Leonard had to come through for his younger sister. My life depended on it.

After a distance, the car stopped and the motor was turned off. I heard the man talk to a woman. Then I heard gunshots, shouts and glass breaking. The cops must have tailed the woman and the bald man and ambushed the trio. I pictured twenty cops surrounding the car, and the threesome full of bullet holes. I envisioned Phil opening the truck and carrying me to safety in his arms. He leaned to kiss me then I felt heat surrounding me.

My mind snapped back to the present. I could smell smoke. The car was on fire! I started banging against the sides of the trunk in desperation. I couldn't call out. Did anyone even know I was in the trunk? If the gas tank blew, it would be curtains for me.

I felt the car bounce. What was going on? I heard scraping and saw a crack of daylight. The trunk lid swung open and I saw my angel, Marco standing with a crowbar. He and Nate pulled me out of the trunk and we ran. Within seconds, the car blew.

Marco removed the tape off my mouth and the ropes that tied my wrists. Taylor, Raj, Nate, Denise, and Jacklyn gathered around.

"Am I glad to see you!" I inhaled the outside air and tasted freedom.

"Are you okay?" said Nate. "Those cuts look nasty."

"I thought I was going to be burnt to a crisp when I smelled the smoke. This feels so surreal. What happened?"

"Leonard got the call and called us," began Nate. "We contacted Phil and he made the drop. The kidnappers were smart to block the camera in the washroom in the train station, but with a description of the white van we saw outside the restaurant, Phil was able to track a man and woman leaving the station in a hurry. He followed them to a storage facility where they used the key to unlock a locker. Still under surveillance, the duo left the storage facility with suitcases loaded with cocaine and money. They rendezvoused with the other guy and there was a big shootout."

"But why were you part of the tail? I didn't think the cops would let you be part of the chase."

"Because we knew where their hideout was at the restaurant the whole time. We camped out and watched from a distance to see who came and went. We tailed you while the cops worked the other end. We didn't tell them what we were up to in case there was anyone on the inside who was working with the Chinese." Nate winked.

"Where's Leonard now?"

"He said he had to go to work. He needed to keep busy so he wouldn't get too scared. We told him you were in good hands."

Taylor gave me a hug. Surprisingly, I felt comfortable enough to hug back. It was as if my autism had worn off overnight, if I'd ever been autistic at all. "I wouldn't have missed this for the world," said Taylor. "I'm just glad you're safe."

I glanced around to see cops pulling suitcases out of the white van and the trio being taken away in squad cars. Then I saw Phil the Magnificent stride over to where I sat. He looked as tall and powerful as ever. A modern day hero saving distressed women and fighting the darker side of humanity. He was a do-gooder, a master of disguises, intelligent and fearless. Too good for me without question. I didn't know if I should have knelt down and kissed his feet.

"Cathy, I see you made it out alive. To flush them out from the inside was ingenious. I'm so deeply proud of you and your team. Citizens taking justice into their own hands. Putting yourself at risk to capture the accomplices to a crime when national security couldn't find their whereabouts or locate the stolen property. We had the keys but do you know how many places use a key like that? There's a reward coming to you, but we're keeping your involvement in the case out of the papers for your own protection. I'll take full credit on your behalf." He beamed.

I didn't know if it was the trick of the sun but I saw a ray of light from heaven shine down on him as he shook my hand. I blinked. He strode off to talk to an officer.

Despite being saved, I felt the after effects of my traumatic experience. Tremors ran through me, visibly making me shake. Denise put an arm around me to calm me down.

"I feel guilty we all took off and you were caught," said Jacklyn.

"If we could have saved you sooner, we would have. We're glad you're alive," said Denise.

"I don't blame you," I replied. "I thought I'd be eating lead but thanks to all of you I survived."

After a paramedic attended to my injuries, Taylor said he had to get back to the store. He was expecting a customer who was picking up a big order. The rest of us decided we were hungry and needed lunch.

"Where shall we go?" I asked. "Dim sum?"

"There's no way we're going to a Chinese restaurant," said Nate. "I have a safer place in mind."

"Gino's!" We all chimed in at once.

When one has felt the icy breath of death on their neck, they are forever transformed. I realized the preciousness of every moment. When I looked at my friends' faces, I saw their kindness and compassion. Laughter seemed to make the ugliness go away. But in the back of my mind, I wondered what if they hadn't been able to save me? What if I had been killed or all of us had been shot in the lane trying to escape? Were any of us truly safe in any circumstance? The fear came back like a boomerang.

Chapter 13

After being kidnapped and the horrendous close call of almost being blown to smithereens, I wanted to check into a five-star hotel for a month and sleep, eat shrimp tacos, and watch baby cartoons from a four-poster bed.

The arrest and recovery of the stolen goods made headlines but the media didn't reveal the names or faces of our group or my brother. I wouldn't have minded seeing myself on TV, but at the same time I didn't want to be on some gangster's hit list either. Better safe than disabled after being punched to a pulp or worse by vengeful enemies.

True to his word, Phil took credit for the arrest and finding the stolen property. They mentioned his name as Agent P. Johnston, but in his blurry photo he wore sunglasses and I couldn't make out all his facial features. He needed to protect himself for further assignments, I guessed.

Phil called to say he needed to see me on official business and said something about my valour deserving a reward. Excitedly, I told my family. They were curious enough to sit in the living room and wait with me for his arrival. Leonard was especially impressed that Phil had made an appointment to see his little sister. An hour later, Phil showed up in his black suit, black leather shoes and dark sunglasses accompanied by another agent.

In the living room, my family gathered around as he pulled out a black box from his jacket.

"On behalf of CSIS, I give you this medal in honour of your bravery and courage."

He took a medal with a purple ribbon out of the box and placed it around my neck. I took a step back, feeling overwhelmed.

"Sorry it isn't a Medal of Bravery, but it's all we could do," said Phil.

Leonard mumbled in my ear that it looked kind of fake and not official, but I didn't care.

"Cathy Fung, I give you this certificate as a record of the honour bestowed on you and a cheque for ten thousand dollars."

I gasped and my family applauded. The other agent took a photo of Phil and me and said he'd send me a copy.

"You look a little faint," whispered Leonard. "Would you like me to take that certificate for you? And the cheque too." I was too happy to box his ears. My mother hugged me for the first time in twenty years. I felt like I was three or four years old again and almost wept.

My father looked at me with disapproval. I knew I'd caused him a lot of worry. I took him aside while Phil was taking a call on his cellphone.

"Dad, I'm so sorry for putting you through this. I made some bad choices."

He leaned close to me. "I'm just angry the cheque wasn't larger."

Phil said that they had to leave. Another case had come up, needing their immediate attention. I wanted to hug him but quickly dismissed the urge. "By the way, what was the other key for?"

He grinned. His pearly whites were blinding. "Sorry, that's classified. But I will say that when Mahoney tried to escape one night, he threw the keys over the fence in desperation because he didn't want the Bentleys to find them. They tortured him until he confessed he'd thrown them, but by then you'd acquired them." He shook my hand with a firm grip. His hand was surprising smooth and well-moisturized. My mother invited them to stay for tea and lemon squares but they politely refused, shook the others' hands, offered a quick goodbye, and left in his dark blue sedan.

I couldn't wait to share the news and show off my medal to the gang at the café. It glistened but I could already see the gold paint was peeling.

"Wow, what are you going to do with all the money?" asked Nate, a little in awe.

"Well, isn't it for all of us?" I said.

They shook their heads. "No, you earned it, Cathy. It's yours," said Raj.

"As long as you promise to buy a round next time at the pub," added Marco, punching me in the shoulder. I playfully punched him back.

#

The next day I went to the bank and invested half the cheque in mutual funds and opened a chequing account with the rest. I'd never had my own chequing account before. Dr. Montgomery congratulated me on expanding my financials as he put it.

"Considering recent events in your life such as your kidnapping, torture, and narrow escape from the claws of death, how do you feel?"

"Oh, I'm fine," I said, trying to hide my true feelings and appear unfazed by the ordeal. Then my eyes glazed over as the depths of my fear resurfaced. I saw the haunting face of the man with a goatee and felt the sting of his hand across my face. "Actually I think I have a bad case of post-traumatic stress disorder."

"What can I do for you?"

"A bottle of Bourbon and tickets to the Grammy Awards including airfare and hotel for starters. A rack of pork ribs and yam fries followed by a slice of black cherry cake would be good too," I babbled.

"Food isn't the solution. Counseling and medication will help you." He jotted something on a prescription pad.

I pictured myself swallowing a bottle of tranquilizers with a glass of whiskey. Yes, that would numb the fear. Call the hearse now, I said to myself. At least, I still had my sarcastic wit.

"Do you feel like hurting yourself or others?"

I knew that was a trick question. If I said yes, he'd recommend hospitalization. "Oh, of course not. I don't have psychosis either. I believe with your help, I will recover from this experience." I smiled. The appropriate answer. I could play the game. The last thing I wanted was to be hospitalized and drugged up. Sedation and other side effects from the medication negatively affected my spontaneity as an artist. Best to keep my head up, ignore the pangs of anxiety as much as I could, and not say too much to avoid a visit to the psychiatric ward. I had better ways to spend my time.

He ripped a page off the pad and gave it to me. "Take one pill as needed for anxiety and melatonin if you have trouble sleeping. You are a remarkable, responsible young lady. See you in two weeks." He put down his pen.

I floated out of the psychiatrist's office on a cloud. I'd conquered the need for hospitalization. Dr. Montgomery was one of the good guys. He trusted me to handle things. I felt a surge of confidence. I also knew my fans were waiting in the wings after my stellar performance escaping captivity and nearly being blown up in a car explosion on the same day. I had a painting to sell to a certain stockbroker and a movie set designer needed my work too.

#

After I got home from the psychiatrist's office, I called Jim Broughton and his secretary answered.

"Hello, this is Cathy Fung. Can I speak to Mr. Broughton?"

"One moment. I'll check if he's free."

"Hello, Jim here."

"Do you remember me? It's Cathy Fung."

Silence. For a moment, I thought he must have forgotten who I was.

"The fainting artist? Oh yes. How are you feeling?"

"Oh, better." I thought it was best if I didn’t give him the details of the events of the last several days since we met. It was exhausting to think about never mind tell the story. "Do you recall which painting of mine you wanted to purchase?"

"Oh, yes. The one with the vertical streaks. The red is so prominent. How much would you sell that for?"

I paused. "I haven't really thought of a price to tell you the truth. Can you make me an offer?"

"I'll go as high as one."

"One hundred?" I said.

"One thousand I mean. I can get my secretary to cut you a cheque. It's for the office."

"I guess that's acceptable." I tried to remain calm but inside I was leaping for joy. "Would you like to pick it up from my house? I don't have a car."

When I got off the phone, I thought I was going to pass out all over again. My heart was beating a mile a minute. I couldn't take much more of this.

Next I emailed Dylan Gray with my phone number. He called me an hour later.

"Cathy, I'd like to rent two of your larger paintings with the blue background. Even if they don't make it into the movie, we will pay you anyway. How does two hundred and fifty sound?"

"For both?"

"No, sorry for each per month for the duration of the shoot. Sorry, that's all we can afford."

"Gee. After that will I get them back?"

"Of course! Shall I send a crew member to pick them up next week?"

When an artist makes money for his work, it's exhilarating. It doesn't matter if it's fifty, five hundred or five thousand dollars. It's all relative. I'd never received so much for my work in the past. For me, earning money for my work had a direct correlation to how much time and effort I'd put into new work. When I received the stockbroker's cheque and had a first installment from a major film production company (which chooses to remain anonymous), I was over the moon. If I could make money on paintings, which I confess were accidents on canvas, surely there must be money to be made by applying myself in a more serious manner.

Since the arrest of the Asian trio, I had boats on my mind. I didn't want to copy Nate again but I decided to visit Granville Island and take some original photos of boat scenes from the wharf. I picked one I especially liked and sketched the image on a canvas after prepping the canvas with a layer of raw umber mixed with white.

Boats are fascinating subjects because of the water, the reflection, and the curvaceous shapes and angular masts and sails. The trick was not to make the image photorealistic but to interpret the photo, by omitting certain details and enhancing others. I used three types of blue in the water, adding warmer tones as well. The hull of the boat was painted with varying degrees of white to grey.

I stepped back, absentmindedly biting on the end of my paintbrush. I added some dark shadows and voilà, it was done! I surprised myself that the contrast of light and dark popped so well. I was definitely in the groove. It's surprising what a monetary reward will do for one's confidence.

#

At the café, Gino didn't greet me with his usual smile. Subdued, he didn't compliment me on my new sneakers. Anytime I came in with something new, nine times out of ten he'd said something. I attempted to make a joke about needing coffee because I was 'running on empty' and pointed at my runners, but he didn't respond.

"Hey, Raj. What's up with Gino? He's a deflated balloon." I sat down on the patio with a latte. Raj was dabbling on a piece of watercolour paper with blue paint.

"Bad news. He doesn't want people to know he's in the red. The café hasn't been doing well. He's lost a lot of business to Sushi on a Stick."

"Sushi on a Stick?"

"Yeah, haven't you heard of it? They opened a block away. New concept restaurant. Anyway, he may have to sell the café or declare bankruptcy. He also has run up enormous gambling debts playing Pinochle."

"I didn't know people bet at Pinochle. That's awful. Does he really have to sell? If he can't sell, he'll be sunk." I saw my next art show dissolve before my eyes. "How long does he have?"

"He's behind on the rent. He has until the end of the month to pay. He owes a bunch of badass Pinochle players."

"What can we do? I don't want to lose the café!" I dreaded the thought of the café turning into a massage parlour or a Chinese herbal store that sold bear claws illegally. "What will become of us?" I asked anxiously.

"We need to help Gino. He needs to borrow funds."

I thought about asking my father for an advance from my trust or putting a mortgage on the house. Better yet, I could slip and fall in a bank and sue for injury and give Gino my settlement.

"He has a big Pinochle game scheduled for tomorrow. He intends to win it all back." Raj dipped his brush in water and continued to paint.

"I don't think gambling's the answer."

Like magic, Nate appeared. He placed a shiny, black case on the railing. "I got it, Raj."

"What is that?" I sat erect with curiosity.

Nate reached into the black case and pulled out a wad of hundred dollar bills.

"Wow!" My eyes popped. "Where did you get that from?"

"Raj, I overheard you tell Cathy about Gino's predicament. I sold my truck to help Gino and save the restaurant."

"You sold your beautiful, expensive truck? I love that truck!" I was practically in tears. In my eyes, a man with a truck was a beautiful combination of horsepower, ruggedness, and testosterone unmatched by anything. "How could you?"

"After Sylvie left me, I was so depressed and needed a new purpose in life. I decided to sell everything I have, cash in my bonds, and help Gino."

"You're pulling my leg, you two. This is another one of your ploys. I'm not stupid, you know." My hands found my hips.

"Okay, I lied about the truck but this cash is for Gino."

I stared at the money and it didn't lie. I was touched by Nate's loyalty to the café. "Why would you give him all this money?"

"I'm not giving it to him, I'm investing. We all know Montagna's a good restaurant. What would make it great is some capital to give it a facelift. A coat of paint, new furniture, an expanded menu, and some advertising. People will be lining up to make reservations."

I thumped my fist on the table. "This café is a gem. I like it the way it is." I marched inside to talk to the owner. "Gino, you can't change the restaurant!"

"Cathy, what is this about?" said Gino.

"Gambling is wrong. You need to find a better way," I shook my finger at him.

Nate and Raj stood behind me and laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"The money is ours, Cathy," said Nate. "It's another installment for the sculpture. You are so funny when you get passionate about things. You should have been an actress. Come on, let's go to the pub and have a few drinks."

"What about Gino's debt?"

"He doesn’t have debt, he stayed up too late last night watching a Star Wars marathon," said Raj.

"Star Wars? And I missed it. Damn it to hell," I said.

#

Taylor knew someone who knew someone who knew a top grade electrician named Sam. He helped us attain a permit and set up the cables and control panel installation.

Finally, we were ready to transport the five sections to the site and reconstruct them there. At my garage, we loaded three vehicles with the sections, tools, and the pump and rendezvoused downtown at the site. I rode with Leonard and Jacklyn in her family van. She turned on her flashers on the van so we had time to unload. Traffic was mayhem not only on the road but also on the sidewalk.

There were so many pedestrians I had to shout for them to move out of the way. One would think people would have the common sense and courtesy to not block the unloading of cargo from a vehicle, but they kept bumping into us oblivious to our efforts. Robot city.

"Nate and Raj, you can bolt the bicycle while Denise and I work on the waterwheel." Marco barked out orders but none of us minded. I helped Leonard with the pump. It took us an hour to erect the pieces but Marco still needed to do several onsite last minute welds with Denise's help. He wanted to reinforce the joints. It had to be rock solid. We taped off an area for safety and stood guard.

I was surprised on how well the work was going. I was so excited I couldn't sleep. A week later, the electrical hook-up was complete and the sculpture ready to test. We gathered for the trial run.

"What happens if it blows sky high?" I stood a few yards back as the electrician made some final adjustments.

"Then we don't get the last installment and our reputations as artists are ruined for eternity," said Marco. "We'll never get another chance and be exiled as marked sculptors. Or we'll end up in prison guilty of a sculpture meltdown causing plants to die." He pointed at the hostas in a nearby planter. I pictured them deep-fried like tempura.

Leonard overheard Marco's comment. "If this fails, my career as an electrical engineer will end before it's started. I'll be the one doling out potatoes and gravy to you and the other prison inmates," said Leonard, nervously rubbing his hands together.

"Gee, that's good to know," I said. I heard a sizzle. "Doesn't sound good."

"I see movement," said Leonard. The group of us watched closely as the waterwheel began to turn. The belt attached to the waterwheel activated a moving mobile.

"Beautiful!" Jacklyn clapped her hands and the others in the group clapped and cheered.

"What about the water?" I asked.

We managed to wrangle the groundskeeper to attach a hose to an outdoor spout and fill the fountain basin.

"So are you in charge of keeping an eye on the fountain to maintain the water level?" I asked.

"I can check it every few days, but you'll have to pay me extra." He winked. "Don't worry. Arrangements have been made with staff. We aren't going to responsible for causing a malfunction. This sculpture costs three times my annual salary."

"Okay, the moment of truth," called Nate. "Flick it, Leonard."

"Leonard punched the control panel and started the pump. After a few gurgles, the water started to pump, and splash out of three spouts. The waterwheel continued to turn as lights inside the fountain glowed magnified by the water. The water overflowed from one basin to one under it and re-circulated up through the hoses to the spouts. The motor in the pump created a soft hum but was barely noticeable with the sound of trickling water.

"We did it!" said Raj.

"Woohoo!" called Nate. We hugged each other and shook hands. My 'no-hugs' policy was erased as I wrapped my arms around every one of them including Leonard.

Dreams do come true, thought the Queen of Clichés.

#

The Big Six gathered at the pub to celebrate. We cheered, congratulating ourselves at pulling off the commission.

"Okay, I think we are ready to give out the last well-earned payments for working on the project," said Raj. "Nate has the cash."

Nate passed out six envelopes each addressed with a name written in pencil. Quietly, we all counted our amounts. I was thrilled to get any money at all for the little work I did, but then again I had offered the garage as workspace among other details.

"Thanks!" said Marco, waving a substantially larger wad than the others. "However, I'm redistributing part of this if you all agree I can have some of the tools we bought including the welder and other equipment."

"Fine with me," said Raj. The others nodded except Jacklyn who was silent, looking in her envelope.

"How come I only get a measly five hundred and ten dollars?" she said. "You cheaters. Who divvied this up? This is fucking unfair."

"Cool your jets woman," I said. "None of us are getting rich on this."

"Cathy, you got a fucking ten grand!" Her voice was shrill.

"That's for finding Mahoney's loot, stupid!" I yelled as my internal temperature reached 100 degrees Celsius. "How dare you throw that at me! I could have been murdered, bean head!"

"Are you calling me a druggie? You insane wuss!" Her voice screeched like a pterodactyl in pain.

"I'm saying what we get is what we get. Who are you calling a wuss?" I shouted.

"You're all shitheads! I'm never going to trust you a-holes again!" She grabbed her pink hoodie and strode toward the door.

"Jacklyn, you can have some of mine," called Marco, but she kept walking. I caught a glimpse of pink before the door swung shut behind her.

"Why did Jacklyn get so little money?" asked Denise.

"We spent more on materials and had to buy tools. Also we fixed the jeep," said Raj.

"Should someone go after Jacklyn?" Denise regarded the door.

"Let her blow it off," I said. "She's can't get away with calling us vicious names. It's not my fault."

"Guys, did someone make an error in the calculations?" said Denise.

"She didn't fill out her timesheet properly, so I only paid her for the hours she recorded," said Raj.

"But she deserves more!" Denise argued. "We're giving her more tomorrow at the unveiling. We'll each give part of our share to her."

I looked around at the others who all nodded. "Okay, you're right," I said.

#

"Where the heck is Jacklyn?" said Nate, looking at his watch. Nate looked dapper with his hair slicked back.

"Maybe she's stuck in traffic or jogging down," I said. "She might have her earphones on and can't hear her ringtone." Decked-out Denise in Denim nodded in agreement.

"Maybe her runner blew," joked Marco. He wore his signature cargo pants and had trimmed his beard.

Leonard texted Jacklyn and called her cellphone again but there was no answer. "This is unusual for her." He scratched his chin.

Raj was busy snapping photos of everyone. "For posterity," he said.

"We're almost ready," said Beverly, the organizer of the event. She asked us to stand beside the podium next to the sculpture on the plaza. A microphone was linked to an amplifier and speakers.

"What do we do if Jacklyn's not here?" said Nate. "We can't be the Big Six with five people."

"I'll grab Leonard." I didn't need to coax Leonard much to stand in for Jacklyn.

Leonard wore a pink shirt and a gray blazer. He joined us stage right.

Raj squeezed Leonard's hand. "Welcome to the Big Six. You're one of us." We linked arms and moved closer for a group shot and grinned broadly for the photographers.

"Greetings, mayor, councilors and citizens." Beverly's voice was loud and clear. "Today the Downtown Centre is proud to unveil a new sculpture made of 90% recycled materials, promoting environmental awareness. Conservation, sustainability and reduction of waste and pollution are important factors to us in Vancouver and across our nation. I present to you the newest addition to the Downtown Centre plaza, this stunning sculpture named 'The Bentley'." The crowd clapped as Beverly paused. I thought the name of the sculpture was a stroke of genius. Why couldn’t artists be ironic?

"This project took hundreds of man-hours by six artists and the cooperation of the Downtown Centre and the City. We'd like to thank our mayor and funding provided by our sponsors." She pointed to a poster with a sea of logos and names. "This amazing sculpture was designed and created by the Big Six, including Rajani Pandit, Nathan X, Marco Manicotti, Denise Huang, Cathy Fung and…"

"Leonard!" I shouted, raising his hand in the air. The crowd roared. I felt a surge of joy, pride, and triumph. The clouds parted and God smiled down at us.

The planets were aligned, and family, friends and admirers were gathered to clap and celebrate our accomplishment. There was only one problem. Where the fuck was Jacklyn?

Chapter 14

"Leonard, did you and Jacklyn have a tiff? Is that the reason why she isn't here?" Denise asked. The crowd huddled around to get a good look at The Bentley. The band was playing 'God Save the Queen'.

He shook his head. "She seemed fine yesterday afternoon. She said she was going to get a good night's rest before today's unveiling."

"Do you think she's run into foul play?" Denise frowned.

"Nonsense, she's fine," Marco replied. "She's late, that's all."

"You think she's still mad about the money?" I asked. "She was pretty steamed when she left the pub." I felt guilty about calling her names, but Nate and Raj were responsible for dividing up the profit. Maybe they should've checked to make sure Jacklyn filled in her timesheet and reminded her when she didn't. On the other hand, it was Jacklyn's responsibility.

"I'm worried. I'll call her home. I don't see her parents here. Maybe they're at work." Leonard turned away to make the call.

"Jacklyn has a few grand sitting in an envelope waiting for her," said Nate, patting his pocket.

"She'll be happy about that," said Denise. I nodded.

People congratulated us with handshakes and smiles. Newspaper reporters interviewed Raj and Marco. I beamed with pride. This was our day. Today, people on the street didn't rush by but took time to stop and admire our handiwork.

"It's ingenious!" A man pumped my hand.

"Playful," said another spectator.

"It's so Vancouver."

"Love it!"

"Does that bike on the top go anywhere?"

People gathered to throw coins in the fountain. A mother guided her tot away from the edge. A raven landed on the bicycle handle high above us, ruffled his feathers, and cawed to us below. The little girl pointed at him with her tiny index finger and called out, "Birdie, mom!"

"Nate, don't look now," I murmured.

He stomped his foot. "Why does this always happen to me?"

Raj patted Nate on the back. "Don't believe superstition. Think of it as any other bird."

"Like Pipsy?" Denise raised a brow.

"Where are those bitches?" Nate's voice squeaked. We laughed at his imitation of Taylor's parrot.

"I'm famished! Let's get something to eat." Marco rubbed his stomach.

Denise linked her arms with Nate's and mine. "To the food fair we go." I left my parents and Leonard outside and entered the mall with the other artists.

"Do you know why the food fair is called a food fair?" I asked.

"Why?" responded Denise.

"Because the food is only fair!"

That's not worth even commenting on," Nate said. "Do they sell champagne here? We need to celebrate."

"No such luck, but they do have poutine," said Raj.

"Now you're talking!" said Nate.

#

Later that day, Leonard and I watched ourselves on a news broadcast. Leonard hadn't heard from Jacklyn yet which was odd. The newscaster used phrases like 'universal meaning' and 'rejuvenation of the cultural landscape'. The sculpture looked smaller and we looked different on the TV screen. It seemed strange like it was happening to people that only looked like us.

"You look really svelte in that pink shirt. You always were a little effeminate." I punched Leonard playfully in the shoulder.

"Gee, thanks Butch."

The phone rang and Leonard picked it up before the answering machine kicked in.

"Hello," said Leonard, holding the receiver. "What? Thanks for letting me know." He hung up. "Mrs. Kennedy said that Jacklyn went jogging this morning in Stanley Park. She thought she might have gone to the library in the West End. They got worried when she didn't return home. They sent out a search party looking for her in Stanley Park."

"A search party? I need to call Denise." I rose to grab the phone, but suddenly, a picture of Jacklyn appeared on the TV screen. "Omigod, it's her!" I yelped.

"Jacklyn Kennedy, aged twenty-one, disappeared this morning. She was jogging in Stanley Park. We go to Emily Hart, reporting live at Stanley Park."

The screen switched to Emily holding a microphone, standing with trees behind her. "A search party gathered to find Jacklyn. Minutes ago they found a pink running shoe and a smashed cellphone, which may belong to this missing woman. Volunteers are still looking for her. If you see this woman, please call 911."

"Oh, Jackie!" Leonard curled into a ball and covered his face with his hands.

"Leonard, pull yourself together. She can't be far, I hope."

I couldn't sleep all night thinking about pink running shoes and broken cellphones. Early the next morning, I woke up and brewed a pot of coffee but it was too bitter to drink. Anxiously, Leonard spoke to Mrs. Kennedy on the phone but there was still no sign of Jacklyn. She said that the police checked the hospitals and the morgue but didn't find her. Leonard neglected to shave or shower. He called in sick and moped around the house in loungewear.

"Leonard, we need to do something. We need to help find her." We finally got dressed and met the gang at Montagna's. The excitement of the unveiling the day before was replaced by worry and tension.

"We need to take action. Jacklyn is one of us," I said, biting my nails. "I feel this is partly our fault because she was so mad about the payout. Maybe she went on some kind of rampage or is hiding out to teach us a lesson."

"Cathy, she wouldn't do that. Maybe she ran into an old friend or decided to take a bus trip," said Denise.

"Without her shoe or phone?" said Marco. "This sounds crazy but maybe she was kidnapped by more of Mahoney's associates."

"You think so?" I gaped.

"I feel guilty about all of this like I’m responsible. I'm going to post her pic online and offer a reward," said Nate.

"What reward?" asked Raj.

"I'll offer a painting to the person that finds her."

"Not the painting of the heron?" said Raj.

"Yes, the heron."

"I don't think you should give that one away. How about the fisherman?"

"No, I want to keep the fisherman."

"I want to buy the heron," said Raj.

"Would you two quit it? This is Jacklyn we're talking about," I said.

"I'm tweeting," said Denise, texting on her cellphone.

We spent the rest of the week, knocking on doors and handing out photocopies of Jacklyn's picture that read, "Help us find Jackie Kennedy" with Leonard's cellphone number on the bottom. We taped posters on columns downtown and asked everyone we met on Denman Street in the West End. We were surprised when a woman said, "I saw her at the supermarket. She was buying frozen meat pies."

"Are you sure it was her?" I felt a jolt of anticipation as my hope meter hit ninety-five percent.

"Yes, it's her!"

"When did you see her?"

"Two weeks ago. Do I get a reward?"

My meter dropped considerably. We shared Jacklyn's photo with all our friends online. Denise tweeted so many times she lost count and her fingers got fatigued. We shared some of the comments we received.

"Nice smile. I'd like to smooch with her once she's found."

"Is she really a Kennedy?"

"Tough luck finding her."

"She's got rape victim written all over her."

"People are pigs," Denise complained to the gang. "Insults and derogatory comments aren't going to help us find her. We need to do something drastic."

"They say the longer someone is missing, the less chance they have of showing up," I said. "This is awful. We should have been more fair to her. Do you think she was kidnapped like Marco said?"

"They would have asked for a ransom by now," Nate replied.

"Hey, someone just texted me. Jacklyn was spotted in Seattle." Denise showed us the message on her device.

"That's bogus. She hates Seattle," I said.

"Why? Isn't it similar to Vancouver?"

"I'm not having this discussion." I was too tired to have a debate.

After one week, we were still vigilant. Nate held onto Jacklyn's share, hoping she'd show. We kept watch at the café in case she came around. I got an itch to get back to my boat paintings. A day later, I was immersed in acrylic painting at home not thinking about Jacklyn at all. Then she sprung to my mind and I felt guilty over and over again. She had left the group on bad terms and that made it worse. Was I allowed to continue on in my daily living when my friend was missing?

#

Dr. Montgomery remarked that painting is good therapy for me. After what I'd been through, I needed to paint and not just for a few hours but a solid month.

After mentioning my work at the café, Raj wanted to see my paintings. I invited him over to the garage. With the sculpture and junk gone, there was room for my easel. I had hung my new boat and seascape paintings on the wall with nails and wire. He stared at the work without commenting, counted on his fingers and nodded his head.

"Not bad. With ten pieces, you have enough for a gallery show with Nate."

"No, not Nate! His work is so much better than mine." I cringed at the thought.

"You complement each other's work. I'll see what I can do." He took photos of my work and jotted down titles and sizes. He even took a photograph of me by my easel, with my smock covered with dabs of lemon yellow and orange pigment like the sunrise.

"What do I owe you?" Raj was more than a friend.

"I haven't got a show for you yet. But you can give me a hug."

I hugged Raj for a full five seconds. I was no longer afraid to be close to other people.

Dreaming came easier to me these days. Closing my eyes, I dreamt of my paintings hanging on the walls from the floor to the ceiling in a large hall glowing with light. Paintings cover the floor and ceiling too. I tiptoe between them, then up the stairs to touch the paintings all around and hanging from the chandelier. The thick paint is still wet, oozing and dripping on the canvases, transferring to my fingers. I suck the blue and green paint off my fingers and taste apples tart and sweet.

With my eyes shut, I felt the roughness of Raj's shirt, reminding me of the sand at Locarno Beach. In the small space where I stood, I sensed energy around me. I breathed deeply. I heard waves crashing in the distance and close by at the same time.

My eyes fluttered open, and Raj was gone.

#

Marco was animated as he shared his story. Nate, Marco, Raj and I sat outside at the café. Marco showed us a purple bruise on his arm.

"I fell in the bathtub. Hit my head. And bruised my arm. I was unconscious for a while. Raj found me." Marco's beard has grown long. Tendrils reached toward his penne. I licked my lips.

"I went to his place to drop off some scrap metal I found, but there was no answer when I knocked. All I could hear were moans. I alerted the building manager and he unlocked his door in using a master key," Raj said. "Marco had been lying there all night. He couldn't get up in his weakened state and his skin was like ice."

"Raj took me to the hospital where I stayed overnight for tests and observation," said Marco.

I felt a lump in my throat. "Marco, are you okay?" I was afraid of losing him too.

"They said I could have died."

I felt the shakes. My lip trembled.

"Did the doctor say your unconscious state was caused by a brain injury, some sort of stroke or cardiac arrest, a diabetic or drug-related coma, alcohol poisoning, renal failure, or related to dehydration?" asked Nate.

"It was a combination of things," replied Marco.

"Nate, you seem to have a great knowledge about loss of consciousness. You didn't learn that in art school," commented Raj. "Is it from watching hospital dramas on TV or personal experience?"

"In Marco's case, he may have experienced hypothermia due to the bathwater becoming cold, depending on the temperature of the room," Nate deduced. "Diabetic ketoacidosis must have been ruled out because it's preceded by an extended period of vomiting and hyperventilation. Perhaps it was a seizure or neurological problem of some kind."

Ignoring Nate's search for a diagnosis, Raj continued his thread of conversation. "Diagnosis is of course crucial to patient care, but on occasion people are still misdiagnosed despite the advances of modern science. Take for example, mental illness. There are some diagnoses in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which to me are somewhat unnecessary. Can't we treat people without the fancy terms?"

"Are you two finished?" I was as agitated as laundry in a top load washer. "I'm just glad he's okay."

"Cathy, relax." Marco opened his sketchbook and showed me a drawing of a young girl but it wasn't a young girl. "I drew this when I was in hospital."

I looked down and saw the girl who wasn't a girl. The subject matter didn't resemble his usual drawings and the style was different. Her cherub face was coloured peach and yellow and her eyes were far apart. Around her were rays of sunlight that looked like wings. "She's a guardian angel, Marco. I think you were saved by an angel." I touched his shoulder.

"An angel? No I didn't see an angel," he answered. "When I was asleep, I saw Jacklyn. That's the dream I wanted to tell you about. She was coming toward me, beckoning for me to join her for a game of croquet. She had a croquet stick in her hand. She aimed and her ball hit the post. I remember."

What he said didn't make sense to me. Jacklyn played tennis not croquet and the drawing of a girl was definitely not her. My mind drifted to Buntzen Lake. I see myself walking out on the dock and sitting in a grey chair as Winston stands a distance away filming. Caroline swims underwater, diving for pink running shoes. A strong wind blows and lifts the chair off the dock with me in it. I float in the ether momentarily until I land back at the café.

"I think she's in heaven beating everyone at croquet." Solemnly, Marco closed his sketchpad like a Bible. We sat in a sliver of silence as a cloud blocked out the sun.

Chapter 15

Excitedly, Raj told me that due to a cancellation by another artist, Nate and I have a show coming up in two months in West Vancouver. Nate said that’s where the rich people live and they like boats. He winked at me. I could have eaten his eyes they shone so blue.

I was so elated that I wanted to work on new paintings but they weren't for the West Vancouver show. In the garage, I constructed two large canvases with stretcher bars, wood braces, raw canvas, and a staple gun. To prepare the surface, I primed them with two coats of clear gesso.

I didn't have a clear image in mind but intended to express the complexity of my anguish. My anger, guilt, and sense of loss around Jacklyn's disappearance fueled my art. I wanted to throw paint all over the windows of the garage. In a fit of outrage, I attacked the canvas.

Leonard found me dripping paint on a canvas on the floor. "Jackson Pollock technique?"

"I'm rebelling against every art teacher I ever had! I'm an unhinged psychotic aiming to turn the world upside down through feats on canvas." I tilted the canvas upright so the paint would drip in a different direction.

"I think delusions of grandeur are affecting your work," he said.

I ignored his attempt at humour. Using large brushes, I worked vigorously and intuitively with form, shape, texture, and colour. Energy from the universe flooded my being strengthening me tenfold and guided the work. Painting with a brush came naturally as breathing. Marco called me but I was too busy to go to the café.

When I stood back and regarded my new work, something was different. The brushstrokes were more confident and alive. Emotion lay behind the application of the paint. The colours sung like nightingales. The work transcended the physical. I realized I'd constructed something phenomenal but I didn't know exactly how or why. I put one freshly painted canvas aside and prepared to tackle the other.

#

The next afternoon, Leonard entered the garage and studied the canvas I was working on. I had blocked in major tonal areas in the second painting, balancing the weight of forms against each other. He tilted his head sideways. "What is this? Heaven and hell?"

I bit the end of a two-inch brush in contemplation.

"Have you had lunch?"

"No." Engrossed in an unsolved area in the top right corner of the canvas, I didn't look at him. I drew the paintbrush lightly across the canvas, intuitively adding cadmium red dabs here and there.

"You should eat you know. You've been losing weight. Are you smoking weed? Because that doesn't look like anything you've done before."

I ignored him. I was too busy painting a leaf shape. I knew he was only joking because he knew I didn't smoke pot.

"Can I make you some chicken soup?" he asked.

"Only if it comes with crackers."

Leonard left and came back with a bowl of steaming soup and saltines. Beasty followed him with his tongue hanging out. Leonard went back and forth, bringing me tea, cheese sticks and red seedless grapes. Beasty got tired of following Leonard and jumped onto a worn cushion lying on a set of old tires. The patio chair cushion had a floral pattern. I selected a few green shades from the cushion and added them to my work.

My brother's behavior was unusual. Before he met Jacklyn, he used to play video games on the weekend and jog a lot. Now he spent time watching me with fascination. The change was something I couldn't describe. 'Respect' sounded foreign to our relationship. 'Admiration' seemed like a distant star in another galaxy. But we were growing in leaps and bounds.

"I can't paint like that. How do you create that from nothing? Where do your ideas spring from?" Leonard was learning to appreciate my art.

"Don't bug me." I rinsed my brush in a jar of water.

"I'm so happy for you, Cathy. I'm telling everyone at the office that my little sister is a professional, very talented and extremely successful artist."

"Don't you have a software program to design or underwear to fold?"

"Why? Do I make you nervous?"

"I don't understand the attention. You aren't insulting me. What's the matter?"

"I want to be close to you. Is something wrong with that?"

We stood a few feet apart but our hearts were pressed against one another. Against the backdrop of the maze of life, we bonded as siblings—a tie which would not break.

"I miss Jacklyn. I hope she's alive and safe," said Leonard. "Maybe she's running across the country, heading for the east coast. She could be in Montreal right now. The least she could do is call."

#

In a rare break from my studio, I met Nate at the café to arrange a time he could pick up my artwork and take us to West Vancouver in his truck.

"Sylvie is coming back to Vancouver," Nate said. "She wants to get back together with me."

"Is she over that guy Pierre?" I asked.

"He stole her credit cards and burned cigarette holes in her drapes."

"Ouch! Would you take Sylvie back?"

Nate shrugged. "She's too fickle and too French." I wondered what that meant to him. "I promised to pick her up at the airport, but she'll stay at a hotel. There's no room at my place because of the art."

"The art takes precedence." We both nodded in humility.

I wondered if Sylvie was taking advantage of him but I dismissed the thought. Nate wouldn't allow it.

I called his cellphone a few days later to discuss painting prices. I wasn't sure what to ask for. He said that he and Sylvie were at a fancy furniture store. She wanted to buy a loveseat for his man cave. They were arguing over the pattern. Sylvie wanted the pink diamonds; Nate wanted anything but pink diamonds. I heard her whine and he hung up.

Marco came by the garage to pick up a hammer he left behind. He was excited to be able to afford new studio space. To receive the tools as partial payment for the project made him very pleased. They meant more than money to him. "I'm working on some new reliefs. Better than what was lost in the fire," he said. I gave him a hug. Leonard and I were happy for him.

Denise called to say that she was pregnant and Jake was overjoyed to become a dad. He was lucky he got promoted to teach at the art school. I was glad too. They'd need the money. Denise's parents were happy too because they were going to be grandparents. They wanted to invite Jake and Denise to a family reunion. She wasn't ostracized anymore. Her accessory line was taking off. Raj found her a distributor and she hoped to go national. I said that her name will be as well-known as breakfast cereal. She said that breakfast cereal isn't a brand name but she knows what I mean.

At the café, Nate, Marco, Denise and I met with Raj at his request. Gino brought us espresso with his own special ingredients. I wondered if he added nutmeg but Marco said that it was cinnamon.

"What red flaming pants you have on, Cathy," said Gino. "Where did you buy them? The fire department?" He chuckled and I laughed with him.

Raj was excited. "We're invited to participate in a national call for art proposals for a site in Ottawa outside the Royal Canadian Mint. An official at the Mint saw us on TV and was interested in our sculpture. Think of it."

"That's fantastic. We could be even more famous!" I controlled the urge to dance on the tabletop. Instead, I dreamt of hiring someone like Ron Howard to direct the reality movie about the Making Of. He did such a good job directing Splash. A real down-to-earth guy. Cameras roll and the action begins. Mayhem ensues. I am ready for my close-up. "Do we get to fly to Ottawa? Will we meet the Governor General? I'd love to see the Parliament Buildings. Politicians are such good, upstanding citizens."

The others rolled their eyes.

"I'm a painter not a sculptor. I need to stay in school. Sorry, I'm out," said Nate.

Denise said, "I can't work if I'm too pregnant. Besides how can we do it without Jacklyn? It's not fair to her or her memory." I knew she was right but I was eager to try anyway. Was that wrong?

"We can't all move to Ottawa," argued Marco. "How would we transport a monument from Vancouver to Ottawa?"

"If we knew someone to direct like Ron Howard, he'd figure out a way," I said.

"WHAT?" They gave me strange looks.

After arriving home, I walked into the kitchen as Leonard was setting the table. He was making spaghetti and meatballs for dinner. The sauce was bubbling on the stove.

"Hey, the Big Six were asked to enter a call to design a sculpture to be erected outside the Royal Canadian Mint. I bet the winner makes a lot of coin."

"What's the maximum grant?"

"A cool two hundred thousand."

He whistled.

"Unfortunately, the idea was vetoed. We couldn't get consensus."

"Lost the popular vote, eh?"

"Yep. Without Jacklyn it's not the same. Denise says that it's not right." I sniffed the sauce. "It's too bad. It would have made an awesome movie."

#

Nate rang the bell at my front door. I was happy to see him and gave him a hug, admiring his blue eyes. He helped me carry my artwork and put it in his truck. We climbed in and headed for the Lions Gate Bridge.

"How's Sylvie?"

"I was ready to try again with her after she apologized. Now she's leaving and taking her loveseat with her." His voice sounded hollow.

"Aw. Did you two have a fight?"

"She said that I was too focused on my art. When Darkness clawed the couch and ripped out the stuffing, that was the last straw. She's getting the couch repaired and sent to Paris."

"Darkness is a mean cat."

"When I first met Sylvie, I thought she was the total package. I trusted her. Darkness didn't like her and hissed at her all the time. He had better sense than me."

I kept quiet that Darkness hissed at everybody at Nate's dinner parties. "Don't worry, you'll find the right girl. It's okay to be single too." Casually, I watched pedestrians through the open window.

"Maybe she's right here."

Surprised, I turned quickly to regard Nate. He was looking in the rear view mirror at a girl walking south on Denman. She looked like Sylvie from behind. I tried to appear disinterested.

As we drove through Stanley Park, I silently thought about Jacklyn. The wind reached in through the open car window and tangled my hair into an uncontrollable pile of rice noodles. In the mirror, my face appeared a greyish white making me look like a zombie. I rolled up the window, cutting off the flow of air. The whole park was a tomb.

We arrived at the gallery in West Vancouver. We spoke politely to the curator and unloaded our canvases. Nate's paintings were beautiful, majestic landscapes. Mine were vibrant, lively seascapes. The curator said that she will hang the show and handed us invitations for the opening reception to give our friends and patrons. I didn't have regular patrons but I thanked her anyway. We each shook her hand. After climbing back in the truck, we went for sushi.

"Once the fish supply runs out, there will be no more sushi joints like this." He chewed a slice of tuna sashimi.

"They can always use farmed fish, can't they?"

"The ocean's going to hell. Oil spills, contaminants, sewage. The blue water in your paintings will be replaced by grey sludge, I'm afraid."

"You're put off. You are still upset about Sylvie, aren't you?"

Nate stabbed a California roll and dipped it in soya sauce. "We broke up twice. You'd think after the first time, I'd learn." He fumbled with his chopsticks and the California roll landed on the placemat. "How could I fall for her deceptive charms? From now on, no French chicks." He surveyed an attractive Japanese girl at the next table. "Maybe someone Asian."

"Asian?" My heart beat against my rib cage like wings of a dove.

"Of course not you Cathy. I consider you a friend."

"Of course." My voice sounded flat. I felt like a dandelion that had been stamped on. "Dutch treat?"

"I like your style."

#

The gang showed up at the art opening in West Vancouver, but I was conscious that Jacklyn wasn't there, a missing actor in our play of life. Slowly, people drifted in and signed the guest book. The curator's assistant offered wine, green grapes, and hummus on crackers to the guests.

"Are you Cathy Fung the artist?" asked a woman in a tailored suit.

I nodded silently.

"Your boat paintings are wonderful. Do you take commissions? Of course, any artist worth her salt does. My husband and I have a sailboat named 'Queenie'. If you are interested in painting it for us, here's my card."

I took her card gratefully. I regarded a middle-aged couple looking at one of my works. One turned and looked at me. I smiled.

Denise nudged me. "Mingle, Cathy. You know how to mingle, don't you?"

I approached the couple. "Hello, I’m Cathy Fung, one of the artists."

"You're very young, aren't you?" The woman frowned.

"Ah, is that a problem?"

Her frown turned into a smile. "Only if you think so." She extended her hand. "I'm Molly and this is my husband Frank. Do you live in West Vancouver?"

"I'm from East Vancouver."

"My daughter and her husband recently bought a house in East Vancouver. The prices of homes nowadays!" Molly fanned herself with a gallery brochure.

"Molly, she's so young but so talented," remarked Frank.

Molly nodded. "Cathy, have you ever thought of doing larger works?"

"Why's that?"

"I have friends who buy art and they really prefer large scale works because they have so-o much wall space. Their homes are enormous. Medium size paintings are better for medium size rooms. Do you understand?"

"Oh yes. Thanks for the advice." I felt lightheaded. If I sell any work in the show, I'm buying five foot stretcher bars and buckets of paint, I thought to myself.

By the end of the evening, Nate had three red dots on his paintings and I had one. I tried not to be envious of his sales but instead be happy about my sale. Some artists are seen as overnight successes but even those artists must start somewhere, I thought.

Raj gave me a ride back to East Vancouver. I was so excited that I had trouble going to sleep that night. After three a.m., I finally drifted off. I dreamt of a superhero who saves me and my art from a fire in the garage and carries me over land and sea, flying all the way to London, England where the Queen invites me to a royal garden party at Buckingham Palace, where she trips and spills Darjeeling tea on my smock.

At eight a.m., Beasty jumped on my bed with a paintbrush in his mouth. He barked at the window. I looked out to see a beautiful sunny day, a sapphire sky, and blossoms glowing like jewels in the garden. Starlings chirped high up in the maple tree. Is Beasty trying to tell me something?

#

In my slippers and robe, I yawned and padded into the kitchen where Leonard was making French toast.

"I thought I heard Beasty waking you up. This is special for you because of your art opening." He flipped a French toast slice onto a plate for me. "Sorry, I couldn't be there because of a work deadline."

"Thanks." I poured maple syrup on top of the French toast and took a scrumptious bite. The sweetness was delectable. "You missed a fine evening. I sold a work. I felt good but also guilty because Jacklyn introduced me to the gang and how could I feel positive about my successes if she's not here? She's left a hole in our group and I think the others feel it too even though we don't always express it."

"I feel that emptiness too."

"I'm angry because we can't blame anyone for her disappearance except ourselves. I'm angry that after all we went through, I survived and she's gone," I said.

"You had a disagreement, but you all were willing to make it square. You can't change the past. Even if you hadn't had an argument, she might have gone jogging anyway. I'm sure that if she were here, she'd want you to be happy."

"Really happy?"

"Yes, completely overwhelmed with joy because wherever she is she cares about you."

"You're okay for a brother."

"Thanks, shrimp."

Chapter 16

"Cathy, I'm asking you to attend a cognitive behavioural therapy group." My psychiatrist's request sounded like a covert command from a colonel. Did I need army fatigues?

"Do I really need to? I'm not interested in looking like an idiot," I said, scrunching up in a chair in his office.

"Regard this as a challenge rather than dismissing it without trying."

"What do they do in this group? Sit cross-legged in a circle and process each other's thoughts through meditation or act out stupid scenarios where they make me angry so I explode thereby demonstrating the futility of my actions?"

"It's really not like that," he replied. "Here's the date, time and address. I already signed you up."

Without my permission? Wonderful. Sounds like something a do-gooder would do. I wasn't crazy about participating in this group but then again maybe I was crazy, thus obligated to go. I shoved the note in my jean pocket and bussed to the café.

#

"Hi Chuckles." Raj greeted me on the café patio. I waved without smiling and entered to order a medium coffee without cream. My family doctor told me to limit fat intake because of high cholesterol and triglycerides associated with my medication. I cut out some of the fried foods and gravies I was eating but was still tempted by donuts, cookies and scones. However, we won't get into a discussion about how high sugar foods convert into fat, right?

I took my coffee outside and plunked into a chair. "So Dr. Raj."

He put down his pen and raised a brow. "What can I do for you Miss Fung?"

"Do you think you can help me get another show?"

"Depends on how much you are going to pay me," he jested. "Because of your tendency to not self-promote, you should think about getting an agent."

"An agent? They take a percentage and can bill for their time."

"So what's your problem? If you don't sell your work, you don't get a percentage either."

"True enough but you've been helping me already. Why would I want to switch?"

He leaned in closer. "If you give me a chance, I can make it worth your while. You pay me a percentage of everything you sell, and I'll do more for you."

"But you already helped me get shows at Montagna's, in West Vancouver and a few other places."

"In the past, you've seen the benefits of working with me. I can mentor you to produce more ambitious and higher quality work."

My eyes widened. "For what kind of money?"

"Do you agree in theory that I could in fact aid your blossoming career?"

I put my fist on the table. "How much?"

"For every hundred dollars you earn, I receive—" He whispered an amount in my ear.

"Can I think about it?" I folded my arms.

"I'm not asking for an hourly wage. You're not going to get a better deal. You need someone who understands your abilities, and ways you can improve. Not everyone can work with a hothead."  
 "I’m a hothead?" I asked. "You don't understand. I have latent anger."

"If you bottle that you could sell it as hot sauce."

"Ha ha. How much do you think I could sell my latest painting for?" I pulled out my tablet and thumbed through, pausing at the last photo I took.

He examined the image from all angles. "Hmm. You call this art? What are you trying to say?"

"This first one is titled Edge because of the jagged brushstrokes and fragmentation of the forms. It's about texture."  
 "But what is it really about? Why did you paint it?"

"I guess I was feeling angry and guilty about Jacklyn."  
 He pointed to some of the forms. "These pink streaks symbolize Jacklyn and the way you break up the surface with these angled lines are reminiscent of her shattered cellphone. Also the green and blue represent Stanley Park."

"No way." I peered at the tablet. "It's not supposed to be that specific."

"I'm not saying it's intentional. Your subconscious memories and emotions are coming through in your work. Your hard work is starting to pay off. I think you're almost ready."

"Ready for what?" I put my hands on my hips.

"You are coming into your own. After the West Vancouver exhibition, you seem more confident and focused. You're not at Montagna's as often because you're painting. How late do you paint?"

"I have been sleeping in late and painting until ten o'clock at night but I can't get to sleep until one. But other days I goof off and hang out at the mall."

"You're budding."  
 "What do you mean?"

"You're starting to think and breathe your art."

"By going to the mall?" I asked.

"Why do you go to the mall?"

"There are all kinds of activity at the mall. People bustling around, colours to see and fabrics to touch and I can check out the popular trends of what people are buying and wearing."  
 "Why do you like fashion?"

"The contours and the detailing are interesting to me. And I want to know what's in because it makes me feel current."

"Art is like fashion in that old ideas are reintroduced in a new way. You need to look at your art and see why it's current and how it fits in today."

"Why it's contemporary."  
 He nodded.

I tilted my head and looked at him from a different angle. "As an agent can you teach me how to see?"

"If you mean giving my opinion of what makes you tick as an artist and the reason behind your work then the answer is yes."

With my palms down, I spread my fingers on the table. "Okay, in that case, Raj, would you please be my agent?"

"Yes." He smiled and we shook to seal the deal. I didn't say how much I truly needed his help but maybe he knew anyway.

Nate arrived like the wind.

"Hey, don't you have class today?" Raj asked.

"I quit school. I've decided to become a home economics teacher," Nate responded.

"Sewing aprons and baking blueberry muffins sounds fascinating," I said. "You're giving up painting? Is that really a satisfying career change?"

"I'm not afraid to show my feminine side." Nate's eyebrows rose over the top of his sunglasses.

"Nate, your jokes are getting really bad," Raj commented.  
 "I learn from the best. Cathy here is the comeback queen." He removed his sunglasses. "Cathy, you're sitting in my seat again."  
 "What are you going to do? You don't own every seat in this café!"

"Hothead!"

Raj put up his hand. "Nate, go inside and get a coffee and Cathy, count backwards from one hundred." Nate put back on his sunglasses and went inside.

I started counting. "One hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight… wait, why am I doing this?"

#

"I'm Evelyn, an occupational therapist. Please come in and have a seat. Everyone, this is Cathy."

The cognitive behavioural therapy group met at a mental health team, which I'd never visited before. Mental health teams were different from the private psychiatrist I usually saw. Their offices employed psychiatrists, mental health workers, occupational therapists, nurses, social workers and administrative staff, which served hundreds of clients in recovery living in different parts of Vancouver. By centralizing care at mental health teams, the health authority saved money and could offer group activities, workshops and other types of support.

Unsure of what to expect, I glanced around the room at six other participants and slid into the only seat left at the front of the room. At the back, I saw a helper setting up a projector connected to a laptop.

Evelyn clapped her hands unnecessarily. "Okay, we're ready to begin."

I didn't interrupt to say that I didn't know the names of the others, but I didn't plan on making friends anyway.

"Welcome to our first cognitive behavioural therapy session. We are here to learn how people can misinterpret or misread events, which can be prevented. Through a series of lessons, we will learn how to be more aware of assumptions and identify techniques to improve objectivity," said Evelyn.

I raised my hand. "Isn't this a class for people with mental illness? If someone is normal is this course for them too?"

"As I said, the tools we are going to teach you are for all types of people. People without mental illness can also misread events. Okay, so if we're ready, let's take a look at the first slide. Describe this man."

No longwinded preamble to say what's said in the room stay in the room or guidelines around foul language? Hmm. This was unusual for a self-help group. At least it was free and the door was only eight feet away for a quick getaway if it started to turn ugly. You never know what will happen when you gather a bunch of deranged people in a room, I said to myself.

A slide appeared on a screen. The image looked like a low-resolution picture taken with a cheap camera in the dark. Couldn't the health authority at least afford better slides?

"He's smart because he wears glasses and he has a briefcase so he's probably a businessman," said a bearded man behind me. Traditional answer.

"I agree. Also he's young, so he's probably single and can't find a date," said a woman in a red and black scarf beside me.

"Natalie, why would you think his appearance would mean he can't find a date?" asked Evelyn.

I turned to Natalie in the red and black scarf. How could she know the guy, if she hadn’t met him in person? I narrowed my eyes at her for good measure.

"Well, I wouldn't date him. He's nerdy."

"I think there's nothing wrong with him. You're the one with a problem," I argued. "My brother's a nerd and he used to have a girlfriend and she was quite pretty."

"Sounds like he doesn't have a girlfriend now." She glared back at me.  
 "He would have if she hadn't gone missing since May. She could be dead."

Evelyn jumped in. "We're not going to talk about personal issues here. This isn't a talk therapy group."  
 "You never said we couldn't." I should've been a defense attorney.

"Cathy, you know the rules."

"Did I miss something?"

"Through this exercise, we can see how each of us has personal biases based on the appearance of others. This bias can affect our judgment. This man might be a band manager and he's carrying music sheets in his briefcase. Or maybe he's a writer like Stephen King," she explained.

"Or maybe it's Cathy's brother with a bad hair day," said Natalie.

I envisioned shredding her with a cheese grater and squeezing her bits into a toaster oven set on high for a hundred and twenty minutes. They probably wouldn't fit but I'd enjoy trying.

Evelyn didn't bat an eyelash. "Next slide, people."

#

The group was scheduled to meet twice a week for eight weeks. I came late to the second session because I slept in.

"Cathy, please try to be on time."

"Sorry Evelyn. I was exhausted after painting last night."

"What do you paint?" asked Natalie.

"I paint what I see," I replied.

She looked at me quizzically. "It's impossible to paint everything."  
 "I don't paint everything. I interpret significant events in my life through abstract painting."

"Meaning you don't know how to paint," she jeered.

"No, I was kidnapped and sometimes being kidnapped makes you paint."

"You're lying!" Her face contorted, stricken with distress. "Everyone knows mental patients aren't worth kidnapping!"

Natalie was asking for it. I could outsmart her in this debate. I pictured that we were in a courtroom to investigate the truth about past injustices. She was the prosecutor and I was my own defense attorney.

"I'm not a patient. I'm a person. You don't know a thing about me! I'm a victim!" I pointed at my chest as an imaginary jury stood and clapped in my honour. She should pay for her accusations against me. I wanted retribution for everyone who had ever thwarted me. I estimated Natalie couldn't be over a hundred and ten pounds. If I didn't win this debate, I'll deck her one, I thought. I made fists under the table ready to beat her brains out.

The bearded man behind me began to resemble Jesus Christ. The other participants' heads started to glow and I heard bells. My reality melted like icecaps in summer. I decompensated.  
 Evelyn clapped her hands. "Enough. Cathy, may I have a word with you." I blinked and followed her into the hallway. "Cathy, this is a warning. Do not fabricate lies in my class. You're frightening the others."

"I'm not lying." My voice sounded small, like a child's whisper in a room of opera singers.

"Of course, you're lying. Or perhaps this is a fantasy of yours."

"I’m not delusional."

"I have to get back to the class. If you want to join in and participate, limit it to the scope of the class." With my head down, I followed her back in to the room to face Nasty Natalie. We didn't speak to each other; however, I did throw my candy wrapper which hit her on the cheek. I turned to hide my smirk, before she threw the candy wrapper back hitting the side of my head. Touché.

#

In the second session, Evelyn introduced a guessing game. We tried to guess the object on the screen based on clues. The first clue was several lines.

"It's a bucket."

"A tire."

"No, it's a pair of handcuffs," I said. I glanced back to see odd looks on the others' faces.

Evelyn showed us the next clue, which added more lines to the drawing.

"I think it's a platter with a turkey on it."

"I think it's a trampoline."  
 My eyes were intent on the screen. "I still think it's a pair of handcuffs, tying up a murderer who's been kidnapped by extortionists."  
 "CATHY!" yelled Evelyn. I bowed my head and followed her outside again meeker than a mouse.

"In no uncertain terms are you to bring up kidnapping again." She shook her finger at me like my seventh grade teacher who also had berated me. "Some people are swayed by the power of suggestion. If you bring up extortion or murder, you are going to upset the class. Understand?"

"I’m answering the questions like you asked me to." I shrugged my shoulders.

"Cathy, I think you need private sessions because you don't fit in with the group."

"Natalie doesn't like me, but the others are okay with me or do they hate me too?" I pointed at the door and pouted.

"They don't hate you, Cathy. They have difficulty with your honesty."

"So you believe me now that I was kidnapped?"

"I had a discussion with Dr. Montgomery and yes, I believe you. That's why I’m suggesting an alternative."

"Okay, then I don't have to deal with the Brady Bunch."

#

At the mental health team, Evelyn and I sat in her office in front of a computer screen. On the monitor, I surveyed a predominantly red and orange painting.

"Cathy, what do you see?"  
 "A burning building with a black hole where the body of Ramirez lies in the middle."

By the expression on her face, I saw my answer didn't faze her. "Are you familiar with Georgia O'Keeffe? This is one of her famous poppy paintings," she responded.

"I know. I was trying to fool you."

"This isn't going to work if you don't take it seriously."

"Can I say something? Why don't you tell me what the intent of the lesson is instead of these long sessions of slides? You're trying to illustrate a point. I get that but it's taking too long!"

She rubbed her forehead in consternation. "Cathy, I'm trying to show you that if you change your perspective, you won't have to live in a world of paranoia and suspicion."  
 "I'm not suspicious."

"What type of symptoms do you have?"

"I'm tired and I put on two pounds since last year."  
 She shook her head. "I’m talking about your mental health. I'm an occupational therapist. You can trust me."

I gave her a steady look and lied. "I'm fine."

"Dr. Montgomery said that you need help to decrease self-criticism and not take things personally."

"Self-criticism? You mean the fact that no one understands me because I must be an alien or something?"

She pondered for a moment. "Okay, let's try something different. I want you to list out loud five of your achievements."

I counted on my fingers. "My West Vancouver exhibit, catching Mad Mahoney, getting a medal and reward for helping CSIS find two million dollars in cocaine and cash, having friends, and investing in mutual funds."

"That's quite a list."

"You look skeptical. Do you not believe me?" I asked. I framed my fingers around my eyes like an owl wearing binoculars.

"Cathy, it's hard to digest what you are saying. Let's start with having friends. How is that an achievement?"

"Because I never had good friends before and they make me happy."

"That's very positive. Next question, what are five things that are wrong in your life?"

"I'm ugly, stupid, dissatisfied, mental, and prone to angry outbursts where I tell people what I really think of them."

She sighed and looked past me at a spot on the wall, moving her lips like she was counting to ten. She refocused on me. "Most people wouldn't think that about you. Don't you think you're being hard on yourself? If you believe those things, how could you accomplish so much?"

"It's uncanny, isn't it?"

"The truth is self-worth will give you strength. You seem like a determined person but you compare yourself unfavourably. You don't have to be perfect in every way. Does your mother love you?"

"Yeah, but she's my mom."

"Why are you qualifying your answer? Do you believe your mother loves you because of who you are?"

"She's proud of me but she doesn't think Beasty my pug should sleep in my room because he sheds so much."

"So she is one person who treasures you because you have value. I'm sure there are others. The fact that Beasty sleeps in your room has nothing to do with her loving you or not."

I rolled my eyes and thought of blue, round pills dancing in the air. I swallowed one.

"Anger is healthy in that it tells us when things are out of balance. What are ways you can deal with your anger?"

"I could tell other people where to go."  
 "And what would the result be?"

"I'd get so mad I'd cut off someone's head, and they'd put me in jail for murder."

"You don't really mean that. How about writing a journal?"

"God, that sounds so poetic. Woman writes poem and leaves it next to corpse."

"Whom do you want to kill?" she asked.

"Can't you take a joke? I paint. That's what I do when I get emotional. Or I spout off, let off steam, and level out."

"Sounds like a healthy response as long as no one gets hurt. How about exercise?"  
 "I have asthma so I can hardly run or swim and I can't lift weights or do yoga because of my back. I got thrown by a horse on a pony ride at age five, can't ski worth a darn, and am prone to motion sickness so hand-gliding and whitewater rafting are out."

"How about walking?"

"On the moon? Sign me up."

"Why is it easier for you to evade questions rather than answer them honestly?"

"I've got bats in the belfry. If I'm honest that's a terrifying thing. I'd be overexposed like film in direct sunlight. I admit I'm a wimp."

"It's safe to talk here. I don't think you're crazy at all. I think you make perfect sense. Life handed you a grenade and took the pin out. You are a miracle, you know."

I grinned and punched her in the shoulder. "Shucks, Evelyn."

She looked mortified. I realized too late I had entered her private space.

"I only did that because I appreciate what you said," I added. Her lips curled in the corners. I'd never seen her smile before.

#

Over the next day, I mulled over her response that I am sane. Since my diagnosis I thought that anything out of the ordinary in my thinking must be psychosis but maybe that was an overgeneralization. For example, fear that someone would come after me in vengeance because of my involvement in the arrest of criminals was a response anyone might have in my circumstances. Reliving or talking about the kidnapping was my way to work through the past until the pain and anxiety diminish. I still panicked on occasion but not because of past crises. Instead, I worried about having enough money for gas or art supplies, which is normal for someone who doesn't have a regular paycheque. Deep down I knew my idle threats are only sarcasm. I had no intention of hurting anyone or myself.

Evelyn acted differently from Dr. Montgomery in that she was more sensitive and empathetic. She was funny when she tried to hide her lack of control over situations like my 'disruptive' responses in the cognitive behavioural therapy class. If I started to talk about Molotov cocktails burning down buildings with people in them or gunshot wounds to the head or claustrophobia caused by being gagged, tied and thrown into a car trunk, she turned chartreuse. If I mentioned anything about helping CSIS, she changed the subject.

We met again the following week at the mental health team.

"Are you afraid of reality?" I could be facetious.

"What do you mean?" Evelyn crossed her legs. We no longer used the computer but talked instead.

"Why do you not comment when I talk to you about Phil the undercover agent?"

"It's not because I’m afraid. I want you to think about ordinary, day to day things. I don't feel you need to play vigilante anymore. It's not your responsibility to keep the city safe. I want you to be present and focused on what you are doing now."

"Don't you think that CSIS needed me in those situations? That without me, they'd never capture Mahoney or the Bentleys or find their black book?"

"It's not that they needed you or not, Cathy. You took the initiative and did what you did which was courageous but you risked a lot. I know it's really hard to release yourself from the trauma you experienced but you need to move forward. I’m not asking you to forget, but to free yourself instead of binding yourself in knots about it."

I paused for a moment. "You think I've spent enough time and energy ruminating about it all?"

"YES!" She sat erect in her chair. "Cathy, you're so headstrong. Your mind is razor sharp and that's part of the problem because you can bring back past memories so vividly. You talk about so many things in such detail and maybe that bogs you down because it fills your mind with information that serves little purpose in the here and now."

"You're telling me to not think about it?"

"YES! If I say it again, I'm going to need therapy myself for redundancy."

I shrugged. "Okay, whatever floats your boat."

I discovered that if I expressed my frustration by infuriating her, it made me feel better. But I also knew she taught me things that Dr. Montgomery hadn't. She was open to hearing what I have to say and responded with a fresh pair of eyes to my current attitudes and psychology without bias from my past. When I talked to Dr. Montgomery, we routinely speak in mental health terms such as 'delusion', 'hallucination' or 'false beliefs'. In discussions with Evelyn, she used words like 'idea', 'wrong conclusion', or 'bad judgment call' which weren't buzz words. They put a different spin on my so-called symptoms.

"Let's talk about why you threw the brick through the car windshield," she asked me.

"It started in school. I started to think the other students were ridiculing me. Then I thought the neighbours were spying on me and trained their cat to scratch our steps with markings I could read but my brother couldn't. The markings were a warning that a bad man was coming to get me. So I stopped talking to other people and stayed in my room listening to my music. I skipped class because I didn't want the students laughing at me anymore. Then I decided I needed to track down the bad man so he wouldn't be a threat anymore."

I stretched out my legs and continued. "I woke up when I heard noises outside. I looked out the window and saw a man in the yard. I thought it was the bad man. So I ran barefoot into the yard and picked up the first weapon I found which was the brick. I saw a light in the car, which indicated he was inside trying to steal it. So I tried to hit him with the brick."

"Okay, thinking back were the students talking about you?"

"Maybe." I laced my fingers together.

"Do you ever talk about another person behind their back?"

"Yeah, but I don't gang up with other people to victimize someone."

"Did you actually hear them call you names? Were they talking to you or to someone else in the vicinity? And if they were being mean, perhaps that's more about them than about you."

I stretched my arms, lacing my fingers above my head. "It doesn't really bother me anymore. Water off a duck's back."

"Let's think about the light in the car. Could that have been the reflection of a streetlamp? Or a family member left the inside light on in the car?"

"I never thought about that. I guess that's possible. But I saw a silhouette of someone in the driver's seat."

"Could it have been a trick of the light or a silhouette of the rear view mirror? Was it the shape of the neck rest or the back of the seat?"

I shook my head. "They told me I had schizophrenia and hospitalized me. It got worse in hospital because by then I knew I was crazy and was ultra-sensitive to every nuance, word, or gesture of the staff and patients. The walls were talking to me and that's when things really got weird."

"Cathy, I know you think you saw someone in the car, but could it have been a misinterpretation of the event?"  
 "Evelyn, I've spent three and a half years on medication and in therapy for mental illness. If what you are saying is true, this has all been a big waste of my time due to a false diagnosis!" I stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"Well, I'm definitely not staying here. This is crap."

"Please sit down."

I sat back in the chair and covered my eyes. My eyes started to water and I felt a lump in my throat.

"I'm not saying you suffered for no reason. I think you suffered because there were things that you feared or were sad or disappointed about during that time in your life. Today there are still things that scare or sadden you and that goes for everyone. I'm trying to give you a rational, objective view that you aren't crazy. Maybe in the past, your mind was working overtime to the point of disassociation with reality."

"Why would I do that on purpose?"

"It wasn't on purpose. It was a defense."  
 "I don't understand how you can pull this on me now. For years, I've believed I'm mentally ill. I feel like this is one big practical joke. Is it somehow my fault for not figuring it out and I'm being penalized?"

"There is no penalty because you aren't to blame."

"Aren't you saying that I was fooled by my own mind?"

"Cathy, calm yourself." She took a water pitcher on the table and poured me a paper cup of water.

I sipped it slowly but my throat didn't feel any better.

"Sometimes bad things happen to good people. Sometimes they're accidents."

"Like accidently getting beat up by Chinese gangsters and accidentally ending up in a psychiatric ward."

"Be sarcastic as you want. It doesn't bother me. If you need to let it out this is a safe place to do it."

"Even though some of what you say makes sense, the other part is clichéd generalizations."  
 "Sometimes clichés are truer than you think."

"I need someone to show me what's real."  
 "Don't fight me. Let me help you."

I sensed her energy in the room and it strengthened me.

Chapter 17

Denise swung open the door and Marco and I yelled, "Surprise!" We bounded across her threshold into her cramp apartment. "We come bearing gifts!"

Denise's stomach swelled under one of Jake's old t-shirts that she wore. We hugged which felt good to me.

"We have a present for you," said Marco.

"Baby shower's next week, silly people."

"Denise, this isn't for the baby." I held up a strangely shaped, awkwardly wrapped gift. Gleefully, she took the package from me and ripped off the paper. Inside she found a tin sculpture of a miniature banana seat bicycle with a missing back tire.

"Oh, you shouldn't have!" She understood the significance.

"If you hang it over your door, it might bring you good luck," I said.

"Or it might fall on your head," Marco teased. "I want you to remember every fight we had over that sculpture and every time we got back on the horse and worked through it. Because when you have a little Denise or Jake, you're going to have to work through stuff. So this is a reminder to be patient with your child."

"Are you saying I'm impatient!" Denise stamped her foot but soon her face broke into a grin. "Unfortunately, my temper is hereditary. Jake's the peacemaker in the family. Wanna see the baby room?"

#

Nate graduated from art school with a Bachelor of Fine Arts, majoring in painting. He was planning to continue on to attain a master's degree but decided to take a year to paint on his own, not influenced by instructors or other students. To isolate himself was part of his creative method, however, he showed up at the café more often than when he was in school. Nate, Raj and I were sitting inside for a change.

"What is the square root of an isosceles triangle?" Nate quizzed Raj.

"There isn't one," he responded. "Here's a question for you. What flies upside down and lands right side up?"

"A plane flying over Australia and landing in Canada." Nate drew an arc in the air with his spoon.

"How did you guess that one?"

"Because I'm a superior being." Come to think of it, Nate did resemble an alien in his sunglasses, I said to myself.

"Or you're reading off my tablet where I found the joke," said Raj. "Cathy, when are you going to show us your new work?"

"As soon as I see Nate's so I can forge it." I blew on my pencil after using a small sharpener to create a better point. "I can't wait to see what's he's working on."

"Did I ever tell you the penalty for forgery is up to a ten year sentence in Canada?" Nate declared.

"Moving right along, Cathy doesn't copy anymore," said Raj. "She's matured as an artist."

Taylor bustled in. Gino gave a big hello and Jeanne offered him a free espresso.

"Taylor, why don't you pull up a chair?" I asked.

"Sorry, can't stay. I need to get back to work."

"You can't even sit down and drink your coffee?"

"Clock's ticking." Taylor took a few quick sips and walked over to the display of cookies and other desserts but didn't order one.

"They taste better if you buy one," I jested.

He returned to our table. "Do you all live here? You're here all the time."

"We sleep in pizza boxes and Gino throws us expired loaves of bread to eat," I answered.

"Aren't we full of cheer. Unfortunately, I have some sad news. Pipsy is no longer."

"He died!" I said a little too loud.

"He had a few too many pretzels, fell off his perch and drowned in his water dish."  
 "Very funny," I said.

"Well, I must be off." He made a quick getaway out the door.

"You'd think after getting a free espresso, he'd buy a cookie!" I remarked. Nate laughed.

Raj held up his empty mug. "Can someone get me an Americano?"

#

Bad news befell our family. My dad came home wearing a neck brace in a taxi. He was injured driving the jeep. He was at a stoplight when a car rear-ended him. The jeep was totaled. So much for our repair. I guessed it was only meant to be for a short time. He took sick leave off work for a month. He said that he was going to sue the bastard.

Leonard drove him twice a week to the massage therapist two miles away. Dad acted nervous every time he climbed into a car. He wouldn't take the bus because they have no seatbelts. One time mom took him in a taxi to see the doctor. He jumped out at a red light, shouting, "They're coming!"

I talked in low whispers to Mom about symptoms of dementia, post-traumatic stress disorder and mental illness. "Early onset of Alzheimer's disease can occur in the 40s and 50s."

"He doesn't talk to me. Instead he talks to the walls. What can be done?" She bowed her head.

"His behaviour was triggered by the accident. He needs to go to hospital."

Leonard drove Mom, Dad and me to emergency. Dad was interviewed by one doctor then another. He was admitted to an acute psychiatric ward. We helped him settle in, carrying a few of his belongings in a suitcase to the ward. In his room, Dad wasn't allowed to have his razor, penknife or keys. All his identification was locked away.

"Relax, Dad. They'll take care of you." I had stayed on the same ward four years previously. The walls were still beige and the old antiseptic smell hadn't changed.

"I want to go home." He groaned and covered his face in shame. He shed tears which trickled down his cheeks. I'd never seen him cry before.

"Cathy, Leonard, let him rest." Mom prodded us like sheep toward the elevator. I looked back to see my father sitting in a wheelchair at the end of the hall but he didn't wave good-bye. Instead, his eyes were fixed on a spot on the cold tile floor.

Mom worked double-shifts to pay the bills. She visited Dad often in hospital. They moved him to another ward. She wanted to hire a nurse so he could live at home. Mom didn't want to talk about suing the other driver who was elderly and also injured in the accident. I convinced her that we could sue for lost wages and the cost of home care from the car insurance company. After considering how many thousands of dollars that would be, she asked the doctor to fill out the forms.

Leonard received a raise at work. He was busy a lot of the time and spent less time with me. Instead I forged on alone without his chicken soup. I knew that he was disillusioned because of Dad's illness. He had a picture of Jacklyn on his bedroom wall. At the dinner table, he wondered out loud if there was a God.

"If you believe in God then God exists. We need to hang onto hope. Don't beat yourself up, Leonard. Dad's coming home soon." I rubbed his shoulder. "I know you think about Jacklyn too, but you should think about finding new friends. You work too much."

"I don't know Dad anymore," he said. "We used to watch hockey together and talk about politics. I tried to do a puzzle with him on the ward and he started chewing on the pieces."

Mom ran out of the dining room to blow her nose. I noticed the slump of her shoulders and her bowed head when she walked around the house. She hadn't had a haircut or coloured her grey hair in three months. I went to comfort her but she closed the bathroom door in my face. I spoke to her through the door. She opened it and we hugged for the second time in twenty years.

I was no longer the Queen of Puns or Clichés. Life had become more serious.

"Leonard, I had a dream about Jacklyn last night. She was petting Nate's black cat Darkness. She held Darkness in her arms, smiled and walked toward a golden door."

"What was behind the door?" he asked.

"I asked my psychiatrist the same question. He said, 'Behind the door is whatever you want. Whatever you want to believe in.' "

#

In Gastown, a new gallery opened with international connections. Raj suggested I enter a piece into a juried exhibition there. He helped me to compose a submission but I paid the entry fee.

A week after the deadline, I received a call from Ms. Penny at the gallery.

"Cathy, we like your work and your painting is approved to be in our juried show. I'll email you details. However, you didn't receive an award."  
 "Thanks, Ms. Penny. That's wonderful news." Elated, I immediately called Raj.

"I'm disappointed in you, Cathy. You should have gotten at least a third place prize."

"Raj, don't you think it's great I was chosen at all?"

He chuckled. "Good job, Cathy."

After I hung up, I began to get angry that I didn't get an award, but I caught myself mid-thought. I was fortunate to be selected and maybe that was good enough for now.

#

I noticed Leonard seemed fine on the surface, but once in a while, I detected a certain somberness on his face. Dad was living at home with us. Mom hired a male nurse to attend to his needs. I visited Dr. Montgomery's office on a clear morning in October. From where I sat across from him, I could see Grouse Mountain through the window.

"Yesterday I found my father in the backyard standing in the rain in his slippers and robe and talking to the fence about hockey. Do you think he will ever recover?" I thought about him a lot.

"I can't answer that." Dr. Montgomery didn't want to say what I already knew.

"I hope he finds and opens his golden door where his truth lies." I shifted in my seat and admired the toes of my pink running shoes. I bought them because they reminded me of Jacklyn. I counted the months and days since she'd gone missing. It had been too long. "Jacklyn may never return but is that better than knowing she's dead?"

"Her memory is alive either way."

"Leonard said her parents pray for her. They're Catholic." I leaned back and focused on a lit candle beside the window. I visualized a procession of women in white carrying candles in Jacklyn's memory.

"What are you thinking?"

The flame flickered. I thought of tiny acrobats dancing on the table. "I would like to be in love."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because to be in love is what a lot of people want. Nate wants love too."

"Does Nate care for you?"

"We're friends." I tilted my head and stared at the garbage can in the corner of the room. The colour of the bin was turquoise like the sea in my paintings.

Dr. Montgomery drew on his pad. He liked to draw circles. "Sometimes friendship is the best love there is."

I looked at him quizzically. "Are you sure about that?"

He cleared his throat. "Have you had contact with your neighbour Phil?"

"Phil?" I laughed. "He's a goddamn special agent. Not a boyfriend!"

He began to chuckle. Soon we were both roaring with laughter. With a handkerchief, he wiped the lenses of his spectacles. Soon he was composed again. "How long has it been since you've been ill?"

"What do you mean? Aren't I always ill?"

"I've charted that you have been symptom-free for a year now."

"News to me."

"What do you think about reducing your medication?"

"That's a strange request coming from a psychiatrist." I decided to investigate the offer. "By how much?"

"From fifteen to ten to five to…zero."

"Go completely off the pills?" I sat on the edge of the seat. "But what if I relapse?"

"Then you go back on the medication. Cathy, I know to you it's a risk, but I think you've handled a lot of change in your life in a practical and reasonable way. Jacklyn, your father, life and death situations. Even though, you've been in these stressful and dangerous times, you have made strides in your chosen field, become a better painter, been a loyal friend and sibling. I have no record in the past year of you having psychotic symptoms."

I retraced my steps over the past twelve months, wondering if what he said was true, but I couldn't pinpoint any particular time or place where I lost control of my faculties.

"The problem with these medications is that in the long term they may have detrimental effects and cause serious physical health risks like diabetes or weight gain, which unchecked could eventually lead to heart disease. If you go off these medications, I can't promise your mental health will be problem-free, but your senses will seem more alive because the haze caused by the medication won't be there. You may experience withdrawal symptoms, but they will fade in time."

"I'm afraid." I felt like an ant in an ambush of medical alert bracelets, warning me of impeding doom if I stayed on my medication. I pictured myself obese and in cardiac arrest caused by side effects of prescription drugs. "It's unconventional. You could lose your license over malpractice for suggesting such a thing." In my mind, I heard a judge sentencing Dr. Montgomery to ten years in prison for the slow death of Cathy Fung.

"I'm not a pill pusher. I am a doctor who has known you for a number of years." He adjusted his glasses.

"Schizophrenic is chronic illness. How could I be cured?"

"I believe you had a one-time major psychotic episode which required hospitalization. It took awhile for you to stabilize. Because of your natural tendencies, you internalized your emotions and your outlook became negative and exaggerated. Ideas would snowball into more ideas in your thinking, causing you distress. Since then, you have found a way to control your thoughts from interfering in your life. You discard superfluous information that used to deceive you. If that's being cured, then yes you are."

"If I'm cured, can I still see you?"

"You may not want or need to. I want to wean you off not only the medication but also therapy. You need to be independent, responsible for your own actions, and utilize your support system. You have a good head on your shoulders."

#

After the meeting ended, I left dizzy, weak, and tingling all over like I'd been struck by lightning. I strolled along the seawall. In my mind's eye, I saw Jacklyn wave and run toward me. I started to run toward her, then in a blink of a raven's eye she disappeared.

I realized that nothing is permanent in life. Friends come and go. Some stay longer than others. Families grow in different directions and so do the paths we all take. One opportunity might end, but others open up, if a person searches hard enough.

When I faced death at the hands of the Chinese gangsters, a switch went off and a switch came on. I believed that trial snapped me out of the marshmallow layer, in which I was immersed. In marshmallowland, I was inert, stuck without the will or tools to free myself. When my father had the accident that triggered his confusion, I didn't revert into delusions as an exit from a painful reality. Instead I stood my ground and faced the fact that my father was almost as mad as I once had been.

I was no longer ruled by fear and the stigma of being labeled as having schizophrenia. If I didn't read the behaviour of others as acts against me, I was no longer tied to being a victim. I decided no one was out to get me because there was no reason. In fact, there were people in my life who supported me, ready to help if I need it.

The German at the café I suspected of foul play was still a regular, but I no longer perceived him as part of an elaborate spy scheme. Maybe he liked to eat out of pizza boxes and learn Chinese, right? Sometimes thinking less means living more.

I no longer carried the weight of world as my previous magnified view of my own purpose dictated. My responsibility to myself was to live a healthy, disciplined, sensible life and be comfortable with who I was.

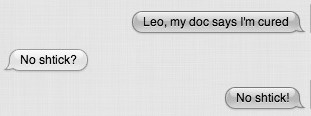
Some people are diagnosed as having bipolar disorder or schizophrenia or a combination of both, but I believe in some cases it is more a case of an extreme emotional and psychological response to a past or current event, like post-traumatic stress disorder. If a woman is beaten by her husband repeatedly and has a manic response, I think that is normal because her animal instinct is to react with fear, runaway or fight back or a combination of those elements. If she is paralyzed to not act because her attacker is still a threat, her paranoia is reality-based. So what if she starts to react to other people in her life. It's because she is a victim caught in a bear trap. If she's diagnosed as mentally ill, she may feed into that because she's lost and looking for protection and may even feel a thread of guilty she brought punishment upon herself.

Being kidnapped, I was faced with a situation I had brought on myself. I chose to search the boat. I survived due to the aid of my friends, my brother and Phil. I was very lucky but it could have gone the other way so easily. The memory was still there but caused me less distress as time passed. I still had waking dreams, good and bad, that seemed real but once fully awake I had the capacity to regard them as not as reality but as ideas. Good dreams empowered me to create and believe in the future. When I had a bad day, I minimized my self-pity, and tried again the next day.

The raven song in my life was now here to protect me.

I breathed deeply and my lungs expanded filled with my life force. Things were looking better than they had in a long time. The shackles were off. With elation, my heart did somersaults and a half pike as I dove into a new phase of my life.

Walking on air, I pulled out my cellphone and texted Leonard. Incidentally, Leonard had taught me how to text recently. I had a new talent.



There will always be time for that! I smiled to myself. Texting isn't so hard once you get used to it. Reality was a good place to be but my dreams would keep me sane.

Author's Note

In the fictional story *Chopshtick*, I explore the dream some people with mental illness have that they may one day be cured. There are cases of a person having a one-time psychotic episode which doesn't reoccur. I've heard rumours of people with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder being able to cease medication and function in the community.

However, most of the stories I hear are that people with schizophrenia need to be on medication for the rest of their lives and also function better with other supports, such as subsidized housing, mental health professionals, family, friends, meaningful activities such as volunteer or paid work, and financial assistance.

In an ideal world, it would be wonderful to believe that fundamental shifts in one's thinking can cure a brain disease like schizophrenia. However, delusions and hallucinations are caused by a chemical imbalance that cannot necessarily be controlled by logical thinking in all cases. Medication may be part of the answer to living with a mental illness because it regulates neurotransmitter activity in the brain.

Personally, I found cognitive behavioural therapy was helpful to an extent, for me as a person with schizophrenia, but I also function better with medication and support from others. When I do experience thoughts that are suspicious or threatening, I attempt to allow them to flow through like water through a sieve. By not letting them control me and looking for underlying causes such as imbalances in my life, I am more resilient and spring back quicker from disruptive thinking. However, I am not always objective.

I hope readers will feel empowered by the story as an example of my own hope on my road to recovery, despite the general consensus that schizophrenia is incurable. Also I hope readers understand the reality that many people with this illness struggle on a daily or weekly basis.

In *Chopshtick*, I began with an idea to describe Cathy's illness and madcap adventures with humour but it turned into a story of her heroism to overcome great odds in her life including curing her schizophrenia, which I myself cannot.

THE END