

A painting of a boy's face and legs. The boy has short, spiky grey hair and large, bright green eyes. He has a serious expression. He is wearing blue denim jeans with a prominent tear on the right leg, revealing a brown and orange patterned fabric underneath. The background is a textured, abstract mix of colors including white, grey, brown, and hints of red and green. The overall style is expressive and somewhat somber.

A NOVEL BY PETER SCHAFFTER

**The
Binbrook
Caucus**

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PART
ONE

Chapter 1

PROLOGUE – EYES AND APPLE PIE

IF EMERALDS WEPT, their tears would be the colour of my eyes. The clear, chrome green is so intense the pupils drink it in and seem to vanish under certain lights.

Marion, who lived and worked next door, was jealous as all hell.

“I need the props,” she used to sigh. “Cards and tea leaves, palms and birth charts. Otherwise my clients wouldn’t give me the time of day. But you? You’re lucky. Insta-otherworldly.”

A communicating door linked our apartments, never locked but seldom used. Marion preferred the corridor outside with its lemongrass and curry smells whenever she popped over. We lived above a row of shops in Little Italy, but Asian pressure on the edges of the neighbourhood had supplanted memories of Tuscany with memories of Singapore. The café and the bridal shop below us—Gato Nero and Lucia’s, respectively—still claimed the street for Rome, but the culinary fugue upstairs foretold a second fall.

“It smells so good,” she’d always comment, lingering in the hall.

“Doesn’t it?” I’d answer, motioning her in.

She’d smile, happy of an ally, unaware of what the ritual revealed: Marion Harper wished that she were someone else. Advancing toward sixty, her hair had gone that driftwood shade of Anglo-Saxon drab you see on Tilley-ed women haunting birding stores and Third-World shops. Ageing so *undifferently* preoccupied a small,

disgruntled corner of her mind. In adolescence she read Nin and Woolf, wrote poetry to trees, and defined herself by all the things she wasn't. In latter days she clung to borrowed otherness—the smell of Asian cooking, which she loved as an idea more than with her nose—to reinforce a flagging sense of nonconformity.

Did she know I knew? Hard to say. She scarcely knew herself. She was good at what she did—very good—but her Tarot cards and birth charts couldn't tell her what I got from just the colour of her hair and four small words.

It smells so good...



Whenever clients called—their first time, anyway—their gaze inevitably landed on a clipping from the *Sun*, framed in ebony and hanging in the space between two deep-silled parlour windows. *Rags to Riches* screamed the big, bold type. Underneath, a little smaller, *Jobless Man Hits Jackpot*. Alliteration must have been the headline fiat of the day.

At some point in those visits, the telephone would ring. The computer in my study was set up to make the call. I'd excuse myself just long enough for clients to get curious and read that David Ase, age twenty-eight, had won the undivided spoils of the largest Super 7 ever, a record still unbroken. The photo with the article was staged: a functionary handing me a cheque. From the rictus on his face, one could easily suppose a Gollum in his head, muttering and hissing, "*Mine, all mine, my preciousss.*"

The story plumbed its subject with the insight of a comic book. Where were you when you found out? What were you doing? How did you feel?

And, of course, the one that always has them hanging on their seats: *What will you do now?*

Four years old, the story wasn't accurate. Hustler's what I told them when they asked about my job. A male prostitute. An escort, if you like, though that's just fig-leaf talk for what amounts to

lounging at the curb while men drive by and check you out for bulges in the places they're supposed to be.

Perhaps the paper thought it wasn't work.

Could have fooled me.

There's more to hustling than a pretty face and shaking what your momma gave you. The real trick, what brings the money in, is getting in a client's head and giving him exactly what he wants. If he doesn't have to spell it out, if you just seem to *know*, a tip is sure to grease the bills already in your wallet.

But it's never easy turning into someone else's fantasy. You have to split yourself in two, one half empty like a vinyl waterbag, the other sensitive to clues. When they start pouring in you let them fill your empty half. Your skin remains your own, but its shape is contoured from the inside by a stranger's need. Do it right, and your client thinks he's lucked into the greatest fuck and soul-mate of his life.

With more money than he'd ever spend and all his life ahead of him, you'd think a man who'd sold his ass since seventeen would look for something else to do. Something unrelated. Something easier. Hustling is no Sunday in the park. There are dead nights. There are rainy nights. There are nights so stinking cold your thighs cramp up with palsy.

But there are good nights, too, when johns descend like Manna. Something special happens then. You get inside the heads of six or seven different men and discover that you like it there. The power to become what someone else desires draws you back and back and back. The control you wield is absolute, utilized or not. Servant first, you end up being master.

Not an easy thing to put behind, even for a Super 7 jackpot.

With the winnings breeding in accounts around the world, I still got into people's heads. I still established, from the tells they dropped like pennies through a pocket tear, who they were, where they were headed, what they craved. They forked out big for having someone *understand*.

Just like my former clients.

The difference was I didn't have to strip and sport a ready-made erection.



“What do you suppose the chances are?” Marion asked me two days after I'd moved in. Despite an August heat wave she'd come knocking with an apple pie, still warm and redolent of cloves and curiosity. “Two of us, winding up as neighbours, neither of us knowing?”

“The chances of not knowing? Pretty good, I'd say.”

“No, I meant about the other part. Winding up as neighbours. We hardly practise what you'd call a common occupation.”

“I wouldn't be so sure. Not around here, anyway.”

I'd counted thirteen signs within a five-block radius, all with variations of the Eye-in-Palm motif. Most advertised Madame—not Signora—Somebody-or-other ready to reveal all: *Money, Health, Career, Love*. Hand-painted, none looked new. At least a few of the Madames had long since journeyed to the other side.

My own sign, in the window of a room I never used, was yellow neon. *David Ase, it said, Psychic Counsellor*. I'd plugged it in on Tuesday. Marion had waited—or not—till Thursday before dropping by.

“We're in the same profession,” she'd announced, holding up her fresh-baked ploy for snooping. “May I come in?”

Arching crust, generous filling, deft crimping... farm raised... two brothers... takes the room she's had forever when she goes home in August and the corn is coming on...

Normally I guarded against dislocations in my days, but I'd known this one was coming. I took her welcome-wagon gift.

“Thank you. And yes, please, come in. You're Marion.”

She paused inside the door and looked around.

“No need to play me for a rube,” she said distractedly. “My name's on the mailbox downstairs. And I didn't come over for—whatever it is you do. If you can, shut it off.” She broke off her in-

spection. "I'd like us to be friends."

"Pie, then? Or something to drink?"

"Brandy and tonic if you have it. Orange juice otherwise. Save the pie for yourself. I made two."

I headed for the kitchen while she toured the living room. When I came back her eye had landed on the black-framed clipping.

"Is this authentic?"

"Yes."

She took the sweating tumbler with her Hennessey and Schweppes, squeegeeing the bottom with her thumb.

"How much did you win?"

"Enough to lobotomize the past. Or portions thereof."

"Ooo, a man of mystery. Do tell. An outlaw past or just conventionally juicy?"

"Closer to the former, I'm afraid."

She sipped her drink and raised her brows.

And waited.

Finally the brows came down.

"And you don't intend to talk about it. That's all right. I won't pry. At least you weren't a grifter."

Shrewd. If I'd been running psychic scams, it wasn't very likely I'd have carried on. Not after lucking out so big.

Marion turned around and cast about for seating. The problem wasn't lack of chairs. The room's high ceilings, plaster walls and whitewashed mouldings had, to my eyes, wanted to be overfilled with worn-but-decent furniture, like those claustrophobic daguerreotypes of British spiritualists' salons. Raymond Kiefer—upstairs neighbour at a former digs and master of excess—had tracked me down a madman's omnium-gatherum of fauteuils, bergères, hassocks and causeuses in stolid woods and bourgeois fabrics.

"I'm glad you're not bilking widows," she said, settling on a brocade wing-back. "I was worried. We're none of us beyond chicanery but outright swindling I can't tolerate. You have the looks for it, you know. They're real, aren't they? Your eyes? At first I thought they must be contacts."

I nodded.

“Extraordinary. Do you mind?”

She gestured me to squat in front of her, then cupped her hands around my face. At her touch I prickled with the urge to pull away, but a grey, familiar quiet opened up and killed the reflex. I’d seen too many eyes before, staring at—not into—mine, been subject to too many forward hands.

“Extraordinary,” she repeated. “A tremendous asset. Like your lottery. Anyone might think you’re blessed.”

“Or psychic,” I said, getting up.

“Are you?”

I went over to a burgundy *méridienne*, a damask dromedary of a couch that Raymond had unearthed before he drank away the rest of his commission.

“What’s the matter? Can’t you tell?”

“I said before I’d like us to be friends,” she answered sweetly. “You don’t bullshit me, I don’t bullshit you.”

“Then your answer is, I’m not.”

“Good. Now that that’s established, could you rustle up a napkin?”

She held her drink an inch or two above a side table.

Brothers Tom and Jared... Jared hates Jerry—a good thing... calls her father Daddy... mother is Mama, accent on the second ma...

I handed her a coaster from an inlaid walnut box.

“How old are you?” she asked, studying the coaster’s tea-rose *découpage*.

“Thirty-one.”

“Too young for all this bric-a-brac. Unless you’re into séances. That isn’t what you do, is it?”

“No, although at times, it’s true, I feel like David Sludge, not David Ase.”

She set the coaster and the tumbler down and sank back in her chair.

“If I recall my Browning, Mr. Sludge, the Medium, was a misan-

thropic charlatan, as base and filthy as his name. Is that how you see yourself?”

“People pay me for a gift I don’t possess. It’s not that big a leap. But I was trying for a joke.”

“I’m aware. I didn’t want you thinking it had gone over my head.” She rolled her eyes. “*Browning.*”

Silence followed, oddly easy in the August heat. No anachronistic thrumming of a fifteen-thousand BTU disturbed my Antiques Roadshow parlour. A westering sun, glinting off the storefronts across College Street, had flushed the room with salmon pink.

“What’s your angle?” Marion asked.

“I help people.”

The corners of her mouth tightened.

A teacher before fortune telling... maths and sciences and English... keeps in touch with gifted students... one especially who’s recently resurfaced...

“It’s what we all do,” she retorted, “those of us who aren’t just in it for the money. What I mean is, what’s your hook? Cards? Astrology? Channelling?”

“Untangling knotted auras? Dangling crystals over contumacious genitals? No, nothing like that. I listen to my clients, establish their concerns and give advice.”

She harrumphed. “Nice soundbite. Hardly an answer.”

“It’s all the answer there is. I don’t use Tarot. Tea leaves are something I strain out when I’m playing mother. What I know about crystals comes from sleepless nights with Shirley Maclaine. I listen, observe, ask questions, and tell people what they need or want to hear. That’s all.”

“Why all this then?” She waved her hand around the room, acknowledging the décor—overdone or not—as perfect for the practice of divinatory arts. “Why not psychiatry?”

“Can’t be bothered with the schooling.”

Another answer that didn’t sit well. Her eyes went heavenward again.

I shrugged.

“People get defensive around shrinks. They resent it when a therapist appears to know them better than they do themselves. It makes them feel unspecial somehow—statistical, not unique. A psychic’s insights have the opposite effect, reinforcing singularity instead of undermining it.”

“Bravo,” Marion clapped. “A lovely speech. Beautifully rehearsed, like everything you’ve said. Tell me—do you really have so much to hide?”

Hard on her clients, mostly male... investment brokers... a judge... an Anglican minister with his eye on the bishopric... some philandering married forty-somethings wondering if they could have their cake—or tart—and eat it, too...

“You said you wouldn’t pry.”

“I did, didn’t I? Damn. Hoist on my own petard.”

She took a deep pull from her glass and held it forward by the rim.

“Top-me-up?” I asked.

“You *are* psychic.”

As before, she swiped the bottom of the refill I brought back. “You know,” she said, aligning it dead centre of the coaster, “I think we’re getting off on the wrong foot. I’ve a good feeling about you, but you’re too quick by half. Normally that scares me. Sociopaths like the mask of cleverness, and they’re not unknown in this business. Still, I can’t shake the feeling we’re playing at a game whose rules you haven’t bothered to explain.”

“You’re actually not far off on that,” I replied, “and I really should apologize. The little time I spend with others in this business always veers into unspoken competition. Anything you can divine, I can divine better. I’m not sure what it is—are all psychics monomaniacs who hate to be one-upped? At any rate, it turns me off. I can smell cold reading at a hundred paces and immediately clam up.”

“Well, it’s a reflex wasted on me. We’re not in competition. I don’t believe in clairvoyance, clairaudiance, automatic writing, auras or past lives. You needn’t worry I’m a loonie or a monomaniac. And in my case you’re confusing cold reading with garden variety nose-

parkerishness. Which surprises me. You don't usually make mistakes like that, do you?"

No mistake. A statement ending with a question is square one of reading cold, even when it's uttered—as Marion had done—with vibrant overtones of friendship and complicity.

"Tell me how you operate," I sidestepped. "I'm intrigued. You're the first psychic I've met whose belief system runs as shallow as my own."

She exhaled softly through her nose. She'd get through my defences some other day.

"There's nothing magical in what I do. I deal in patterns, not the paranormal. A spread of cards. A birth chart. The lines on someone's hands. Things anyone can read if they bother to learn how. True, it does require some skill to make the leap between the Seven of Cups, the Hanged Man and a client's faulty liver, but it's ordinary intellect, not a capital-G Gift. Mostly it's just common sense, which has an almost perfect record when it comes to seeing what the future holds. Ask any parent."

"You don't believe in psychic ability at all, then?"

"That coincidence can be dissected to determine where the moment's headed I don't doubt. But that's it. My clients can believe whatever other nonsense strikes their fancy. Truth is I encourage it. That's the shady side of fortune telling. If I could I'd dispense with all the falderal and tell them, minus props, what's visible to anyone. But I'd need eyes like yours to do that, wouldn't I?"

Out of sight, the sun was dropping quickly. The rosy mote-filled light descended into blue and shadow.

Marion reached for her drink with the languorous exertion of someone getting tipsy.

"Here I came over to find out about you and somehow you've got me talking about myself. You must be very good. Well, I'm glad. We're going to get along just fine."

She hoisted her glass.

"To new friends. And to coincidence. I mean, what do you suppose the chances are?"