

# Chapter 3

## GLASS WALLS

I'D JUST TURNED off the shower when I heard the knock. Drying hastily, I pulled on jeans and answered.

Marion, of course.

“How would you feel about coming to the fair?” she asked, bustling in instead of making culinary comments from the corridor.

I shook water from my ears and towelled my neck.

“Meet me in St. Louis, Louis’?”

She eyed me up and down.

“You’d make a lousy Judy Garland.”

“Not something I aspire to. What fair are you talking about? It’s too early in the year for pumpkin pies and hayrides.”

“The Psychic Fair. Down at the Convention Centre.”

“The Convention Centre? What’s the matter? The TravelLodge not big enough for those things these days?”

“Psychics are a booming business.”

“Apparently.”

“Will you come?”

“In another lifetime, maybe.”

“Hear me out.”

“What’s to hear? I showed up at the TravelLodge—or was it the Best Western?—once. It felt like a cheap bazaar with the merchants hawking fibs instead trinkets.”

“So you’ve been to one.”

“Some things even Madame Harper doesn’t know. Want some coffee?”

“Why ask a question when you already know the answer?”

“Manners.”

“From a man who greets his guests half-naked?”

“‘Guest’ is pushing it.”

I left her to the comfort of her wing-back chair.

After doing up the *grand salon*, Raymond Kiefer, champion of chintz, had wanted to go at my kitchen too. I’d balked. Kitchens should be bright and airy, as if basking in a fake Ikea sun. In fact, Ikea’s what I wanted, but Raymond, having lost on overdone, insisted on Georg Jensen. Same thing but a whole lot more expensive.

I hopped up on the cobalt-tiled counter while the coffee maker—twenty bucks on sale at The Bay—finished its dyspeptic gurgling.

So the Psychic Fair was coming up, and Marion wanted company. That was odd. She’d had a booth the year before, and managed on her own. What was different this year? Not the guts to ask. Marion was fearless when it came to asking favours, be it fetching drinks or plunging her john.

Doctoring two mugs of coffee, I decided to accede. But not right off the bat. I’d let her do a little talking first.

“I hate these do’s as much as you,” she called as I was coming down the hall. “So many fakes, and all so terribly sincere.”

I handed her her mug.

“Is there a word for that, I wonder? Psychics who detest their colleagues? Something like misogyny?”

“Fraudulogy?”

She snorted in her coffee, unprepared for how it sounded.

“Good stuff,” she said, recovering. “You must have an in downstairs.” The café, Gato Nero. “The stuff Ermanno sells me never tastes this good. But I’d enjoy it more if you got dressed. A woman my age with a man of your charms—anyone might think you were my gigolo.”

We’d never talked about my former life, but Marion had nearly

raised the spectre more than once.

“Hang on,” I said. “Back in a flash.”

I returned tucking in a T-Shirt. She nodded her approval.

“Much better. Though it’s high time you went out and got a real wardrobe. It’s not like money’s standing in your way. That fifties rebel thing has got to go. Especially as all it does is draw attention to your eyes. They’re fine for clients, but in mundane social intercourse, they’re really quite distracting.”

“What would you have me wear? A smoking jacket? Silk pyjamas?”

“Anything so long as I don’t feel like I’m talking to a pair of tourmalines.”

“Do you sit up nights with a thesaurus? Last time they were chrysoprases.”

“Shall we talk about the Fair?”

“If you must.”

She took another hit of coffee.

“You’re wondering why I’m asking you, and why this year and not last. The answer is, because I feel like it.”

“A persuasive rationale. Remind me of it next time I get stopped for speeding.”

“Which isn’t going to happen any time soon, is it? You almost never use that car of yours. Weekends only, near as I can tell.”

“I like to walk.”

“No, you don’t like going out.”

“I’ve seen everything I want to see?”

She wasn’t buying it.

“Maybe I’m just shy?”

The look she gave me could have withered winter cabbages.

“Okay,” I said, “consider this. I’ve got the means to do what keeps me happy and I’m doing it. Didn’t someone say contentment is the highest goal in life?”

“Hobbes. But the idea was hardly new with him. It’s been around at least since Buddha.”

I held out my hands, palms up.

“In company like that I rest my case.”

“Not so fast. I’ve watched you come and go—when go you do. Your routines never vary. You see clients between two and seven, with a break at five for dinner. Your sessions never go on past the hour. I know you love to read so I’ll assume that’s what you do till bedtime. You’ve never had a guest stay overnight. Saturdays you shop, but only in the neighbourhood. Between one and four, you disappear, then re-emerge for supper at Il Vagabondo. Sundays you observe the fourth commandment, except those odd times when you take that car I’d kill for and head to points unknown, always coming home an hour after sundown. For contentment, that’s too rigorous.”

“I think you mean ‘obsessive.’”

“I didn’t want to be insulting.”

“Since when? Have you suddenly found Jesus?”

She stuck out her tongue.

“Besides,” I said, “there’s always you to keep me from my ruts. I had no idea I was watched so closely. What comes next? Sneaking in here while I sleep?”

I glanced over at the door between our flats.

“You’ve always known I was a snoop.”

“An unrepentant one, at that.”

She went silent then abruptly changed her tack.

“Do you have friends?”

*Not exactly fishing... not exactly worried...*

“There’s you,” I said.

“Don’t flatter. It sounds cheap. I meant anyone else.”

“Yes.”

I didn’t amplify. Marion waited, coffee cradled in her hands.

“Family?” she asked at length.

“Not that I know of.”

She looked down, then raised her mug and drained it. A good performance. By my reckoning, she’d emptied it some time before.

“My man of mystery,” she said lightly. “Did you make lots of coffee? I’d have some more.”

Slave by complicity, I did my duties and came back.

“What I’m getting at,” she carried on, “is that you don’t have a social life. Not that it’s any of my business—”

“Never stopped you before.”

“—but even you and I don’t do much of anything but sit around and think up clever things to say. Schmoozing clients at the Fair is a such a bore. I want company this year, preferably yours. Lobbing brickbats at our so-called peers ought to keep us both amused.”

*Tone too breezy... too much emphasis on “bore”...*

For the first time in two years Marion was hiding something.

More unusual, I couldn’t say just what.

Sensing hidden motives, most people call on intuition to discern the truth. I rely on observation—quite a different thing—and a gift for putting two and two together. Just then the gift had left me. In its absence, I looked instead at the geometry of Marion I carry in my head. Her need for something deeper than the favour she was asking danced like a square peg before a chorus line of round holes.

*Never married... hasn’t had a lover since her thirties... pregnant once, terminated at the Morgentaler clinic...*

I took a stab. “Is this like a date?”

She threw back her head.

“Oh, the vanity of men. No, David, it is not a date. I’m worried about you, that’s all. Call it the concern of an ordinary busybody, but I have noticed you don’t get out much and I really would enjoy the company.”

*... worried about you.* That, at least, rang true. So much it caught me off my guard.

“How long’s the Fair?” I asked.

“Just two days. The weekend.”

“I’ll do it, then.”

Her face fell comically.

“That’s it? I expected more resistance. Don’t wimp out on me. I want this to be fun.”

“If it restores things to their proper balance, I can only come one day.”

“That would be Sunday?”

“I withdraw the Madame Harper crack.”

Mission accomplished, she abandoned her coffee and made, uncharacteristically, for the communicating door.

“There’s one more thing,” she said. “Please—do wear something else. That bursting from the T-shirt look has got to go. I don’t want people drawing wrong conclusions. Tone down the hunk.”



*Hunk.*

It’s why I should have stuck to male clients. *Heterosexual* male clients. My looks passed underneath their radar, or, if they registered, only as a blip, a ghost that vanished on the next spin of their ego-dish. Unlike that afternoon’s new client, a woman whose antenna wouldn’t budge. Her name was Kirin Neemes. She said she’d seen my ad in *Now*. The ad contained my picture; she should have been forewarned.

“Darker and larger,” I said. “Plus a bit less hair. Then you’ll have it right.”

She had slightly exophthalmic eyes, which she widened in bewilderment. No frown lines creased her forehead.

*A model... catalogue, not runway... one child, a daughter... never married... terrible luck with men...*

“I don’t understand.”

She made it sound as if her intellect, not my abstruseness, were to blame.

“My chest,” I said. “The nipples are darker than you’re imagining. The aureoles are larger. And I have a tad less hair.”

From her look you’d think I’d been undressing her inside my head, not the other way around.

“And in case your interested,” I smiled, “I’m not. For reason number two.”

She kept on gaping. “You know what I’m thinking.”

“Not precisely. But you were wondering whether I’m available or

married-slash-gay. It's the latter of the latter I'm afraid."

Up till then she'd been perched forward on a claw-foot deacon's chair. Delighted and a bit in awe, she relaxed to the extent its pious back allowed.

"That's amazing. How do you do that?"

Sometimes I just smiled and let my clients draw their own conclusions. Not this time.

"Good guesses," I replied.

"No way. You knew what was in my head."

I shrugged. "Shot in the dark."

She had curiously flat features—ideal for photographs at any angle—and very straight blond hair. Not just the frown-avoidance trick, but all her gestures kept her at her pert and photogenic best. It wasn't vanity. She'd gotten excellent professional advice and practised. Practised hard, for underneath the magazine veneer spun a maelstrom of confusion and a fragile edginess that made me think of sparrows mindful of the hawk.

"You've visited a lot of psychics," I said.

"How did you...?" She stopped. "Right. Of course. If I'm here ..."

"No, it isn't that."

I'd only said it to keep conversation going.

"What, then?"

Her eyes really were too large. She didn't so much look at things as peer at them, as if by working at it she could bring them into focus.

*Wants to be liked... trusting... too much so... sensitive to others' feelings... overwhelmed by them...*

"You're getting something," she insisted. "I can tell. What is it? Are you getting something from me?"

With variations, every client asked me that and always for the same two reasons. One was vanity, the narcissistic thrill of harking to a verbal mirror. The other, far less frequent, was the fear some hidden flaw—or rarer still some undeveloped virtue—was impinging on their lives. Kirin straddled both. She wanted me to tell her all

about herself—a regrettable prerequisite to trusting I was psychic—but she'd sought me out with a less frivolous agenda. Something was consuming her.

"You were good girl growing up," I said, "closer to your father than your mother. Your mother's mother was a drunk. You were pretty as a teenager and even though you hated it, played the proto-prom-queen well to make your Daddy smile.

"Later in your teens you fell in love with a photographer, an older man who got you into modelling but proved be an asshole. You stuck with him far longer than you should. Your reaction, when he dumped you, was to find another guy who might well have been his moral twin. Virile men attract you so testosterone grenades make up the bulk of your relationships.

"You have a daughter, about six, whose name is similar to yours—Karen or Carla, something like that. Her father, whom you hate, is a manipulative SOB who uses your daughter to control you for the sheer nastiness of proving that he can. Shall I go on?"

"Oh my god," Kirin whispered. "My daughter's name is Carlin. How could you possibly know that?"

On cue, the phone began to ring. I excused myself to let her snoop and ponder.

She'd reached the *Sun* article when I got back.

"Did you use your powers to predict this?" she asked.

*No inverted commas around 'powers'... a real believer...*

"It was a Quick Pick. No one can predict a lottery."

"Then why's this here? Don't people ask?"

"I don't always give them the same answer."

She heard the smile in my voice.

"You mean you lie?"

"If that's what someone needs."

"And you don't think I do?"

I let her figure that one for herself.

She finished reading and moved over to a love-seat done in floral chintz, more her style than the torture rack she'd picked before.

"You can have a cigarette if you like," I said.



She lit up gratefully before it crossed her mind to wonder how I knew she smoked. I answered when I saw the question reach her eyes.

“You sat down next to that,” I said, pointing to an ashtray that had drawn her like a magnet. “You’re a model and it helps you to stay thin. More simply, I can smell it on your clothes.”

She took a fast drag and blew the smoke to one side.

“Are you like this with everyone?”

I went for disingenuous. “Like what?”

“Honest. Straightforward.”

“Better you should know right off what I can and cannot do.”

“But you are psychic, right?”

“The proof, as grandma used to say, is in the pudding.”

She tugged at her cigarette and turned away, exhaling in a focused stream. When she looked back, the frown she’d bypassed earlier was shadowing her brow.

“But you don’t have a grandmother.”

Her eyes had changed. She wasn’t peering at the world anymore. Instead, she had the inward-looking gaze of someone high on acid.

She shook her head and gave a quick apologetic smile.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know where that came from. I just got this flash of you as...I don’t know...an orphan. Someone who wouldn’t have a grandmother. I mean, one you knew.”

“You’re right. I invented grandma to lend weight to my clichés.”

Her attention was still elsewhere. Another drag on her cigarette, another sideways plume of smoke, and she posed the question that had brought her here.

“Why do I just... know... things about people?”



Steve Smith, a.k.a. Red Green, the comedian, claimed the three hardest words for a man are *I don’t know*. I found them a relief. My pseudo-occupation required lies, half-truths and silences. Context and expedience excused what elsewhere would be called deceit.

Admitting ignorance kept me on the straight and narrow.

But some clients wouldn't let me speak those three short words. They thought it meant I must be keeping something from them.

Marion, who considered that the future, or at least its outlines, could be read in random patterns, made guesses when she didn't know. If she proved right, her clients posited, *post hoc*, she'd seen it in the cards. But if she got it wrong, the miscall got forgotten. It's no fun dining out on psychic mispredictions.

I didn't work that way. If I didn't have an answer I just said so.

"But you *have* to know," some clients countered. "Why won't you tell me?"

I suppose I could have made up something about Destiny, the Gift, uncertainty, bad vibes... the usual obfuscatory legerdemain professionals use to cover their tracks. But what would have been the point? Honesty was simpler. Lazier, too—an easy footpath through the psychic moral quagmire. I misled sometimes about the source of my intelligence, but never lied to fill in what it couldn't tell me. I'd had enough of lying when I worked out on the streets.

I couldn't answer Kirin Neemes. When I said as much, she simply shook her head.

"No, you know. I'm sure of it."

No pleading, no cajoling, just an utterance of faith—which I would have disregarded if I hadn't got the sudden feeling she was right.

I build maps of people in my head, three and four dimensional topographies of everything I note about them in a given context, physical and temporal. Build's perhaps too strong a word for something so reflexive. Map's not dead on, either. Sculpture is more accurate, a grey-white mental artefact whose size and shape and luminance determine true from false, constituent from adjunct, acquired from innate.

My map of Kirin came from the observable—the timbre of her voice in relation to her words, the gestures she employed to hide or show her feelings, her brands of soap, shampoo and perfume, her choice of clothes, the way she smoked her cigarette.

But something that I couldn't trace to sight or smell or hearing occupied the centre of my Kirin-map, a sizzling block of static like a snowy TV screen.

Stranger still, inside it, when I quieted my thoughts and stopped my senses, I caught glimpses of myself.



“Tell me about your glass wall again, Ferko.”

Had anyone been watching us, they might have thought the old man hadn't heard. He took a handkerchief he'd stuck between his wheelchair seat and thigh and dabbed some spittle from the corner of his mouth. His movements were deliberate and slow, as if the fragrance of the apple trees in blossom round the courtyard made him torpid.

Beaupré Manor's sliding doors whooshed open so a nurse could wheel a sunshine-weary resident inside.

“Ah, so you remember the glass wall,” he said, speaking with the left side of his mouth, internally translating from Hungarian to Magyar-coloured English. “That was some time ago. After you read Schneider's *Clinical Psychopathology*.”

“After you made me read it.”

“Made?” Behind glasses whose right lens was frosted to protect an unresponsive eye, a single grey brow rose. “As I recall, you couldn't get enough on the subject.”

“The idea was originally yours.”

“Yes, to have a sounding board. One not infected by dogma. But Kraepelin, Bleuler, Freud, Reich... I didn't think you'd be so thorough.”

“Yes, you did.”

A smile was beyond him but his good eye beamed. I mussed his thinning hair and kissed his cheek.

“Not like that,” he ordered, sounding less Hungarian than Prussian. “Properly.”

I bent over him and grasped his face, covering his mouth with

mine. His left hand squeezed my leg below the buttock. I started to go hard.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “The widow Pyper is watching from her window. I do so like to scare the horses.”

“You’re a tease,” I said, adjusting myself inside my jeans. “In more ways than one.”

He raised his handkerchief and patted more saliva from his chin.

“No more so than you. Always putting out but never saying what you want. Even as you kiss me now, so wonderfully you make me think my equipment works again, I still don’t know what fantasies you cherish in a partner. Shall we stroll?”

He fiddled with the joystick of his chair and manoeuvred it so we could circumambulate the walled-in garden. Grape hyacinths and primula played hide and seek among the daffodils and tulips still in bloom. *What money buys the infirm elderly*. Who knew? In time, I myself might end up here. At one point in my life, a provincial institution with surly staff and smelly hallways would have seemed more likely, not this almost-condo with its richly-tended pleasance.

“What do you want to know about the glass wall?” Ferko asked.

“You told me once, for schizophrenia, that Schneider’s first-rank symptoms weren’t enough to make a diagnosis. That it took intuition too, something you could sense around a patient like a thick, transparent wall.”

“Correct.”

The syllables were weighted with pedantically approving heft.

“Since you were never one for flights of lyric fancy, I’ve always thought you meant a feeling which could not be put in any other words. But now I’m wondering. Was it a visual impression too? Something you could see in your mind’s eye?”

“A difficult question, David. It was a bit of both, I think.”

“Would you say you reached your diagnosis from observable behaviours, subconsciously collected, or was it in the real sense of the word a hunch?”

“A hunch, yes. But more. In forty years, I made only one mistake.”

“Did you ever wonder where your glass wall came from?”

“Fleeing the invasion in the fifties taught me the value of being pragmatic. If something works, don’t ask.”

“Sorry, Ferko, but I’m asking now.”

We reached an angle in the path. Ferko backed diagonally to navigate the turn and used the time to frame his answer.

“Holmes’ claim that the improbable is true when you’ve discarded the impossible should help me here, but doesn’t. If I divined the nature of a mental illness without concrete data, the improbable would be I read the patient’s mind, or that they conveyed their thoughts to me. But Schneider places thought transference in his first-rank symptoms for the reason that it simply isn’t possible. It has to be delusion. You see my problem? In the case of my glass wall, the improbable joins ranks with the impossible. Unless, of course, I too were suffering delusions.”

“But what if Schneider got it wrong? What if mind can speak to mind?”

“You would risk an auto-da-fe by suggesting Schneider got it *wrong*?”

His stroke had robbed him of the vocal subtleties of irony but not his pleasure in it.

“Seriously, Ferko.”

He mulled it over as we inched past clumps of lavender and ferny yarrow.

“I’d say, then, that we have a second improbability. That thought-broadcasting and thought-insertion—the clinical terms, as you know—are only *statistically* symptomatic of schizophrenia. That there may be times they actually take place.

“Why does all this interest you? Has one of your neurotic housewives crossed the line into psychosis?”

We passed into a Russian olive’s mottled shade. Ferko stopped and raised his hand, turning it to watch the play of shadow on his skin.

“I saw a first-time client a few days ago,” I said. “You know how it works. People think I’m psychic because they don’t realize how much they’re telling me.”

“Yes, I know,” he said, still studying his hand. “I’ve been on the receiving end. If you hadn’t proven that your insights come from simple observation, you might have made me question my position on the matter. You have a talent, David, but it isn’t reading minds.”

“My client—her name is Kirin, by the way—is believer-believer, if you know what I mean. Not a hopeful sceptic. She came to me because she’s wondering if she herself is psychic. She gets flashes about people. They turn out to be true.”

“A believer who merely *wonders* if she’s psychic? Interesting. Like a Catholic who merely wonders if there’s God.” He made a sound that would have been a chuckle once. “In my country, those women who addict themselves to fortune-tellers always claim, with utter certainty, that they possess the Gift themselves.”

“My problem with Kirin is, I think she may be right.”

He broke off studying his hand. “Why do you say that?”

“Something that I saw. An image. Up here.” I tapped my temple.

“Describe it, please.”

“Like a TV tuned to every channel all at once.”

“And when you... saw... this image, what was your impression?”

“That it fit. That it came from her, not me. That anyone with that inside them would go mad. I don’t know how she lives with the confusion.”

“Anything else?”

I tried to think how best to say it. “Recognition. An otherness both foreign and familiar.”

“You felt no pain? There was no distress associated with this?”

“No.”

He looked down, sucking in the left side of his mouth, as close as he could get to thoughtful pursing of the lips. Finally, he nudged the wheelchair’s control and set himself in motion. Had he been walking he’d have clasped his hands behind his back.

“Four things spring to mind. The recognition aspect is most likely déjà-vu. Some sensory impression that slid past your eagle gaze and lodged in your subconscious. Your brain rewrote the data, coughing up an image you believed you recognized. The way faint odours in an stranger’s house can make you think you’ve been there in the past.”

“It’s possible, I guess.”

“As to your feeling the experience was extra-sensory, it could be that you slipped into your psychic role too fully. Like an actor when the spotlights die forgetting where his character leaves off and he begins.”

“I guard against that sort of thing.”

“As well you should. You cannot be too careful. Thirdly, consider that this woman—Kirin’s—credulity is charismatic. You were seduced. It happens, even to the rigorously sceptical.”

Some private memory brought forth the chuckle sound again.

We reached another angle in the path, bringing us in line with the sleek, post-modern back of Beaupré Manor.

“You said four things,” I prompted.

He brought his wheelchair to a halt before the sliding doors.

“You’ve read Medawar, correct?” he asked. “*Pluto’s Republic, The Limits of Science?*”

I nodded. My copies of both volumes bore inscriptions in Hungarian.

“Then you have to weigh the possibility—improbable, unlikely, or implausible—that your client has a real psychic gift and you’ve experienced your version of my glass wall hunch.”