

Chapter 7

SCEPTICISM'S RAMPARTS

LEASED KIRIN down so she was sitting with her head between her knees. We were near the back of Jena's crowd and no one paid attention. A woman fainting couldn't hold a candle to the *grand guignol* on stage.

"I feel like such an idiot," she muttered while I fanned her with the leaflet she'd been reading. "I hate it when this happens."

"What?"

"Low blood sugar. I should have grabbed a chocolate bar."

"Good luck finding one."

"Yeah, I know. Granola city."

She gave a shaky laugh.

"Think you can stand?"

"In a minute. Feels nice down here."

I waited for a bit, then helped her up and out of doors. The clear May sunlight hit us like a revelation. She hugged herself despite the warmth.

"God," she shivered, "that was awful. Did you feel it? That thing that happened? I thought she'd gotten right inside my head. Everything went sort of echo-y, and then it was like, I dunno, just her and me and . . . Did you get that? What was it?"

"Cheap theatrics with assistance from the sound man."

She started pacing in tight circles.

“No. I *felt* something. Like she knew that I was there. A connection. You know?”

She still looked pale. Her lips were drawn and bloodless.

“Want me to take you home?”

She shook her head. “You don’t have to.”

“I’ll feel better if I do.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’ll go tell Marion.”



We stopped at Wendy’s on the way where Kirin polished off a Baconator, king-size fries and chili.

“Been dieting too hard,” she said, washing down the carbs with root beer from a bladder-buster. “Guess my body’s telling me to take a break.”

Her place was in the north end of the city, in a ’50s-style suburb. Cookie-cutter bungalows marched up and down the street, sequestered from each other by obsessively square hedges.

“I feel like something stronger,” she announced, opening a milk chute by the kitchen door and pulling out tequila and a margarita mix. “Screw the calories. You want anything? Help yourself. There’s Coronas in the fridge.”

I peeked inside the makeshift cupboard. Bailey’s, Amaretto, and an uncracked bottle of Crown Royal. I slipped it from its purple velvet bag.

“You saving this?”

She looked up from breaking ice into a blender

“Never drink the stuff. It’s from a shoot I did a couple of years ago.” She punched the blender on. “Glasses are over here,” she shouted above the clatter. “Have as much as you want. Take the bottle with you if you like.”

I poured myself two fingers while she spatulaed green sludge into a salted glass that could have doubled as her daughter’s wading pool. With a sombrero and chipped writing on the sides, it looked

like something lifted from a bar.

“Cheers.” She held the glass for me to see. “You like? It’s from this tacky little theme park off the I-95 called South of the Border. First place you hit crossing into South Carolina.”

“And did Carlin like her trip to Disney World?”

She stared. “How...?”

“Single mother, roadside theme park, highway to Orlando? A pretty easy guess. Did you stay at Disney World?”

“No. Further up the coast. Ormond-by-the-Sea. Carlin had more fun there chasing sand crabs on the beach than visiting Mickey and Goofey. I think she was too young. *Shit!*”

She struck her forehead with the heel of her hand.

“What’s the matter?”

“I just remembered. My car. It’s still at the Convention Centre. *Fuck!* How could I be so stupid?”

“No biggie. Where’s your phone? I’ll call a tow truck.”

“It’ll cost a fortune.”

“That’s okay. I’m rich, remember?”

She handed me a cordless and hunted through a cupboard for her Yellow Pages.

“You really don’t have to do this,” she said as I punched in a number.

“Beats driving back to the Convention Centre.”

She fed me her address, plus her car’s coordinates and plates, then looked around distractedly while I finished up with credit card details.

“I don’t get you,” she said, taking back the phone.

“In what way?”

“That line about being rich. It sounded cheap.”

“It *was* cheap.”

“But it’s such a guy thing. Help the chick, flash some cash, get in her pants.”

“Your point?”

“You’re not trying to jump my bones.”

“Your blood sugar’s still off. You’re not making any sense.

Wanna go back to Wendy's? I think you need a Frosty."

She forced a smile and took a hit of lime-green slush.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "It's just me. Always trying to figure things out. You were teasing, right? About being rich?"

"Well, I am."

"Yes, I know, but..." She shook her head in frustration. "There I go again. Figuring out. Second guessing. I'm never sure when people say things like that. I'm always scared of being called an idiot."

Carlin's father... the photographer... Burke... vain... muscled... coiled like a prison riot waiting to explode...

"It's all right," I reassured her. "You can take me at face value."

She drained her margarita, then started picking at the salt around the rim. Her nails made a tinkling sound against the glass. For the second time, the not-quite-visual impression of a blast of TV static filled my head. I held it for a moment, with as strong a feeling as before that I was catching glimpses myself in clear but stroboscopic flashes.

"No," she said, looking up, "I'm not so sure I can. There's something funny about you. I don't know what it is. It isn't like I think you're lying or anything, but it feels like I can't believe a single word you say."



I thought Marion was pissed at me for leaving her to deal with the Psychic Fair alone. She didn't come around for several days—not for coffee, not for drinks, not even with some piddling task for manly me to do.

I was just as glad. Spring fever, or perhaps the Fair itself, had brought a spate of curious first-timers from the woodwork, meaning hours of toil in front of the computer. Databases had to be compiled, profiles put together, research done. A psychic always comes prepared. The problem was, even with GNU/Linux software and a T1 line, it always took more time than I expected. The World Wide

Wait.

Some busy little server god-knows-where was taking its sweet time when my telephone began to chirp. I picked it up and checked the call display. Marion.

“David,” she whispered in a hand-around-the-mouthpiece hush, “I have to make this quick. I’m with a client. The thing is, he seems terribly interested in you. He says he saw you at my booth, but, well, I don’t quite trust him. He’s sly. He keeps turning the conversation around. And he’s damn good at it, too. I know we never talk about your past, but you’ve hinted more than once at skeletons. I’m a bit concerned. Could you come over? Use the door between us. I’m in the kitchen.”

She rang off without letting me ask questions. I stared at the monitor. The file I’d been after had come up, but it might as well have been in Sanskrit.

Skeletons. Yes, I had a few.

I pushed away from the computer. Maybe it was nothing.

I never understood why Marion’s and my apartment were connected. None of the six across the hallway were. But we were only two, with great views onto College Street. My best guess was the builder had put family next door. Well-treated family, since Marion’s apartment was as overlarge as mine.

I let myself in quietly. The door opened on her kitchen, not her living room. She was at the counter fixing tea. Earl Grey by the smell.

“Good,” she whispered. “You’re in stocking feet. Follow me down the hallway and slip into the bedroom. There’s a Krieghof on the wall just inside the door. Behind it I’ve got one of those fish-eye things. It looks out through the barometer in the living room. I’ll make sure I don’t block your view. The tea’s for him. He asked for lemon, but I’m going to forget it and come back. Tell me if you recognize him.”

“A peephole? Why, Marion, you old fraud.”

I followed her in step in case the floorboards creaked. The Krieghof in her bedroom lifted easily. Behind it gleamed the brass-

rimmed pimple of a fish-eye lens. I took a breath and pressed my nose against the wall. Marion had better be getting excited over nothing. Money buys insurance from the past, but *forces-majeures* are never in the policy.

Contrary to what she'd said, she was in the way, at least at first—a pin-sized head and hulking shoulders. No sound came through the lathe-and-plaster wall, but I got an impression of hostessly fussing.

Finally, she moved aside, giving me a clear, if rounded, view of a spread of cards and the man whose fortunes they presumably held.

Hugely-muscled... biceps would be thighs on any normal human being...

I stepped back and breathed again. Just the orderly I'd jostled near the gang of seniors at the Psychic Fair. He'd given me the eye. No skeletons there.

I rehung Marion's print and waited till she passed the bedroom door, then followed her, step-in-step again, back to the kitchen.

"Well?" she demanded.

"It's nothing," I assured her. "We bumped body parts outside your booth at the Fair. He gave me, not exactly a vertical stare, but one that lingered long."

She frowned. "Funny. I didn't peg him as being gay."

"Neither did I. But then, I was in a hurry for lunch."

"I wonder why he's being so goddamn subtle asking things about you."

"What sorts of things?"

"How old you are, how long I've known you, what I think of your 'abilities,' your clientèle. I told him quite a bit before I realized who was pumping whom."

"You make it sound like fun."

"Don't joke. I was getting worried."

"Tell you what—if he keeps fishing, be direct and send him over."

"I might just do that."

"What's his name, by the way?"

“Joshua Byron. I can’t tell you what he does. He’s a tester. You know, one of those clients who wants me to divine his occupation to prove how sensitive I am.” She hooked her fingers around ‘sensitive’.

“Ho-hum.”

“Indeed. Well, I’d better scurry.”

“Don’t forget the lemon.”

Back at my computer, I had trouble concentrating. The profile I was putting together on twenty-eight-year-old Gillian Murdock, investment strategist at TD-Canada Trust, resident of The Beaches, owner of a late-model BMW, holder of seventeen credit cards and nascent white-collar criminal was complete enough for me to wow her with my psychic acumen when she came by in two days’ time. I typed :wq to save and close `gillian_murdock.xml`, then leaned back from the monitor.

A desert night-scene filled the screen: cacti, tumbleweed, a yellow moon. The transparent terminal I usually worked in covered half the screen, sprinkling the blue-black sky with file names and directories. I sat there, staring, till the screensaver kicked in. Creeping fractal frost replaced the Arizona nocturne.

Finally I nudged the mouse to melt the frost, launched my browser, hit Alt-b for Bookmarks and scrolled to *Canada 411*. When the page had loaded I sat forward and typed JOSHUA and BYRON in the little blanks.



Beaupré Manor called at two a.m. Ferko’d had another stroke.

Just a small one, Mr. Ase, nothing to worry about, but his file says we should call you any time...

I waited until morning to drive out. Ferko had been taken to the General for tests, but the phone voice reassured me he’d be back by nine.

Eastbound on the 401 the sun was dazzling. I had to switch the AC on and flip the leather visor. By the time I got to Beaupré it was twenty-four degrees outside according to the car’s external sensor. I

parked inside the shadow of a towering blue spruce and used a side door to go in.

Ferko was asleep, the top half of his mattress at a restful forty-five degrees. Tubes snaked to his nostrils from a moustache of adhesive tape. A monitor stood watch over his vitals, which, to my unpractised eye, looked vigorous enough.

I got a double latte from the ground-floor cafeteria—Beaupré being much too tony for a simple Bunn machine—and took it back upstairs.

Hospital bed and monitor aside, Ferko's rooms looked nothing like a nursing home. The furnishings were his, an abbreviated version of the shaded townhouse floors they used to occupy on Birch Street close to Rosedale.

I settled in a comfy chair with fleur-de-lys upholstery, passing through a ghost of me who used to choose the same chair after suppers, which was Ferko's time for reading, or for holding forth about his day, or trying to fathom how a hustler with his memories behind a wall of pain could be so good at seeing in the hearts and minds of others.

Asleep, he looked no different than he had back then, those mornings after, when, the night's transacted fucking over, he invited me to sleep with him instead of in my room. Sometimes a second partner would be spooned around him and I'd have to get up gently so as not to wake them if I wanted orange juice or just to catch some solitary Zs. Funny how that worked. Ferko always paid for sex as if I were a colleague he would never ask a service from for free.

My latte had gone tepid when at last he stirred. His eyelids fluttered and an arm jerked underneath the sheets. I got up and kissed him on the forehead, sweeping back his thin but still-there hair.

“David.”

He sounded weak but not confused. I've never known another human being who could wake up quite as lucidly as Ferko. His eyes roved about the room—assessing, confirming—then came back to me.

“It has been seven years,” he said, taking care with every word, “since you woke me up like that.”

“You must have read my mind. I was just recalling.”

“You’re far too young to be remembering like that.”

“I’m not in my twenties anymore.”

“You’re still too young. When I was your age you were not yet even born.”

I smiled; the taunt was old, familiar.

“How are you feeling?”

His forehead wrinkled while he mentally palpated all his faculties.

“Well, I think. But tired. The stroke was small. No damage. Or, if there was, my brain has found a way around it. As brains will do.”

“Can I get you anything?”

“Some water.”

I raised him with an arm behind his shoulders, then held the glass and tilted it toward his mouth. He turned his head to signal when he’d had enough. I put the glass aside and eased him back. He closed his eyes, exhausted.

A doctor Endicott-Ellis came by a quarter of an hour later. She wore an extra-long name tag and introduced herself as Eileen. She asked if I was family. I told her no.

“Just friends, then?”

Her voice held just the right amount of irony. I liked her right away.

She checked the monitor and sat down next to Ferko. He greeted her with a professional regard that came through even in his weakened speech. From my chair, I watched them spend the next five minutes going over scans. Ferko offered up prognoses on the images as if the patient in his bed were someone else. Dr. E-cubed gave no sign of finding it unusual.

Ferko’s animation vanished when she left. He lay quietly a long time, gazing at the ceiling.

Finally he looked at me with eyes gone for the first time truly

old.

“So now you see, David, why I wouldn’t let you stay? You could not have given me this kind of care.”

“I realize.”

He blinked, stalling while he hunted round for words. *Nearly beaten . . . enough to feel submission’s tempting pull . . .*

“And my pride would not have had you tending me in any case.”

“Thank you, doctor, for that bit of truth—seven years past due.”

“You knew it anyway.”

“I did.”

“That wondrous skill of yours.”

“In this case, hardly.”

Silence. I watched him breathe. On the monitor, his heartbeat slowed. Between each spike I saw plateaued intimations of the future.

But not today . . . not for some time yet . . .

“David?”

I went over to the bed and took his hand.

“What?”

“How much longer do I have?”

After so much time, so much rigour . . .

“I can’t predict the future, Ferko. You know that.”

A little sigh escaped him.

“No, I suppose not.”



Would it have hurt to lie?

No easy answer came as I headed back downtown. The Parkway south for once deserved its name—a parkway, not a parking lot. The sky was clear midmorning blue; the towers of the city looked like pristine foil cut-outs. I nudged up to one-forty, set the cruise control, sailed through the dips and curves and mulled the question over.

I told futures all the time. Barring acts of Fate—and even those

could sometimes be predicted, so strong the trait of self-fulfilling prophecy—what I learned about my clients, what they told me in a thousand different ways, was enough to make their futures nothing more than simple math. Lust divided by *I-want-so-much-to-help-him* equalled pain. Chubby thighs times supermarket diets equalled sentimental choices that were always disappointing. Inferiority plus envy equalled guile and only fugitive success. The more data I acquired, the more complex the equations. But I had a head for algebraizing human interactions and geometrizing feelings.

Ferko's fascination with my speed at sizing people up had never wavered from the rationally curious. He used to show me off at dinners—who could blame him? a respected older man with an intriguing young companion—getting me to dazzle friends and colleagues with my so-called psychic skills. It wasn't empty trophying. When the paprikash and dumplings had been cleared, when the guests had all gone home, he'd pick my brain about the clues and tells they'd dropped till satisfied that every hit could be explained.

But like Houdini in his rage to debunk mediums, a part of Ferko wanted to disprove himself, to stumble on the truly unexplainable. I liked to think it was the Magyar in him, prowling gypsy-rough and superstitious round the walls of reason.

Small or not, his stroke had raised the spectre of mortality. No amount of careful discourse, not with me or with his specialist, could hide the fact. And in the helpless child-time that follows on a vis-à-vis with death, Ferko's gypsy had snuck in through scepticism's ramparts, mocking, not unkindly, an ordered life of fact and scientific data.

How much longer do I have?

I'd had a choice: affirm the Ferko that I knew, in just the way I had, reminding him not I, not anyone, can really know future; or lie and tell him what, somehow, I knew to be the truth.

You've a ways to go, my friend.



Marion's mystery man, Joshua Byron, was at Gato Nero's marble counter with a small espresso and a paper open to the Sports.

Not just anyone fit in at Gato Nero. First of all you had to be Italian. Secondly you had to be a man. Last of all you had to be past fifty. If you weren't, you moved too fast, you talked too much and didn't know *merda*. Silvered Mylar on the windows kept pedestrians from peering in. Dusty shelves around the walls held boxes of *biscotti*. No one ever sat down at the two small tables set with folding chairs.

If you properly belonged in Gato Nero, if you just *fit in*, you said *Ciao* to Ermanno behind the counter, spent a little time catching up, then made for the back room—twice as large as the café itself with a sign that read, in English, "Social Club". The air inside was blue with smoke, the pool game never-ending.

Ermanno always greeted me as Signore Ase and sold me coffee from his private bin. Though young and not Italian, I was wealthy and deserved respect. Marion, who chose to disregard the semiotics of the place, got talked about behind her back.

Yet there was Byron, fitting in as if he'd sat across the counter from Ermanno all his life.

"Signore Ase! *Come sta?*"

"*Bene*, Ermanno. *Bene*."

"You need coffee?"

"Always."

"Just a minute. I get it for you."

He found a paper bag and started spooning pre-ground coffee into it. I never asked him where he got it. The grind was fine as talcum, the colour black as India ink and the smell like burning rubber.

While I waited, Joshua Byron did the best feigned lack of interest I had ever seen. His eyes moved across the paper—reading, not pretending. When he flipped the page, he went straight to the continuation article. He crossed his legs, but only to get comfortable. Nothing in the way he reached for his espresso said *I'm trying not to look at you*.

“Here you go, Signore,” Ermanno announced, stapling the paper bag.

“*Grazie*, Ermanno. How much do I owe you?”

“Same as always.”

I took a twenty from my wallet. “Keep the change.”

“Thank you, Signore. You are a good man.”

“Have a nice day.”

“You too. We see you soon. *Ciao*.”

He grabbed a rag and started wiping down the Gaggia.

I went to the door.

“Mr. Byron?”

The paper at the counter rustled.

“If you’d care to follow me upstairs . . . ?”



The extravagance of seating in my *grand salon* forced visitors to make a choice.

Male clients mostly went for armchairs, the territory easily defined and marked. Older gay men, those who still believed that gay entailed elegance, selected a divan or love-seat. Women often asked where they should sit, or were drawn to fabrics that accentuated or played down their virtues or their flaws. Lesbians alone possessed the sense to go for comfortable.

Some crafty clients, sensing that their choice would be revealing, parked their asses anywhere but where they really wanted. Their sessions always started with me asking why they’d come to see a psychic if they hoped to keep things secret.

Byron didn’t take a seat at all. He leaned against a window sill.

“Did your neighbour give you my description?” he began.

“No,” I answered truthfully, “she didn’t. Just your name. From the questions you were asking, she wondered if I might know who you were. We don’t normally share intel on our clients.”

“Like you don’t share that?”

He used his chin to indicate the door between our places. Its

function wasn't obvious; it could have been a closet.

"You're an observant man," I said.

"Do the two of you run some sort of scam?"

"Any bamboozling we do, we keep it to ourselves."

"Have you known her long?"

"Since I was a baby."

Bald-faced lies—even better conversation stoppers than the truth. What was Byron going to say? *That's not what she told me?*

"That's not what she told me," he replied. "How did you recognize me, then?"

"From the Psychic Fair. You're short, but with those muscles, hard to miss."

Chest out a millimetre... palms pressed flat to pneumatize his shoulders...

He wasn't, in fact, bad-looking—the kind of man whose face stays stuck at twenty while the rest of him grows up. Or, in his case, out.

"What's your interest in me, Mr. Byron? And please don't say: 'You're the psychic—you tell me.'"

He cracked a smile. "You do read minds."

"No. I hear it all the time."

"Do you have trouble reading me?"

"Not especially. Do you have trouble answering questions?"

He left the window sill and started circling the room, inspecting this and that. After downstairs' flawless mimicking of total lack of interest, pretty corny stuff.

"You might say, I'm looking for someone special."

Even cornier.

"Marion wouldn't do?"

"No. She was good—"

"—but you didn't really go to her to have your tea leaves read. What sort of special person?"

"It's a little hard to say."

"You'll know him when you see him?"

"Something like that."

He picked up a silver vase designed to hold a single rose. More of Raymond Kiefer's bric-a-brac. He warned me never to put flowers in it. *Déclassé*.

"What exactly does a psychic counsellor do, Mr. Ase?"

"Amongst other things he addresses people face to face."

Byron set the vase down in precisely its original location. Then he sat—in Marion's chair.

Left leg crossed... head resting on the back... too obviously casual...

"As far as I know," I said, "no one else in the city uses the term. Psychic counsellor is open-ended. It could mean someone who counsels *because* he's psychic, or someone who counsels *about* being psychic."

"And you do which?"

"Both. And neither. My clients pretty much determine for themselves."

"Been at it long?"

"Six years."

"Many customers?"

"Enough to keep me busy."

"Do they come back?"

"If you mean, do I keep a string of suckers, no."

"But some of them depend on you."

"Psychics, Mr. Byron, like hookers, shrinks and churches, tend to garner regulars."

"You've practised that."

"I have."

"Do you believe in what you do?"

"Oh, yes. Wholeheartedly."

Another outright lie, one not so deftly dealt with. He sat up straight, displaying his upper body like a cobra opening its hood.

Decision reached... a final stab at ruffling me...

"Do you have any idea why I'm here, Mr. Ase?"

"I'm developing a theory. On the surface of it, though, you're here because I asked you in."

He thought it over. *No fear of seeming slow... attentive to the nuances...*

“And you can throw me out, that’s what you’re saying?”

“Not physically, perhaps, but yes, that’s what I’m saying.”

“Are you this cold with all your clients?”

“You’re not a client, Mr. Byron.”

He shook his head, defeated.

“Nothing fazes you, does it?”

“Many things faze me. Just not you.”

He thought that over, too.

“Fair enough.”

He pushed up from the chair and explored the room some more. *Memorizing... not because he needs to... out of habit...*

My clipping from the *Sun* kept him busy long enough to speed read every period and comma, then he pulled a curtain back.

“Would you humour me in something?” he asked, contemplating College Street.

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“Whether you intend to pay.”

He let the curtain fall.

“You hardly need the money.”

“No. But my services aren’t free.”

“How much will it cost?”

“One-twenty.”

It was obvious he wasn’t going to pony up.

“You can always find your someone special somewhere else,” I said. “Except you won’t. Your mind’s made up. You don’t need me ‘pretending you’re a client’—what you were going to ask—in order to determine my effectiveness for what you really want.”

“Which is?”

“I haven’t got a clue. But you should know that I’m unlikely to agree. Agencies of any kind make me uneasy and I have a particular aversion to those that serve the interests of the government. Correct me if I’m wrong, but you’re with CSIS, right?”

He cocked an eyebrow. Nothing much fazed him, either.

“However,” I went on, “I’ll admit to being intrigued. I’m not sure why. I read too much, I think. Come back on Monday around two. And bring your partner. Or should I say your boss? A woman, right? You can make your sales pitch then.”

Both eyebrows rose this time.