

Chapter 9

SPOOR IN CYBERSPACE

JOSHUA BYRON ARRIVED at two, on time but unaccompanied.

“Subira will be here shortly,” he announced, settling in a club chair. His strategy was obvious. Make me edgy waiting in my own apartment.

It wasn’t going to work.

“Coffee?” I asked. “It’s from downstairs.”

“Espresso?”

“Just ordinary filter.”

“That’ll be fine.”

I left him in the parlour, which he no doubt went over thoroughly again. I didn’t mind. The room was just a set.

While the coffee brewed, I slipped into my study and did a little googling. Subira, it turned out, was a woman’s name—Egyptian—which established, in a roundabout way, that she was, in fact, Byron’s superior. It worked like this: he hadn’t bridled when I suggested his partner was his boss—a shot in the dark, admittedly—something that, now I knew for sure she was a woman, he would certainly have done. A man like Byron, short but pumped up, would have found some way to let me know, however subtly, that I was wrong if it were he who called the shots in any male-female partnership.

As for Subira, I’d assess her when I met her. I was, however,

forewarned. A woman, possibly of North African descent, who'd climbed high in the white- and male-dominated Canadian Security Intelligence Service.

I called to Byron down the hall to come and doctor his own coffee. It was either that or look like I was anxious to play host.

"Nice kitchen." He leaned against the counter. "Did you have it redone?"

"I should think that's obvious, Mr. Byron. I appreciate the effort at small talk, though."

"Call me Josh."

"As you wish." In my head, he'd still be Byron. "Call me David." He nodded. "David. Can I ask you a question?"

"Why bother asking when you're going to ask anyway? Is that something they teach you to do at spy school?"

"Spy?" He pursed his lips in an effort not to smile. "Is that what you think?"

"To be honest, like most Canadians, I have trouble believing we have a functioning intelligence agency at all. But you do work for CSIS."

"True. And that's been puzzling me. You knew. Before we met it seems. How?"

"Research. I had your name from Marion."

"What sort of research?"

It cost him not to preface it with *May I ask . . . ?*

"Better you don't know. For all concerned."

He frowned into his coffee. "The internet?"

There didn't seem much point denying it. "The psychic's twenty-first century Blue Book."

He looked up, puzzled.

"Spiritualists in the nineteenth century used to circulate a book—blue, obviously—with detailed information about clients who were known to make the séance rounds. It never crossed the clients' minds that little Tommy calling from the other side was speaking through a medium less flesh and blood than ink and paper. What we call 'hot reading' in the psychic biz."

“You said you didn’t scam.”

“I don’t, but the more I know about a client the easier it is to do my job.”

“Which is? You weren’t too clear on that.”

“To make my clients feel special and unique. To listen and to understand. To help them see the silliness of hiding things from others and uncover things they’re hiding from themselves. Mostly, though, I just make common sense a little magical. The transfiguration of the commonplace, to use a phrase from Muriel Spark.”

“Noble. It still doesn’t tell me what you do.”

I sighed.

“I give psychic readings, Mr. Byron. Josh. Take that to mean whatever you like.”

“I take it to mean you think you’re sensitive and sympathetic. So far all I’ve seen is arrogance.”

“I don’t suppose the way you’ve gone about approaching me has anything to do with it.”

He took a gulp of coffee, staring past my shoulder, trying to convey a sort of worldly apology for doing things he had to do. I didn’t buy it. He was checking out the clock above the stove.

Loosening of bunched trapezius... flicker of anticipation near the eyes...

“Three minutes more,” I said. “Where is she now? Downstairs at Lucia’s killing time? I hope it’s not too boring. I don’t imagine they have much by way of gowns for CSIS brides.”

He drained his mug, straightened up and rinsed it in the sink—all the proof I needed I was right. To give him credit he was good at hiding tells, which only made his slip-ups more apparent.

“The databases you hack into—which ones are they?”

“The word you want is crack, not hack. Unauthorized computer entry. Hacking only means you like to mess around with code.”

“Would you call yourself a hacker?”

“I run GNU/Linux, which means I’m a little smarter than your average computer bear, but no, I’m not a hacker.”

“How do you gain access then?”

“Money. There’s no lock, virtual or real, it can’t pick. But before you read me the riot act, I should point out that the information I gather on my clients comes mostly off the Web. Everyone leaves spoor in cyberspace.”

“Have you broken into CSIS?”

“No. Consider that a freebie.”

“Then how...?”

“Total lack of information. Other than an Ottawa address, a social insurance number and an Ontario driver’s licence, there’s no trace of you. I won’t list everywhere I checked; that would be truly telling. Your name is real—I’d know if you were lying—yet you don’t exist except at the required official level. I asked myself how that could be. I guessed intelligence.”

“Sixth sense?”

“I’m psychic.”

He tilted his head. “Are you?”

I walked past him to the hallway intercom, waited for a count of three and spoke into the grill.

“Come on up,” I said, wishing I could see his partner’s face when she heard the unexpected *vox ex machina*. “It’s the first door on your right.”



Subira MacKenzie was a knockout, with tawny skin, waves of blue-black hair, huge brown eyes and a wide straight mouth the colour of ripe plums. Little evidence of her paternal genes, Anglo-Scots presumably, came through.

Right off the bat, she insisted on first names. The informality rang false, even though it carried over to her clothes—simple slacks, a plain white blouse. Lines from classic Hall and Oates ran through my head:

Oh-oh here she comes

Watch out boy, she’ll chew you up

Byron seemed easy around her though, which bumped him up a notch in my estimation. Men who partner comfortably with women, especially when the woman holds the reins, are a breed apart.

“Sorry I’m late,” she offered after introductions. “Traffic.”

I glanced over at Byron. His face showed nothing.

“No problem,” I said. “I hear the lineups for Lucia’s fitting rooms are bumper-to-bumper this time of year. See anything you liked?”

It was her turn to glance at Byron. A ghost of movement in his chin confirmed he hadn’t said a word.

She took it in stride.

“Joshua said you were good. Apparently he was right.”

“What else did he tell you?”

“That you’re the man we want.”

I looked pointedly from one to the other, she with her exotic features, he with his pneumatic, blond good looks.

“In other circumstances, from either one of you, I’d take that as a compliment. Tell me, does CSIS ask for headshots when they let you in the service?”

Subira smiled indulgently. “Joshua also said I’d have trouble with you. Something about a knee-jerk reaction?”

“‘Aversion’ is the word I used.”

“We’ll see. You did agree to meet us after all.”

“Curiosity. It isn’t every day Canadian Intelligence comes calling.”

“Yes, and I understand congratulations are in order on that score. You made Joshua right away.”

“I wouldn’t overestimate his subtlety.”

“And I wouldn’t underestimate yourself. Now, do you have someplace we can sit around a table? It’ll be easier to talk and I have some things to show you.”

Her chatty tone was utterly contrived. I hiked it up one icky-sweet degree.

“Why not just stay here? More cozy, don’t you think?”

Her buttons weren’t easy to push. She settled on Raymond

Kiefer's awful damask *méridienne* as if it were exactly what she wanted in the first place. The two-seater gave her room to open up a zippered briefcase—more like a portfolio—and spread out several files.

I stayed standing. Byron, from the club chair, acknowledged that I'd kept the upper hand with a smile so faint it could have been a trick of light.

Appreciation . . . admiration . . .

In some contest that had just begun, apparently I'd won round one.

"Do you know why we're here?" Subira began.

More than just an opener . . .

"Your partner asked me the same thing."

"Would you like to take a guess?"

There it was—she wanted to find out if I could see inside her mind. My third eye rolled.

"Is that germane to why you're here?"

"Not really. But you are a psychic."

"And you're hoping for a demonstration."

She dipped her head. "Well, yes. Who wouldn't?"

"Why not tell me what you want?"

"Of course." She picked out a manila folder. "Are you familiar with this outfit?"

The file was stamped with an official-looking string of digits. Big block letters marched across the index tab.

"What? No *Top Secret* blazoned on the front?"

From her laugh, one might almost think she found it funny.

I flipped the folder open. A photo-filled brochure obscured the documents beneath. *Rocks and trees, rocks and trees . . .*

"Cassandra Island? They had a booth at the Psychic Fair. That's about all I know."

"You've never heard of them?"

"No."

"It's a retreat for psychics."

She said it like a challenge.

“And that’s supposed to mean I’m *au courant*? Sorry, I don’t have much truck with the group hug set.”

She forgot to laugh this time.

“You’re not familiar with them?”

“Ms. MacKenzie—”

“—Subira—”

“—Ms. MacKenzie, is there some part of *No* you’re having trouble grasping?”

I handed back the folder. Byron, quiet until then, spoke up.

“Cassandra Island, the retreat, isn’t an island at all. It’s located on Dawe’s Lake in northeastern Ontario, near an island of the same name. Why they set up on the mainland is anybody’s guess. Infrastructure probably.

“Dawe’s Lake isn’t huge, but it’s situated near some minor ski hills so it has its share of year round cottagers—Anglo cream from Ottawa who don’t want lakeside getaways in francophone Québec. The capital’s about two hours away. The nearest town is Paxton, population twenty-five hundred.

“The retreat is publicly traded and listed on the TSE. The majority shareholder is a numbered company owned by the previous landholder and two partners. Doors opened in the early nineties. Their mission statement, in the file Subira gave you, lists a mandate covering education, practical training, research, counselling and career assistance to professional psychics or anyone wanting to try their hand at being one. In addition, they let out their facilities to any group who can afford them.

“The property covers about fifteen hectares and includes a main lodge holding up to thirty guests, plus several smaller cabins. The population is, of course, in flux, with a live-in staff of five. Other help, as needed, comes from Paxton and its environs.”

I cut him off.

“What is this? A speech to whip up new investors? Do you want me to buy stock?”

“No, David,” Subira answered quietly. “Nothing like that.”

They held a little eye conference. I couldn’t read what passed be-

tween them. My wondrous skill, as Ferko called it, couldn't tell the dancers from the dance.

Like lovers, though they've never been... same smugness built on partnership... same hidden canker of unspoken differences...

"David?"

It was Byron speaking.

"Sorry."

I flicked away the puzzle pieces sliding round inside my head.

Subira handed me another file.

"Have a look at these."

Nothing in her voice gave any indication what the folder held. It might as well have been some legal documents she wanted me to sign. *Just check these over, will you, see that everything's in order*
...

It wasn't legal documents.

A man's eyes, frozen wide in death, stared nowhere in a harsh-lit eight-by-ten. Lank, wet hair stuck to his skull like seaweed on a log. Foam bubbled from a cyanotic mouth. A slice of swimming pool cut across the top edge of the picture. The photograph was clipped to documents, the top one a certificate of death.

Underneath, a second photo. And a third. In the second, a woman lay on concrete with a stain of water spreading out from under her. Her naked breasts sagged to her sides. The third one showed a bloated male, still in sodden clothing, stretched out on the grass. His features—even his eyes—looked as if they'd been dipped in dirty paraffin.

I tossed the folder at Subira.

"You'd better have a fucking good reason for showing me this."

She squared off the contents.

"We do," she said evenly. "I'm sorry if it shocked you."

"Bullshit. That was planned."

I glared, daring her to contradict me. She didn't. For a moment, her connection to her partner vanished and I got the measure of the woman.

Never, ever to be trusted... false in all her words... a child-

hood of deceit, drunk in at the teat of a clever, grasping mother...

Byron poured oil on troubled waters.

“As you can see, the victims in those photos drowned. All three were suicides. None had a history of depression or other mental illness. None left a note. Subsequent investigations into family, health, relationships and finances gave no clue as to why they’d killed themselves.

“There’s no doubt that they were suicides. The naked woman entered a Vancouver hotel pool late at night, took off her bathing suit and knotted both her ankles to the bottom of the ladder.

“The victim on the grass was in a river in Nebraska, his pockets filled with sinkers from a local tackle shop. No evidence of foul play.

“The other guy’s from St-Lazare outside of Montreal. They pulled him from his private pool. He’d used duct tape to attach a pair of dumbbells to his legs. His girlfriend heard him get up in the night. She found him in the morning.

“Aside from drowning, the victims had other things in common. Notably, all three were psychics. The woman in Vancouver did transactional analysis and also gave life readings. The guy in Nebraska was a mentalist whose shtick was getting couples to confess their infidelities in public. The Montrealer charged four hundred bucks a pop for psychic readings with the rich in Outremont.

“Another thing they shared was the timing of their deaths. All three died within a few days of each other. The swimming pool deaths were reported immediately. The guy in the river didn’t get discovered until much later, but a missing person report had been filed around the same date as the other deaths.”

Byron stopped. His laying out of facts had a surreal quality, as if I’d stumbled into *Murder on the Orient Express*. My stage-set parlour didn’t help. Hercule Poirot could not have done it better.

Except Poirot had never spooked me. Byron did.

“The suicides took place about three years ago. Three separate agencies filed reports—the RCMP in BC, state police in Nebraska, and the Sûreté du Québec. They only came to our attention because CSIS, and our intelligence brothers to the south, monitor crime

databases for certain key words. One of them is ‘psychic.’”

“Psychic? Why?”

Subira answered for him.

“Cults. Joshua and I operate within a branch of CSIS that assesses potential threats to Canadian security posed by quasi-religious and paramilitary organizations.”

“And which are psychics? Quasi-religious or paramilitary?”

Nothing worked on this woman—not insults, not confrontation, not sarcasm.

“As you probably know,” she carried on, “cults form around a nucleus of mysticism. Their belief systems focus on redemption or salvation—enlightenment, ascension to a higher plane, escape to another planet—some sort of spiritual reward for members abrogating responsibility to the cult collective.

“What distinguishes cults from tamer secret societies is the messianic nature of their leaders, typically male, charismatic and sociopathic or psychotic. They claim for themselves, in addition to receiving divine or alien revelation, supra-human powers not unlike those claimed by psychics—clairvoyance, foreknowledge, mind-reading, gifts of healing.”

“So every psychic is a budding Marshall Applewhite or David Koresh?”

“That’s overstating things.”

“Is it? You’re the ones keeping tabs on psychics.”

“We don’t keep tabs. We gather data and correlate it under headings useful for determining trends that may have an impact on national security and the safety of Canadian citizens.”

“Which,” Byron put in, “may be the case here. Subira?”

She passed me another manila folder.

“The contents of this one aren’t so distressing,” she reassured me, reading what was in my face.

Again, three photos, this time snapshots: an older woman wearing a conical birthday hat; a bride with baby’s breath woven in her hair; a man on a beach with his arm around the shoulders of an adolescent boy. The documents underneath were missing person re-

ports.

Byron provided commentary.

“The birthday woman vanished two and a half years ago on the way from her Willowdale home to a hairdresser’s appointment. She sold hand-drawn Tarot decks from a website and gave readings herself.

“The newlywed disappeared eight months later, in Calgary. She worked in an occult bookstore and claimed to have the ‘gift of comfort’. Which, according to Calgary General’s palliative care unit, where she volunteered, she did. In spades.

“The man on the beach went missing from Halifax ten months after that. He worked with autistic children, claiming to be able to psychically ‘guide’ them toward normal interaction in the world. In one case, documented at Mt. Alison University, it appears he could.”

He stopped. I closed the cover on the missing psychics and looked up. He and Subira both had their eyes on me.

“Am I supposed to make something of this for you?” I asked. “Are you warning me? I still don’t know what you want.”

Subira glanced at Byron. I knew what she was thinking. *For a psychic, he isn’t very good.*

I passed her back the photographs and decided it was time to sit down. It looked as if they were going to go on playing roundabout for a while yet.

“Three suicides,” Subira said. “Three disappearances—”

“And three years ago,” I interrupted. “Should I be getting down a tome on numerology?”

Byron’s mouth twitched upward, perhaps the cumulative effect of the other shots I’d taken at her. I was beginning to warm up to him. Or at least to feel that if my life were on the line, I’d gamble on him long before her.

“Six psychics,” Subira continued, emphasizing *six*, “who, spread out geographically, and, other than the similarity of their professions, plus, in the case of the suicides, their deaths, have *one—*,” another bit of underlining,”—thing in common.”

She let it hang, expecting me to exercise, if not some psychic

ability, at least a little deductive reasoning.

“Cassandra Island,” I said.

“All six had some connection with the place. The Montreal suicide was a shareholder. The Vancouver woman and the man in Halifax gave seminars there from time to time. The others had been visitors. In one case, for a six-week stay.”

“Haven’t the RCMP or the OPP investigated?”

“The RCMP and the Ontario police aren’t even aware of the connection. There’s nothing for them to connect. The suicides and disappearances took place in completely different jurisdictions. Neither one is the kind of incident that receives much in-depth investigation.”

“You, on the other hand, seem to have put a lot of effort into it.”

“We have. Joshua, would you explain?”

Over to you, Mike.

“When the three suicides came to our attention, we smelled the possibility of cult involvement. ‘Likelihood’ would be more accurate. The victims’ professed psychic abilities, the identical manner of death and the coincidence of timing fit the profile of cult suicide. Canadian Security officers in the three jurisdictions uncovered the Cassandra Island connection.”

“Didn’t you say one of the victims was American?”

Byron struggled not to quip, *And your point is?* He shrugged, half apologetically.

“We’re an intelligence service, David.” *What can I say?*

“Preliminary investigation of the retreat turned up nothing. They’d never applied for charitable or religious status. Their taxes were paid up. Their finances were squeaky clean. Background checks on the majority shareholders turned up no suspicious affiliations. We sent an officer to Dawe’s Lake, but she reported nothing unusual. In fact, I understand she enjoyed her stay. Nice people—if a bit flaky—decent food, interesting seminars. No sign of an organization within an organization. No hint of covert screening. No unusual contact. She said she’d go back if she had the chance.

“CSIS doesn’t have the unlimited funding of some of our inter-

national intelligence brethren. Keeping an eye on cult activity has a lower priority these days than monitoring terrorism. We didn't have the resources for a continuing surveillance of Cassandra Island and were forced to put it on a back burner.

"When psychics started disappearing, we had no trouble connecting them to Cassandra Island—we knew what we were looking for. However, it took all three disappearances before sufficient funds were allocated to mount a protracted undercover investigation. That operation, like the one before it, came up zero."

"If you didn't have the resources to pursue it," I said, "why didn't you pass it on to an agency with a more public mandate to look into cults? The RCMP, for example."

Byron and Subira answered simultaneously.

"We do not provide security assessments to the RCMP—"

"CSIS does not share intelligence with the RCMP—"

Oh.

"Our problem is this," Subira said. "We're certain Cassandra Island is a cult recruiting ground. The precise constitution of that cult remains unknown, but its presence and influence have become apparent through three identical suicides and three abductions or voluntary disappearances. Our attempts at contact and infiltration have so far failed."

"And so you've come to me."

"Yes."

"You want me to go undercover."

Her face softened prettily; she'd made her pitch. "Nothing as dramatic as that."

"What, then?"

"We'd like you to go up there and spend some time, that's all. Make an effort to get to know the people in charge, as well as the guests. Be on the lookout for anything unusual. If you spot or sense something, report to us."

"And if someone from this supposed cult approaches me?"

"Let us know, then steer clear. As of now we have no information whatsoever. A person's name, or the manner of contact, are all

we need to start mounting a proper intelligence operation.”

“And if nothing happens?”

Byron replied. “Then that’s the end of it. Until another psychic drowns or drops off the face of planet Earth.”

He sat forward with his hands clasped and his Popeye forearms on his knees. He looked like a deeply caring Hummer.

“We need someone with your qualifications, David. We surmise our operatives turned up nothing because they weren’t psychic.”

“I hope you’re aware how funny that sounds.”

He gave a little grunt. It might have been a laugh.

“It’s possible—likely, even—that potential inductees are vetted. Anyone without a history in the profession might be suspect. Equally, anyone without an aptitude for it might not be considered.”

“Or maybe Cassandra Island really is a hotbed for people with psychic abilities and they read your operatives’ minds.”

He blinked. MacKenzie seemed content to let him deal with my reaction.

“So what you’re looking for is somebody to act as bait. A psychic with sterling credentials.”

“In a nutshell.”

“Why me?”

“Your appearance.”

He stared past me.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your looks,” Subira said flatly. “Your eyes, in particular. Joshua feels they give you a certain charisma. I agree. Human nature being what it is, you’re likely to attract attention. Make a better magnet.”

“I’m flattered. But aren’t you leaving something out?”

She gave me a blank, questioning look.

“My fee. You are going to pay me, aren’t you?”

The blank turned stony. Byron kept on looking elsewhere.

“Would it be fair to say, then, that aside from my ‘qualifications’ and my physical appearance, my being well off, to use an entirely inadequate euphemism, factors into your choice?”

She made to speak but decided against it. Enough had already

been said about funding and allocation.

“What happens if I just tell you to take a hike?”

She recovered her voice.

“You may not want to do that.”

I raised my eyebrows. She took another folder but kept it to herself, leafing through it idly.

“You’re an interesting man, David. As far as we can tell, you didn’t exist officially until four years ago, when you walked off with the biggest undivided jackpot in Canadian history. Shortly afterwards you applied for a birth certificate, a social insurance number, a driver’s licence and a Canadian passport—in that order. The affidavit for your birth certificate lists your father as unknown, your mother as Margaret Ase, mentally incompetent and believed deceased, your probable place of birth as Hamilton, Ontario, and your family ties as ‘no known relatives.’

“There is no record of you at all until sixteen years ago, when your name begins to crop up in Toronto police files for various misdemeanours, primarily vagrancy and trespassing. Then, eleven years ago, Royal Bank records show you opening a joint account with the man who subsequently stood for you in your birth certificate application, one Ferenc Anhalt. The account remains active for four years, then once again, you drop off any sort of radar until three years later when you emerge as a one-day front page item.”

I could feel Byron enjoying this after I’d confronted him with the similar fruits of a computer rampage.

“So you see, we have a problem,” Subira went on. “The present government hopes to impress our neighbours to the south with a tough, proactive stance on terrorism. A closed session Bill passed in Parliament grants CSIS sweeping powers in this regard, similar to the War Measures Act. Included are the right to search without a warrant and the freedom to hold indefinitely any citizen on suspicion only. I’m sure you can see how, in other hands, your file might be a source of some concern.”

She looked up just long enough to let me know she wasn’t done.

“In addition, Revenue Canada may want to dig into the Royal

Bank account you held with Mr. Anhalt. Naturally, this would involve a thorough investigation of not only your finances, past and present, but Mr. Anhalt's as well. As you know, with Revenue Canada, one is always guilty until proven innocent. I assume you and Mr. Anhalt are close?"

She closed the file as delicately and deliberately as a dinner guest folding up her napkin. Byron, still perched forward, wore a studiously neutral expression.

Doesn't like this... she's gone too far...

I stood and went to the door.

"Ms. MacKenzie, Mr. Byron—take a hike."