

Chapter 11

COMING UP WITH TWENTY-TWO

“**B**RAVO,” MARION APPLAUDED when I told her about showing Byron and MacKenzie to the door. “I can never steel myself to be that rude, even when it’s called for.”

“Not so’s I’d ever noticed.”

“David, really. I couldn’t insult someone I actually dislike.”

“Do you think there’s anything to this cult of theirs?”

“It’s possible, I suppose. Provided your visitors had their facts straight. CSIS does have a reputation for putting two and two together and coming up with twenty-two.”

“Have you heard of this place, Cassandra Island?”

“Honestly, David—when are you going to join the real world? They’ve been around for at least a decade. Buzz is they’re on the up-and-up—inasmuch as anything to do with psychics can be.”

“‘Up-and-up’ meaning what, exactly?”

“Well, aside from touchy-feely, find-your-inner-Jena weekends, I’m told they host workshops on self-employment, marketing, ways to maintain a client base, that sort of thing. A woman who used to see me got a nice little business going thanks to them. But is it all right for us to be talking like this? You know, high level hush-hush and that sort of thing?”

“If you really cared you’d have asked sooner. Frankly I can’t see what difference it makes. That is, not unless you’re head poobah of

the next Temple du soleil, which is how our friends from CSIS made Cassandra Island sound. But no, they didn't tell me not to talk about it."

"Perhaps they thought it was implied."

"More fools them."

Marion sat quietly a moment, staring at her second brandy and tonic. Joshua Byron and Subira MacKenzie had made for a long recital.

"It's a shame you threw them out," she said, spinning ice cubes in her glass.

"How so?"

"You could have been a hit on the cocktail circuit. Spies, cults, suicides, disappearances. It isn't every day an opportunity like that comes along."

"Opportunity is hardly what I'd call it. And it's not supposed to happen, period. Not in real life."

"Winning a lottery isn't supposed to happen, either."

Nor, I thought, is waking in an alley with six years' of your memory behind a wall of pain.



Ferko's reaction the following Saturday was soberer.

His colour had returned. The monitors were gone. So was the oxygen feed. Only the IV drip remained.

"It was not the wisest thing to do, David."

Surprisingly, his speech had gotten better following the stroke. He had less trouble forming words. If I closed my eyes, I could almost hear the impish host who used to disconcert his guests with, "*David, tell us everything you can about the good professor here.*" Or "*... my colleague, Dr. Murchison.*" Or "*... my old friend, Judith,*" which he pronounced *YOU-deet*.

"I don't deal well with threats."

"Few do. But I would not have acted as you did."

He handed me a glass beside his bed.

“Would you mind?”

Over running water in the bathroom, I called out: “Do you think I should relent? Get in touch with them again?”

I unwrapped a straw, bent it to a drinking angle and took the water back. Ferko rolled it in his mouth as if it were Lafitte-Rothschild. A little dribbled down his chin. He dabbed it with a corner of the bedsheet.

“For myself,” he said, handing back the glass, “I am unconcerned. The taxman will not find me easy to harass. But you? In Hungary, before I fled, those in power did exactly as they wished. I imagined I’d escaped all that in Canada. But more and more, even in this country, citizens are not safe from those agencies whose *raison d’être* is security.”

“What do you suggest I do?”

“Go along with their request. Your heart need not be in it. It is usually enough to observe the forms. Were this the time of Torquemada, I would wear the biggest crucifix I could lay my hands on. Expedience is the key to survival when in danger from the state.”

“Danger’s a bit strong, don’t you think?”

“The CIA, in fiction and in fact, has no reputation for respecting freedom. Or life.”

“The two I saw were CSIS, Ferko. This isn’t the US.”

“No? The elites who run this country seem determined to prove otherwise.”

“But can CSIS really be so scary? Any time they make the news, it’s for yet another blunder. Remember when some poor schmuck left sensitive documents on the seat at a hockey game? It was front page news. They’re hardly in the same league as the Hungarian Secret Police.”

“If you wanted to disguise your competence, what better way than playing at the bumbling fool?”

“The two I saw, the word I’d use is hokey, not bumbling. Over-rehearsed, like colour commentators. I couldn’t take them seriously. Not until that woman showed her claws.”

He turned his eyes full on me. “And will she act upon her

threats?”

I knew what he was asking.

“I honestly can’t say. I could read the partnership but not the partners. She stayed pretty much a closed book. Him I had a bit less trouble with, but then we’d met already.”

He started plucking at his blanket.

“Your skill attenuates with numbers,” he enunciated carefully. “This we know. But there were only two of them. I have seen you flawlessly assess around a table set for eight. That you couldn’t read this woman speaks of discipline, physical and psychological, which by itself should put you on your guard. Your past, both what we know and what we don’t, puts you at risk. You could suffer if she uses it against you.”

“So you think I should go to this Cassandra Island place? Scope it out the way they ask?” I shook my head. “It’s ridiculous. Like something out of *Le Carré*.”

“What harm would it do?”

“You know that all my life, I’ve kept away from record-keeping agencies. That invisible, I feel safe.”

“A not unjustified paranoia.” He savoured the oxymoron. “But it’s too late now. They have come to you. In your place, I’d appease the gods of state.”



I paid a call on Raymond Kiefer later the same day.

Ten years earlier, he’d sold the yellow house and moved up in the world. At least that’s how he put it. The place he bought instead—a tall Victorian with real bow windows and a circular, peaked tower—was two blocks north.

“But it’s across the great divide—,” Carleton-College Street, which distinguishes upper Jarvis from lower, “—and snuggled up beside the Kremlin.” The Kremlin was the grimy former home of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, also known as Mother. “What more could any self-respecting faggot want?”

From the start, Raymond occupied the upper storey, renting out the other two: the main floor and the spacious semi-basement.

The main floor had a gym-sized living room and marble fireplace. For five years after Ferko's stroke, the sound of Callas drifting down the flue had dogged me like a Banshee, screeching in the bedrooms, down the halls, and even in the big porch off the kitchen. The only place I could escape her was the shower. I grew to loathe *La Traviata*, though I loved the flat.

I'd be there still, if Raymond hadn't moved his mother in.

I parked out back and walked around. Waiting on the broad front steps, I tried to peer inside my old apartment but was thwarted by a froth of ruffled sheers.

"Sweetie!" Raymond greeted me in cut-offs and a cloud of gin. "*Quelle surprise!* What brings you to the heartland? Do come up. Let me show you what I'm working on."

He led me up the stairs and to the sun porch at the back. Paint and thinner blended with the smell of booze. Cans of brilliant pigment held a dropsheet on the floor. In the middle was a small, three-legged table.

Raymond waved me over.

"Do you love it?"

It looked like marble. Inlaid on the top—*trompe l'oeil* but perfect—was a compass rose, each ray a different coloured mineral. The figure glowed like morning through a stained-glass window.

"Lapis, turquoise, carnelian, onyx... The onyx isn't perfect. And I think I'll change the porphyry to verd antique—"

"It's beautiful," I interrupted. "Who's it for?"

"The American Hysterical Society. They want a sample piece. Why does that remind me of the old lady who, instead of sectional, told her decorator she wanted a *sexual* couch for an occasional piece? So—drinkie-poo?"

"Rye."

"Coming up."

He shambled to the kitchen and came back with twice the quantity of rye I could consume and still stay standing.

“Cheers, darling. Have a seat. I’m going to go on working.”

I settled in a lumpy armchair. Raymond took an artist’s brush and dipped it in a tin. The brush looked like it only had about three bristles on it. The paint resembled liquid gold. He deftly added highlights to the onyx ray in his design. How he did it drunk escaped me.

Blessedly, La Callas wasn’t on. Sunlight filtered through his hanging plants. The wicker furniture, all white, looked bathed in seawater. It reminded me of my porch when I lived downstairs.

“Do you realize we’ve known each other fifteen years?” I said.

He glanced up. “The years do toddle by, don’t they?”

“Would you say I’ve changed?”

He put his free hand to his cheek, Jack Benny style.

“*Hmmm*, I wonder—street urchin to gazillionaire. Yes, I’d say you’ve changed.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“No, sweetie. I didn’t think it was.”

“Do you remember when I moved downstairs?”

“I’m a lush, not a victim of Oldtimer’s disease. That mad Russian you were hiding out with had a stroke.”

“He’s Hungarian.”

“And still cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs. Urging you to escort—,” he hooked his fingers around the word, “—while paying all your bills. That’s against the sugar-daddy rules.”

“I don’t recall you bitching when I paid a whole year’s rent up front.”

“Hypocrites are born of second mortgages.”

“Do you remember how I seemed when I moved in?”

“Listless and lethargic? Or just bummed out and bored?”

“That about covers it.”

“Poor thing. Your hard-on wasn’t in the escort business anymore. You had offers to be kept, but turned them down. Most days you were up here killing time with auntie Raymond, waiting for the world to throw you something to replace the high of fucking for a buck.”

“That obvious, huh?”

“Honey, more obvious than that and you’d have had a scarlet letter on your back. You weren’t having any fun. Then you started with your psychic readings—” more visible quotation marks, “—another one of Count Vlad’s crazy ideas. Someone should have explained to him that spotting boners in a business suit doth not a psychic make. My, that came out tortured, didn’t it? Time for another drink.”

He laid his brush across the paint tin and listed to the kitchen. When he returned he sat down on a sofa facing me.

“So, then, what’s this all about?”

“Patterns. Rhythms. Cycles. Mine especially.”

“Can’t help you there. The only pattern I know is get up, have a coffee, feel like shit and hit the gin. Works for me.”

“Sorry, Raymond. I’m not letting you off the hook. A long time ago, you said if I ever needed to talk—”

“Ah, but darling, you were young and gorgeous then. I can’t be held accountable.”

“Yes, you can. Let me ask you this. You’ve seen me through several incarnations, right?”

“Street kid, beggar, hustler, kept boy, psychic, filthy *rich* psychic?”

“Yeah, them. Which one made me happiest?”

“Oh, my, you *are* serious. Does this means I have to drop my role as quipper of bon mots?” He took a gulp of G&T. “Let’s see. Happy.” He thought about it some. “Well, I’m not sure you’ve ever been. But then who is? I mean, look at me. Actually, don’t look at me; it’s too depressing. Better you should ask me when you’ve been *unhappy*.”

“And that would be?”

“When you’re not doing something you shouldn’t. When you’re on the inside, not the fringe. Whenever other people aren’t inventing lives for you to play act at—a john who wants a stand-in for his captain-of-the-hockey team best friend at school. Or a horny honky shrink Henry Higgins-ing your Audrey Hepburn. Goodness, all

those aitches. I'm running out of breath. The point is, when you try to settle down, become respectable, you get bored. The Zippety goes out of your do-dah. That's what happened when you moved downstairs."

"I'd been with Ferko for four years. I thought it was a phase, what everyone goes through when an epoch in their life draws to a close."

"David, sweetie, you read too much. Your sentences are coming out pre-edited. I liked it better when you couldn't string two words together."

"You would. You did all the talking."

"Bitch."

I raised my drink. "Learned it from a master."

Raymond raised his, too. A little bit sloshed over the lip. He didn't seem to notice. His eyes were going cloudy and unfocused.

"You were better for a while when you started with your psychic readings."

"That's what I thought, too."

"But it didn't last, now, did it? A year later, you were moping around auntie again. Then you won that lottery. Money can't buy happiness—blah-blah-blah—but if it buys the things that make you happy what's the difference? You travelled, got yourself another place, bought off portions of your past and settled into getting into people's heads instead of in their pants. But here you are again, talking to a drunken queen about your empty life."

"Did I say empty?"

His far-off gaze was getting far-er.

"You were at your best when you and Pete were kings of Grenville Street. Footloose, fancy free, depending on the kindness of a steady stream of strangers. The memory won't go away. If you're looking for a pattern, start there.

"Too bad you didn't hook yourself on drink back then. The buzz is so reliable. What a friend we have in Gordon's. No matter where you are, it's never further than your local holy water fount."



My sometimes Sunday ritual that Marion had yet to figure out was that I snuck off to Mt. Hope. That weekend, I indulged.

The route I took there never varied—QEW to 403, 403 to Hamilton, then south on Highway 6. The first leg's just as numbing as it sounds, with box stores, malls and hotels whizzing by. The sameness makes you feel you could be anywhere. But then you hit the 403 and sweep around the west end of the lake. Hamilton comes into view and suddenly you realize that where you are's no longer where you were.

Hamilton's a city split—vertically, not horizontally. Lower town surrounds a bay that's charcoal blue on sunny days and dotted with white sails. Freighters ply the waters, dropping ore and hauling steel from the Stelco and Dofasco plants. Torontonians who seldom come this way maintain that's all there is to Hamilton: steel, and smog, and burly men in wifebeaters.

They're wrong.

Inland from the harbour rears a vast eccentric landform like a massive butte with just one face. The hundred metre rise is treed, obscuring access roads so steep you wonder if you'll make it to the top. When you do, the street names change to Upper-This and Upper-That and Hamilton continues. The bluff's official name is the Niagara Escarpment, but to locals it has always been *The Mountain*.

Non-Hamiltonian's deride the name, imagining the Rockies where the Mountain wouldn't cut it as a foothill. What they're missing is that height is not the only measure of a mountain.

The Mountain stands between two worlds: the Golden Horseshoe down below, a sprawling megalopolis that stretches from Niagara Falls to Oshawa; and rolling, well-farmed tableland above.

Development along the brow has yet to turn malignant. It doesn't even peter out; it simply stops, five kilometres south. The vegetation softens, as if going up the Mountain were a change of latitude, not altitude. The pine and spruce that practically define the

northern landscape of Ontario give way to broadleaf copses. Willows flourish. Roadside flowers overtake the gravel berms. Teasels spike above the pampas grass that grows in every ditch. Fields of sod and dark green soybeans intersperse with pasturage that reaches to the shoulders of old Highway 6.

The light is different, too, the sky a little paler, as if filtered through a haze of motes kicked up by farmers' ploughs. The countryside is criss-crossed by concession roads whose names recall the landmarks of a simpler time: Stone Church Road, Whitechurch Road, English Church Road, Trinity Church Road.

I parked as always in the parking lot of St. Paul's, Anglican, a little south of English Church. The single house across the way looks like a child's drawing: too much roof, a chimneypot, and centred windows bracketing a small front door. That day, a tattered net was strung between two canted poles out front.

The right side of the property slopes down to meet a bottomland that spreads out from a shallow creek. Pine trees on the left side screen a vacant lot next door, where Queen Anne's lace and purple vetch have taken over what was once my foster home's front yard. The house is gone, and so's the barn; the long, long driveway ends at overgrown foundations.

The first time I drove out—I didn't get a license until after I won big and did a lot of things to make myself official—I was itching to explore. I parked the car, unlocked the door, went to put my foot down...

... and slammed into a wall of pain so fierce I almost fainted. It was a hot day, I remember, but for fifteen minutes afterwards I shivered like I'd fallen through a skin of river ice.

I could look, but not get out. Some spell prevented it—the bad Queen's rosy apple with a poisoned core. Yet I couldn't help returning, like a peeping Tom who can't resist the perilous but aching need to cloak himself in night and drink in other people's lives.

The front door of the house flew open. Four kids scrambled out and started volleying a bright red ball across the ragged net.

I put the car in gear and headed down to Homestead Drive.

Homestead's like a tributary, branching off old Highway 6 and merging back with traffic at the south end of the village. Nothing on it ever changed. The clapboard house that used to be the doctor's office still had smart, black trim. The Town Hall where I sent a private eye to check on records still concealed a park out back. The machine shop, curling rink and barbershop—all untouched and varnished into place.

At Airport Road I hung a right, passing by the public school and cruising west a country block. Driving east held no attraction. This side of the highway, every road was like a line of force, the straights and curves and intersections glowing with enchantment. East, the magic vanished. The lines of force turned grey and dead. Nothing called me there. I tried exploring once, on Whitechurch Road, but U-turned half a kilometre later.

I meandered south on farm roads till I came to Caledonia, a gypsum-mining town along the banks of the Grand River. Like Mt. Hope, the main street is impervious to time, with shops whose orange brickwork looks as hotly terra cotta as it did a century ago. I stopped for fish and chips, had a Blizzard at the Dairy Queen, then took the highway north again and pulled in at St. Paul's.

The sun was getting low, burnishing the bottomland and firing wisps of cloud with pink. The kids had left their ball outside, a red splotch on the evening lawn.

The creek that forms the bottomland is fed in part with run-off from a pond behind the vacant lot. A muddy channel joins the two, thick with lime-green algae when the weather's hot. The pond itself is wide, spring-fed, and deep enough to swim, although you have to wade through silt before the bottom starts to drop. As you do, minnows dart around your legs and crayfish skitter under rocks. Cattails on the far side shelter turtles and spring peepers.

But however much I wanted to, I couldn't squelch through silt or swim across. I couldn't hunt for frogs' eggs in the reeds, or upend turtles with a stick. I couldn't happen on a nest of snakes and keep one in a jar, or lie down on the bank and look for castles in the clouds. Something always stopped me. All I had was memory. I

couldn't even see the pond from here.

The day before, Ferko, musing presciently, had asked:

"Do you still drive to Mt. Hope?"

"Sometimes."

"Is it still the same?"

"It is."

"I'm becoming worried, David. Your settled life—the riches, repetition, ritual—how long has it been? Four years? It's done you good. The therapist in me approves."

"But what comes next? Who you are is locked inside your missing years. Visiting Mt. Hope may not be how to find them. Perhaps the key is lurking somewhere other than the past."



I ate supper at Il Vagabondo, a block from my apartment. Fettuccine with gnocchi in a cream sauce—the Italian equivalent of a plate of home fries doused with Heinz.

At home, I checked my messages. Two from clients cancelling their visits later in the week, and one from Kirin Neemes. I fixed myself a rye and ginger, took it to the study and dialled Kirin's number.

"I hope it's not too late," I started off.

"No, it's fine. I'm a night owl and I don't have any contracts right now anyway."

"What's up? You left a message. Did you want to schedule an appointment?"

"Maybe I should?" It sounded like she didn't know the proper etiquette. "I really just wanted to ask you about something."

"Shoot. If I can't help over the phone, we'll book some time."

"Oh, okay. What I was wondering is, do you know anything about that retreat for psychics up north? The one with the booth I met you outside of at the Fair?"

I smiled. Coincidence. It happens all the time. Making something of it is a psychic's bread and butter.

“As a matter of fact, I was asking my neighbour about it a few days ago.”

“Really? Why?”

“The subject came up.”

“What did she say?”

“Good things. They’re on the up-and-up. Why the interest?”

“I’m thinking about going. I got my tax return, and Carlin’s with her father. I was reading the brochure, and it sounded like something I ought to do. I mean, I have all these questions, you know, about stuff, and I thought maybe—”

“When?” I cut her off.

“I dunno. Next week some time?”

“How long?”

“A week, maybe? Ten days? I checked online. They’re not booked up or anything.”

The first time Byron called he’d tucked a card beneath the rose vase. I’d wondered at his choice of paperweights but hadn’t thrown it out. It was on my desk beside the mouse. I picked it up and flicked it with my thumb.

“Feel like company?”