

Chapter 13

ONLY ROUND THE MOON

I DIDN'T LET Josh Byron know about my trip with Kirin. Sussing out Cassandra Island had developed some appeal, but no way did I want his boss imagining her threats had worked.

My only preparations were to cancel all appointments, check the long-range forecast, and download Google maps for transfer to my laptop. We'd decided to go up in Kirin's GPS locator-less old Honda. That way if she wanted to leave early, she wouldn't have to call on my good graces.

Her music for the trip turned out to be a schizophrenic mix of Indigo Girls and Shaggy. The joyous harmonies of breakout feminism crashed up against *Picture this, we were both buck naked, bangin' on the bathroom floor* as Toronto petered out and the fields of Prince Edward County rolled greenly to the Lake.

We spoke little on the 401 to Napanee, even when we made a Timmie's stop for coffee and some doughnuts. Music was a safety zone for Kirin, a sonic island she could camp out on when chit-chat wasn't easy. Self-consciously aware we hardly knew each other, she retreated into humming *Girl, you're my angel, you're my darling* and *The closer I am to fi-ine*.

Off the highway, heading north on 41, she turned the music down.

"What did you do before?"

Before you started working as a psychic... before you won the lottery...

“Not much of anything, really.” I did my imitation of the Mona Lisa’s smile.

“I don’t believe you.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

Her eyes slid off the road. “What do you mean?”

“Only that you’ve said it before.”

“Right, I have, haven’t I?” She looked ahead again. “So, what *did* you do?”

“I was a kept boy. And, to use a phrase from yellow journalism, a high-priced escort. Before that, I sold my ass from curbside.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Not a bit.”

“You hustled?”

At least she had the terminology correct.

“In a nutshell, yes.”

We passed a rock-strewn pasture with some sooty-looking sheep. A log barn crumbled in the middle. The smell of shit seeped through the dashboard vents.

“What was it like?”

“Sometimes easy, sometimes rotten. Sometimes work, sometimes play. It had its ups and downs.”

“And ins-and-outs?” She flushed and gripped the steering wheel. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. It might have been a terrible time for you.”

“It’s all right, I’m not made of glass.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“And I’m not your mother’s mother, nor your daughter’s father. There’s no need to tread on eggshells around me.”

More farms went by, interspersed with rockface scarred from blasting. Atop the granite, blueberries were growing wild, judging from the roadside stands that offered them for half the price you pay in town. The stands were shuttered but in August would have

SUVs and Winnebagos parked for half a kilometre back.

“Is that something in my aura?” she asked. “Something you see? My grandmother *was* an alcoholic, the meanest kind there is. You knew without me telling you. And Carlin’s father—”

“—Burke—”

“See? There you go again. How come you know that?”

My laptop was up front between the seats. “Simple,” I said, patting it. “I looked it up.”

“Before or after I came to see you?”

“After.”

“But you knew so much about him.”

“What can I say? You have a way about you that says ‘grandchild of a drunk.’ It doesn’t take a genius to figure out your history with men.”

“It’s that obvious?”

“Does it bother you?”

“Sort of, yeah.”

“If I said I saw it in your aura, would that help?”

“Do you see auras?”

“Only round the moon when there’s weather coming.”

I knew what she was hoping I would say. *I see things, Kirin. I know the secrets of the heart and mind. I have the Gift.* And it would have been so easy. I’d never balked at lies before. Why then?

“What was he like?”

The man who kept you . . .

“What *is* he like. We’re still in touch.”

She raised a tailored brow. “You mean you still . . . ?”

“No. He’s an older man. Partially paralysed now. Stroke.”

“How much older?”

“Forty years.”

“Rich?”

“It seemed so at the time. My perspective’s changed a little.”

“I guess it would. Was he good to you?”

“Extremely. And not just in the material sense. Although that, too, of course.”

“What did he do?”

“Head of psychiatry at Sunnybrook for twenty-five years, then in private practice. He liked thorny cases, ones that kept him hopping. He used to call initial consultations ‘auditions.’ That should give you some idea.”

“How long were you together?”

“Four years.”

“Did you love him?”

“He was insatiable in bed, considerate in everything, loved to share his knowledge, and never could resist the urge to stir the shit.”

“But he wasn’t meant for you.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know. A feeling I get. Like you’ve never been in love.”

“Do you see that in my aura?”

She punched me lightly on the shoulder. “Don’t make fun.”

“I’m not.”

Just trying to make a point.

We made a stop for gas at Kaladar where Highway 7, the Trans-Canada, intersects with 41. A little further on, the landscape started changing into True North Strong and Free. Spruce and cedar lined the shoulders. Gangly birches struggled to survive. Profoundly asymmetrical Jack pines capped sheer pink granite crests. Skeletons of drowned trees rose from glaring water pooled in bogs.

“He was your mentor, right?”

Back to Ferko.

“Yes.”

“And you paid him back in sex.”

“A Greek arrangement’s what he called it. He said the Greeks knew something we’ve forgotten, that erotic tension motivates a teacher. Viewed that way it’s hard to say who paid whom for what.”

“And this thing you do—psychic counselling—it was his idea?”

I mentally gold-starred her psychic scorecard. Focused on the road, she was making leaps and coming up with answers.

“Is that another ‘feeling that you get’?”

“I don’t know what else to call it. But I’m right, aren’t I?”

“You are.”

We swept around a curve. A small lake glittered through the trees ahead.

“What was his name?”

I looked over at her. “Why don’t you try telling me?”

“What do you mean?”

“I think you know.”

She laughed nervously. “Like a sort of psychic test?”

“You’ve been flirting with your intuitions for the past few minutes. Why not go all the way?”

“What do I have to do?”

Take my hand... concentrate... focus... focus on the energy between us...

“Nothing,” I said. “Just pull a name out of a hat.”

“That’s all?” She sounded dubious. “I dunno, how ’bout... Frank?”

The road turned glassy for a moment. I blew out a long breath.

“What?” she asked, mistaking my reaction.

“His name is Ferenc,” I said. “Hungarian for Franklin.”

“No way. You’re kidding.”

Suddenly I understood the image I’d gotten from her twice of static coalescing into pictures of myself. We were the same, or very nearly. She was taking in enormous quantities of data—her “flashes”—but lacked the discipline to make them all cohere.

“I call him Ferko. It’s a diminutive, not exactly Frank, more like Frankie. In Hungarian, the last thing you’d expect him to be called. He enjoys the way it ruffles stuffy feathers.”

Kirin gripped the wheel at ten and two, peering at the road like those old men in hats who crawl along the highway with a trail of thirty cars behind.

Highway 41 took us through the settlements of Cloyne and Northbrook and past the entrance to Bon Echo park. In places we could see Lake Mazinaw, the jewel in Bon Echo’s crown. I read somewhere Walt Whitman found it paradise on earth.

A little past Bon Echo, I began to notice traffic on the other side

was coming down in little clumps. Construction signs appeared, then bulldozers and finally an orange-vested flagman.

“Ask him how far the roadwork goes,” I said to Kirin.

She rolled her window down and got the news: twenty kilometres of stop-and-go single lane.

I leaned over.

“We’re trying to get to Dawe’s Lake. Is there any way to bypass this?”

The flagman—young and deeply tanned—took off his hardhat and scratched his head.

“Well, if you don’t mind going back a ways, you can take a right at Cloyne. That’ll get you over to Fourth Line, which goes straight up to 78. Or you can stay on Fourth until you hit Bourne Road. Either one’ll take you to River Road. Hang a right there and just keep going till you see the lake.”

Kirin made a three-point turn and took us back to Cloyne.

Fourth Line turned out to be a gravel road and anything but straight. At one point what we took to be a country lane split off a big left curve. Two concessions later Kirin noticed that our route was now identified as Curley Road. I pulled the laptop from between the seats and booted up. Four zooms on the map and I could see where we’d gone wrong.

“That was Fourth Line back there,” I told her. “But it looks like Curley Road veers over to High River so I think we’re still on track.”

We carried on, silent in the way lost travellers get. The gravel turned to hardpack, then to washboard, but eventually decanted us on River Road. High River, to our left, was a muddy ribbon stippled with bright sunlight.

“I hope Dawe’s Lake is cleaner than this,” Kirin said. “I brought a bathing suit.”

“It’ll be cold this time of year.”

“I swam in high school. Synchronized. We used to call it Sink-or-Swim. I got used to cold water.”

We passed through Paxton, a nowhere-looking town tucked between the river and a wooded ridge. North, the ridge became a cliff,

glittering with schist and mica. Cedars with their roots exposed clung gamely to the side. Across the water, docks with power boats and seaplanes spoke of cottages behind a scrim of conifers.

“Why are you doing this?” Kirin asked.

Why are you coming to Cassandra Island?

“I need a break.”

“That’s all? With the kind of money you’ve got you could take a break in Monaco.”

“Good point. Truth is, I’ve been looking for an excuse to check this place out.”

“And I provided the excuse?”

“Said like that, it sounds awful. What I mean is, I don’t have a lot of friends. I was sort of hoping you and I . . .”

She nodded. *Not a lot of friends in her life, either.*

The crest of rock and trees veered east while the road stuck to the riverside. Ahead, a concrete arch bridge spanned the water.

Kirin slowed.

“Is this where we turn?”

“It’s either that or swim.”

Halfway across, I could see where High River widened into Dawe’s Lake—a blinding finger of water ringed with pines and dotted with small islands.

Kirin’s mood grew somber as we headed north again.

“That’s not all, is it?” she said. “There’s more to your coming along than you’re letting on.”

No doubt . . . no insecurity . . .

It felt odd being told about myself. Odd, but not disquieting. And if Kirin were like me, I knew I’d have to tell the truth.

“You’re right,” I said. “I’m on a secret mission for Canadian Intelligence, spying on Cassandra Island to discover if it hides a cult that kidnaps hapless psychics and occasionally sends them to their deaths.”

This time, she didn’t punch me lightly on the shoulder. She swatted me. And hard.



With memories of the Psychic Fair still fresh, Cassandra Island came as a surprise.

After jogging down a shaded lane, we pulled into a parking lot marked off with railway sleepers. The smell of sun-baked creosote greeted us when we got out.

Kirin stretched and breathed a liberated lungful.

“I could get used to this.”

“Cottage country at its finest.”

The brochure photos hadn’t lied. The cedar lodge, set off against a deep blue sky, had the rich orange hue of ’50s Kodachrome. Dawe’s Lake twinkled prettily. Several hundred metres out, the treed mound of Cassandra Island rose above its own reflection.

Kirin popped the hatchback, tussled with a hockey bag, and slung it on her shoulder while I hauled my suitcase from the back seat of the Honda.

“Ready?” I asked, shutting the door with my hip. “Let’s go see if the rooms match the view.”

The lodge was built of square-hewn logs, neatly pointed, freshly stained. Dormers marched along the roof. Inside, the wide-plank flooring gleamed with Varathane. A braided rug in pale blues and russets held a sofa and some chairs. Dried flowers in wicker sconces graced the walls. Martha Stewart would have approved.

A ponytailed blonde at the reception desk, tippy-tapping at a keyboard, looked up as we approached.

“Mr. Ase and Ms. Neemes?”

We must have been the only guests slated to arrive that day. Still, it was a nice touch, greeting us by name.

“David and Kirin, please,” I said, flashing her a thousand-watter. “And you are . . . ?”

“Debbie. Welcome to Cassandra Island. Your first visit, right?”

The smile may have been too much. She glanced from me to Kirin. *Anything between them?* she was wondering. *Just friends?*

“Let me show you to your rooms. When you’ve settled in, come

back down. I'll give you the tour." She opened a drawer and took out keys. "This way."

She led us to a landing on the second floor and down a panelled hall. The doors on either side had numbers done in whittled pine.

"You picked a good time. We're not too full. Both your rooms have views toward the lake."

She opened number six and waited to see which of us would take it. I moved first.

"Now, remember—whenever you're ready, come down and I'll show you around."

The room smelled faintly of vanilla. I tossed my suitcase on the bed and set about transferring jeans and T-shirts to an antique dresser. The clothes I had to hang—flannel shirts, a windbreaker and vest—went in a closet stocked with solid maple hangers.

I splashed some water on my face in the standard-issue bathroom—water glass in paper, wafers of unopened soap, midget bottles of shampoo—then cranked the bedroom window open.

The sun was getting low, casting shadows on a broad expanse of lawn that sloped toward the rocky shore. Flanking it were cabins nestled in the trees. A flagstone path led to a fire pit with limestone benches. A long black dock stretched out into the lake.

Kirin tapped and let herself in.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" she said, coming up beside me. "I'm glad I did this. I already feel . . . something. It's so peaceful." She continued looking out. "Not many people around."

"Perhaps they're at an afternoon séance."

She turned.

"Don't do that. Not here." *Don't burst my bubble.* "I'm confused enough. I don't need someone making fun all the time."

"You're right. It isn't fair. I'll keep my tongue in check."

She searched my face, looking for an answer to the unasked question: *What makes you such a cynic, anyway?*

"Shall we go downstairs?" I said.

Debbie heard us coming and looked up. "Your rooms okay? Ready for the tour?"

She came around the desk and gave us both a neatly printed sheet of paper.

“Since this is your first visit—you heard about us at the Psychic Fair in Toronto, right?—I’ll explain a bit about how we operate.

“What you have there is our schedule for the next two weeks. As you know, we’re a retreat. The idea is to get away. But we’re also here for education and support so there are always seminars and workshops going on. No need to sign up for them, by the way. They’re mostly led by guests who volunteer when they arrive. Six times a year, we hold focused training courses. For those we bring in paid instructors. The rest of the time we try to make sure at least one acknowledged psychic is in residence.”

“I understand you rent out to non-psychics, too.” I made *non-psychics* come across as faintly xenophobic.

“During the winter. The Bridle Valley hill’s not far from here. Don’t worry. Your visit won’t be interrupted by a gang of ski jocks. Now, if you’ll come this way?”

She led us to a set of double doors.

“The dining hall. Breakfast is from six to nine. Lunch is eleven-thirty to one. Dinner is from six to eight. Meals are buffet. If you have special dietary needs, speak to the cook. His name’s Axel. He’s always in the kitchen—,” she pointed to a door behind a bank of steam tables, “—and doesn’t mind rustling up snacks if you get hungry.”

I stepped inside the empty room. The high cathedral ceiling echoed. The furnishings—long plank tables, ladder-back chairs—were of the everything-in-native-wood motif. Two framed posters caught my eye. One was from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. First officer Will Ryker’s hand brushed the tush of empath, Counsellor Troi. A cartoon bubble had her saying: “Captain, I *sense* something.” The other was from an *X-Files* episode. Its bubble had a fortune teller saying: “You will meet a blonde. Or a redhead. Maybe a brunette.” If memory served, the caption was verbatim. Someone at Cassandra Island had a sense of humour.

“Over here,” our guide went on, “is the library.”

She stood aside and let us take in floor-to-ceiling books. In deference to its only occupant, a grey-haired Asian man, she dropped her voice.

“We have an excellent collection of books on a variety of subjects: psychology, paranormal studies, anthropology, Eastern mysticism, fortune-telling. You’ll notice some of them are behind glass. They’re very old. If you want to study them, the key is at the desk.”

The Asian man glanced up. Debbie led us quietly away.

“That was John Wu Shen. An authority on the Chinese *Book of Changes*. He’ll be giving lectures.”

“Do you participate in any of the activities?” I asked.

She flushed, crediting my question with more than I’d intended.

“I don’t have any sort of special gift. This is a summer job. I’m a student at Trent.”

“Are you from around here?”

“Bourne. It’s east of Paxton. Now, here’s the conference room . . .”

Medium-sized, devoid of windows. Long tables, braided rugs, and carts of multi-media equipment.

“The meditation room . . .”

Simplicity itself, with Lauren Harris arctic scapes bejewelling the walls.

“And down here, the lab . . .”

Two adjoining rooms, separated by a wall whose top half was a sheet of glass. Both rooms were clad in sound-absorbing tile. A counter ran the length of the dividing wall. The room beyond held monitors not unlike the one in Ferko’s room.

“Lab?” Kirin enquired.

“More of a practice room,” Debbie amended. “It was originally hoped Cassandra Island would encourage scientific research into psionic phenomena. That didn’t happen but the lab proved popular with guests. The equipment lets them work with biofeedback.”

“Can anyone use it?” I asked.

“Sure. Get Mr. Sheffield—the Island administrator—to show you how. Speaking of whom, he’ll want to meet you. I can take you

to his office now, or, if you'd rather, you can catch up with him at supper. You'll like him. He's a great guy."

I looked at Kirin to see which she preferred.

"I'd kind of like to settle in first," she said. "Maybe have a nap and freshen up."

"Right," said Debbie. "And you, David?"

"The same. Thanks for showing us around."

"My pleasure. If there's anything you need, don't hesitate to ask."

"I do have one question," I said. "Where is everyone?"

"Oh, that," she laughed. "Down in Paxton, at the Rainbow Grill. We don't have a liquor licence so just about every afternoon somebody gets a gang together. The Rainbow's sort of our unofficial watering hole. Don't be surprised if you get invited."



The missing guests returned when I went later to retrieve my laptop out of Kirin's car.

A small blue schoolbus with Cassandra Island's logo on the side disgorged a laughing, rag-tag group who, by the time I'd collected Kirin in response to a vigorously clattered dinner bell, were already in the dining hall swarming the buffet. Behind it was a blond-haired giant wielding a carving knife with frightening panache. His infrequent smiles showed teeth that looked like they'd been smithied in a Nordic forge.

"He's hot," Kirin whispered in my ear.

"And gay."

"You wish."

I scooped some mashed potatoes on my plate. "If you say so."

Kirin helped herself to fiddleheads and stared.

"Damn. I think you're right."

"Looks like coming here was a good idea."

"What do you mean?"

"Your sensitivity's improving already."

“Fat lot of good it’s doing me. I’m straight. I don’t need gaydar.”

She flirted anyway, but the knife-wielding god—obviously Axel, the cook who’d whip up something between meals—carved her rare roast beef stonefaced. However when I asked for pork, I got a flash of glacier-blue eyes. It looked as if my scouting trip for CSIS was going to have an unexpected perk.

Most of the diners were clustered under Deanna Troi’s sumptuous hips. Only the Asian scholar we’d seen in the library sat apart, an open book for company.

Kirin and I took a table near enough the group to welcome invitation. Friendly taunts and laughter filled the hall. The New Age flakes Cassandra Island’s promo copy seemed to have been written for must have been in hiding.

When we got to coffee Kirin’s eyes took on a nico-junkie’s wandering, desperate gaze. She started fidgeting with empty cream containers.

“Outside?” I suggested. “I’ll keep you company.”

She stood up gratefully, mug in hand.

“Yoo-hoo!”

A happy-looking woman in a flowered muumuu waved us over. Kirin muttered *Shit* but flashed some model-perfect teeth.

“You must be Kirin and David,” the woman gushed, all bright red lipstick and pencilled brows. A cap of auburn hair, of a shade unknown in nature, wiggled on her scalp like a badly seated wig.

“Guilty.” I lifted a hand in greeting. Kirin did the same, adding a self-conscious *Hi, all*. “And you are . . . ?”

“Irene.”

“Resident nosey-parker,” the man beside her piped up.

“Social director from hell,” someone else remarked.

Irene dismissed them with a wave. “I check the guest list for arrivals. It’s how I knew your names.”

“And how she rooks you into things,” another wag contributed.

“Oh, hush. Now—who’s going to scoot over so Kirin and David can join us?”

Kirin’s look grew panicky.

“Can we take a mini-raincheque on that?” I asked. “We were just going outside.”

Kirin held up her pack of cigarettes by way of explanation.

“Don’t be silly. Nobody’s going to die if she smokes in here.” Irene looked pointedly around the table. “Anyone who doesn’t like it can be the one to go outside for a change.”

“No, really . . . ” Kirin demurred.

“Nonsense. There’s no reason for you to be treated like a leper. Axel!” The blond giant looked up. “Is there an ashtray somewhere?”

He vanished to the kitchen and returned a moment later. Irene ordered two of her companions to another table.

“So,” she asked me while Kirin lit up, “what do you do? Psychically-speaking, I mean.”

“It’s a little hard to describe. The term I use is psychic counselor.”

“As in you counsel psychics, or counsel people using psychic means?”

“The latter, mostly.”

“But how *wonderful*. What’s your special skill? I’m a channeler. I re-unite people with their former lives.”

“Most of whom her clients died to get away from in the first place,” a woman in horn-rimmed spectacles put in. She was thin and wore a pleated skirt, which made her look like a librarian.

“Careful, Margie,” Irene said, “or I’ll tell them what you do.”

“She’s an aura healer,” the man across from me confided with a wink. His buckskin vest and moustache made him look as if he ought to be out roping calves. “With a speciality in male dysfunction.”

“Really, Don,” Margie chastised. “That’s only part of what I do.” She took a sip of what I’d have bet was tea, not coffee. “You make it sound as if I hump my clients.”

“You mean you don’t?”

“Only if they’re hung.”

Everybody roared. When the laughter died, Irene asked again:

“Really, David—what’s your special skill?”

“I read people,” I answered. That sounded bald so I added: “In the present,” which garnered a few chuckles. “I see who they are, *where* they are, and where they’re headed. I know what’s troubling them, what mistakes they’re going to make. You could say I sense the person people try to hide.”

Irene clasped her hands. “What a marvellous gift.”

“Better watch it, Irene,” the cattle-rancher guy named Don cut in. “I hate to think what he could sense from you.”

“Chippendale fantasies.”

“More past lives than Mehitabel.”

“A closet full of polyester muumuus.”

“Her real hair colour.”

Irene absorbed the insults.

“You’re all drunk,” she said, crossing her arms.

“Guess you shouldn’t have bought that last round at the Rainbow, eh?”

She ignored the quip and spoke to me again.

“Seriously, David—you can read the thoughts of others? Know what they’re feeling?”

“As long as I can remember,” I answered, mentally adding *but not by psychic means*.

Actually, it felt good to lie directly instead of dancing, as I usually did, around the truth *with* the truth. Hell, I was supposed to draw attention to myself. I could make up any story I wanted.

“Marvellous,” Irene repeated, then turned her attention to Kirin. “And what about you, dear? What do you do?”

Kirin, who’d been smoking nervously, tamped out her cigarette with rapid little movements.

“I model. I mean, that’s what I do professionally. I’m not sure I have a psychic gift.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Margie down the table said. “Anyone can see you have a talent.”

“See?”

Kirin shook her head as if trying to clear her vision.

“Your aura, dear. There’s a purple glow around your heart and in the space between your eyes. That’s your gift. I’m surprised you wonder. I’d have thought you felt it all the time.”

“I think maybe I do,” Kirin said, warming up. “Feel it, that is. Feel *something*, anyway. All the time.”

“Is that why you’re here, then?” Irene asked. “To find out what it is?”

“I guess so.”

Irene studied her with kindly eyes that made me think of Yoda.

“Well, you’ve certainly come to the right place. I can’t imagine a safer spot or more helpful people.”

“Do you come here frequently?” I asked.

“Every couple of months,” she said proudly.

“So she can whip whoever’s here into a spirit of co-operation. Right, Irene?” The speaker, at another table, rose. “David, Kirin—I was hoping to catch up with you. Tom Sheffield. I manage this crazy place. I was planning on welcoming you but Irene’s already taken care of that. I’m starting to think we should put her on salary.”

He shook hands with Kirin, then with me. His grip was warm and his appearance just about as far as one could get from a Jim Jones or David Koresh. Despite the crowd, I had no trouble reading him, or what was on the surface anyway.

Thirty-seven, a decade older than he looks... not a native of the region... Vancouver, from his accent... Toronto educated... put himself through school... loves the out-of-doors... plays hockey... not married... will be some day...

“Are you the owner, then?” I asked, reverse confirming what I knew from Byron and MacKenzie.

“Just the guy who keeps things running. And takes the flak when they don’t.”

Been here since the start... thinks it’s the greatest job in the world...

“It must be quite a challenge.”

“You’d be surprised. Half the time, this place just runs itself. There’s always someone like Irene around. It’s amazing really.”

“Do you yourself have psychic gifts?”

Across the table, Don snorted.

“Tom? He hasn’t got a psychic bone in his body.”

“This from a man whose only skill is finding oil for companies too cheap to pay a real geologist?” Sheffield taunted.

“You’ve got it backwards, Tom,” Don replied. “They pay me more.”

“Good thing, too, or you’d never be able to afford a cabin to yourself.”

“Hey—I like my privacy.”

“No,” Margie interjected, “you like a place to entertain the ladies. A word of caution, Kirin: if Don offers to show you his divining rod, just say no.”

Kirin giggled, not her usual nervous laugh, but a happy, childlike sound. Don wiggled his fingers at her with a look both lecherous and utterly unthreatening.

Irene clapped her hands. “Okay, everybody. Enough teasing. Kirin, David—we’re glad to have you here. I hope you’ll get involved. Did you get a schedule from Debbie?”

I nodded.

“Good. Don’t expect it to be carved in stone. We go with the flow, as you young people say. I’ll be holding workshops on hypnotic regression. Margie likes one on one, so if you’re interested in aura manipulation, talk to her. Reggie, over there—,” she pointed to a stick-thin man incongruously chowing down on chocolate cake, “—knows more about Tarot than anyone. His seminars are great. And Mr. Shen,” she said respectfully, “lectures on the *I Ching* every day at ten.”

“Carved in stone,” Mr. Shen said without looking up from his book.

“And you, David, perhaps you’ll contribute something?”

“I’m not sure what I have to offer. I suppose there are a few . . . external . . . aspects to what I do. Perhaps I could give a little talk on sizing people up?”

“Wonderful. How long are you here?”

“For the week.”

“Well, then, I’m giving you a day to settle in, after which I’m going to hold you to that talk. And you, Kirin—I get such a good feeling about you. I’m not sure what or how, but something wonderful is going to happen while you’re here.”

Heads bobbed around the table. Somehow she was right. It was Kirin’s life, not mine, Cassandra Island was about to change.



After sunset, I sat crosslegged on my bed with my laptop open. A fire crackled in the pit outside. Kirin had gone down to join the group. Sounds of conversation echoed off the lake.

“Report to Joshua Byron, CSIS,” I typed. *“Cassandra Island.”*

Would he ever read this? Most likely not. But if his boss, MacKenzie, decided to cause trouble, a record of my stay would force her to back off.

I doubt anything I have to say will help in any way. You already sent your people to Cassandra Island and they didn’t find a thing. No doubt I won’t either.

By your own admission, you approached me in the hope I’d draw this cult of yours out in the open. What you didn’t say--were at great pains *not* to say--was that even if I don’t, you hope my psychic skills will sense them anyway.

Sorry to disappoint, but my impressions at this early stage confirm what you’ve already heard. I came up here with one of my clients, Kirin Neemes. The drive was lovely; the place itself is even lovelier. There’s money here. Lots and lots of it. You said their finances were clean so I won’t speculate if some consortium hell-bent on hastening the End of Days is funding them (tempting thought that is; I own all the X-Files DVDs). The psychic business is a billion dollar industry. A retreat for psychics isn’t

half as flaky as it sounds.

I stopped, reflexively hit Esc:w to save my work, and read over what I'd written. "Supercilious" sprang to mind. It might make Byron smile, but was sure to get MacKenzie pissed. She wouldn't like disdain, however chattily concealed. Part of me thought: *tough shit*. The other part remembered Ferko's warnings.

Outside, someone started playing a guitar. Voices joined in, far away and plaintive on the cool night air.

*Je m'appelle Jean, Jean Batailleur
Je m'ennuie tant que ça m'fait peur
Chus orphelin abandonné
Sous la plein lune, on m'a laissé*

A haunting song, full of pain, but somehow perfect for a fire by a northern lake. *Chus orphelin abandonné... I was an orphan, left to die; left beneath a full-moon sky.* Cajun genius Zachary Richard's ballad had been a hit even in English-speaking Ontario.

I went back to writing, trying to stick to facts.

I've met some of the staff: Debbie, a local girl who works reception; Tom Sheffield, the Island administrator; Axel, the cook. They all seem quite contented with their jobs.

I also met some of the current crop of guests. One--Irene--appears to be a focal point, but she's an open book. I'll retire my psychic shingle if she's concealing anything more sinister than the urge to be a sheepdog. Concerning the others, I can only comment on the way they interact. (I have no special skill at reading groups. Even my ability with individuals diminishes in crowds). Briefly, for a transient group of oddballs, they get along remarkably well. No signs of cliquishness. Only one stands apart, an I-Ching scholar named John Wu Shen. I'm not sure if he's an invited

expert or just a frequent guest. Either way, he's held in high esteem, no doubt because he's Asian, an authority and keeps to his own company.

The Ballad of John the Scrapper died away. I sat there staring at the laptop but I couldn't think of anything to add. I saved the file, typed `sudo iwlist wlan0 scan` to verify Cassandra Island's WiFi link, then uploaded what I'd written to Toronto.

The renewed murmur of conversation drew me to the window. I set my laptop on the dresser and looked out.

Silhouettes were grouped around the fire, mostly to one side. A solitary figure sat across from them. What seemed to be a chin-high phallus rose between his knees. The murmurs died. In its place came music, lonely and exotic, from an instrument I realized must be a Chinese fiddle—two-stringed, played upright. Mr. Shen, it seemed, had many talents.

Past the fire, the gently rocking swell of Dawe's Lake bathed in light from poetry by Walter de la Mare.

*Slowly, silently, now the moon
Walks the night in her silver shoon*

Déjà-vu. Ferko liked to deconstruct it, but standing there, taking in the scene—the sombre trees, the rocky shore—I really felt as if I'd seen it all before.

I shook my head. *Canadians*. Seen one Tom Thomson landscape, seen 'em all.