



THE SEEKER (Marie)

Sometimes they come to me. I do not need to lift a finger. They ring my doorbell, and as soon as I slide the metal grate aside and peer through the bars, we recognize each other. It is that simple.

If the garage apartment is presently unoccupied, I smile and let them in. If it is occupied, I let them go, knowing someone else will come sooner or later. I've always felt quite easy about this, but last month when I saw Simon out there with his friend Ginny, I felt I'd done the wrong thing letting them go. I felt the same way six weeks earlier when Simon brought the other American, the one who is now in my yoga and drawing classes, Lourdes. I wonder if he and Patriciό are in on this. That Patriciό has asked him to disrupt my essential solitude. The woman, Lourdes, who came first wanted the apartment only for herself. Her husband was returning to the States. I thought about her too after I shut the grate and for several days was quite impatient with Gertrud, my current renter, for being so very twenty and German. I don't even like the Americans in general, so how strange that two of them, only weeks apart, set up this slight oscillation at first meeting.

I'm not a psychic. I don't believe in auras or energy flows or chakras, even though Patriciό and I are so close and I stay with him often. I have made visits to San Simόn, but that feels quite French to me—like taking my string bag to the mercado on Saturday and looking for the best bargains. But I do believe in chance, that it exceeds our imagination in directions both benign and destructive, and so, if we give ourselves up to it, it brings us back to ourselves, humbled, grateful, and happy to be home. I also believe the act of

giving ourselves up like that enlarges our imagination so that the self we return to, however chastened, is larger for our departure and return. But when Simon brought these women, I questioned whether it was por azar as they say here. I did not give myself up to that possibility. And now I wonder why, for they stay in my mind these two.

I also believe in the power of recognition. Recognition is what makes these little journeys out of ourselves safe. We are assured, whatever happens, of meaning. It has taken me years to trust this capacity—to let the doors of my heart swing open freely, with a feeling of anticipation and interest.

I learned about the overwhelming power of chance when my only child, Colette, died twenty-five years ago. Childhood cancers are as random, brutal and senseless as the explosion that began our universe. With Colette's death, something in me changed so quickly, so completely, that both my husband and I had trouble taking it in. More difficulty than we did the overnight whitening of my hair once I heard her diagnosis. We made a family joke of that. It became me, Eduard said. But he didn't say that after Colette's death when I lost my powers of speech for long periods of time as well. For years, I fought off the implications of what had happened. Eduard did too. But it was true, I was a different person after Colette's last breath from the one I was holding her in her last hours.

I am not nostalgic for my dead child. I don't believe in an afterlife, a time when we will all be reunited. I don't feel remorse or recrimination for the years we didn't have together. She was nine when she died, so I had some idea of the woman she might have become. I would have liked her. We would have been friends I think. But at this point in my life I would be exactly where I am now whether she had lived or died.

Not necessarily this town, this country. But I would have divorced Eduard. I would have gone abroad. I would be a quiet woman with quick eyes who is more alive to the world inside her mind than the one outside her door. It would have taken me just as long to trust this sense of recognition, invitation.

It is difficult to be a skeptic and a mystic simultaneously, but I doubt, by nationality, temperament, and personal experience, I could be one without the other. What has taken me years is to learn how to bring these two impulses into harmonious collaboration. That is where recognition comes in, the collapse of inner and outer, when the world outside us just interests us in the simplest, most intimate way. When we see the smile of an unknown person on the outside of our grate, and we feel as if we had just taken a bite of the sweetest cake. Or we catch the eyes of another woman and it is like the welcome touch of cool water in our throat when we wake troubled from some chaotic and inconsequential dream.



Chapter 8 LUCID DREAMS AND ASTRAL TRAVEL

At first, Ginny thought she was in a bed, but then she felt the satin sides of the coffin against the back of her hands and arms, which were pressed down tightly against her sides. Will was leaning down over her.

“Boy, you really fucked up,” he said, smiling his large white charismatic smile. “You sure didn’t go halfway—not my Ginny-gin-gin. You should have taken some lessons from me.” Will laughed, his mouth opening wide, so Ginny was staring straight down his clean red throat.

“What the hell,” Ginny thought, waking abruptly, her heart racing. She heard her breath coming faster than it ever did when she was running and tried to bring it back under control. Her face was wet with sweat. She could still see the pain in Will’s eyes, but it didn’t change what she felt. She pulled the pillow up to her shoulders and leaned over and buried her face in it, letting her skin feel the soft caressing pressure, wiping the sweat from her forehead and under her eyes.

“Son of a bitch,” she kept muttering as she brushed her face back and forth across the pillow. “Lessons from you. Son of a *bitch*, Will.”

She quickly dressed in her running clothes, even though the sky wasn’t yet blue. She needed to pound the distress out of her. Will was dead. The distance between them was permanent.

“You set yourself up, Ginny.” Will had said to her. “Couldn’t you

have gotten it on with an engineer, my dear? Couldn’t you have done it with a closeted nun? Someone, anyone, with just a smidgeon of discretion? Seems like you wanted to punish yourself.”

“How would you know?” Ginny asked through gritted teeth as she pushed herself through that first wall of physical resistance.

She could smell the forced lilies in the cathedral in Chicago at Will’s funeral, even stronger than the incense billowing from the censers. She could see Marcella standing up there in the pulpit reading her eulogy for her husband, so proud and controlled even in her grief. He had died of pneumonia allied with lung cancer, the obituary said. Who was going to contradict her?

“He owes me this,” she had told Ginny. “I paid all our married life. Willingly, I’m not staying it wasn’t willingly. But that doesn’t make it any less of a debt.”

Ginny had taken back the copy of her own eulogy that she had given to Marcella for comments. All her newly discovered home truths about Will were marked through with a thick red marker. “The rest of this is fine,” Marcella said. “Those of us who experienced that side of Will, the complexity of his sexual nature, are the only ones in any position to speak of it. And out of respect for me, today no one will. Today we celebrate the man the world believed him to be, because he was that too. Is that clear?”

“Perfectly, Marcella.”

“I loved him, Ginny. Don’t lose sight of that. I knew him as well as anyone on this earth could—even you, my dear.” Marcella’s voice softened, and her brown hand rested gently on Ginny’s shoulder. “Whatever it might appear like today, I don’t simplify the man or the impact he had on my life or the lives of the other people who loved him and were loved by him. I sometimes think you paid the highest cost of all—and the saddest thing is you don’t seem to know it.”

But I do, Ginny thought, the sound of her feet colliding with the cobblestones echoed over and over again in the cool gray air. Lessons from you, Will! Lessons from you!

She spread her arms out like wings, just to be sure that the space was there, the empty air, for the feel of the satin sides of the coffin against the back of her hands was still so clear.

“I do not believe God has ever asked me to simplify my nature, rather to trust it and be true to it. I do not believe this disease is saying anything different,” Will said when he told Ginny of his diagnosis.

“It is *my* choice,” Marcella said. “I have a right to my privacy. Hypocrisy has nothing to do with it. Discretion is not the same as hypocrisy, Ginny.”

“God isn’t synonymous with social norms, Ginny.”

Tell it, Will, she thought.

The church isn’t synonymous with God, my dear, a woman’s voice said so clearly that Ginny stumbled, looking around her with a sudden cooling of her blood. *Will isn’t either.*

A small man dressed in torn green pants and a t-shirt crossed the street in front of her, his eyes trained on the cobblestones. He carried a huge bundle on his back, his head in rope traces to help him balance it. The volcano loomed nearly black against the pearly sky.

“You didn’t believe, Ginny. You didn’t believe God would let you be true to your own nature. If you had, wouldn’t you have acted differently?” Will’s voice was warm, so warm. Ginny felt, as she had all those years they worked together, comfortably enveloped in it. She had never felt invaded by Will, that is what she had loved about him. She felt so much herself around him, so intact.

Until now, the woman’s voice said kindly. *He’s really gotten to you now, hasn’t he?*

I have to call Bob Althorpe and let him know I’m leaving the church, Ginny thought.

Why? the voice asked. *Why do you still feel you have to account to them for anything you do? You think they care, Ginny-gin-gin?*

But Ginny couldn’t hear, the sound of her racing heart and her racing feet were both so loud inside her, and the images just wouldn’t stop coming. Will’s funeral, Bob Althorpe up there in his bishop’s robes, his miter, giving Marcella’s party line with total conviction. Four months earlier—Will and Bob and George Davidson at the meeting in Bob’s office at the cathedral, all listening stone-faced to her own account of things. None of them had wanted to be alone with her. The meeting with the vestry, the senior warden, Mr. Rufus Johnson, crowing, literally crowing, with victory as he accepted her resignation. The last sermon before the whole congregation and the questions, without answers, that followed. The night of David’s opening, walking into the museum and seeing her destruction walking toward her with an irresistible smile on her face. Doppelganger. And even so, the ache of longing that *was* David to her, how it made her want to cover her loins with

her hands, it was so sharp.

I am doing it for me, Ginny told the voice. It has nothing to do with them. I’m doing it for me.

We believe what we need to believe, the voice said. *No one is going to stop you, Ginny.*

“Are you telling me to call or not to call?” Ginny asked.

“I’m suggesting maybe you should think on it over the weekend. It’s waited this long, it can wait another few days.”

“I don’t think I’ll change my mind,” Ginny said, obscurely relieved by Simon’s suggestion.

“It’s not going to put a stop to anything, honey. I think you’ve got to stop expecting that.”

“But it may free some energy if *I* say that I’m never going back.”

“But you will be,” Simon said. “In your mind if not your body. That’s the bitch about being human—life may move in only one direction but until our brains short circuit with dementia, we’re always going forward and back simultaneously. There’s really not much we can do to stop it—we can just start thinking of it as a spiritual salsa step. Speaking of which, have you signed up for your dance classes yet? And what about another massage with Rosemary? I know you’re having your aura read up at the lake.” He laughed at Ginny’s expression. “I do believe maybe I see some shooting stars inside that little black cloud you carry with you everywhere, but Patriciό will be able to tell for sure.”

Ginny was leaving soon to go with Marie up to the lake for a few days. Simon had pleaded other commitments, but really he and Ginny were eager for a little time away from each other. If she was going to stay on here, Ginny knew she would have to find a place of her own. And a purpose.

Healing, the voice said to her. *That should be obvious.*

“Under the circumstances, contrition isn’t really a sufficient response—at least not to the vestry or the parish, Ginny,” Bob Althorpe had said.

“And for you?” Ginny had asked.

“How the hell did you get yourself *into* this mess, Ginny?” he had exploded. “I did everything I could to help you. I didn’t deserve this.”