



I

OVERTURE

Freshly turned earth. Ammonia.

The alternating aromas fill my senses as I take the first Charlotte exit off I-77 and forge my way through the rain toward the cloud-obscured cluster of skyscrapers in the distance. Death and despair hang over the city like the leaden sky that has been my only companion for the last hour. I peer through the deluge, my rapid breathing in time with the staccato rhythm of my windshield wipers, and contemplate turning around.

Have I done the right thing coming here?

The tinny drone of my GPS guides me through the clogged maze of streets, the hint of ammonia growing stronger with each passing minute. When I finally arrive at the clinic, the odor becomes so overpowering, I nearly retch. I take a moment to clear my thoughts the way my mother taught me before rushing through the downpour and inside. Cool, sterile air fills my lungs as the receptionist motions me to meet her at the door to her left.

“Are you Mira Tejedor?” she asks.

I nod and head for the frosted glass door leading to the back. One last wave of nausea ripples through me as I step through the doorway and follow her to an office at the end of the hall. The sickening ammonia stench fades with each step, though no time passes before another scent fills the gap.

DARIN KENNEDY

Part of me wishes I'd awake tomorrow with only the five senses God afforded the rest of humanity.

But my wish is a fool's wish.

I am, after all, my mother's daughter.

My grandmother always knew when it was going to rain. More accurate than any weatherman, people outside our family usually guessed the arthritis gnarling her fingers gave her this particular insight. The truth is far stranger.

The women in my family all possess certain talents that set us apart. With Grandma, it was the weather. With Mom, truths, half-truths, and lies. And me? Emotions. I can sense happiness like the average person smells fresh-baked apple pie.

The faint scent of roses drifting across my consciousness, for instance, suggests the receptionist's hint of a smile is genuine. Still, the barely veiled disapproval in her gaze tells me all I need to know.

Like so many before, she thinks I'm a fraud.

Or worse, insane.

You'd think I'd be used to this by now.

"You can wait in here, Ms. Tejedor." Studying me over her zebra-striped reading glasses, she keeps her eyes on mine as she backs out of the room. "Dr. Archer is finishing up with his one o'clock. Shouldn't be but a few more minutes."

"Thank you, umm..." Her ID is flipped around backward. May be unintentional, but it wouldn't be the first time a person tried to see if the "psychic" could guess their name.

"Agnes. My name is Agnes." Her cheeks flush. "Can I get you a water or something?"

"Sure."

She disappears into the hall only to return a moment later with a bottled water complete with folded napkin. A pleasant pine fragrance lights up my mind.

A woman who shows up for work in teddy bear scrubs should probably get the benefit of the doubt.

"Thanks, Agnes. I'll make myself comfortable till the good doctor gets freed up."

"Not too comfortable." She straightens the papers in the desk inbox. "Dr. Archer is pretty particular about his office."

THE MUSSORGSKY RIDDLE

As she pulls the door closed, I hang my compact umbrella on the rack by the door, slip off my lime-green peacoat, and take a look around.

Clearly a man's space, the slab of polished cherry that serves as his desk appears large enough to land a plane. The air smells of old books, leather, and aftershave. The delicate sounds of a string quartet echo from the high-end stereo system in the corner. The quiet strains compete with the crescendoing rain that beats the roof like a thousand snare drums.

The polished brass nameplate on the desk gleams with his name in script letters.

Dr. Thomas Archer.

Sounds like some hot neurosurgeon from *Days of Our Lives*.

To the untrained eye, the office likely appears cluttered, but I recognize organized chaos when I see it. Every book and piece of paper is no doubt exactly where the good Dr. Archer wishes it to be. Diplomas, licenses, and awards fill two of the walls, each triple matted with matching frames and hung with immaculate precision.

Perhaps the good doctor suffers from a bit of OCD himself.

My pocket buzzes. A missed call on my cell phone. Mom's number. I try to call her back a couple of times but the reception in the office is for crap. I'd be lying if I didn't admit a part of me is relieved. Yet again, she's keeping Isabella while I'm on assignment and I'm not quite up for one of my mother's patented guilt trips at the moment.

Continuing my inspection of the office, I pull an old, leather-bound book from the shelf and try to decipher the title.

"*Die Traumdeutung*." Though trilingual in English, Spanish, and Italian for the better part of my years on the planet, any attempt at German ties my tongue in knots. I flip through the first few pages and discover the work appears to be an original from 1899 and printed in the original tongue. Several spots throughout the book have been marked with scraps of colored paper.

I let out a laugh. "Must be a real page turner."

"Freud's book on the interpretation of dreams."

Smooth as chocolate mousse, the baritone voice sends a shiver down my spine as the tang of sweat after a long day's work plays across my consciousness.

DARIN KENNEDY

“Groundbreaking work in its time, though it comes across a bit dated these days.”

Leaning in the doorway, a man dressed in a gray blazer and dark slacks regards me with a genial smile. Like Agnes, however, his steely blue eyes tell a different story. Just shy of disdain, the professional dismissal in his gaze is all too familiar.

“Ms. Tejedor, I assume?”

“That would be me.” I close the book and slide it back into its space on the shelf. “And you must be Dr. Archer.”

“Batting a thousand so far. A little demonstration of the old ‘extra sensory perception?’” He steps into the room and brushes his temple like some carnival mind reader.

I force a smile. “Sorry to disappoint. I recognized you from your website.” That much is true. Though his official photo must be a little out of date, the years have been kind to him. A few years older than me, he’s mid-thirties, forty tops. He’s taller than I would have guessed, and even better looking than his picture. “Not to mention, this is your office.”

“Fair enough.”

He gives me a quick but firm handshake, steps behind his aircraft carrier of a desk, and drapes his jacket across his leather swivel throne. I’m not sure if it’s the brush of his broad shoulders or the hint of cologne as he passes me that breaks my concentration, but it takes a couple blinks and a deep breath to refocus on why I’m here.

“I wasn’t sure we’d have the pleasure of your company today,” he says, “what with all the storms between here and D.C.”

With that voice of his, it’s clear Archer has found the right vocation. There’s also little doubt about what he’s trying to say.

“It was I-85 pretty much the whole way.” I offer him the most genuine smile I can muster. “Rain or no rain, it’s a pretty easy drive. Would’ve been here an hour ago, but traffic was backed up for miles a little north of here. Someplace called Concord Mills?”

He lets out a chuckle. “With all the highway construction there at the bypass, I’m not surprised.” He inhales deeply through his nose and any joviality vacates his features. “Look, I appreciate the fact you’ve come a long way, and in less than perfect conditions, but...” He glances at his shoes and then back at me. “May I be frank, Ms. Tejedor?”

THE MUSSORGSKY RIDDLE

I set my jaw. "I'd expect nothing less."

"How do I say this?" His eyes go up and to the right, as if he's trying to remember a word that won't quite come. "Can you tell me what it is you hope to accomplish here?"

And there it is. The kiss of death. If six years of this gig have taught me nothing else, it's once you identify yourself as a "psychic," the absolute best you can hope for is a healthy dose of skepticism. I can count on one hand the number of times I've shown up for a job and been met with anything even remotely resembling acceptance, and that includes the clients who paid good money for me to be there.

Most people assume you're either a con or a lunatic. The average cop won't give you the time of day and the few who will won't stick up for you in front of their buddies. The clergy I've worked with are always too busy trying to save my soul to listen to anything someone like me might have to say. Worst of all, however, are the doctors. Like they're fighting to keep their spot at the top of the moral food chain.

Regarding people like me, the head shrinkers lead the pack.

Archer rubs at his right eye as a sympathetic twinge of pain blossoms above mine. Three minutes in my presence and he's developing a headache. An auspicious beginning.

"Caroline emailed me a few days ago. Said she'd asked you to come today, but—"

"With all due respect, Dr. Archer, Ms. Faircloth all but begged me on the phone to drive down and meet her family today. In fact, she paid a full week in advance to ensure she'd have my undivided attention. I woke up a little after five to get here on time. Spent eight hours on the highway dodging rain and hail and a whole slew of idiots who don't know how to drive in either. All the road construction put me behind an hour, so I skipped lunch to make it here before two. Trust me. I'm not going anywhere."

Archer studies me like some kind of museum exhibit.

Or, more likely, a prospective patient.

"Look." I hold my hands up before me in mock surrender. "You and me, we're on the same side here. I just want to help the boy."

Archer grabs a medical chart the size of a small encyclopedia from his desk and holds it before him like some kind of sacred text. "I've taken