Lovereading.co.uk

The Calling

Inger Ash Wolfe

Published by Corgi Books,
an imprint of The Random House Group Ltd

Extract

All text is copyright © Inger Ash Wolfe 2008

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

1

Friday, 12 November, 3 p.m.

He was precisely on time.

For most of the afternoon, Delia Chandler had busied herself with small tasks around the house. She had already vacuumed the upstairs and downstairs that week, but she did it again, taking care to move tables and chairs to ensure she got the head of the vacuum everywhere that dust could hide. One of Simon's tenets was cleanliness: she did not want to meet him for the first time with so much as a speck of dirt anywhere in the house.

She ran the dishwasher and cleaned the dish tray. She even washed the bar of soap in the bathroom. In his communications with her, Simon had said that the key to health was to take care of your environment as you took care of yourself. She had followed his advice very closely indeed, preparing

the teas exactly as he detailed, drinking them at the prescribed times of day, taking gentle exercise at exactly 6 a.m., and getting into bed at 9 p.m. to make sure she got nine full hours of sleep every night.

His ministrations – however long-distance they were – had been invaluable in keeping her strength up until he could come. The cancer was in her bones now, and it had spread like a moss through her pelvis and into the surrounding tissues. Dr Lewiston had laid out for her the palliative options: once the pain got too intense, she would be moved into the hospice where it would be 'managed'. She imagined herself being put to sleep like a dog. Her sons, Robert and Dennis, had said they would pay whatever costs were involved to ensure her comfort. Sweet boys. She agreed to whatever they proposed, knowing that, when the time came, she would not need their help at all.

At two-thirty, Delia went upstairs and changed into something befitting the guest she was about to receive. She pulled on a new pair of pantyhose, and then stepped into a blue wool dress. Any movement of her arms above shoulder level shot a scatter of pain throughout her body, as if a tiny grenade had gone off in her hips. She eased the dress up over her chest and shoulders, and she sat

down to catch her breath. Then she stood and looked at herself in the mirror. She was quite presentable for an eighty-one-year-old, dying woman. She put on a pair of black low-heeled shoes, but thought better of them, and put the orthotics back on. Simon would not want her to be in pain for the sake of looking good for him. No, he would not approve of that kind of vanity.

The doorbell rang at three o'clock on the button. She even saw the second hand hit twelve at that very moment. She took a deep breath, smoothed the dress over her stomach, and opened the door.

Simon stood on her doorstep, bearing a heavy valise. He was terribly thin, perhaps one of the thinnest human beings she had ever seen. It gave him the appearance of height. He wore a long black coat and a black derby on his head, and his face was deeply lined. He had the aspect of a gentle elder, even though she knew he was younger than she was, by at least thirty years. His was a face with all the blows of life nesting in it. Her heart went out to him, even though it was she he had come to succour.

'Mrs Chandler,' he said. 'Thank you for inviting me to your home.'

She drew the door wide and gestured into

the house. 'Simon, I am honoured to welcome you.'

He entered and removed his hat, placing it silently on the hall table. He undid a black silk sash from under his chin, and slid out of his caped coat, and handed it to Delia. The outside of the coat was cold from the fall air without, but inside, where his body had been, it was warm. She went down the hall a little and hung it for him. When she came back, he was sitting on the couch, eyes scanning the room, and his long hands clasping his knees. 'I imagined your house would be just like this, Mrs Chandler.'

'Please call me Delia.'

'Delia, then. This house is as if I'd dreamed it. Come and sit near me.' She did, lowering herself uncomfortably into the chair beside the couch. When she was seated, he lifted his valise onto the table and opened it. A smell of camphor emerged from inside. 'We needn't truck in chit-chat,' he said. 'It's as if we are already old friends, no?' She smiled at him and nodded once in assent. It delighted her that his demeanour in person was entirely of a piece with how he was in his emails: grave, but not humourless, and quietly authoritative. He drew out half a dozen vials from the valise. They were filled with dried plant matter and powders. He lined them up neatly on the coffee

table. 'How have you been?' he asked. 'How's your pain?'

'It's manageable,' she said. 'I take the lantana for the pain in my bones, and it works for a couple of hours. But I don't mind. A little respite is all I need while waiting for you.'

He smiled at this, and reached out to take her hand. He clasped it gently. 'I choose very carefully, Delia, who I come to see. Only those who are completely committed will do. Are you still completely committed?'

'I am.'

'And you are not frightened?'

She hesitated here and looked away from him. 'I have told myself to be truthful with you, so I will say that I have been scared, yes. A little. But not now, not at this moment.'

'Good,' he said, and his voice told her that it was all right to have experienced some trepidation. It meant she had faced it and moved past it. 'We should get started then.'

'Yes,' she said.

'I do have to ask you to do one thing for me first, however. It will make you somewhat uncomfortable.' Delia looked at his eyes and waited for him to explain. 'I must look at your body, Delia. I need to see your skin before proceeding.'

She blanched at this, and thought of herself picking through the few dresses in her closet for one that would make her look the most presentable. Now he wanted her to stand exposed before him? But she did not question him, rather she rose and faced him in front of the low coffee table. She reached behind herself with one hand and drew the zipper on the back of her dress down, wincing in pain.

'Hold on,' he said. 'I don't want this to be difficult for you.' He stood and came to her, went behind her and unzipped her the rest of the way. The dress fell to the floor in a pool of blue wool. She felt him unsnap her bra, and she shook it off down her arms, and then her hands travelled down the puckered, pale flesh over her belly and she pushed her underwear and pantyhose down. 'Thank you, Delia. I'm sorry for the discomfort. Are you cold?'

'No,' she said. She felt his finger tracing her spine, and she imagined he was pulsing energy into her, burning away the wild cells under her skin that were eating her life. Simon held her shoulder and gently turned her. She half-expected to catch his eyes, as if this could be a romantic moment blooming – and what would she do if it were? If the last person to show her real compassion also wanted to

show her love? But no, all of that kind of love was gone from her life forever. The last time she'd stood before a man naked she had ruined lives. She wondered how far into the past her own purity had to extend for Simon's purposes, and she debated whether she should tell him. Then, selfishly, so she thought, she decided to keep it to herself. There was only this now, no past, only this. He lifted her arms and looked into her armpits, then lifted each breast, one at a time. He touched his fingertip to a shiny coin of skin beneath one breast. 'This was a mole, I'm presuming?'

'I had it removed when I was forty,' she said. 'Vain of me.'

'It's all right,' he said.

When he reached her abdomen, he laid his hand on a scar below her navel. 'My birthsmile,' she said, looking down. 'Caesarean. Just Dennis. There'd been no problem with Robert.' She shook her head. 'Fifty-four years ago now, if you can believe it.'

'Did they do a hysterectomy? Take out your uterus?'

'No.'

He patted the scar. 'Good. What about your appendix? You still have that?' She nodded. 'But not your tonsils, I imagine.'

'No,' she said. 'Who at my age has their tonsils any more?'

'It's always a bonus if someone does. But I don't expect it.' He picked her dress up off the floor and slid it down over her head, then put her hand in his and held it there, in his palm. 'I put you at a hundred and thirty-five pounds,' he said. 'Forgive me for saying.'

'One hundred and thirty-seven,' she said, trying to sound impressed. 'Did you once work on the midway?'

He smiled kindly. 'It's only to help me with my measurements. Dosages and that sort of thing.'

'Is there anything else?'

'No . . . that's all, Delia. Thank you. You can put the rest of it on and sit down now. Sit on the couch if you will.' She pulled her underthings on, feeling more shy than she had when she'd stood naked before him. He leaned over to pick up a piece of thread that had come off her dress. He rolled it into a ball between his thumb and forefinger, and slid it into his pocket. She watched him turn and go into her kitchen and put the kettle on the stove. She saw him inspecting the countertops and the kitchen table. A couple of times, he went out of view, and she heard the lid of her garbage can open and close. She did feel frightened now. She wanted

to tell him, but she did not want him to change his mind. He had told her she was special. She had impressed him. After everything he had done for her, now he was asking for *her* help. She could not refuse him, and she would not fail him. What he asked for, what he asked of her, was so insignificant in the face of what she would reap from her courage. She heard the kettle begin to whistle, and Simon brought it back, a plume of white steam trailing behind him, and he laid a trivet on the table. He took a small white teacup out of his valise and put it on the table beside the six vials. He opened them one at a time and held them out to her, to smell. Valerian to calm her, belladonna and hops to help her sleep, herbal sedatives. In higher doses, they acted as anaesthetics. He tipped out a half-thimbleful of each and dropped it into the teacup, then poured hot water over it. Immediately, the air filled with an earthy smell, a smell of the forest floor and bark and roots. He swirled the cup in his hands.

'Are you ready?'

'Will it taste bad, Simon?'

'It will taste absolutely dreadful,' he said, and he smiled for her. She took the cup and looked into it. It looked like a miniature swamp, swimming with bracken and bits of matter. 'Drink it all. Including

the solid bits. Try to chew them a little if you can bear to.'

She tilted the cup into her mouth. The herbal stew poured into her like a caustic, burning her tongue and the back of her throat. She pitched forward instinctively to spit the brew out, but he caught her with one hand against her clavicle and the other over her mouth.

'That's it, Delia. You can do this.'

She swallowed in fits, her eyes watering. 'God,' she said, her voice choked. 'Is this poison?'

'No, Delia. The tea is not going to kill you. Swallow it . . . that's it, let it go down.'

He watched her settle as the last of the tea went down her esophagus. She clamped a hand over her stomach. 'My God, Simon. That was the worst one yet.'

'Can you feel it in you? Spreading?'

She looked around, as if to check that her reality was as she remembered it. She was in her living room. In the house she had lived in since her wedding day. Her sons had been born in this house, and had grown into men against the backdrop of its walls. Eric had died here. She had grown old here. She would not make it to *ripe* old age.

'We'll activate the compounds now, Delia.'

'Oh, can we skip the chanting, Simon? If

you don't mind. I feel like I might throw up.'

'Every plant and mineral has its own sound signature, and if you do not bring yourself into sync with it, it won't work. Have you not been doing the chants?'

'I've been doing them,' she said. 'They make me feel silly.'

'They're an essential part of the treatment. I'll do this one with you. A head tone for belladonna and low breath drone for the hops. Come on now.' He held his hands out to her, and she took them. He lowered his head, as if in prayer, and she did the same. He breathed in deeply, and a sound began to flow from the middle of his head, from the space behind his eyes and nose. He opened his mouth and the sound flattened. Delia followed him as best she could, alternating between the high, ringing tones, and the low, breathy ones.

When they stopped, she released his hands. She actually felt warm. For the first time in months, she felt warmth in her extremities. How pleasant, she thought. She felt Simon's hands on her shoulders, easing her back. 'Thank you, Simon,' she said quietly. 'This is very nice.'

He brushed her hair away from her face, and cupped his hand on her cheek. 'It is you who is to be thanked,' he said. 'I thank you.'

Presently, Delia closed her eyes. He listened to her breathing – low, long, soughing breaths. He lifted an eyelid, but she was profoundly asleep. He watched her for another minute, observing her becalmed features.

He put his vials back into the valise and went into the kitchen to wash his teacup. This too he replaced in the valise. He took his Polaroid camera out and checked that there was a film pack loaded. He was too careful to have come without being absolutely sure the camera had film, but he was also too fastidious not to check again.

He laid the camera on the coffee table and went to sit beside Delia. He took her wrist in his hand and felt her pulse. It was faint, as he would have expected, but steady. He ran his fingertips along the outside of her palm, and up her pinkie, then gripped the finger and snapped it at the bottom joint. Her body jumped, but her eyes did not open. The faintest moan escaped her lips.

Simon pulled the valise toward himself and placed it on his lap, opening it wide and turning its mouth toward the light so he could see inside. He took another vial out of his bag and with it, a long, thin spoon with a narrow head. He dipped it into the lunar white powder within the vial and drew out enough to coat the face of a dime. He held

Delia's mouth open with the thumb of his other hand and tipped the contents of the spoon into the space beneath her tongue and stirred it into the moisture there, making a thin, ivory-coloured paste. He replaced the vial and the spoon and pulled out a length of tubing and a sterile swab along with his sharps, and put them down on the table. There was a coil of wire around a dowel in there that he rejected, along with vials of herbs and dried mushrooms that had come loose of their moorings on the side of the bag. He cleaned it all up. There was a .22 in there somewhere, but it felt wrong for tonight, as did the hammer he pushed aside. Its metal head clinked against glass. Finally, his eye fell on a leather knife-sheath, and he took it out and held the weight of it in the palm of his hand. He wrapped his fingers around the handle, and the sound as he drew the blade from its hiding place was like a voice, like a word whispered: an utterance. It said *taketh*, and he did.