

PART
TWO

Chapter 25

SINS OF OMISSION

AN IRON GATE slammed shut inside me. A very cold iron gate.

“Where am I?”

“On a farm near Binbrook.”

*Binbrook... south of Mt. Hope... east of Highway 6... east
... the compass point where memories turned into dross...*

“Am I a prisoner?”

“No.” Marion set her tray on the dresser and fished in her skirt.

“Here. Your keys. John nearly took off without giving them back.”

She dangled them in front of me.

“John. Mr. Shen?”

“That’s right.”

“Whom you know?”

She nodded.

“And told I was working for Canadian Intelligence.”

“Not directly, no.”

“But you told someone.”

“Whom you’ll be meeting soon enough.”

I snatched the keys.

“I doubt it.”

She watched me ransack through the dresser for my clothes.

“Your friend, Kirin, is here.”

I started pitching jeans and T-shirts into my suitcase. “And?”

“You should talk to her.”

“What for?”

“So you can see that she’s all right.”

“Is she?”

“Yes.”

“Then we don’t need to talk.”

I jammed in socks and underwear, slammed the lid and pointed at my laptop on the floor.

“You’re in my way.”

She moved over to the bed.

“I’m sorry, David. If there’d been any—”

“Sorry?” I shouldered the laptop. “Don’t you mean inordinately pleased? I’m not an easy man to hoodwink. You’ve been at it how long now?”

She sighed and sat down wearily. “Since you moved next door.”

“Well, then, there you have it. Congratulations. You must be feeling very proud of yourself.”

I hoisted up my suitcase and stormed out.

“Aren’t you interested to find out why?” she called after me.

“In another lifetime.”

The room opened on a hallway with a service staircase at the far end and a formal landing in the middle. I made for the fancy balustrades and started down.

Marion’s footsteps sounded quickly overhead.

“David, please. Wait. Listen to me.”

I carried on.

So did she.

“Your mother’s name was Margaret. She tried to kill herself, and you, by jumping from the Skyway Bridge in Hamilton when you were three. She thought you were a demon—you, and your imaginary friend.”

I froze.

“She got committed and you were shipped out to a foster home. You grew up there until a fire razed the place—a fire you had a hand in. The man who worked this farm was in the township VFD. He

spotted you, your . . . talents, and arranged to have you placed here.

“Those six years you can’t remember? The ones you never mention? This is where you spent them. This is what you can’t recall.”

The blood drained from my head. I couldn’t find the strength to look behind.

“Who *are* you?” I asked dully.

“Not are, David. Were. You created problems around other kids. You couldn’t go to school. I was hired to be your teacher.”

The staircase broadened to a living-room jam-packed with antique furniture. *Just like my stage-set parlour in Toronto.* Through sheers gone ivory with age, I could see the willow tree out front, moveless in the morning light. No sounds intruded on the quiet of the house. Smells of breakfast filled the air, too rich for just one diner. Not long before, a gang had scarfed down porridge, pancakes, bacon, eggs.

My right foot dropped a stair. The left one followed. Then again. And again. I reached the bottom. My suitcase weighed a ton. I set it down and turned around. Marion was frozen like a player in a game of statues.

Farm raised . . . a teacher before fortune-telling . . . takes the room she’s had forever when she goes home in August and the corn is coming on . . .

She looked like Marion Harper.

She sounded like Marion Harper.

I didn’t know who Marion Harper was.

“Don’t leave, David, please. There’s so much to explain.” She started down the stairs. “John told me you’d be hungry when you woke. *Are you hungry?*”

She asked as if I had Down’s Syndrome, and I sensed her wondering if she should take my arm or whether reassuring contact was some sort of breach of etiquette.

“This way,” she said, making for a pair of sliding doors. “Cook knows you’re here. She’s as excited as all get out. Don’t be surprised if she breaks down and cries.”

The doors were glazed with bevelled panes and opened on a

dining room. Marion skirted round the table and crossed a narrow hallway to a kitchen lined with whitewashed shelves of pickles and preserves.

A Garland stove held pride of place against one wall. A tiny woman with her back to us was taking muffins from the ovens to an oval table large enough for twelve. Her hair was pulled back in a frizzy, silver knot.

“Cook,” Marion announced brightly, “look who’s up.”

The wizened figure spun, stood still a moment, then rushed over, tearing off her oven mitts.

“Oh, my Lord—David, it *is* you. I can’t believe it. Welcome back, welcome back.” She stopped a foot below my nose. “You haven’t changed a bit. No, no, that isn’t true at all. You’re more dashing than before. But still dressing like a fifties tough. I’ll bet you’re back in fashion now, the way these things go. Here, let me look at you.”

She reached up and touched my face. Her eyes were brimming. Suddenly her arms were round my waist.

“Oh, David, it’s so good to have you back.”

I stood there woodenly.

“Forgive me,” she sniffed, dabbing her eyes with her apron. “I know you haven’t got a clue who I am, but you were always, *always* my favourite. Do you still eat like you used to? I’ve kept everything from breakfast. Except the eggs. I’ll fix some if you like. I’ve got the last of last year’s quince honey for your pancakes. You used to love it. Eat it right out of the jar, you would, thinking I wouldn’t notice. Come, sit.”

She dragged me to the table and starting bustling, laying out a feast that did indeed seem made to order.

And I *was* hungry. Ravenous. The only sense that didn’t feel numb was taste. I dug in with the focus of a family dog for whom the world disappears when his nose is in the bowl. Marion sat opposite. Cook hovered, refreshing food, clearing dishes, pouring coffee from a percolator.

“Cook,” said Marion when the only thing in front of me was

half a slice of toast, “could you give us a few minutes? If you don’t have something on the go, that is.”

“Of course. I’ll go pick vegetables for lunch and do some weeding.”

She gave me a final look then took a sunhat and a plastic grocery bag from beside the door and went outside. Through the screen I watched her make her way across the driveway.

“This place,” I said to Marion, waving my hand around, “it isn’t yours, is it?”

She shook her head.

“But I see only you and . . . Cook.”

“There are others,” she said. “Around.”

“Avoiding me.”

“Not precisely, but yes, everyone’s been cleared out.”

“Why?”

“To give you time. You saw Cook’s reaction. Look—shall we dispense with the ‘I know this must be quite a shock’ thing? My job is to babysit, pique your interest so you won’t bolt, show you around—not, I should add, in the hope of epiphanic recollections—and provide unsatisfactory responses to questions you’re not ready to have answered.”

That sounded like the Marion I knew.

“I know it doesn’t mean a thing,” she went on, “but I’ve hated lying to you since you moved next door. I’ll skip the justification that you haven’t exactly been forthcoming with me either. And I won’t ask you to start trusting me now. That’ll come or it won’t. Right now you have no reason to.”

“There are understatements, and there are understatements.”

She absorbed the comment with more difficulty than she let on. “It needed to be said.”

“Does—did—Mr. Shen know me, too, then?”

She shot me a withering look. “What do *you* think? I’m sorry—that wasn’t called for. This won’t be easy, forgetting we have two years of badinage behind us. Yes, John knew you. He was your—,” she sought the word, “—other teacher.”

“Not of algebra and English Lit.”

“No,” she allowed herself a little smile, “not of algebra and English Lit. Look, you’ll be meeting other people who know you from before. It’s going to be tough. You won’t know them from Adam. I can’t even begin to imagine how disconcerting that will be. Especially since your natural tendency will be to try to remember, which you can’t. Not without . . . consequences.”

“You know about that, too.”

“Yes.”

“What else do you know?”

“I know that right now, in your place, finding out what you’re finding out, I’d be feeling like a drunk with the mother of all black-outs.”

Lace had been hung halfway up the kitchen windows. Hummingbirds outside were spearing feeders filled with ruby nectar. Across the lane, Cook bent over rows of greens, her dress hiked well above her skinny knees.

“Were they all as fond of me as her?” I asked.

“You were special.”

“She said I was her favourite. Favourite what?”

“That was just Cook talking.”

No, it wasn’t.

“Is that your first ‘unsatisfactory response?’”

“Bear with me, David.”

“Give me one fucking reason why I should.”

“We know who you are.”

“And that’s supposed to make me playdough in your hands? Two years ago, maybe. You know, something like, ‘Oh, my God, David—is it really you?’ Now? It’s bogus and stinks of machination.”

“It isn’t bogus. We do know who you are.”

“I notice you’re not answering the machination part.”

“Because it’s true. Has been, in fact, since first you told me that that fire plug of a CSIS agent asked you to investigate Cassandra Island.”

“With good reason, it turns out.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“No? Let’s see. Psychics have been vanishing and dying. CSIS thinks Cassandra Island is involved. I go up there and get drugged and kidnapped. Am I missing something?”

“We weren’t concerned the first time you went up. We merely use Cassandra Island. We don’t own it. The administration hasn’t got a clue. We felt safe, even knowing who you were.

“What we didn’t know was that the friend you showed up with would prove to be an empath. Or that her empathy would give us information we’ve been seeking for a long time now. Or that what we’d learn from her would mean we had to bring you back.”

“Back where? Charles Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters?”

“The Binbrook Caucus. Formerly of the Society for Psychological Research, in England. We’re not the X-Men, David. The man who owns this place is Dr. Robert Colton and he doesn’t look anything like Patrick Stewart in the movies.”

The X-Men... Brian, Neil, Shox... no, it had to be coincidence...

“Mr. Shen kept saying ‘we’. Like he was trying to let me know about this... Binbrook Caucus.”

“He hoped that curiosity would make you more amenable.”

“Amenable to what?”

“Don’t be thick. To coming here of course.”

“Who needs curiosity when you’ve got roofies or whatever up your sleeve?”

“Yes, I suppose from your perspective it must seem that way. And John’s pill does explain why you’re not the sharpest knife in the drawer this morning.”

I stared at her, this woman that I used to know, this person called Marion Harper.

“Fuck you.”

She held my gaze then quietly got up and poured herself some coffee.

“Will you stay?” she asked, her back to me.

“What happens if I don’t?”

“That’s up to you. We’ve played our hand. We don’t intend to hold you. The car keys in your pocket should be proof of that. If you wish, you can expose us to your CSIS friend. Truth is it won’t make that much difference. We’re at risk from quarters other than Canadian Intelligence.”

Something in her voice caught my attention.

“Other than, or in addition to?”

She came back to the table.

“Both. The purpose of the Caucus is protection, primarily through secrecy. As things stand now we’re in danger of exposure anyway. It won’t make a hill of beans who breaks our cover. But you should know, you’re in jeopardy yourself unless you understand the reasons why we brought you here.”

“If I stay, will I start speaking in riddles, too?”

“There’s no help for it. Not at this stage. We don’t want to keep things from you, but we’ve agreed that for the time being, it’s best to—how shall I say?—funnel what you learn. Until you’re up to speed.”

“Up to speed on what?”

“Who you really are. Who *we* are.”

“If this is your idea of a choice, it sucks.”

“It’s the way things are.”

“I don’t get it. You say I’m free to leave, and I agreed to come here willingly. Or, at least, come *somewhere* with Mr. Shen. Why the Mickey Finn?”

Marion sat back.

“I was wondering when you’d get to that. I know this isn’t the time or place for levity—you’ve made that abundantly clear, thank you very much—but I can’t resist. Fasten your seatbelt, David. You’re about to get an inkling of how deep my sin of omission runs.

“I assume your sporadic Sunday jaunts are to Mt. Hope. You retain your memories of childhood up until the barn fire so it’s natural you’d go there looking for yourself. But when you leave your car you feel ill. More than ill—as if you’re going to die. Equally, you’ll

have noticed certain places seem to be off-limits. I don't know how you process that, but simply put, you have no urge to travel east of Highway 6. Toward this farm, in other words.

"There's a reason for that, which, provided you don't scarper, you'll be given. For now, in answer to your question, you were drugged because we didn't know how you'd react as you got closer to the farm. Your resistance might have triggered the response I understand you call 'the wall of pain.' We thought it best to have you sleep throughout the trip and wake up with a *fait accompli*."

"You've known all along," I said, my voice a disbelieving whisper. "About my memory. About the wall of pain. About the trips to Mt. Hope."

"And about your psychism."

"How have you been doing it?"

"Doing what?"

"Lying. Hiding things. Are you one of Mr. Shen's psychics?"

"Not 'Mr. Shen's psychics', David. Psychism is real, regardless of opinions spouted when we've chewed the matter over. Very real. And right now, people who possess it are in danger. It's why you're here. You're safer than you would be in Toronto."

"Are you one of Mr. Shen's psychics?" I repeated.

Marion looked down. "No."

The answer cost her and she wasn't hiding it.

"But you wish you were."

She raised her eyes and gave a long, assessing stare.

"One thing the Caucus asks is that, while you're here, you don't read other members."

"Who's reading? From the day you introduced yourself, I knew some part of you was discontented. As if life had cheated you. I thought it was advancing years."

"Yet you've let me go on and on . . ."

She stopped, realizing what she was saying.

Outside, Cook was coming back, listing with the weight of fresh-picked vegetables.

Marion took her mug over to the sink. "Cook's going to need

the kitchen soon. Would you like to take a walk? You were out for nearly eighteen hours. You must be feeling stiff.”

“Whatever. You’re calling the shots.”

She dried her hands on a checkered towel.

“I’ll take that as a yes. But before we go, would you mind doing something with your suitcase? You left it at the bottom of the stairs.”

Smooth. Rather than asking if I’d stay, she was forcing a commitment: return the suitcase to your room or take it to your car and leave.

I carted it upstairs.

The shock of finding out that Marion knew things about my past was wearing off. What she’d told me wasn’t all that recondite. My birthplace, my mother’s name, the foster home—all were no doubt in public records someplace, even if the private eye I’d hired once to find them hadn’t. Other kids who’d grown up in the home could be tracked down. And both Ferko and his colleague, Dr. Behr, knew about the fire, my imaginary friend, the wall of pain. Two days earlier, I’d been ready to believe they hadn’t been sought out. Not anymore. That Marion had some facts to hand didn’t make her story true. That’s the way a psychic’s clients think. I wasn’t going to fall into that kind of *post hoc* fallacy.

Still, she’d known about my strange unwillingness to travel east of Highway 6. A small thing to be sure, but not one easily dismissed.

She wasn’t in the kitchen when I came back down.

“Out front,” Cook told me. “You might as well go out this door.” She spent a moment staring. “It really is good to have you back. I never approved, you know.”

“Approved of what?”

“I wish I could say, dear. I just wanted you to know.”

Out front was a veranda wrapping round two sides of an enormous old brick farmhouse. Wooden columns tapered to an overhang. Stumpy banisters held up a solid railing. A settee and some wicker chairs invited contemplation of the field across the road.

Nasturtiums spilled from hanging pots.

“So,” Marion asked, coming down to meet me on the lawn, “would you like to see the place?”

“Don’t make like I’m a guest.”

“I’m only trying to be civil.”

“Why bother? You’ve got me by the balls.”

She shook her head dispiritedly.

“I don’t know why I hoped you wouldn’t be so fractious.”

“Sorry if I’m ruining your fun.”

She started for the lane. I stayed put.

“Well, are you coming or not?” she called out.

What choice did I have?

A row of oaks and maples formed a windbreak to the driveway’s left. A little past Cook’s garden, two board-and-batten cabins sported fresh blue trim and window boxes filled with pansies.

“This used to be a commune in the sixties,” Marion informed me, sounding like a tour guide. “Commune slash retreat slash place-of-study for people working in the counselling professions. It had—has—quite the library, plus a couple of consulting rooms in the extension at the back. Visitors could stay as long as they liked provided they pitched in with the chores. It was before my time, but I believe they grew produce for the Hamilton farmers’ market. The official name was the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Alternative Psychotherapies. Very sixties. I’m told locals called it The Funny Farm.”

Byron had mentioned CISAP in his run-down on Mr. Shen.

The driveway widened to an oval patch of hardpack. Marion stopped. The Jag was parked against a long addition, faced in brick to match the house. Beyond, the broad doors of a red barn yawed. A rutted track beside the barn led to a cabin larger than the other two and fronted by a covered porch.

“The farm comprises three fields,” Marion said. These two—,” she swept her arm to indicate the field behind the barn and another to the left, “—and the acreage across the road. That one’s rented out to a potato grower. These other two are corn and soya, alfalfa

in the off years.”

I held my hand above my eyes. Behind the barn, maturing corn, gilded by the morning sun, glittered with remaining dew. A tractor in the distance kicked up dust. Marion had said I shouldn't hope for recollections. None came. Why should they?

“That used to be your room,” she said, pointing to a corner window right above the kitchen. “Next to the back stairs. You were always first up in the morning, getting in Cook's way.”

She stood a moment, then turned around and walked us to the road.

“Nebo Road,” she told me, heading right. “It ends about a mile back at Chippewa. If we keep going this way, we'll hit Whitechurch, which takes you into Binbrook.”

A breeze played through the lush growth in the ditch where the teasel heads were at their lilac-banded peak.

“These don't grow much in Toronto,” I said. “The only place I've seen them is High Park. They used to make me feel sad. I never understood. When they're not flowering they just look weird, as if they're from another planet.”

Further down the road, a small black car approached. Kirin honked and waved as she drove by.

“She really does want to talk to you,” Marion said. “She feels terrible about her part in this.”

“No doubt.”

Several hundred meters on, she slowed and halted. Turning to the sun, she raised her chin and closed her eyes.

“You never answered my question,” I said.

“Which one was that?” she asked.

“How you managed to lie to me.”

She lowered her face. “Simple. I just didn't say anything. The same way anybody would.”

“But Mr. Shen implied that only psychics—”

She cut me off. “You can't have it both ways, David, citing John but not believing him.”

“It isn't him I'm having trouble with.”

“But the Caucus—you, me, the Farm—it’s all connected.”

“I’m either for you or against you, is that it? All or nothing?”

“Please, David—we’re not a bunch of Christofascists like those thugs who used to rule the States.”

“No? Seems to me they wouldn’t balk at drugged abduction any more than you.”

“I told you why that was.”

“And of course I bought it. Totally. A friend turns out to be a plant and tells me I was kidnapped for my own protection. What could be more natural than trusting her?”

“You were ready to trust John.”

“I was keeping up my cover, pointless as that proved.”

“John thinks otherwise.”

“I guess you’re not the only one who’s good at faking friendship.”

Her face turned hard.

“I wasn’t faking anything, goddamn you. And don’t you *fuck-ing* raise your eyebrows like you don’t believe me.”

She wheeled and stalked off. In any other circumstances I’d have rushed to smooth things over. I didn’t doubt her outburst, but why should I feel sympathy? If everything she said was true, she had a lot of catching up to do before our pain was equal.

I waited till she vanished up the drive, then followed her.



“David!”

Kirin waved brightly from the doorway of the cabin adjacent to Cook’s garden. She’d parked across the way, beside the Jag.

“It worked,” she said as I came up. “You’re here.”

“Seems so.”

“Are you angry?”

“I’m not sure if that’s the word for it, but even if it is, it doesn’t do my feelings justice.”

She made a sour face.

“That pissed, eh? Want to come inside? Have some coffee?”

“Anything stronger?”

“Coronas.”

“That’ll do.”

Her cabin faced north-south and didn’t get much light. She fetched and cracked two beers while my eyes adjusted. The place was clean and comfortably filled with cast-offs from the seventies. I sat down in a rough twill chair that matched a houndstooth daybed. Kirin handed me a beer and put her own down on a coffee table—kidney-shaped with canted legs.

“No limes,” she apologized, settling on the daybed with her legs drawn up. “Unless you want to run across the way and see if Cook has some.”

“I’ll pass. Are you alone?”

“Roy’s out with Carlin. They’ve gone to see the warplanes at the airport.”

She raised her beer. I returned the *not-quite-sure-if-we’re-still-friends* half toast.

“I’m really sorry, you know, David.”

“I’ve just been with Marion. She was sorry, too. If your apology covers anything like hers, you’re going to have to spell out what you’re sorry for.”

“I’m not part of what you can’t remember, if that’s what you mean. I mean, I am now, but if you’re asking if I knew you before we met . . . God, this is complicated.” She smacked her forehead with the heel of her hand. “What am I saying? This must be *terrible* for you.”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“You *are* angry.”

“No, numb. If I were angry, I’d be out of here.”

“You’re going to stay?”

“More like I won’t be leaving.”

“I get that, totally. In your place, I’d be freaking. I mean, finding out you grew up here, not remembering, discovering your next-door neighbour knew about it all along. She’s great, by the way. I

wish I'd met her sooner."

"You left out 'finding out about this Caucus thing'. Being told that I was raised inside a secret order. One so clandestine I have no recollection of it."

"Secret order? Yeah, well, I guess it is. Sort of. It doesn't feel like it, though. They've been so helpful. I get it now. Why I'm so sensitive to other people's feelings. Why I get these flashes. Why I cave in so easily, always doing what other people want."

Surely not because your mother's mother was a drunk, I thought, but bit my tongue.

"It's why I came to you in the first place. Something weird was going on. I *knew* it. You couldn't help—I understand that now—but, if I hadn't come..."

"... I'd be at home right now, padding barefoot round my place, a mug of coffee glued to one hand, looking forward to a day like any other."

"That doesn't matter now."

"Maybe not to you."

"Oh, God—you're right. I'm sorry. It's just that this is so awesome for me. I had no idea."

"What did they tell you?"

"That I'm psychic. An empath."

"Well, well. Imagine that."

"You don't believe it."

"The term belongs in science fiction. It isn't even a real word."

"You're wrong, David. Empathy is real. That's what's so weird. I kept getting the feeling you knew what was going on but wouldn't tell me. Like you had the answers and were testing me or something. But you didn't know, did you? You still don't. Something happened. Your memories... they sort of explained. I'm not sure I understood."

"What did they say?"

"Something about walling off your memories. Burying them or hiding them. Something like that. They say you *agreed*."

"And did they tell you why I'd go along with amputating six

years, just like that?”

“Is that how much is gone? Jesus. I had no idea.”

“I take it that’s a no?”

She was having trouble with the six-year span.

“I thought it was just, you know, specific things. Like the Caucasus. Or being psychic. Shit—how can anyone ‘forget’ a thing like that?”

“Easy if it isn’t true.”

“You really don’t believe it.”

“It’s a lot to swallow.”

“For someone who knew everything about me when we met?”

“I cheat, Kirin,” I said, not very patiently. “I dig up dirt on all my clients before they cross my threshold. Plus I’ve been around. I’m good at wild stabs. I’ve told you that before.”

“You mean you’ve never felt . . . ?” She tossed her head, rejecting the idea. “No. You have. I know you have.”

“Not much I can say in the face of so much certainty.”

She flushed. “You *are* mad at me.”

“No. Someone’s been feeding you a line. Which one did they use? Lives are at stake? It’s for his own protection? For ours?”

From her face, all three. It didn’t take an empath to see that.

“Why don’t you just tell me everything?” I suggested. “I suspect that’s what they want you to do anyway. It’s a little too convenient, you being the first person I meet up with. After my trusted next-door neighbour, that is.”

She unfolded herself from the daybed and hunted round for cigarettes, not as if she were buying time, more as if she felt relieved. Returning, she stretched her model’s legs across the coffee table. The Kirin I’d first met would have been mortified.

“Roy’s friends,” I said to get her started, “the ones you mentioned on the phone. Let me guess—members of this Caucus thing?”

She exhaled a stream of smoke.

“He introduced me to them right away. Mr. Shen spotted me while you and I were at Cassandra Island and called in Roy to do

exactly what he did: get me away from you. The Caucus didn't want you knowing anything about them. They figured if you thought I'd just gone gaga for another jerk you wouldn't be suspicious. Mr. Shen's an empath—but you know that now—so he was pretty sure that Roy would turn my crank. Did I mention Roy's psychic, too? I guess you figured that out. Except he's the other kind. A transmitter.”

“So Mr. Shen had you seduced by a man with nearly god-like powers of persuasion. He could have been a troll and gotten in your pants. Don't you feel a little used?”

“It's not like that,” she answered icily.

“No? How is it, then?”

“He's not a troll.”

The deadpan caught me unawares. There was something almost Marion-esque about it.

“Roy and I are still together,” she said, enjoying my reaction, “and he's crazy about Carlin. He isn't what you think. That was an act. A good one, too. He had you fooled.”

“The seducer got seduced and now it's happily ever after, is that it?”

“He loves me, David,” she said, all humour gone. “I know.”

“Because you're psychic?”

“Because he's good to me and Carlin.”

I drained my beer and waved away the offer of another.

“Assuming that I buy this empath-transmitter shit,” I said, “what's stopping Roy from entering your mind and making you feel things you don't? You've been set up once and used to get to me. Do you imagine it stops there?”

She shook her head. “One of the first things that they taught me was to recognize an imprint.”

“They—this Caucus thing?”

“Stop calling them ‘this Caucus’ and ‘this group’. You've made your point. I know you're sceptical.” *Definitely Marion-esque*. “An imprint's not some kind of mind control. It feels like those ideas you get sometimes. You know, crazy thoughts you don't know where

they come from. You don't have to act on them."

"Very reassuring," I murmured.

"Would you *stop*? This is important. The Caucus has been helping me. It's what they do: help people with their gift. Do you know what my problem was?"

An alcoholic grandmother and a taste for macho men? I'd have found it easier to kill the snide remarks if she'd stop handing me the openings.

"Even without training, empaths are supposed to have the power to shut down. Stop getting vibes, reading people, whatever. The shutting down's supposed to be reflexive. You go crazy otherwise. But I was like a TV with a wonky switch—sometimes on, sometimes off. It was never under my control.

"Roy showed me how to turn it off. Just by thinking it. Imprinting me. I—," she made a helpless gesture with her hands, "—*saw*. Not what was in his head, but how it was arranged. How the bits and pieces fit together. How they moved. It all made sense. I understood. I only had to—"

She made the gesture with her hands again, trying to find words for concepts beyond speech.

"Try me," she said, giving up.

"What?"

"Try reading me. See what you get."

No matter how I tried to cool her psychic ardour, she remained impervious. I heaved a mental sigh and made a show of visibly relaxing, putting on a middle-distance stare.

No sizzling snowy image...no trace of me...utterly self-assured...no grey fuzziness of doubt...the inside and the outside matched...

"See?" she said.

The only thing I'd "seen" was that her mental map resembled Roy's and Mr. Shen's. She'd learned the trick of buffing the rough edges off revealing conflicts. Learned, or had drilled into her.

"Quite a difference," I said noncommittally. "What happens if you switch the TV on?"

“You mean read you while you’re reading me? Not a good idea. There’s this kind of feedback loop that happens when two empaths read each other. It’s nasty, like a blast of static in your brain. It’s happened between you and me.” Pre-Caucus Kirin made a brief appearance. “You do know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

I nodded. No point in lying. Her description sounded like the one I’d given Ferko.

“Empaths are supposed to shy away from it by instinct. It’s kind of like a mental cringe, but with the problem I was having... well, you get the picture.

“Roy’s friends—Mr. Shen and two others; they’re here, you’ll get to meet them—asked to read me once they knew I wouldn’t fry their brains. They said they needed to, as part of what the Caucus does. Mr. Shen called it a background check. Kinda made me laugh, except I get the reason for it now.

“That’s when things got weird. All of a sudden they had to get you back. They knew about the CSIS thing—you weren’t pulling my leg, were you?—and figured you’d go back to Cassandra Island if I up and disappeared. They pulled Roy from his job and got us all to move here, then had me give you Roy’s address so you’d find the trailer empty if you ever came to visit. They were pretty sure you would. The card to Burke was my idea. To keep him off my back *and* make you suspicious. You did track him down, didn’t you?”

I nodded.

She looked pleased. “I thought you would. Look—I know this is going to sound strange, but thanks. I don’t know anybody else who would have done the gung-ho thing for me like you. Marion’s lucky to have you for a friend.”

“Luck that’s running out.”

“Because she never told you about this?” She used her chin to indicate the farm outside.

“That and other things.”

“Cook said Marion was your teacher. I can’t believe she didn’t at least *want* to tell you.”

“But she didn’t, did she? And not to put too fine a point on it,

why should I believe her now? I have a six-year hole where my memories ought to be. She could say I was the king of Spain and how would I know differently?"

"Did you ever talk about your missing years?"

"It's not the kind of thing I trot out over drinks."

"Right," Kirin drawled. *If you never broached the subject how on earth was she supposed to?*

I heard the crunch of tires in the drive. Kirin shot a glance outside.

"It's not a lie, David. I know what I've experienced with Roy and with the others. This farm is real. The Caucus is real. The people in it all have gifts. Everyone is special. You more than most, I guess. Don't turn you back on Marion just yet."