

Chapter 27

NINETEEN MINUTES APART

KIRIN TOOK ONE look at my face.

“Jesus, David—what’s up?”

“I need to talk.”

She glanced over her shoulder. Behind her in the cabin I could hear the *bloop! blap!* of a video game.

“Roy’s here with Carlin. You want to go somewhere? There’s a bar in Mt. Hope.”

Right. I wasn’t captive. I could leave any time I wanted.

“Not Mt. Hope.”

“Binbrook, then? Roy took us to a diner out on Highway 56. It’s licensed. You need a drink, I’m guessing?”

“Yeah. You’d better drive.”



The grey zone. The dead zone. Whitechurch Road, east of Highway 6, toward a village called Binbrook. A trajectory I’d been conditioned—persuaded? brainwashed?—to avoid.

Kirin’s Honda was a stationary bubble, the scenery outside a looping film projected on the windows. Fields upon fields upon fields. As we got near Binbrook, the houses started scooting closer to the road and to each other. Few of them were new, but few were

old like Colton's. Most were fifties brick, solid and four-square. Some had front-yard signs for studio-boutiques—scented candles and ceramics—and basement hair salons.

A fairgrounds with a baseball diamond was the only indication we'd arrived at Binbrook. Otherwise, where Whitechurch Road met 56 was just a knot of rural businesses, all prosperous. None had Mt. Hope's worn-down, fixed-in-amber patina.

Lady Jo's, the diner, was a clapboard rectangle with sod farms all around. Wooden shutters held in place with one-by-two's angled over dusty window screens. It looked like the kind of eatery that opens up May twenty-fourth and battens down on Labour Day.

The booths along the windows were red leatherette, the tables chipped Formica. Refrigerated shelves held cakes and pies and little coupes of Jello and rice pudding. A narrow hutch displayed the basic bar-brand liquors. A solitary farmer nursed a coffee at the counter. High up on a corner shelf a radio played tinny country music. Behind the cash, James Dean pouted from a faded poster framed in Christmas lights.

A waitress in a polyester apron took our order—a Blue Lite for Kirin and a double rye for me. The waitress' hair was steel grey and marshaled into ringlets like the curls on a Roman bust. She set the drinks on placemats advertising local businesses in faded lime-green ink.

"Are you going to say anything?" Kirin asked halfway through her beer. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"In a way, I have."

"Dr. Colton?"

"No, not him. Somebody he introduced me to."

"Someone in the Caucus? I thought you had no memories of the Farm."

"I don't. It's someone from before. A long time before. The beginning, you might say."

"You're talking double-Dutch."

"What do you expect? That's all I've been hearing for the past couple of days."

"You're pissed."

"Fucking right."

She sipped her beer and made a face. Not her regular Corona.

"Look, David, if all you want is company, just tell me. I hate quizzing people when they get all surly."

"Surly? Is that what you call this? I've been trying to find a name for it."



His mouth twists in a slow, lopsided smile.

"David."

The syllables sound rusty, as if he hasn't spoken them in so long he's not sure he's got them right.

Blood speaks to blood.

"Brothers?" *I whisper.*

He nods. The smile's still there. If it vanishes the scene will go away. The porch, the cabin, the field beyond...

Dr. Colton, an inconsequential phantom, says We'll talk again and quits the porch.

"Twins?"

I reach out with my mind, but there's only calm, unruffled grey, like Lake Ontario before the sun comes up on still November days.

"Nineteen minutes apart."

His voice sounds far away.

"You're real," *I stammer.*

He steps closer, lifts his hand, lays it on my shoulder.

"As it gets."

His grip's as reassuring as a promise.

"I thought..."

"... you made me up? That I was just pretend?"

"More than that. So much more. Every memory I have of growing up, you're there. Nearby, like a dream you know you had but can't recall."

He takes his hand away. The echo of it lingers on my shoulder.

“At least they left you that.”

“Your memories—are they... intact?”

He gazes off, as distant suddenly as he is near.

“Let’s just say they found some other things to break.”



“A brother? *Fuck.*” Kirin breathed the expletive. “That’s heavy.”

“They didn’t introduce you?”

“They said he was the farmhand. Keeps to himself.”

“You didn’t see his eyes?”

“Don’t you think I’d have said something about it?”

“I don’t know. Would you?”

“We’d better get this straight. Any lies I’m guilty of start and end with saying I was someplace that I wasn’t. Period.”

I drained my drink and held my glass up for another. The waitress shuffled over to the bare-bones bar.

“Sorry, Kirin. I had to ask.”

“It’s okay. In your place I would, too.”

“I thought he was a figment of my imagination.”

“So what you’re saying is you knew about him but you thought he wasn’t real? How the fuck does that work?”

“I remember growing up till age eleven. He’s in those memories. Every single one of them. He talks to me, gives me ideas, listens. Only I can’t see him. I was a foster kid. I had no friends. I thought he was, I don’t know, a symptom or something.”

“But how can someone disappear from memory like that? I don’t get it.”

“Neither do I, Kirin. Neither do I.”

“It really was like seeing a ghost.”

“The opposite.”



The noonday sun is fierce. Everything beyond the porch is bleached and insubstantial. He alone is solid, like a spectre in reverse.



“It was as if we’d met before, without ‘as if’. I kept thinking: ‘You’re my other half. The rest of me. The key.’ That someone everyone is looking for and no one ever finds.”

“And he’s in *every* memory you have?” Kirin’s eyes were wide. “Shit—how close was that?”



He wants to hug me, wrap me in a tight embrace and say my name a thousand times. The impulse quivers in the air between us.

He steps back.

“I fixed up beans. You want some lunch?”

“Food’s the last thing on my mind. I can’t eat right now.”

He tries to hide his disappointment.

“You used to never stop.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“You don’t anymore?”

“No, I still dig in.”

Approval spreads across his face.

“I’ve got beers,” he tries.

“Sounds good.”

“Coming up.”

I haven’t budged when he comes back with quarts of Coors. We crack the tops in unison and land the caps together in the pail between the bucket seats.



“You drank beer all afternoon?”

Her eyes went to my second double rye.

“Not the whole afternoon. He had chores to do.”

“You meet a brother you didn’t know you had and all of a sudden he has to go and milk the cows?”

“Mend a fence. It’s not a dairy farm. And yes, it felt contrived. I sensed Dr. Colton’s hand. He wanted us to meet, that’s all. For now, anyway.”

“But surely Luke—”

“—didn’t have to go along?” I shook my head. “No, Kirin. I think he did.”



The sun’s a little further to the right. A patch of light has crept up on the porch. We’re seated, legs stretched out. Luke’s undone the buttons of his shirt.

“We have to take this carefully,” he says, “Go slow because of what they did.”

“Dr. Colton said I did it to myself.”

He’s looking straight ahead. A muscle twitches in his jaw.

“You don’t think it’s true,” I say.

He turns.

“We have to get to know each other in the here-and-now.” Here-and-now’s a phrase that Dr. Colton used. “I can only tell you things, not let you read them from me.”

“What’ll happen if I do?”

“I might lose you for a second time.” He goes back to staring off. “We only get this chance.”



“I’m the carrot, Kirin. *We’re* the carrot. The *us* of us. It’s obvious the Caucus wants us back together. It wouldn’t have been all that difficult to keep me in the dark about a brother that I didn’t know I had, right? I have no idea what they’re after, but whatever they’re

expecting—from me, from him, from us—they're holding out the promise of my memories. The real ones, the ones we genuinely share, not grafts made up of bits and pieces other people tell me. Everything that made us us—unbroken in a line from birth.”



“Do you remember about Mom?” he asks.

An overcoat drawn tight against the cold... hair whipping in the wind... a high bridge over inky water...

“She was going to kill herself,” I say. “And me.”

“And us.”

He tips his beer, takes a swig, wipes foam off with his knuckle.

“She woke us up. Helped us into snowsuits, wrapped us up in scarves. Said she had to go somewhere, we had to come along. She dragged us to the Skyway Bridge and walked across. There were hardly any cars. The wind was freezing. You lost your scarf and started crying so I gave you mine.

“She stopped halfway and said the breeze was dangerous. She wrapped her own scarf around her waist and tied it to our wrists. Then she hopped up on the railing. You sensed what she was going to do and pushed me down. Pinned me to the sidewalk—like that was going to save us.”

It’s so close to what I think I know. So very close.

“I just remember Mom. Realizing what she’s doing, throwing myself down. Some guy squealing to a stop. Her yelling as he yanked her off the railing. I never understood. I scared her somehow.”

“What’s to understand? She was off her rocker.”

“Is she still alive?”

He tilts his beer again.

“Who knows?”



The waitress ambled over and took Kirin's empty.

"Another, dear?"

"Coffee. I'm driving."

She watched the waitress rinse out dregs and start a fresh batch brewing.

"He was that cavalier about your mother?"

"She was crazy. Committed the same night. We were only three. She tried to kill us. Not much *not* to feel cavalier about."

"Did you ever see her afterwards?"

"We were shipped off to a foster home."

"What about your father?"

"We must have had one but we never knew."

"That first time I came to see you? In your apartment? I had a sense you were an orphan. Cut off, without roots. Totally alone. Remember?"

"Not so alone after all, as it turns out."

"Guess not, eh?"

The waitress hurried up the coffee, pouring from a half-full pot. She brought it over with a little pack of cellophane-wrapped cookies.

"You're from around here, aren't you?" she asked me, extracting creamers from her apron. "Long time ago?"

What could I say but yes? *That's what they tell me* would have sounded strange.

"I thought so. You used to come here with your granddad. You and your brother. It's the eyes. Hard to forget."

Granddad? Dr. Colton?

"My niece who used to work here had a crush on you. Can't say I blamed her. Strapping boys, both of you. What's your name?"

"David. David Ase."

"Funny, don't recall it. Can I get you anything else?"

"This is fine, thanks."

Kirin studied me, head tilted, as the waitress walked away.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm wondering how that felt. I mean, if you had any doubts—"

“—I didn’t need to hear about my ‘granddad’. Look over there, behind the cash. Remind you of anyone?”



He slaps at a mosquito on his arm, then licks his thumb and wipes the blood away. He hasn’t spoken for a while, but every gesture is a word, every movement like the easy conversation between people who complete each other’s thoughts.

He slides down in his seat so that his head is on the back and looks over at me sideways.

“Hey, there, Jimmy-Dean.”

He means the way I dress, the clothes that feel like me.

“There was this poster in a restaurant,” he says. “First time you saw it, it was love. You started watching Rebel every time it played. Drove everybody crazy. You didn’t care about the story, just the jeans with cuffs and crew-neck Ts. Ultimate cool for you.”

There’s a softness in his voice, like sympathy that makes you realize how long you’ve been without.

“When I came to,” I say, “after . . .”

After what? Is there a name for what was done to me? He understands and makes a lazy rolling gesture with his hand.

“. . . I saw how I was dressed. James Dean came to mind. I had a feeling I’d been ribbed about it.”

“Doesn’t look as if it bugged you much. You used to slick your hair back, too. And wear your jacket collars up.”

“Cook said something about looking like a fifties thug.”

“She was always putty in your hands. Thought it was adorable.”

He slides down even further in his seat and pulls his cap down like he’s taking a siesta. He’s already said he has to work on Colton’s fence and shucked off the suggestion I could help. I’m a city boy.

“You used to call me that,” I say. “Jimmy-Dean. It was your name for me.”

*He smiles broadly, like I've figured out a secret.
"Little Jimmy-Dean. I popped out first."*



Kirin chose a different route to drive us back, one that crossed the Welland River. A conservation area spread out along the banks. From the way she turned to look, I could tell she'd picnicked there with Carlin.

"He's psychic, right?" she asked. "Your brother?"

"He didn't say."

"Didn't say? What the hell did you guys talk about?"

"There wasn't that much talk."

"*Jesus Christ,*" she exploded. "You sound like love-struck teenagers, not brothers re-united after fifteen years." She stared ahead. "Sorry. Had to say that. It's just too weird. Weren't you dying to know everything?"

"Guys aren't as curious as women. Frustrating, I know. But think about it—we could hardly sit there reminiscing, could we? *Hey, bro, remember when...?* Because I *don't* remember. He has to tell me everything."

She tried again a minute or so later.

"He must have wondered about you."

"I'm sure he did."

"But you didn't talk about you, either."

"No."

We made two turns, one at Haldibrook and one at Tyneside Road. Tyneside took us back across the Welland. Boys in rubber boots with T-shirts to their knees were fishing off the bridge. Further up, a rowboat sliced the crinkled-foil water.

I'd been slammed too hard, too fast, with too much new. The buzz of double ryes was feeling like sobriety compared to where I'd been. Kirin wasn't wrong to find it weird. Punch drunk with answers, questions had escaped me.

A windmill missing several vanes was spinning in a field ahead,

flashing spastic semaphore.

“Why now?”

Kirin glanced over with a puzzled look. I hadn’t meant to voice the thought.

“Why rob me of memories for fifteen years then choose to give them back? Why have me think my brother is a foster-kid’s imaginary friend then introduce him in the flesh? Why the turnaround? What’s different now?”

“CSIS?”

“Not according to Marion and Mr. Shen.”

“What brought them to you in the first place, anyway?”

“Three people with connection to Cassandra Island died. Suicides apparently, all within a week. Later, three others disappeared. Caucus members, I’d guess. CSIS suspected a cult. They hoped somebody with the right credentials would draw it out.”

Kirin fumbled on the dashboard for a cigarette. They—whoever had initiated her, had won her trust in something called the Binbrook Caucus—hadn’t mentioned suicides or disappearances.

“I have a favour to ask, Kirin. I’m trusting you’re not happy telling lies. And that the Caucus won’t require it again. That is, unless you have a side I don’t know anything about—like you’re one of them.”

“One of *them*? Do you know how paranoid that sounds?”

“Maybe that’s exactly what they want. Me to get all paranoid and turn to you so anything I say goes up the pipe to Dr. Colton.”

She lit her cigarette and cracked the window.

“I see,” I said. “You are reporting to him.”

“I don’t know. Maybe. He asked about you yesterday. Had we talked? How did you seem? That sort of thing.”

“Checking up on me.”

“Oh, come on, David. We’d just been talking for an hour. Who else would he ask? You make it sound so ominous. He was concerned is all.”

“Yeah, but about what?”

“You *are* paranoid.”

“Wouldn’t you be?”

She slowed to make a right-hand turn, then shortly up the road, a left. Home, such as it was for now, was getting near.

“If I asked you to be careful when you talk with Dr. Colton, not to say too much about our private conversations, would you be okay with that?”

“I dunno, David. I’m not good at telling lies. You said so yourself.”

“I read you yesterday and got a big, blank nothing.”

“I’m mean ordinary lies. Fibs.”

“That isn’t what I’m asking.”

She sucked hard on her cigarette. “You went to bat for me. I owe you one.”

“And if I asked to be kept posted about anything you hear?”

“Yeah. Sure.” Another long pull at the cigarette. “I can do that.”

The farm hove in view, looking like a photo on a rural business calendar: big brick house, gleaming white veranda, red and orange nasturtiums trailing out of hanging pots.

“I’ve got no reason not to trust the Caucus, David. Not after how they’ve helped me. But you? Your story’s way past weird. It doesn’t even sound like the same people. I hate taking sides, but if I have to I’m on yours.”

Even if the cost is losing Roy?

I left the doubt unvoiced.



He pulls his cap off, rubs his face, hooks the cap back on.

“Got a fence to mend,” he says, standing easily, buttoning his shirt.

He takes the empty beers inside and walks me to the barn. Outside the gaping doors he stops. Sunlight off the hardpack strikes his eyes—eyes like what the woman on the bridge had seen, day in, day out, times two.

“Colton doesn’t want us spending too much time together. Not at first. You’ll see. He’ll find ways to keep you occupied. If you ask him he’ll admit it. Clear, upfront. That’s his way.”

He steps in closer, throws his arms around me. Work-smell fills my nose.

“Play along,” he whispers, “little Jimmy-Dean.”