

Chapter 30

AN OUTCOME, NOT A CAUSE

I LAID *The Rules* on the dresser and went over to the window, where I'd drawn the drapes against the sun, and peered out through the crack.

"...with emendations," Mr. Shen had said. Meaning what, exactly? How much of the document was mine? The language seemed too polished for a sixteen-year-old boy—assuming that my "project for Miss Harper" dated from the year I'd made myself forget the Farm, the Caucus, Luke. The information read like Coles Notes for a subject I'd already mastered, thanks to Mr. Shen.

When's the test? I asked the brilliant afternoon outside. *Is it for marks?*

My answer was a gentle knock.

"David? Are you decent?"

Marion. I hadn't seen her for two days except at mealtimes, when we hadn't said much more than *Pass the butter, please*. I stood aside and let her in. She made a beeline for the rocking chair, leaving me the bed.

I sat and waited. Damned if I was going to start this conversation.

"You're still miffed," she said at last.

"I can't imagine where you got that idea from."

"Don't," she snapped. "I'm not in the mood for sarcasm."

“Gee, isn’t that too bad?”

She looked as if I’d slapped her. “I was hoping we could talk.”

“A chat. How nice. What shall we talk about? This run of lovely weather? The price of tea in China?”

“I was thinking something closer to home.”

“Silly me. Of course. Let’s talk about deceit.”

“I’m not here to make excuses, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I wish you would. Then I could tell you to fuck off.”

She went still. “You’re that angry?”

“You lied to me. For over two years.”

“I kept things from you, yes.”

“Splitting that particular hair is unworthy, even of you.”

“I’m not splitting hairs. Misrepresentation of the truth is a lie however it’s done. I just want us to be very clear what kind of lies I’ve told.”

“Passive lies? Lies of omission? Lies of imposture? There—all cleared up. I feel so much better. All is forgiven.”

“Would you *stop*? Get out of your own head for a minute.”

“How about you try getting *into* it? Right—I forgot. You can’t.”

“Is that meant to be a killing blow because you’re psychic and I’m not?”

“Killing blow? That was just a practice shot.”

We locked eyes.

“I had no idea you could be so nasty,” she said.

“Something you must have missed. You knew everything else about me.”

“Not everything. I didn’t know the adult-you would have an endless store of brandy.”

“If that’s a reference to your dropping over to keep tabs on me, sorry if it isn’t tugging at the heartstrings.”

“I wasn’t keeping tabs.”

“No? What the hell do you call Cassandra Island? The Caucus knew I’d be showing up there almost before I did.”

“That was different.”

“Different from what?”

“Cassandra Island was exceptional. The Caucus had to be forewarned.”

“Are you telling me you waited till then to inform them David Ase, brother of Luke, robbed of his memories, out of sight and out of mind for a decade and a half, had become your next door neighbour?”

“Of course not. I told them the moment you showed up.”

“And their response was, ‘Isn’t that a kicker?’ and that’s all?”

“Don’t play thick. Of course they wanted to know more.”

“And afterwards? No further interest? I’m assuming your August visits ‘home’ were here, not to the family farm?”

“That’s correct.”

“And the subject of me never came up?”

She sighed. “Where are you going with this?”

“Sounds like keeping tabs to me.”

“No, David, it wasn’t. Do you honestly think I was chumming up to spy on you?”

“How the fuck would I know?” I stood and grabbed *The Rules* off the dresser. “As with memory dissimulation,” I read, “‘non-psychics can be taught to mask untruths selectively.’ How am I supposed to interpret that? Sounds like you can lie on just about every level imaginable. I don’t even know who you are anymore.”

“I’m Marion Harper, vituperative prognosticator and supercilious trasher of all things lazy, mediocre and banal.”

I tossed *The Rules* on the dresser.

“Nice try. I used to know someone like that. Any other last ditch appeals? Because I’d rather be alone right now.”

“I’m not leaving till we get this thing hashed out.”

“Fine, then. Stay.”

I threw myself on the bed and turned to face the window. A breeze blew through the curtains, bringing in the dusty smell of sun-baked fields.

Marion cleared her throat.

“I won’t insult you by saying I’m sorry, David. I was bound by a commitment to the Caucus, and I stand by that commitment. Even

if you don't have the whole story, it should be obvious by now that something extraordinary happened fifteen years ago. There could be no further contact between you and Caucus members afterwards. Ever. In the event that our existence became known, we needed to be certain you, especially, couldn't be tracked down.

"When you moved next door—when I saw you for the first time and knew that it was you—I asked Dr. Colton what to do. He said, quite simply: 'Nothing.' He wanted very much to know what sort of person you'd become but never asked me to report on you.

"I tell myself I had the choice to totally ignore you. To play the city neighbour. But did I really? For one thing, there's that damn door between our apartments. Hard to ignore, even if we seldom use it. More than that, it can't have escaped your attention I lead a solitary life. For the most part people bore me. They rarely have anything intelligent to say and when they do they seldom take the time to say it well. Could I really have resisted seeking out your company, even if you weren't my former pupil?"

She stopped. The curtains shuffled in the breeze again, admitting light that crossed the floor and split the room in two.

Play along.

I wanted to believe her, like the victim of a huckster who refuses to acknowledge that the swindler's lies were nothing but a con. But Marion was a pro. A fortune-teller. One who'd learned to fool even a human polygraph.

Play along, little Jimmy-Dean.

I rolled over. Marion was ramrod straight. Her hands were clasped together in her lap. *Worry... chagrin... sadness... resolve ...* And something else: a field, coloured warm, enveloping the rest. *Tenderness.* A soft spot, verging on maternal—at least, maternal as I fancied it to be. I'd encountered it before, but never so predominant, so undisguised.

Play along.

Genuine or not, it's what she wanted me to see.

"I feel so betrayed," I said.

She settled back, relieved by the admission.

“How could you not?”

“More than that, humiliated.”

“Rather like the emperor in his new clothes, I imagine.”

“Exactly. You let me go on and on—about the way I work, my feelings about psychism, a past I wrap in dark ellipses to obscure the fact it makes no sense at all—all the while knowing it was bullshit. And even if I tell myself there had to be a reason, I still feel like a fool.”

“A pissed-off fool.”

“Something like that.”

The laconicism came out sounding churlish.

“Would it help to know I feel every bit as bad as you?” Marion asked.

“I guess that’s what happens when you let obedience trump friendship.”

“I suppose it is.”

“You could have told me, you know. Whatever happened happened long ago. I was seventeen. I’m over thirty now. An adult. One you could have trusted. You could have found a way to tell me.”

“But would you have believed me? Think, David. With no memory of this place, how could you possibly have known if what I said were true? Would you have understood the Caucus’ need for secrecy? More to the point, would you have taken it on faith you had a brother? A twin? If you’d read that in a book it would have had your eyeballs rolling in their sockets.”

“They’re not rolling now.”

“That’s because you’ve met him.”

“Yeah. Once.”

Marion got up. I wondered if she planned to sit beside me, but she skirted round the bed. I heard the curtains rustle; she was peering out, as I had done.

“Why doesn’t Dr. Colton want me spending too much time with him?” I asked.

“Who told you that?”

“Luke.”

“John and Dr. Colton both know what they’re doing.”

“That’s not an answer, Marion.”

“No,” she sighed, “it’s not.”

The floorboards creaked. I felt the mattress sink.

“David,” she said tentatively, “I’m frightened what you’ll say, but I’m going to ask anyway. I want us to stay friends. I don’t want you vanishing again. I don’t want you hating me. I’ve no right, but is there any way . . . ?”

Marion had been my tutor. How much of me had come from her? We conversed so easily, used the same elliptic syntax, spoke the same allusive language. How often had we finished sentences the other had begun, or twisted them for laughs? Was it possible that that had been her doing? Her impact on a mind at an impressionable age? If so her influence had gone beyond the purely pedagogic. I had to have imbibed her lessons, not just merely learned them.

I was an invention built around a six year vacuum. What sort of person had I been? Dr. Colton knew, as did Mr. Shen and Luke. But none of them had chosen to become my friend, to share the things they could despite the things they couldn’t. Subtract humiliation and betrayal, and Marion, at this stage in my life, knew me better than I knew myself. Literally.

“This sucks,” I said.

I felt her turn, and swivelled round to face her.

“Is there a chance,” I asked, “that this place also has an endless store of brandy?”

“And rye,” she answered briskly. “Sideboard in the parlour. Shall I get Cook to fetch us ice?”



Sharing drinks with Marion, my feet up on an ottoman that Raymond could have chosen, it was easy to imagine that no time at all had passed since she’d announced her plan to head home early for the summer. The difference then had been I didn’t know her lines came from a script. Now I did, but though the script was

censored—I could almost see the Magic Marker blotting out key passages—I trusted what she said was true.

She'd been hired by Dr. Colton shortly after he became the legal guardian of two boys implicated in their foster father's death.

"God knows what strings the Caucus pulled," she told me, "but somehow it was legal, or at the very least, attracted no attention. I've been given to understand that all official record of your origins have been expunged. Felony and psychism apparently need not be strangers to each other."

She knew nothing of the Caucus when she started at the Farm, only that her job was tutoring two boys, described as very special, at a salary "that put questions out of the question." Months passed before she found out that her friend, the therapist who'd asked her if she'd like the job, was more than simply good at getting into people's heads. In that time, the Caucus had assessed her to determine her response, not only to the fact of its existence but to finding out that psychism was real.

"I had an aunt who claimed to have the Sight," she reminisced. "Of course she didn't, but as a child I played with her Tarot and traced the Zodiac on onion skin to colour with my Crayons. Some day I was going to be a Seer."

She welcomed finding out that prevoyance was real, though she herself would never have the gift. It was Mr. Shen, responsible for teaching her the discipline of misdirecting empaths, who had swayed her into fortune-telling.

"It was John who showed me synchronicity and random patterns, like dealing out Tarot or the accident of when and where a child is born, could indeed be read for intimations of the future. That suited me just fine, Seer that I hoped to be but hard-nosed pragmatist that I'd become. I suppose I could have gone back to the classroom after working with you two, but... "

You two. Luke and I. Inseparable brothers.

We hadn't really been inseparable. Luke was quite content to leave me in the library while he explored the barn or scoured the property for treasure: flint arrowheads, nests of garter snakes,

hollow trees that could be used as natural redoubts by two boys playing soldiers.

“Yin and yang,” Marion recalled. “You the thinker, Luke the doer. By thirteen he could already disassemble the equipment in the barn and mostly put it back together. You were good at lessons, both of you, but while for him they were the price of living here, you would take the time to read up further.”

We’d been good-looking even then. “Devilishly handsome,” so said Marion, but Luke, with his blond hair, stood out. A charmer, nearly irresistible, “where you were sweet, he was just plain smooth.”

When not engaged in study we had free run of the property. Boys will be boys, and trouble sometimes followed.

“From the start, discipline presented problems. Luke protected you as fiercely as a mother bear. He took the blame for everything, even when responsibility fell squarely on your shoulders. No one could chastise you, not even Dr. Colton. If anyone tried, Luke’s rages were implacable. Scary, really. One got the feeling only you existed in his world.”

For my part, I’d follow him in anything. Not an angel—not by a long shot—I was, in Marion’s words, “not a troublemaker but more than capable of getting into trouble.”

The picture that emerged as Marion downed two, then three, then four drinks was of two boys hidden from the world but given liberty to roam in paradise. All that was required of them was learning—curriculum from Marion, psychic skills from Mr. Shen. If A.S. Neill had met Ray Bradbury—*Summerhill* meets *Dandelion Wine*—between them they could not have made a place more perfect for two brothers tumbling into teenhood.

And I voluntarily excised all memory of it?

Like Mr. Shen, Marion never got to that.



We were eleven for supper. Three new faces—Greg, Mehtar, Lise—

with two from last night missing: Dom and Franklin.

Marion sat next to me, weaving slightly. Mr. Shen had staked out Father's place, with Cook in Mother's at the far end of the table. Across from me were Kirin, Roy and Carlin. Kirin glowed as if she'd gotten laid. Carlin chattered happily about her day to Roy, who did the bug-eyed thing and groaned at her invented jokes. Perhaps I had misjudged him. Or perhaps he really had succeeded in misleading me. I had trouble fitting someone so attentive to an eight-year-old together with the finger-crushing bozo of Cassandra Island.

Conversation, as at other meals, floated around neutral topics as if everyone were talking about everything but what they really wanted to. Halfway through I asked of no one in particular if Luke was going to join us. In the silence following, Mr. Shen offered vaguely that he was off with Dom and Franklin and wouldn't be back till later.

A small group went upstairs for coffee with the doctor after supper. Not one of them enquired if I'd like to tag along. Marion made noises about catching up on god-knows-what. Roy, with Kirin watching, invited me for beers. I declined with an apologetic *Next time*, aimed at Kirin.

I meant to spend the evening reading in my room, but dozed off in the rocking chair. The deep, rich smell of chocolate woke me up.

"I could have come and knocked," Cook told me when my legs had carried me on auto-pilot down the service stairs, "but I decided to make the mountain come to Mohammad for a change." She whipped a towel off a cooling rack of brownies. "Luke just got back. I thought you'd like to know. He's over at his cabin now."

I grabbed her face and kissed her on the cheek, this tiny woman whom, it seemed, I used to love as much as I did now.

"Cook," I said, "you shouldn't have."

"Just completing my side of our bargain. You didn't tell Dr. C about my little slip. Not that it matters now. You and Luke have met."

She cut and transferred brownies to a floral plate.

"I know he hasn't been—," she cast about words, "—around

much since. That's why I wanted you to know he's back."

I took a brownie and bit into soft, moist sin. Words failed me, so I stuffed the whole thing in my mouth. Cook beamed, then set the plate down on the table. I quickly grabbed another.

She batted at my hand.

"Don't be greedy. You're not the only person here. There's a little girl across the way who'll want some, too."

I scarfed another while she hunted up some plastic wrap and stretched it overtop.

"Go," she said, the task complete. "I know Luke's all you're thinking of."



Night. Luke's porch. The southern sky infested with a billion stars. A nail paring of moon. Crickets creaking like a thousand unoiled hinges. The lamp post near the barn attracting moths. A humid, evening smell like pineapples and honey.

"Bedstraw," Luke says. "That's what smells so sweet."

"Never heard of it."

"City boy."

"Did I used to know?"

"A thing like that, you'd probably remember."

He's lit a citronella pail. The three wicks flicker, wafting hot-wax scent. Dr. Colton's window is a pale-yellow cutout. Cook's a shadow flitting in the kitchen. Three rooms in the dorm-extension have their lights on—night owls inside, like us.

"Almost everybody's here," Luke says.

"How many are they?"

"Fourteen, with the new girl. That's leaving out Miss Harper and Cook. The other two arrive tomorrow."

"Do they gather like this often?"

"Once a year. Normally a quorum. This year everyone's been called."

"Why?"

"Things have changed."

"Because of me?"

"Something Colton needs approval for. You're an outcome, not a cause."

"Something?"

"He'll tell you when he's ready."

"But you know."

"I do."

"To do with me?"

"With us."

He stands and makes to go inside.

"Another beer?"

"Sure."

He comes back with a frosty can and hands it to me from behind.

"Jimmy-Dean," he says and scrubs my head.

I don't know this man but he's my partner in a childhood from which he's been erased. I feel his affection flowing from the tingling in my scalp. He's on my side, even if constraints prevent him telling me what's going on.

"I spoke to Marion today," I say when he sits down.

"Miss Harper?"

"Marion to me. My next door neighbour."

He pops his beer. "How did that happen anyway?"

"Coincidence. Didn't they tell you?"

"Only after they recruited the new girl."

"Kirin. She's a friend of mine."

"And Roy Calhoun's new squeeze."

"How well do you know Roy?"

"He's been with the Caucus eleven years. Tight with Colton and a couple of others. Can't say I really know him. Haven't made the effort. Seems full of himself."

"I thought so, too, but I was watching him at supper. He dotes on Kirin's little girl."

He shrugs. "Like I said, I hardly know the guy."

“What about the other Caucus members?”

“I know their names but other than the ones who were around before, I don’t have much to do with them. Or them with me.

What did Miss Harper have to say?”

“Sounds funny to hear you call her that.”

“Habit.”

He takes a swig of beer.

“I asked her about us. What we were like. What it was like, us being here.”

“Did she mention how much fun we had?”

He flashes me a wolfish grin.

“She made it sound like heaven.”

“Yeah, when they weren’t trying to teach us stuff.”

“That’s more or less what she said, too.”

He hears something in my voice.

“You don’t believe her?”

“No, it’s not that. She said that discipline presented challenges. You wouldn’t let anyone come near me.”

A throaty chuckle. “We watched out for each other.”

“You a little more?”

“You could say.”

I twist my beer and watch the light that catches on the can. The citronella flames are dancing little jigs.

“I have memories of the foster home,” I say.

He tips his beer again.

“It was brutal.” The careless nonchalance of someone hiding scars. “The other kids wouldn’t have anything to do with us. They couldn’t hide from you and I was always fucking with their heads.” He pauses, savouring. “Then there was that fat slob, Bennett, drinking up the social service money. Hannah never had enough to make us decent meals.”

“I didn’t know he’d died. I only just found out.”

“How far do your memories go?”

“To the fire in the barn. I see Tom running in to save his truck. After that... not a blank, more like a road I can’t go down.”

He nods. *"The tripwire."*

"That's what I'm told they call it. Dr. Colton and Mr. Shen."

"How bad is it?"

"Bad. Like exploding on the inside while I'm clamped into a vice. There's no escape. It doesn't stop till I black out."

I get around to opening my beer and lick the foam that spreads around the rim.

"Bennett blew up with his truck," Luke says. "The house caught fire in the explosion. No one else got hurt."

"Who really set that fire?"

He takes an empty can and crushes it one-handed.

"We did."

"On purpose?"

His silence chides me for a question that I shouldn't have to ask.

"Jimmy-Dean," he says again and rubs my arm.

The beer is passing through me.

"Straight through, at the back," he tells me.

The layout of his cabin's simple. Living room in front, bedroom on the right, kitchen on the left, bathroom in the rear. Coming back I peek inside the bedroom. There isn't much to see. A futon raised on two-by-fours. Stacks of paperbacks. Ansel Adams posters on the walls. A bureau with a photograph on top of two boys grinning at the camera. One is blond, the other dark. Their eyes are startling green.

I trace the unfledged faces through the scratched acrylic, wondering if this is us age eight or twelve. It's hard to judge. Sunlight coruscates off water in the background. The pond behind the foster home? I try imagining what came before. Luke and I, not as we are now but with these features of our younger selves. Laughing, shouting, diving deep...

The pain slams hard, a tidal wave of agony. I stumble, drop the picture, hear a cry. Luke's bedroom starts to spin. The wave becomes an ever-dimming maelstrom. I feel myself begin to fall.

Darkness overtakes before I reach the floor.



A sound. My name. The pain is gone.

My head is cradled in a lap that smells of sweat and summer fields. Strong hands smooth my hair and stroke my forehead.

“Soon,” I hear, or something like it. “Soon.”