

Chapter 34

AN INFINITELY COMPLEX TANGRAM

WE SHOT THE breeze, our backs against the gravestone, till the noon heat spent itself. Conversation drifted around ordinary things, the data people pool when meeting someone new: movies, music, books, hobbies. Luke told me about farming and the rhythm of his days. I told tales about the psychic counselling profession. By the time we dusted off and headed back, we'd covered the essentials of our lives as they were now.

Kirin hailed us from Luke's porch. She was sitting on the edge, legs dangling, puffing on a cigarette.

"Meeting over for the day?" Luke called as we approached.

She took a drag and nodded.

I hopped up on the porch beside her. "Where's Roy?"

"Off with Carlin. She was by herself all day."

Luke leaned back, resting on his elbows. "How'd it go?"

"Oh, fine, I'm sure. I didn't understand what they were talking about most of the time."

"New girl syndrome?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"They're pretty tight," he offered sympathetically.

She tossed her cigarette away. "No. It wasn't that. They're nice people. Welcoming."

"What, then?" I asked.

She looked from me to Luke and back again.

“You guys *are* scary, you know that? When it’s just you, David, I can deal with the eye thing. But both of you? The creep factor goes nuclear.”

“What did they tell you, Kirin?”

“They said you killed a guy. Both of you. Together. That somehow you can do that. It’s why they separated you. Why you can’t remember anything.”

She felt behind her for her smokes and drew out one mechanically. Luke produced a Zippo from his pocket. She bent and cupped her hand around the flame.

“At least I get it now,” she said, exhaling. “Why you are the way you are.”

“How’s that?”

“Secretive. Ambiguous. Why I always get the feeling that there’s more to what you’re saying than there is. Genuinely psychic and not knowing it? Pretending to be something that you *are*? How’s anyone supposed to process that? And being made to ‘lose’ your brother? That’s got to leave some traces that are hard to figure out. It’s like, you try to tell the truth but only half of it comes out.”

She sucked intently on her cigarette, frowning in a way she never would have when we met.

“You want a beer or something?” Luke put in.

“Sure,” she said distractedly.

While he was getting it I reassured her Garrett’s death had been an accident. “The way I hear it, anyway. A prank gone wrong, however it was done. And the me you know has no connection with the me who was involved. *If* I was involved. None at all. The Caucus made damn sure of that.”

“I know. I got the story over lunch.”

She started worrying her cigarette, flicking at the filter with her thumb.

“What’s bothering you, then?”

“The Caucus is disbanding, David. ‘Going further underground’—that’s how Dr. Colton put it. It’s what these meetings are

about.”

“Well, how traumatic can that be? You’ve only just become a member.”

“Yeah. Figures, too, eh? I join a club, it falls apart.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.”

“I know, I know,” she grimaced. “Self-pity’s never pretty. But there’s more. They say I have to disappear.”

“Disappear, as in . . . ?”

“Relocate. Change my name. Get a new identity. Become another person.”

“How do they expect you to do that?”

“How is not the problem. They have resources. *Resources*. That’s a hoot. Do you know how rich these people are? They spent the morning talking figures. I can’t even count that high.”

“Dr. Colton mentioned something about psychics being lucky around money.”

“Could have fooled me. I work to earn a living. And that’s the thing. I like what I do. I don’t want to give it up. And what about Carlin? There’s her school, her friends. And that asshole Burke. You think he’s going to take my making off with Carlin lying down? He’ll think I’ve done it to get back at him. God knows what he’ll do to try to find me. In films when someone has to disappear, there’s always somebody like him who fucks it up.”

I felt a drop of condensation on my neck as Luke, behind us, handed out cold beers.

“Who fucks what up?”

Kirin twisted round. “You don’t want to know.”

Luke held his palms face out. “Right. This is me, backing off.”

“Is everyone supposed to up and vanish?” I asked.

“That’s part of what they talked about. Whether everybody’d have to, or just me—”

“—and Roy, and John.” Luke hunkered down beside her. “The ones whose names you would have given CSIS.”

“You know about that?” I asked him, surprised.

“You don’t think Colton just came up to me one day and said:

‘Oh, by the way, David’s dropping in tomorrow’ do you?’

“Jesus, Kirin. If I’d known . . .”

“It’s not your fault, David. Marion explained how CSIS hooked you in. You did what you had to. If anyone’s to blame, it’s me.”

“How do you figure?”

“Little Miss Unexpected with a secret in her head? I mean, if Marion had known you were going to Cassandra Island with an undiscovered psychic, she’d never have encouraged you.”

“Trust me, I had reasons to go up there, with or without Marion’s encouragement. I’m only sorry that I didn’t go alone.”

“I doubt it would have mattered. I was going there anyway. They’d still have spotted me and found this thing inside my head that’s screwed up everything.”

“But at least you wouldn’t have to disappear. What did they find, anyway?”

Luke broke in. “She doesn’t know. Not yet. It’ll come out in tomorrow’s meeting.”

Kirin turned to him. “Do you?”

“Most I can say is that you accidentally found the villain of the piece. It’s better if you wait till Colton lays it all in front of you. He’s good at that. Ask David.”



Cook rang the bell for dinner. Kirin asked if we were coming. Luke said no, we’d be eating by ourselves. He hadn’t mentioned supper or asked about my plans; the presumptive invitation came as a surprise—clearly what he wanted.

Ham, potato salad, marinated beans and minted cucumbers—all from Tupperware containers in the fridge. Ravenous—we hadn’t eaten since the morning—neither of us spent much time on talk.

I sat out on the porch while he took care of cleaning up. Someone at the house came out and started walking over. The evening sun was in my eyes; I couldn’t make out who until he crossed the hardpack. Mr. Shen.

He reached the cabin just as Luke was coming out.

"Boys," he said congenially. "Is this a private party?"

"You're always on the guest list," Luke replied. "Want my seat?"

"If you don't mind. David looks quite comfortable in mine."

"Tea?" Luke offered.

"Thanks, no."

"How about a beer?"

"That would be nice."

He moved the pail between the seats when he returned and sank down tailor-style.

"Tired of playing with the grownups, John?" he asked.

"The break is welcome. And it's good to see you boys together. Like old times. How are you holding up, David?"

"Okay, I guess."

"Still feeling overwhelmed?"

"You could say. Half the time I can't decide if what I'm feeling's curious or furious."

"Let's hope the second goes away when the first is satisfied. How was your day?"

"He still loses when we wrestle," Luke put in.

"Don't listen to him, David. You could pin him just as fast as he pinned you."

"I'm plotting my revenge, even as we speak."

"Good, good."

"How 'bout you, John?" Luke enquired. "Things going smoothly over there?" He made it sound as if the farmhouse were across the Great Divide.

"Indeed. And faster than I would have thought."

"No dissenters, then?"

"None so far."

"Will Colton get consensus?"

"It depends on how he makes his case tomorrow."

"You didn't get to that today?"

"Robert laid the groundwork. Rather well, I thought."

"He would."

“Might be nice if I knew what you were talking about,” I interrupted.

“Actually, David,” Mr. Shen replied, “it’s for you I’m here. If things go as expected Dr. Colton will be seeing you tomorrow, but there’s something that I’d like to show you first. Bear with me. It involves your gift.”

“My gift? Right—you mean the one you said I had then promptly rendered useless?”

Mr. Shen looked puzzled.

“This hiding thing you do,” I said. “Misdirection, whatever. First you tell me I can see what’s going on in people’s heads, then conveniently arrange it so I can’t.”

“But how wonderful,” Mr. Shen exclaimed. “That’s exactly what I want to talk to you about.”

“If that’s some sort of ploy to make coincidence shore up your claims . . .”

He held his hand up. “Luke, would you mind going inside a moment? This won’t take long.”

Luke got to his feet without a word and slipped inside.

The light and shadow on the porch had switched positions from the morning. The sun had deepened to a shade of amber, getting ready for the weightless coral pink of setting.

“Tell me what you see when you attempt to read a Caucus member,” Mr. Shen requested.

“We’re not supposed to do that here.”

“And good boy that you are, you haven’t tried,” he teased.

“Got me there. Okay. What I see’s a sort of smooth grey field that tells me absolutely nothing. It’s the same with everyone but Marion and Cook.”

He turned so he was facing me. “Read me now,” he ordered, just like at Dawe’s Lake.

I took a breath and let his image form, the artefact inside my head I’d always thought was just analogy. *Control without rigidity . . . the inside and the outside matched . . . grey the colour of a mirror with no world to reflect . . .* The same as what I’d always seen

except for one brief moment at his cottage.

Then something changed.

The map—the sculpture—glowed. Not the component parts, the tiles of an infinitely complex tangram, but the spaces in between. A tracery of lines spread through the mirror, discernible the way a heat mirage makes temperature visible.

All at once I understood. Where normally the pieces of a mental map arranged themselves in fixed arrays determined by experience and context, in Mr. Shen they were dynamic, tractable, and subject to his will. I wasn't seeing *him*, I was seeing self-awareness—one mind's knowledge of itself. It beckoned like a doorway into places simultaneously known yet unencountered. *Key and keyhole joining...*

As smoothly as they had appeared, the vibrant lines diminished to a once-again undifferentiated whole.

"If any one of us," said Mr. Shen, "lets his or her defences down, this is what an empath 'sees': the independent constant referenced in *The Rules*."

"The psychic footprint?"

"Yes."

"*Jesus*," I said, reeling. "Couldn't you have found a better name?"

"Awe-inspiring, isn't it? Perhaps you understand now why we're such a close-knit bunch. Most of us are empaths. We see this in each other. And seeing it we recognize, not ourselves, not the Other, but the origin of both—the thinker of our thoughts."

"Could I see this in Luke?"

"If he lets you, once the drugs wear off. Which I would have thought would be the case by now."

The observation ended with an upward turn. I shook my head.

"How come he had to go inside?" I asked.

"*The Rules*, David. And your own experience. Empathy attenuates in inverse proportion to the number of subjects being read."

"But I wouldn't have been reading him. Just you."

"In your present state, some part of you is always trying to read him."

“Can he . . . see . . . this thing in me?”

“That’s complicated, Jimmy-Dean,” Luke answered from behind.

I swivelled round. He was standing at the doorway with a beer.

“A trifle,” Mr. Shen agreed, waving him outside. “While empaths can discern it in another’s mind, transmitters, like your brother here, perceive it only in themselves. They never know the pull—the wonderful affinity—of seeing it in others.”

“However—,” Luke held up a finger, aping Mr. Shen’s delivery, “—when you and I are joined, telepathically, I do see it, through you. And feel it, too. It’s difficult to put in words. It’s not so simple, not so subject-object—”

“—and the fact is, no one really knows what happens when the two of you are linked. Luke won’t let us read him. Neither will he say more than he has.”

A loaded sentence if I ever heard one, but spoken without rancour, as if Mr. Shen had come to see things Luke’s way long ago.

“I’ll bet that really pisses Dr. Colton off,” I said.

Luke suppressed a grin.

“The footprint is the Caucus’s Achilles heel,” Mr. Shen went on, “if you’ll pardon the mixed metaphor. The means whereby a psychic can be spotted. Uncamouflaged, it’s practically a beacon.

“Thanks to Marion—you have forgiven her, I hope?—you know that anyone can misdirect an empath. Lie to them, if they’ve been taught the skill. But misdirection’s not enough to hide the psychic footprint. It’s not an amalgam, you see, like memory or feeling. There’s no misdirecting context it can hide within *except itself*. Itself, in this case, means the sum of all cognition. Self-awareness. If it is displaced—folded is a better word—within itself, what an empath reads is that a person’s image of themselves and the image they project are perfectly in synch. Particularly well-adjusted individuals, and sometimes psychopaths, exhibit the same thing. In other words, it’s not unheard-of in the general population. Thus displacement—camouflage—has been our first line of defence against those agencies who seek us.”

He paused to take a sip of beer. An evening breeze blew through

the corn, shivering the glossy blades gone ruddy in the setting sun. The kitchen door swung open. Spindly silhouettes emerged and mosied down the lane.

Psychics out to take their evening constitutional.

“Tomorrow,” I said, watching as they disappeared. “Dr. Colton’s going to tell me that your camouflage no longer works. Project BRAZIER or some other has uncovered ways to pierce it.”

“That’s correct.”

“He’s going to ask for my assistance.”

“Also true.”

“In return you’ll help restore my memories.”

“Yes.”

“And if I refuse?”

He drained his beer and stood.

“Let’s wait until you hear what Robert has to say. Luke—,” he felt his pockets and produced a Ziplock bag, “—for you. With David here, you might run short.”

Luke pulled the baggie’s lips apart and stuck his nose inside.

“Good shit, John. Thanks.”

“You do smoke, don’t you, David?” Mr. Shen enquired.

“From time to time.”

“Enjoy it, then. Boys—good evening.”

Halfway to the barn he slowed and turned.

“Luke,” he called, “we might be finished up by noon, or shortly after lunch. If I need to find you two, you’ll be where I expect?”

“Sure thing, John.” He squinted at the sinking sun. “Going to be another hot one.”



I pass the joint to Luke. It’ll be our last. We’re slipping into separate worlds as separate houses, separate bedrooms, beckon.

“Ever see things, Jimmy-Dean?” he asks, studying the ember.

“Who doesn’t when they’re buzzed?”

He takes a drag. “I mean real things. Stuff that happens later.”

"Like the future?"

"Yeah."

"It's happened a couple of times."

The glowing tip is still intriguing him. "It's true, though, eh? Dope helps."

"I know. It's in The Rules."

He snorts. "The Rules."

"Hey—don't make fun. I wrote them."

"You wrote the rules? Wow." He giggles.

"I'm not sure I buy it."

"What?"

"That stuff about me writing them."

He takes another lungful, passes me the nub. "Nah. It's true. You were a fucking little genius. Should have called you Plato."

"Hub?"

"You know—the other guy in Rebel Without A Cause."

"He's a wimp."

"Yeah, but, you know, the name . . ." His voice trails off.

"Anyway, you only wrote them down. It's not like you invented them or anything."

"How about you? You ever see things?"

"Not supposed to." He mimes a needle in the butt.

"But you do."

He shrugs. "Colton and the Caucus don't know everything."

"Mr. Shen knows, though."

"Not from me he doesn't." A span of quiet seconds. "But, you know, John's not stupid."

I take a final hit and flick the roach away. The arcing afterimage fades from orange to blue.

"You saw me coming back here, didn't you? You knew I would."

At first he doesn't answer. When he does, it sounds like something I might say.

"Just had to wait till time caught up with what already was."