

Chapter 35

A GLAMOUR ON THE SCENE

SOUND OF CRICKETS.

Moonlight on the wall.

The body-buzz of dope.

I couldn't sleep. I'd left myself behind with Luke. Every step—from his place to the house, up the stairs, down the hall, to my room—had dragged against an undertow. I'd stripped and lain down on the bed. The coverlet, cool at first, began to scratch. I threw it off in favour of the smooth sheets underneath.

A nightjar started peeping like a backup signal.

A thousand years ago, a friend named Cowboy picked a tune: *Hear that lonesome whippoorwill... he sounds too blue to fly...*

Luke—my compass foot, the fixed point for all distance now. Before, there'd been just me, and how far could I wander from myself? From here on in, a part of me would always be away, a hollow carved out by the very thing that filled it.

Luke? I called out silently. *Luke?*

Nothing.

The old tree on the front lawn stirred. Shadows shuffled on the wall. A puff of air blew through the window, washed in nighttime smells.

How could I feel homesick when I'd finally found home?



“Sleepyhead.”

The sun’s already two-thirds on the way to noon. Luke is on his porch in cut-offs and a T-shirt. Behind him, in the shade, is a six-pack Coleman cooler and a canvas satchel.

“Couldn’t get to sleep,” I tell him.

“Not me. Like a log. You eat?”

“Cook saved some muffins.”

“That should get you where we’re going.”

He passes me the satchel. Picnic smells—mustard, pickles, cheese—leak out.

We walk along the fence, like yesterday. Halfway up, he sets the cooler down, sheds his T-shirt, twirls it in a braid and wraps it round his forehead. When we reach the woodlot, he turns right. Further on, a trampled patch of raspberries reveals a beaten path that leads toward the trees.

The cool inside feels thick, not fresh, and waist-high ferns conceal the path. I catch a whiff of water as he pushes through the fronds—a vegetative frowst that’s greener than smell of loam. The trunks ahead have furrowed bark, and silver leaves obscure the sky. Willow trees, the kind that cling to river banks.

Luke comes to a halt.

“Close your eyes.”

He takes my hand and draws me on. Suddenly, the sun is on my skin again and orange explodes behind my eyelids.

“Open up.”

The willows ring a dappled pond that’s broad enough to swim. The water’s black and dimpled with small bugs. Yellow leaves drift lazily across the surface. Lozenges of sunlight quiver in the middle. Cattails grow around the western edge. The far side is a sward of pale moss.

Luke drapes his arm across my shoulders. Memory slips a glamour on the scene.

“The pond behind the foster home,” I breathe. “We played

there all the time.”

“Our favourite spot till Bennett killed it for us. This was our replacement. We played here, too. A lot.”

The only sounds are forest birds. Luke bends down, pulls off his Kodiaks and deftly joins the laces.

“It’s deep,” he says and slings the boots around his neck. “We gotta wade around.”

I kick my sneakers off and ball my socks inside. The water’s freezing and the bottom oozes mud.

“Spring fed,” Luke informs me. “Like the other one. Never did find where it enters.”

We circle round while water striders skitter on in front. I stub my toes on rocks beneath the silt. The farther bank turns out to be a snarl of fleshy stems. Yellow flowers dot the spongy mat with five-point stars.

Luke unhooks his boots and sits. I stay standing, trying to imagine me in this same place, on this same spot, fifteen years ago.

He holds his hand up for the satchel. “Wanna swim before we eat?”

“Sounds good to me.”

I shuck my clothes. Luke stays seated, watching.

“You’re not coming?”

“Can’t.” He taps his scar. “Going underwater breaks the signal.”

“Don’t go under, then.”

“Where’s the fun in that? Remember how we used to do it?”

“Nearly drowning to see which of us could hold our breath the longest?”

Us—as if in memory he’s flesh and blood.

“Go on,” he urges.

I wade in gingerly, gasping as the water rises up my legs.

“Scaredy-cat,” Luke yells.

I stumble forward, plunge, and rise up with a holler. Luke flashes me a thumbs-up sign. I tread in place until my body doesn’t feel the cold, then breast stroke to the other side.

A gnarled bough hangs low above the water.

"Is this safe?" I shout across.

"Only one way to find out."

My feet find purchase near the shore. I leap and lever myself up. The wood is solid but gets springier the further I inch out. I totter, miss my step, and fling myself toward the middle of the pond.

The chill is half of what it was. I break the surface, shout Start counting!, take a breath, and sink.

Luke's right, the pond is deep—shades of murky topaz sombering to black. I've forgotten just how quiet underwater is. The slow count in my head is almost audible.

Fifteen-thousand . . . sixteen-thousand . . .

Thirty seconds pass before the pressure in my lungs begins to burn and spread throughout my limbs. My body starts to sing, but I can't give up yet. I have to let the panic grow, crescendo till it feels as if I'm turning inside out.

Fifty-thousand . . . fifty-one . . .

The count's not merely almost audible. I hear it, all around, as if the still cocoon of water is excited by my thoughts. The sound is different from the voice inside my head—deeper, richer—like the bass guitar that grounds a song and gives the chords their meaning.

Sixty-thousand . . . sixty-one . . .

I lose the count, but somehow it's still there. My lungs feel ready to explode. I clamp down on the urge to breathe. My cock grows stiff; my bladder loosens.

Hold on, Jimmy-Dean. Hold on.

I can't. I scrabble up and break the surface. Luke lets forth a mighty whoop, his chest and shoulders heaving.



He hugs me tight. It doesn't bother him I'm dripping wet.

"That's how it came to us before," he says excitedly. "The first time. Here. Like that. You were under water. . . ."

He gives a mighty squeeze and lets me go.

I shake my head in disbelief. "I could hear you counting."

“And I could feel you.”

“Feel?” I echo.

“Everything.”

He winks. A bolt streaks from my belly to my groin. I have to face away to don my jeans. When I turn around, he’s reaching in the cooler for a beer.

“So—ready for lunch?”

He’s teasing me, pretending that telepathy’s the last thing on his mind. And making sure I know. He wants to take his time—with me, with us, with everything about the day.

“I could eat a horse.”

He digs inside the satchel and begins to pull out sandwiches and plastic tubs of mustard beans and bread-and-butter pickles.



“I don’t get it, Luke.”

Lunch is done, the satchel empty. We’re on our backs. The bed of spongy plants—stonecrop I now know—feels like pebbled rubber.

“Don’t get what?”

“How come you’re not angry?”

“You mean at Colton and the gang?”

“Yeah.”

“Ever try to stay pissed fifteen years?”

“Cook says they locked you up.”

“Well, they kinda had to, didn’t they?”

“I wouldn’t know. What happened?”

He turns on his side and props his head up on his hand.

“You want to know what happened? Fury. I’d have killed him if I could.”

“Colton?”

“Colton, John, everyone. I struck at anyone who got within two metres. They tried sedating me. It didn’t do much good. In the end they strapped me to the bed.”

“But that’s barbaric.”

"You didn't see me. It was bad."

"It's not as if you didn't have good reason."

"You don't know how much damage I'd have done."

He's proud of it, the way boys are.

"How long were you like that?"

"Weeks maybe? Months? They let me rage until the fire burnt out. It happened fast. Hellcat one day, vegetable the next. I didn't want to move. I didn't want to eat. Cook had to feed me from a spoon. They weren't expecting that. They had no idea what they'd broken. How could they? You and me, we're the only ones who do. It felt like my insides had been ripped out. I don't know how it was for you. The official story was you 'understood.'"

"That's what Colton says."

"You must have. There's no way they could have forced you into what you did. Maybe it was easier because they left you your abilities."

"And drugged everything from you."

"Everything except remembering."

He lies down on his back again and shuts his eyes.

"They brought me to the point where I could finally accept things as they are. We couldn't be together, plain and simple."

"You know who helped the most? Cook. She kept telling me the one thing I still had was memory. 'David loves this place,' she used to say, 'but since he won't remember it, you have to do it for him.' Corny, I know—"

"No, I get it. What you said yesterday. 'Does this look like a jail?'"

He rubs my forearm lazily. He's glad I understand.

"They opened up some space in the extension and made sure I wasn't bored. Then Colton started visiting. Very proper—fifty-minute sessions every day."

"He was your warden and your therapist?"

"He wanted me to understand what would have happened if we'd stayed together. We're not perfect, neither one of us. Me especially. Imprinting has a way of fucking with your conscience. It

took a while but I got it finally. Colton said it would go faster if I'd let him read me, but I wouldn't."

"He must have told you he'd read me. What was left to hide?"

"Nothing. I just wanted him to suffer."

"You said you understood."

"And I did. He was right to stop us, but he had another motive. Finnestad was dead, and he wanted me to know the pain of losing someone too. It was wrong, him hurting me for something anyone could see had been an accident. So, since he took you away from me, I took Finnestad from him. Again."

"What do you mean?"

"I let him think the guy'd been raping us."

His eyes slide open and his breathing stops, as if any movement will betray his feelings.

"Let him think?"

"You know how it is with shrinks. Something slips, they pounce on it. Clam up afterwards, they poke and prod, convinced it must be true. I wouldn't let him read me so he'd never know for sure. The gravestone and all that? He never goes there anymore."

The stonecrop's soft enough to lie on, but it prickles. I sit up and scratch my back.

"I'm missing something, Luke. Dr. Colton separates us, straps you to a bed, pumps you full of drugs and holds you prisoner for God knows how long. Then he lets you out but only on an electronic leash—and that's so you can work his property. You're mad enough to get revenge, but tell me that he's right. What gives?"

"You've got it wrong. He doesn't make me work the farm."

It's not an answer and he knows it. I start picking at the stonecrop. My fingers find a pebble. I chuck it in the pond. The pluck is echoed by a rising fish.

I lay back down.

"You're trying too hard," he says. "You want Colton in the black hat, you and me in white."

"How else can I see it after everything I've heard?"

"I guess that's the problem, eh? You've only heard."



His entering my thoughts is like a barometric shift. Cool, clean air descends, forcing out the dog-day haze of solipsistic loneliness. Neurons fire, synapses pop. The landscape of my mind is edged in adamantine light.

There are no words, no analog to speech. He's simply there, sharing my perceptions, adding his. It's like a stereopticon where differing perspectives fuse and magically reveal depth. A country-world-cosmos of the mind unfolds, transcending three dimensions. We breathe its textures, taste its contours, touch its febrile colours. Thoughts are lava snaking through tectonic plates, erupting into consciousness.

Luke? I think, and taste-hear-smell the chroma of our joining shift.

Jimmy-Dean, he answers like a warm tongue probing hidden places.

We're one, we're one, we're one...

I feel the joining start to fade. He pulls back like a lover stealing off at dawn—gently, so as not to taint the promise of return.



Sadness claims the spaces left by his retreat. Fifteen years he's known about this; fifteen years recalling it alone.

He rolls over, drapes his arm across my chest.

I reach up for his hand.

He wriggles close and nuzzles me.

For a while there's just his breathing, and the rocking of his pelvis on my hip.