

Chapter 36

MADAME X

WHEN MR. SHEN appeared mid-afternoon to summon me to Dr. Colton's sanctum, Luke and I were poking through the cattails, flipping rocks and scaring crayfish.

"Meeting's over," he announced. "Playtime, too. It's back inside for you now, David, I'm afraid."

"How'd it go?" Luke asked.

"Rather well, I thought. Robert got consensus."

"I guess that means we're back on taxi duty."

"True enough. Now, if I may steal your brother? Robert's waiting."

"*Get mad if you need to, Jimmy-Dean,*" Luke called after us. "*You never got the chance before.*"

"And will you?" Mr. Shen enquired, curious as ever.

I knew I should, but feeling that you should feel something guarantees it's not what's in your heart. Telepathy with Luke, however brief, changed everything. One glimpse, one taste, was like a puff of opium, a dream-like bending of perception that left craving in its wake—a raw, consuming hunger for return.

"You look different, David," Dr. Colton offered in his study. "Stronger, somehow. Fitter."

"I got some sun."

"That must be it." He took the chair beside me. "With Luke?"

“As ordered.”

His eyebrows rose in little circumflexes.

“You told me to spend time with him,” I said.

“Hardly orders.”

“Stage directions, then.”

“May I assume the time was profitably spent?”

“It was.”

He gazed at me a good, long time. I stared back. The silence went on longer than was comfortable.

I broke first.

“You never told me you and Garrett Finnestad were lovers.”

“My generation didn’t talk about such things.”

“That must have made the practice of psychiatry a challenge.”

“There’s no need to get snarky.”

“And there’s no need for you to play the age card when you’re holding honest suit. That trick only works with people who respect their elders, by the way. Which lesson, sad to say, I seem to have misplaced—probably around the time you dumped me in an alley.”

He disdained the gauntlet with a tepid smile.

“Would it have mattered if I told you?”

Dub-uh, I thought, but bit my tongue.

“In what way?” he pressed, the model of sweet reason.

“It might have cast your actions in a somewhat different light.”

“Different?”

“Less lily white.”

“I see. You’d rather that I’d come across as mad with grief and meting out revenge? You and Luke could not remain together, plain and simple. I wanted you to see that, not go jumping to conclusions.”

“So that’s why you omitted telling me you strapped him to a bed, dosed him full of sedatives, locked him up and brainwashed him?”

“Brainwashed? Surely that’s your word, not Luke’s.”

“Not to mention leaving out what Garrett had been doing.”

“Luke’s tale of sexual abuse?” he scoffed. “Does your brother

still believe I bought that childish lie? I merely played along. He needed it to cap his rage. It let him feel some sort of balance was restored. Did he say it was fact, or merely something that he told me?"

I let him think the guy'd been raping us. From someone who could imprint thought, even with the gift disabled, what was that supposed to mean?

"If you have to ask," I answered carefully, "perhaps you should be asking Luke."

And why bother for a childish lie?

"Of course," he dipped his chin, "I can't expect you to report on Luke."

"You got that right."

A muscle twitched beneath the shiny, parchment skin around his eyes.

"Whatever I omitted from the story, have you not now had the opportunity to learn from Luke? An opportunity I actively encouraged?"

"You told me to spend time with him. I can't speak for your intentions."

"Come, now, David. If I wanted to keep secrets, would I leave the two of you unchaperoned?"

The argument smelled Jesuitical, and Ferko liked to say the only way to beat the Jesuits was never to say yea or nay. "*No matter what, they hang you with your answers in the end, but if you give them nothing then they wind up swinging from the noose of their own sophistry.*"

I kept quiet, watching his expectant look erode. In previous encounters, everything he'd said was planned. This time round, he'd chosen to do improv and was finding it a struggle.

He settled back and crossed his legs.

"Very well, then, David. As you wish."

Back to the script.



“From your perspective, your return here started when CSIS agents asked you to investigate Cassandra Island.”

Byron and MacKenzie hadn't, I corrected silently, asked me to investigate. Come to think of it, Ms. MacKenzie's pressure tactics didn't qualify as asking, period.

“For us, the matter started somewhat earlier.”

“When project BRAZIER found a way around your camouflage.”

“You know of that already?”

“Sorry—have I spoiled your punchline?”

“Presumably from John?”

“Let's say his two and two weren't hard to miss.”

“I see. Did he go into details?”

“I imagine he'd have told you if he had.”

“True enough.” Dr. Colton gave a nod that verged on the patrician. “Now, do you recall that I said we had a mole at BRAZIER?”

“Yes. Some sort of analyst.”

“That's correct. Four years ago, she sent us an unsettling report. One of BRAZIER's subjects had developed the ability to sense the psychic footprint over distances.”

“I thought that wasn't possible.”

“As did we. In our experience, proximity had always been prerequisite. Yet, with certain stimuli, this subject—a woman whom we took to calling Madame X—could 'see' the other psychics at Fort Meade, whether they were down the hall or far across the compound.

“I say 'with certain stimuli.' In fact, the opposite was true. For up to five days at stretch, Madame X was kept in isolation, floating in a tank irradiated with red light. Her eyes were bound, her hearing blocked, and all sensation damped with anaesthetics.

“Thus benumbed, she demonstrated the anomalous ability to pinpoint other psychics. Conveying their positions afterwards presented challenges—you can well imagine she'd be nearly incoherent—but BRAZIER had a system that allowed them to triangulate their whereabouts from answers she provided in response to simple

yes-no prompts.

“Wouldn’t it have made more sense to wait till she was normal?”

“Sensory deprivation and red light only temporarily augment psychism. The resulting mental artefacts are volatile, tending to degrade before they’re transferred into episodic memory.”

Why not say, *She wouldn’t have remembered?*

“According to our data, Madame X’s talent wasn’t without limits. Past a certain radius her homing skills got fuzzy. Further out, they faded altogether.

“In her last communication, our insider indicated BRAZIER was attempting to extend the range of Madame X’s sensitivity. Drugs were being tried. Psychomimetics—tropane alkaloids derived from plants in the *Datura* family.”

Was the scientific jargon bullshit-baffles-brains? If so, he’d have to try a little harder.

“Jimsonweed,” I said.

“You’re familiar with it?”

“I’ve read my Carlos Castenada. It induces states of altered consciousness that make a person feel as if they’ve come unglued in time and space.”

He pursed his lips and nodded. “Our insider vanished three weeks later. The official story was she’d been loaned out to the navy. Something classified, based in Honolulu.”

“What about her name? Was that classified as well?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You keep saying ‘our insider’. Was she a person or a label? You’re a therapist, or used to be. You ought to know better.”

He didn’t like the taste of crow. “Diedre,” he acceded archly. “Her name was Diedre.”

“And other than the simplest of enquiries, what measures have you taken to locate her?”

He frowned. “Where are you going with this?”

“I’d like to know the Caucus sees itself as more than players with their entrances and exits.”

His mouth compressed into a thin, exasperated line.

“She was in her fifties. A transmitter. Lovely woman. Bright, capable, fond of cats and crosswords. She lived alone, by choice. She felt it wasn’t right to form relationships wherein she might abuse her gift. Nor to let the US government abuse it, either.

“Believe me, we did everything we could to find her. But bear in mind, her disappearance told us Madame X had more than just a talent for remote psi-constant viewing. It implied that she could spot the footprint even in a psychic trained to hide it.

“We had no way of knowing whether Diedre had been taken as a guinea pig or as a hostile for interrogation. Either way the Caucus was at risk, and we convened *in toto* to consider options. The discussions carried on for many days.

“The events that brought you back here have their origins in that assembly. The second night, near three o’clock, I woke up overcome with inexplicable despair. I had the feeling I was all alone, not in the house but in the world. The darkness in my room seemed tangible, like murky liquid flowing round the bed.

“I could scarcely budge, not because my muscles wouldn’t work, but because I didn’t have the will, as when sorrow drags us down and any effort to combat it takes more strength than we possess. I was certain somehow—it was more than intuition—that the feeling came from Luke.

“Finally I roused myself and went out in the hall. There I found that others had awoken, just as I had, equally distressed and equally convinced the source was Luke.

“I hurried to his cabin, catching up with John outside, who, with a word, confirmed he’d been affected, too.

“We found Luke comatose beside his bed—rigid, quivering and bathed in sweat. I recognized the symptoms of a rare reaction to the drugs we use to still his gift. Straightway, we got him to his bathtub, covered him in ice, and shot him full of Dantrium to loosen up his muscles.

“The reaction, known as Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome, can put a patient in the hospital for weeks. Severe enough, it’s sometimes fatal. We got lucky. By mid-morning all Luke’s symptoms had

abated. He was fully conscious, though confused and with no recollection of the episode.

“The brains of patients in the throes of NMS exhibit heightened theta-wave activity. Theta waves are strongly linked to waking dreams and memory retrieval. We concluded that, even though it shouldn’t have been possible, Luke had touched the minds of everyone with images and feelings from the depths of his subconscious. It was as if his psychism, at bay for such a long time, had, while he was comatose, come storming back.

“No one knows what causes NMS. Patients afterwards are sometimes re-administered the drug that brought it on without recurrence. We played it safe and switched to an alternative for Luke. Happily, there’ve been no further incidents.

“However, in the nights that followed, several members started having dreams of water, siren songs they woke from painfully aroused, and yearning to be taken by the dream again.

“Less than one week later, after we’d dispersed, three of those who suffered from the dreams had killed themselves. By drowning, as you know.”



Eight-by-tens of sodden corpses... two laid out by swimming pools ... one beside a river, fully clothed... Byron and MacKenzie back-and-forthing about suicides and cults and disappearances...

Their fears had come full circle, but the circle hadn’t closed where they imagined. Not by a shot so long they might as well have sighted down the wrong end of the barrel.

“The other three,” I said. “The ones who disappeared. BRAZIER got them, didn’t they?”

“The CSIS officers who called on you were barking up the wrong tree. They’d have had more luck if they’d gone snuffling round their own back yard.”

“CSIS is involved?”

“BRAZIER is a US army intelligence initiative. CSIS is a

Canadian intelligence agency. As the adage goes, when Washington sneezes, Ottawa gets a cold. Draw whatever inferences you like.”

“You played a risky game, then, letting me report to them.”

“We couldn’t tip our hand until we had you safely here. And John was careful not to let slip anything. At most you gave them only his name, Roy’s and Kirin’s. John is wealthy and his wealth will keep him safe. The Caucus will take care of Roy and Kirin.”

“Aren’t you forgetting someone?”

“No,” he answered guardedly. Then, a moment later: “Who?”

A soft knock at the door pre-empted spelling out the obvious: *me*.

“Will you excuse me for a moment?” Dr. Colton said. “I have goodbyes to make, and this is surely one of them. I’ll try to keep it short.”

I glanced around his study while he murmured in the hall, and found—or rather didn’t find—what I was looking for. Photographs. Photographs of anyone. Especially not of anyone who might have been a farmhand from Wisconsin.

He drew the swags when he returned and sat behind his desk.

“We now know the identity of Madame X,” he said without preamble. His dusty monotone dismissed the build-up he’d been giving her. “If you enjoy the workings of coincidence, you may appreciate my saying that you are, in part, responsible.”

He swivelled to his keyboard. The TV crackled and his movie player’s toolbar slid up at the bottom of the screen. The curving glass stayed blank, but kettledrums came booming from the speakers either side. The throbbing faded to a chorus of ethereal sopranos. A sparkly **J** appeared, surrounded by the symbols of the Zodiac, backed by swirls deepening from lavender to plum.

“*Jena?* The rabid dog of TV psychics?”

Dr. Colton brought the volume down.

“Earlier this spring she did a taping in Toronto. You and Kirin Neemes were in the audience. You’re looking at a copy of that show.”

“You record those awful things?”

He made a noise that might have been a chuckle.

“No, David. As you say, they’re awful. But she has a website. You can download any broadcast for a fee—presumably to show your friends a record of your special Jena moment.”

He clicked fast forward. Images sped by: Jena warming up the crowd... Jena laying out her cards... Jena hectoring a supplicant ... Jena beaming at her white-robed Nexus...

Normal speed resumed on Jena entering her fit—fingers splayed, arms rigid, eyes completely white. Froth dribbled from her mouth. Guttural, inhuman sounds bracketed the same four words: *Hear... strong... too... strong... see... hear... too... strong...*

I put my hand up. “You can stop it now. It isn’t like I don’t remember.”

Jena’s face froze in a rictus flecked with spittle.

“Do you recall what you were feeling while this... travesty was going on?” Dr. Colton asked.

“Other than revolted? Disconnected. Dizzy. My vision started swimming. Sounds developed echoes. Some of it—the sound anyway—was faked. The rest I figured was the product of some sort of group hypnosis. Gimmickry aside, the woman has charisma.”

“I suppose. And given you knew nothing of your talents at the time, the explanation must have made some kind of sense. However, I assure you, it was more. You experienced the mental feedback that the Farm’s no-reading rule prevents—what happens when two empaths synchronously read each other.”

“But I’ve butted minds with Kirin and it didn’t feel like that.”

“Jena’s not the same as other empaths. We’re not even sure she *is* an empath. She may simply be an otherwise ungifted woman who can spot the psychic footprint.”

“So why did Kirin faint when all I did was get disgusted—mostly with myself for getting hooked?”

“Kirin lacked the reflex empaths normally possess to break off contact when another empath’s reading them. Not to underplay the suffering that’s caused her, the deficiency proved fortunate. Kirin kept the memory of her fainting spell, or rather, what came just

before—her active reading of the woman on the stage—and in that memory we came across an oddity we'd never seen before.

“Normally, empathic contact with the psychic footprint leads to confluence—in Gestalt terms, a dissolving of the I-thou boundary. Yet in Kirin’s recollection, we sensed ‘other’, too. Something... differentiating, like a stain on pristine linen or a harsh note in a sweet perfume.

“Our first thought was to try to contact Jena, ironically to start the process of inducting her. But everywhere we turned, we ran into a wall. We couldn’t even get her real name.

“John took on the task of studying her shows for clues to who, or what, she was. Unexpectedly he spotted Glen—our third and so far final member to have disappeared—in the audience at one. The show was from a Psychic Fair in Halifax. On a hunch, John checked the date. It proved to be the weekend Glen had vanished.

“Scrutinizing broadcasts from around the dates our other members had gone missing, John discovered both had been at Jena’s shows as well.”

“Which doesn’t rule out coincidence.”

“No, it doesn’t,” he agreed, “but—”

“—and besides,” I cut him off, “how could Jena sense these people at her shows? According to your Rules, empathy diminishes in crowds.”

“These people’?” Dr. Colton chided. “Your Rules’?”

“Sounds like maybe you should toss them out.”

“Not yet, David. We’re still of the opinion Jena’s an exception.”

“No,” I countered, “Jena’s *three* exceptions. One,” I ticked off on my fingers, “she can sense the footprint at a distance. Two, she can see it through your camouflage. Three, she can detect it in a crowd.”

“As I said, we’re not quite sure what sort of psychism she’s gifted with.”

“So what happens when she spots a psychic in the audience? Her Nexus drops their robes, pulls out their guns and snatches BRAZIER’s next white rat?”

A tiny smile waged war around the corners of his mouth.

“Not her Nexus, David. Have a look at this.”

He backed up to a shot of hopefuls queueing up to get their chance with Jena. I recalled the roadie vetting them: red hair, buzz cut, fussy chinstrap beard. His purple Jena sweatshirt hung from shoulders made to model Arrow shirts. A cookie-cutter, show-biz fag.

“The marshal has a headset, much as you’d expect, wired to a battery-transmitter on his belt.” He zoomed so I could see the plastic casing where his sweatshirt had been fetchingly rucked up. “And yet—,” fast forward, “—there’s a bulge above his belt line at the back as well. You can see it... here.”

He froze the frame, reduced the player’s size, and slid it to a corner of the screen. A series of still images popped up beside it: back and side views of the same assistant, clearly pulled from different shows, all exhibiting the same transmitter-on-the-hip, bulge-at-the-back phenomenon. The outline of a pistol grip was menacingly evident in some.

“You’ll agree,” said Dr. Colton, “Jena’s not so famous she requires armed protection from her fans.”

“Is her entire floor crew toting guns?”

“Not as far as we can tell. There’s just one other. We assume they’re operatives, in place to keep an eye on BRAZIER’s major asset. Besides the guns, there’s nothing odd about them. Which can’t be said of other plants we’ve spotted in the audience.”

The screen cleared and another video began, full-size.

“Here’s the show that Glen was at.”

He advanced the player’s slider to about two-thirds, stopping on a wide-shot of the audience and drawing marching-ant marquees around three faces.

“Glen,” he said, pointing with his cursor to the marquee near the top.

I recognized him from his snapshot in the CSIS file of missing psychics. He’d been standing on a beach with his arm around a gawky teen. Byron said his specialty had been autistic kids.

“Now, watch what happens to these other two—,” a balding man at centre screen, an over-madeup blonde down near the bottom, “—when Jena starts her holy roller act.”

The marquees disappeared and the audience unfroze. A second or two later, the camera switched to Jena. Dr. Colton killed the sound. Jena twitched, her eyes rolled back, froth leaked from her mouth. Of a body, white robes rose on either side of her. Dr. Colton teased the slider forward by a fraction. The balding man had moved to a position left of Glen.

Skipping once again through Jena’s throes, he halted on an intercut of the a-twitter audience. The tough-as-nails blonde had taken up position on Glen’s right.

He reduced the player’s size again, scooted it beside the pretty marshal with the gun, and called up two more stills.

“Joyce,” he said, circling his cursor on another face I’d seen before: the woman who sold hand-drawn Tarot decks. Baldie and the blonde were right beside her.

“Recorded at the TravelLodge in Scarborough. And this—,” the cursor skittered to the second still, “—is Melody, at the Sheraton in Calgary.”

Baldie’d grown a beard, but there he was, along with his companion, right beside a pretty twenty-something with an upturned nose and innocent blue eyes. The bride in Ms. Mackenzie’s file.

“We still don’t know if Jena’s fits are real—something that comes on her in the presence of a psychic—or if they’re just for show. The frothing at the mouth is almost certainly burlesque.

“Real or not, her Nexus gathers round and seems to offer their support. We suspect that what they’re doing is triangulating the position of the psychic footprint, most likely with a variation of the yes-no system used to get co-ordinates from Jena when she’s coming out of sensory deprivation. It’s a reversal of the ploy that mentalists and their assistants in the audience are known to use.

“But she’s famous for those fits,” I interrupted. “It’s what keeps her ratings up. If every time she has one she’s responding to the footprint, that’s an awful lot of psychics she’s discovered.”

“Which indicates they’re mostly faked. The cynical, I’m sure, would call it showmanship.”

He dragged the freeze-frame of the man named Glen to full size on the screen again.

“We’ve discovered,” he went on, “from cable companies and TV stations, that Jena’s show is shot in ten-week increments. In between, four times a year, she’s only seen in re-runs.

“We believe that during those hiatuses, she’s subjected to the inhumane conditions that allow her to remotely sense the psychic footprint. The ambit of her sensitivity has been increased—that much is clear—but evidently not its specificity. When she’s done, schedules are drawn up for appearances in cities that encompass the approximate co-ordinates she’s given them.

“The reasoning behind her shows would seem to be the same as ours in setting up Cassandra Island: to attract those curious about, or claiming to possess, a psychic gift. Almost all of Jena’s shows are taped at Psychic Fairs. You yourself wound up at one—directly as a consequence of your profession.”

More like, directly as a consequence of Marion.

“Should an empath or transmitter she remotely sensed show up, she responds by entering a trance wherein she pinpoints their location. Guided by responses given to her ‘Nexus’—,” the quotation marks were nearly visible, “—the bald man and the blonde home in, and either plant a tracer or begin to tail the target for abduction at a later time.”

“Perhaps that’s where the two with guns come in.”

“Perhaps,” he echoed thoughtfully.

I’d meant to be facetious but he hadn’t heard. It wasn’t that I doubted him. No one would attempt a fable so outlandish. A psychic dog-and-pony show that toured in search of mental freaks as subjects for experiments? The unbelievability put disbelief to flight.

Yet something niggled.

“If everything is as you say, why aren’t Kirin and I currently enjoying BRAZIER’s hospitality?”

“Very good, David. I was wondering if you’d ask.”

The cursor touched a backward arrow and the show where Kirin fainted filled the screen.

“Listen carefully. It’s Jena who provides the answer.”

He navigated to the middle of her fit.

“... *see... hear... too... strong...*”

He paused, backed up, and played the same bit over.

“... *see... hear... too... strong...*”

Suddenly it clicked.

Not “hear”: *here*.

Not “too”: *two*.

See. Here. Two. Strong.

“She got confused,” I said. “There were two of us. She couldn’t get a fix.”

“Not just two of you, but two whose gifts are strong. A weakness we’ll exploit in what the Caucus has been meeting to agree upon.”

He blipped the TV off and pulled the curtains back. Reflected in the curving screen, his study looked a hundred metres long. I watched him come around his desk, an elongated figure from a painting by El Greco.

“In addition to your safety, John informs me you’ve already pieced together that we brought you here because we need your help. Yours and Luke’s together.”

“Presumably to deal with the Jena problem.”

“I should think that much is obvious.”

“You’ve figured out a way for us to stop her, to prevent her using this ability she has.”

An odd look crossed his face, as if he’d sucked a lemon.

“Not precisely, David. We want you to assassinate her.”



“Assassinate?”

I sat there, staring. What else could I do?

He stared back.

“*Psychically* assassinate?”

The same unblinking gaze.

“We can do that?”

He perched his chin on steepled fingers with the kind of look that begs the question: Did I miss something?

“Can we?”

Could we? Enter Jena’s mind and cause her death? Get Luke to fry her brains? No—that couldn’t be. The Caucus needed Luke *and* me. And Dr. Colton wouldn’t know if we could do that anyway. By his own admission we were *sui generis*. No one knew what happened when we joined up telepathically.

Unless...

Was there more to psychism than Mr. Shen had told me?

“How?”

“Not the way you’re thinking, I assure you.”

“Are you reading me?” I had only his and Mr. Shen’s assurances he couldn’t.

“No need. Your questions are enough. I gather you’ve seen *Scanners?*”

“Cronenberg? Telepaths, exploding heads?”

“Even minus the exploding heads, psychism does not, and never will, permit committing murder with the mind. There simply is no mechanism for it. Neither can a person be imprinted: *Kill yourself*. Without a backing context, such an imprint would be brushed aside.”

“Then why do you need Luke and me?”

“Jena’s guarded and we can’t risk anyone with knowledge of the Caucus being caught. We need her dealt with indirectly.”

Was the man incapable of giving a straight answer? I aped his steepled fingers pose. Time passed. The big clock ticked. If the silence went on any longer, soon, somewhere, a dog would bark.

“The plan the Caucus has just ratified, the one that brought you here and reunited you and Luke, attempts to minimize the—,” his eyes flicked sideways while he sought the word, “—moral impact of requiring you to be involved. Someone else will pull the trigger, so to speak.”

“And Luke and I...?”

“Will point the gun.”