

Chapter 38

HANGING ON A SOMEHOW

IHAD UNEXPECTED company for breakfast. Kirin, in a pair of flip-flops and a bathrobe. She looked anything but bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

“You’re up early,” I said, pulling out a chair. “What’s the occasion?”

“Roy’s driving Dom to Pearson International. The alarm went off at five-thirty. I couldn’t get back to sleep.”

“Roy’s taken over Luke’s job, then?”

“Huh?”

“Clearing people off the Farm. Must be a whole lot simpler when the chauffeur doesn’t need a complement of two.”

She yawned. “Sorry, not following you.”

“Forget it. Not important. You need coffee.”

Cook came over with a bowl of raspberries and yoghurt.

“Not before she gets some food she doesn’t.”

“Thanks, Cook,” Kirin mumbled sleepily.

“You, David?”

“What kind of porridge are you fixing?”

“Red River.”

“Some of that, with lots of cream.”

If only everybody were as easy to please as Cook.

“I guess Carlin’s still in bed?”

Kirin rubbed her eyes. “Yeah. She won’t be up for at least another hour.”

“Maybe you can introduce us then.”

“But you met already,” Cook said from the stove. “The other day at supper, remember?”

“She was too busy bending Roy’s ear for us to really get acquainted.”

“She’s a talker all right, that one.”

“It does seem kind of funny, our paths not crossing yet,” I said to Kirin. “You and Roy are just across the lane.”

She diddled with her yoghurt. “That’s because you’re always off with Luke, or Dr. Colton’s got you any time she goes outside to play.”

“I’ve got a *lot* of catching up to do.”

She signed. “I know.”

“Luke and I are seeing Dr. Colton later on. Maybe I could drop in afterwards? Finally say hi to Carlin?”

“I dunno. It might be better if you didn’t. She gets attached to people easily.”

“That’s a problem?”

“I don’t want her getting hurt. She’s already losing all her friends from school. You know, ’cause of this disappearing act we have to do. I wouldn’t want her growing fond of you.”

She started making spirals in the yoghurt.

“Are we talking Carlin here, or you?” I asked.

She smiled half-heartedly. “You’re good.”

“Want to talk about it when we get to coffee?”

“Nah. I’ll snap out of it. Just not used to being up this early.”

“Let’s do the coffee thing anyway, okay?”

She didn’t stop at cultured milk and fruit for breakfast. Swayed by Cook’s aubade of breakfast smells, she succumbed to sausages and waffles. The Caucus was arranging a new life for her. She didn’t have to diet like a model anymore.

Afterwards, we went out front and caught the last of day break on the field across the road.

"It's all too weird," Kirin said, tightening her robe against the morning chill.

"Around here, that's like saying water's wet."

"True that. How's it going with you and Luke?"

"In what sense?"

"You know—how are you getting along?"

"We won't be running out of stuff to talk about, that's for sure."

"What about that other thing? You know—Jena."

"They told you what they want us to do?"

"Yeah. You're supposed to assassinate her."

"*Help* assassinate her."

"I can't even begin to imagine what difference that makes, let alone what it means."

"Makes two of us."

"Are you going to do it?"

"I don't even know what 'it' is yet. Did they tell you at the meetings?"

"Mr. Shen explained."

"And?"

"I dunno. It... kinda went over my head. I didn't really pay attention."

She leaned on the veranda railing, staring forward.

"Did Dr. Colton ask you not to talk about it?"

She turned with a despairing look. "David, please. Don't push it. Not right now. I'm feeling shaky enough as it is. I don't want to run the risk of pissing off the people who'll be helping me."

"Fair enough. The doctor's doing a fine job on his own, titrating daily doses of required information."

"You think he's hiding things? Things he really doesn't want you knowing? As in ever?"

"I can't see how he'd manage that. Not without renegeing on the restoration of my proper memories. Right now, I'm hearing bits from him, and bits from Luke. They jive, and yet they don't. Neither of them's lying I don't think, but how am I supposed to know? Like you said, it's all too weird."

“As you said,” a disembodied voice corrected. “I thought I’d taught you better than that.”

Marion, eavesdropping from the living room.

“Don’t skulk,” I called in through the window. “The conversation isn’t private. Not anymore, anyway.”

She appeared a moment later dressed in fraying mules and a flannel nightshirt.

“How long have you been listening in?”

“Since Kirin asked if you were going to do it.”

“You don’t have to make is sound so vulgar. And what is it with everybody getting up early this morning?”

“I’m always up around this time. You just don’t see me.”

“Small wonder, dressed like that.”

“Wouldn’t you know? My black lace teddy’s got a broken strap.” She addressed herself to Kirin. “You’re not going to criticize my sleepwear, too, are you?”

Kirin shrugged. “Looks fine to me.”

Marion stuck out her tongue at me and plopped down in a chair.

“Dr. Colton spoke to me last night, after John and Luke and I got home. He said you’d made some calls. I gather that that means you’ve come to a decision?”

“Only with respect to keeping CSIS off my back.”

“Oh? And how will you do that?”

“By pulling an Amelia Earhart, like Kirin here.”

“I suppose you really haven’t got much choice, have you?”

I raised my eyes to heaven. “Thank god someone’s finally acknowledged it. The thing is, Marion, you’re in the psychic biz and CSIS knows we’re friends. You can bet your bootie they’ll come calling soon enough.”

“If by CSIS you’re referring to that dwarf refrigerator who likes lemon with his tea, have no fear. Now I know his game, he’ll be an easy chump to gull. Besides, I won’t know where you’ve gone. I gather that’s your plan. Cut and run.”

“It is.”

“Then don’t worry about me. The worst part will be trekking to

the Liquor Store to buy my hooch again. I'd gotten used to drinking yours."

"I always knew it was the booze, not my body, you came over for."

"David! I'm pocked and a-shawled. How *could* you say a thing like that?"

"*Sheesh*," Kirin muttered, following us with Wimbledon eyes. "Don't you guys ever quit?"

"Beats hugging," both of us came out with at exactly the same time.

Kirin shook her head despairingly.



It had been three days since it rained, but the air in Dr. Colton's study still felt close. Perhaps it was the extra bodies. Luke and Mr. Shen were seated either side of me, with Dr. Colton next to Mr. Shen. His oxblood chair had been conveyed around the desk to join the armchair proletariat.

The swags were drawn, the TV on. Top left on the screen was a grainy freeze-frame from the footage stolen back in fifty-six. Beside it, Jena with her eyes rolled back. Underneath, the pistol-toting marshal, and next to him a woman in a Jena sweatshirt who looked far too stocky to be other than his fellow bearer of concealed arms.

"Just to keep things clear," Dr. Colton started, "let me acknowledge, David, that you have as yet neither given your consent nor refused participation in the matter we're discussing. You have sufficient information on the threat the Caucus faces, and about your past, to come to a decision as we go along.

"One thing, though. Please—don't feel you have to comment on us asking you to do the very thing for which we separated you and Luke. The irony is more than evident."

I wasn't going to let him off that easily. "The very thing. Are you referring to telepathy or wanton killing?"

Mr. Shen held up a mediating hand.

“What we’re asking, David, is that Luke’s and your abilities be put to service neutralizing Jena.”

Black-ops-speak from Mr. Shen? He didn’t normally resort to verbal drapery.

“Murder her, you mean.”

“Not directly, no,” he answered.

“*Someone else will pull the trigger?*” I nodded at the TV. The purple-shirts weren’t plastered in the lower half by accident. “One of them? We can really make a person do that?”

“Luke is confident you can.”

“But you don’t know.”

“That’s a question for your brother,” Dr. Colton interjected, “as he’s the only one who does.”

Did I detect a peevish note?

You sure did, Jimmy-Dean. He’s still pissed off ’cause I won’t talk about it.

Luke’s voiceless words *were* words, not images and point-of-view like last night in the library.

His left eye sketched a wink.

We can speak like this up close. Used to do it all the time. Drove Colton nuts suspecting.

He said something about us growing taciturn.

We could have been a bit more subtle.

“... its share of unknowns,” Mr. Shen was saying, “and its share of challenges. The biggest challenge facing us is that our only chance is during one of Jena’s shows.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Sadly, no. Effective psychism requires proximity.”

“But she’s BRAZIER’s psychic bird dog. We might as well show up in T-shirts saying ‘Yoo-hoo! Over Here!’”

Good one, Jimmy-Dean.

Is he serious?

Dead.

Dr. Colton flashed an irritated look. “If you’ll recall, you yourself observed that you and Kirin managed to emerge from Jena’s

show unscathed.”

“But we weren’t trying to kill her,” I shot back. “Have you stopped to think that what you want from Luke and me might send her radar into overdrive instead of jamming it?”

Mr. Shen played diplomat again. “A good point, David, and yes, we’ve considered it. You won’t be there alone. If Jena got cross-wired by the presence of two psychics, we’re trusting even more will add to her confusion.”

“And what if all it does is make her blow a gasket?”

“Then you and Luke may prove superfluous.” His black eyes twinkled in a way that only he could get away with.

Dr. Colton took the reins again.

“In three weeks’ time, Jena will be finishing her present round of shows at a Psychic Fair in Ottawa. Hull, to be precise, at the Hilton Lac-Leamy beside the big Casino. That’s the date we’re targeting.”

“*Three weeks?*”

“Jena’s schedules are drawn up at the BRAZIER labs. We have no way of knowing in advance where she’ll be playing, and we have to strike in Canada. When you and Luke were separated, we arranged for your official records to go missing. Re-establishing his bona fides and acquiring a passport will take time the Caucus feels we can’t afford.”

His answer came out smoothly, like a politician’s promise. But then, his every utterance emerged as polished as an Antwerp merchant’s wares. Three weeks to get ready for . . . for *what?* Was there a name for what they wanted us to do?

“You’ll work with John until that time,” he carried on. “For fifteen years, your empathy has largely been reflexive. John will re-awaken the control you used to know. As for Luke, like any skill, psychism gets rusty if it isn’t exercised.

Could have fooled me.

He doesn’t count telepathy as psychism. That’s why he tacks ‘anomalous’ in front.

Jealous?

Maybe.

“The manipulation of a subject through empathy-enhanced imprinting isn’t something we can help you with however. Past events—,” he sought his words, a favoured affectation, “—deprived us of the chance to study it.”

Likes to get his digs in, doesn't he?

You get used to it.

“What you’re saying is we have to train ourselves.”

“In essence, yes.”

“So who’s to be our punching bag? You or Mr. Shen?”

He cocked his head. “I’m sorry?”

“We’ll need somebody to knock around for practice.”

A beat passed while he schooled himself. “Roy Calhoun. He and Kirin will be staying on. Miss Harper, too.”

“Marion? What for?”

“In her words, just to keep an eye on you.”

“Like she’s been doing for the past two years?”

“Luke—,” Mr. Shen broke in, sensing a storm, “—may I assume your neuroleptics have worn off? You boys appear to be communicating telepathically.”

“That obvious, huh?” Luke grinned.

“I sensed a change between you yesterday. Out at the pond. Have your transmissive skills returned as well?”

The grin remained. Mr. Shen, regarding him expectantly, unhooked his spectacles and absentmindedly drew out a handkerchief.

And abruptly started chortling.

“Excellent. Excellent.”

“I take it that’s a yes?” said Dr. Colton testily.

“It seems your worries about Luke are premature, Robert.” Mr. Shen replaced his glasses. “Your brother,” he addressed me, “just imprinted ‘something on the TV is about to change.’” He turned to Luke. “I assume it was the glasses-cleaning reflex you were after?”

“I wasn’t sure if I could pull off getting you to say, ‘These aren’t the ‘droids you’re looking for.’ Not yet, anyway.”

It's Obi-Wan who does that, not Luke.

Yeah, but Luke learns how.

“David—did you sense anything? An urge to turn toward the screen? A feeling something was about to change?”

“Should I have?”

“Imprints sometimes have a haloing effect. It’s been one of our concerns, Luke imprinting in the audience at Jena’s show. His imprints were notoriously shotgun back when you were young.”

“Only when I wanted,” Luke stuck in.

“Is that so? The truth at last. Just as I suspected.” Mr. Shen returned to me. “Our bigger challenge, though, is you. Empathy’s effectiveness diminishes in crowds. You’ll have noticed it—say, when trying to read a stranger at a party?”

“It depends. At smallish gatherings, I’m fine. Too big and it’s like supermarket blindness where I can’t make out the Corn Flakes for the Captain Crunch.”

He nodded.

“Concentrating harder—filtering impressions—doesn’t solve the problem. Empathy’s contextual. The foreground needs a background for the picture to emerge. In a group the crowd is part of context, so you have to know the subject in advance. Which means you’ll have to have had prior contact with your mark at Jena’s show.”

“Interesting choice of words.”

“What, mark? It’s a bit less awkward than ‘the subject you’ll be operating on’.”

“How much contact are we talking about?”

“Somewhat more than merely shaking hands.”

Dr. Colton’s sand-dry voice cut in.

“Jena’s crew arrives in Ottawa two days before the Fair. It starts on Saturday, which means you’ll have from Thursday till her final show on Sunday to get one of those two—,” he gestured at the screen, “—alone.”

“And how am I to do that?”

“John mentioned challenges, and this is one of them. Jena lands in town a day behind her crew, who typically unwind from setting

up by visiting the bar at their hotel the night before. The two with guns prefer to sit together, at a table by themselves. If they follow that routine, you'll have an opening."

"An opening to...?"

"Somehow introduce yourself, chum up to one and spend some time in private."

"*Somehow?* After all your planning, after everything you did to get me here, your scheme hangs on a *somehow?*"

"You'll have to improvise, yes," he said distastefully, as if it cost him to admit that anything lay outside of his control.

Don't sweat it, Jimmy-Dean. You always were the social one. How hard can it be?

Luke was right—more so than he knew. By some twisted act of Fate, the Caucus was responsible for my developing the very skills they needed of me now. Somewhat more than merely shaking hands, eh? Between the stocky female and the trim, clothes-horse guy, the choice was obvious. Jena's logo, stitched in gold, glittered on his purple sweatshirt.

I wondered if the torso underneath would prove as pretty as the shoulders it was hanging from.



Luke puffs long, inhales deep. The pot smells sweet, fusing with the applewood he's laid across the fire.

"A hustler, eh?" His voice is pinched from holding in the smoke.

"Everybody wants to tell me who I was. No one's bothered asking who I've been."

His lungs begin to spasm. "Gotta cough to get off," he splutters, handing me the joint.

I take the smoke in through my nose like a Parisian hooker. It's not as rough that way.

Luke waits until the coughing fit has passed, then puts his knuckles to his eyes and scrubs.

"The look on Colton's face," he says.

“Prune-faced.”

“Nah. That describes him normally.”

“Prune-faced with piles?”

“Somehow,” Luke rasps out in prissy imitation, “you have to get one of those two—alone.”

The pause before alone is wicked, longer than Dracula’s I never drink . . . wine. He starts to giggle.

“Somehow,” he repeats. “Somehow.”

Soon he’s doubled over, wracked with laughter. Trying to say anything just makes it worse.

A log shifts on the fire. Firework confetti geysers to the sky. A yellow moon is stealing half the stars. The Dipper’s missing a few join-the-dots.

“What was it like,” he asks. “Hustling?”

The laughter’s stopped. I’ve been staring up, my head back on the porch seat we dragged over.

“A drug. A magnet. Seems unreal now.”

Luke’s eyes go far away, as if he’s trying to imagine.

The joint is almost done. I pass it back and feel for my beer.

“What do you do when you need sex?” I ask him.

“John makes arrangements. Steel-town boys.”

“He procures for you and gets your dope?”

He takes two hits and flicks the roach toward the flames.

“John wears a lot of hats. He’s a pragmatic sort of guy.”

“You like him.”

“So did you, back when.”

He brought a boom box when he laid the fire in his makeshift barbeque. It’s plugged in at the cabin with a fat extension cord. There’s only one CD. I don’t recognize the singer and it’s on repeat:

Where’s the ocean?

Where’s the moments I once knew inside my heart?

Where’s the ocean, for us, and us?

“That reaction to your drugs—”

“—neuroleptic malignant syndrome—”

“—right.” *It has so many syllables it doesn’t sound like English. “When it happened, your imprint reached the house and everybody got affected.”*

“They were asleep.”

“You think that’s why?”

“I wouldn’t know. I was unconscious.”

“People killed themselves because of it. I guess there isn’t any way, with this Jena thing...?”

“Doesn’t work like that.”

There’s something final in the way he shakes his head.

“Too bad.”

“I dunno. If it did, you wouldn’t be here now.”

“Why drowning, Luke?”

An image of the woodlot pond, the one he can’t go swimming in. Hollow feelings like there’s no place better in the world—and no one in the world to share it with.

In return, I send the pond behind the foster home, not as he remembers it, but from my car, unable to step out. Telepathy’s like that—a second language we slip into for no reason.

Where’s the ocean?

Where’s the ocean?

The ocean’s here.

The ocean’s here.

The song fades out. Another starts. It sounds African this time. The fire pulses with the beat.

Time stops a while.

I take a sip of beer. It tastes like gold with prickles.

“What did Garrett look like?”

“Big guy. Six-two. Like a plank, all bone and muscle.”

“Dr. Colton doesn’t keep a photo in his study.”

“I’ve got one.”

He’s gone before I notice. And back when I’ve forgotten.

I tilt the Polaroid toward the fire. The colour’s off—stale the way old pictures get. The man himself is blond. His eyes might have

been pale blue. In firelight they look light grey, the sockets crowned with sun-bleached brows. It's the kind of face that never knew a childhood.

"I can see why maybe you and he had words from time to time."

"Yeah?"

He says it with an upward turn; whatever I'm imagining is only half the story.

I hand the picture back.

"How come you've still got this?"

"I use it for a bookmark."

He's brought something else along, an open box that rattles when he sits and sets it down.

"Me and Dr. Colton, we got along, didn't we?" I ask him.

"Mm-hm."

A while later: "Why?"

"Because of how much he can't stand me now."

He picks something from his teeth with a corner of the Polaroid.

"Yeah, well, it isn't like he hasn't got his reasons."

He reaches in the box and tosses handfuls of what look like white grubs on the fire.

"Ever seen this? I was doing some re-wiring in the barn."

The grubs are centimetre lengths of plastic-covered wire. As the casing melts and starts to burn, it heats the copper strands inside. The flames downshift from yellow-orange to turquoise, teal, sapphire.

"Can we really do this thing the Caucus wants?"

He shuts his eyes.

"Oh, yes."

The music's lonely now—desolate and puzzled.

You want to walk and talk like the angels talk
This I hear . . .

Luke hums along.

"What was it like, doing it to Garrett?"

Luke's eyelids twitch. The fire sprinkles glitter on the lashes.

"Sweet, Jimmy-Dean. Real sweet."