

Chapter 43

TO AYERE THINNESSE BEAT

THE BEEHCRAFT BANKED and set its snub white nose for Ottawa. The pilot lifted off his headset.

“Be there before you know it, Mr. Ase. We’ve got the tailwind and it’s clear skies all the way. Just settle back and enjoy the flight.”

He touched his cap and went back to his instruments.

Clear skies was an understatement. The patchwork farmland down below was so distinct the furrows looked like quilting. It put Google Earth to shame.

I’d have chosen a commercial flight if not for Ms. MacKenzie. I’d had a week to think things through, and come to the conclusion she’d been acting on her own. Alerting the police to my involvement in the death of Eliot Pierce wouldn’t wash with her superiors. CSIS didn’t bed with law enforcement—not to browbeat small potatoes, anyway. True, I’d been withholding information, but Subira’s hoped-for cult of *psychiques provocateurs* had to be, at best, of marginal concern.

Which didn’t mean she wasn’t squandering their resources on airline manifests and credit card transactions.

The plane’s two other seats were empty. Luke was driving up to Ottawa with Mr. Shen. They were taking the Trans-Canada and going slow. Luke had never travelled further north than Hamilton. I’d meet up with them on Saturday.

Cloistered in his study, Dr. Colton had pulled strings and done whatever else he had to to accommodate his deadline. A resolutely cheerful Cook brought meals to Luke's cabin. Only once did she break down. I hugged her till she squeezed my hand and sniffled she'd be fine. Dr. C had no intention of dismissing her.

Marion was firm—she wasn't going anywhere but back to her apartment. When MacKenzie landed on her doorstep with the thumbscrews, all I'd be was David Ase, her famously rich neighbour with a past he never talked about. As for the Caucus, I could hear the conversation now.

MacKenzie: “Have you ever heard of something called The Caucus?”

Marion: “I know *a* caucus is a school of perch, or a gathering of politicians up to something fishy, but *the* Caucus? You'll have to be more specific.”

Moving trucks pulled at night. The rattle of their coming and the rumble of their leaving floated through Luke's bedroom window, breaking sleep far closer to delirium than slumber.

You'll understand when Roy gets here.

Understand.

It wasn't the right word, any more than “empathy-enhanced imprinting through telepathy” was adequate for what we'd practised all week long on Roy. Too rational. Too *A* connects to *B* and leads to *C*.

Luke and I would cease all telepathic contact. Roy would drop his camouflage so I could read him. Luke would re-initiate telepathy, and the two of us would share Roy-in-my-head. From the insights thus conferred, Luke would fashion imprints that, transmitted, would have had Roy eating flies or turning cartwheels in the nude. Then Luke and I would extricate ourselves and start all over.

A connects to B and leads to C.

Reality was different. Had anyone been watching—and Dr. Colton's curtains did stir periodically—we'd have looked like three guys hanging out: drinking beer, tossing Frisbee, studying the Jaguar's guts. Furthermore, Roy didn't drop his psychic guard,

merely to retreat behind smooth grey surface afterwards. In between, he talked about himself, openly and easily, explaining how, before the Caucus, his transmissive skills had been like Kirin's empathy: uncontrolled and rearing up sporadically. His childhood had been a hell of never understanding why at times the world was utterly in synch with everything he felt, while at others turning a blind eye and even colder shoulder. With patient help from Mr. Shen, he'd stumbled from a youth of sociopathy and narcissism—a transmitter's all-to-easy legacy—into true regard for other people's feelings and the mastery of his gift.

He knew my reading him made speech superfluous; the talk was motivated by a need to reassure me Kirin was in good—and loving—hands. It seemed unfair our budding friendship wouldn't last the week.

But there are things you shouldn't know about a man, even one you've learned to trust. You shouldn't know what beauty calls to him in darkness. You shouldn't see where hungers lurk, and hidden envies fester. You shouldn't sense when anger strikes how white the rage, or linger near the acid bath of unforgotten shames. You shouldn't watch how lovingly he tends his crippled dreams, or probe the secret hollows where they finally creep off to die.

Most of all, you shouldn't see the gossamer, the wires *to ayere thinnesse beat*, nor feel the yielding putties used to hold the Self together.

We're a subset, not the sum, of our experience—a working model built from only portions of the kit. The unbroken tale we tell ourselves from birth comes from a book whose paragraphs are scanned selectively. We foreground *this* and background *that*, fix *this* in place and set *that* free, link *this* to *that*, and *that* again to something else.

The items from the coffers of existence that affirm the Self we wake up to each morning and drift off with every night aren't chosen consciously, nor even in the rigours of the superego or the moiling vapours of the id. Deep within us is a canny void whose emptiness itself is energy, a vibrant vacuum giving rise to self-

awareness, and from which all action springs. Pre-cognitive volition Mr. Shen had called it, the origin of impulse, the Thinker of our Thoughts. We cannot access it ourselves, nor change its functioning. To do so would be death—death to *who we absolutely know we are* no matter what revisions life throws at us.

Like all transmitters, Luke could imprint *in/on/to* pre-cognitive volition. But only Luke, through me, could do so with material authentic and unique to Roy Calhoun.

So what was really going on all week was this:

If Luke were in my mind, I'd let him know when I was ready to begin. He'd withdraw, and Roy would fill me utterly. No longer just a puzzle made of silvered glass, Roy-inside-my-head was tangible—robust, exposed—vigorous with colour, texture, warmth.

I became two people: *David/Roy*.

Eager to participate, Luke would steal back in.

David/Roy/Luke.

A clone of Roy-inside-my-head would form—Luke's perception of him.

I'd be four: *David/Roy/Luke(Roy')*.

Roy could spot the look that came into our eyes, but otherwise had no idea what was going on.

Luke's hunger to explore the who of Roy was palpable, a quivering, restless greed for new ways to refashion Roy from Roy to Roy-not-Roy.

Another person joined the daisy chain: *Roy''*. Had he been imprinted with this version of himself, Roy would not have sensed the changes in the deepest part of him. It *was* Roy, all of it, but pieced together differently.

David/Roy/Luke(Roy'+Roy'').

I had trouble pulling back each time. It wasn't just the dizziness of differing perceptions. When I sensed what Luke was doing, when I *saw* his power over Roy, the sheer delinquent wrongness of it got me hard. Sharing my reaction, Luke would tease—almost, but not quite, imprinting Roy and making him, all unawares, to do anything Luke wanted.

Recalling it at night, my heart would race like Cowboy's fifteen years ago when, hard and wanting me, he'd crawled in bed and forced himself to lie completely still.



"We'll be landing soon, Mr. Ase. Better buckle up."

I must have dozed off. The landscape down below was shaggy forest carpet tattered by small lakes. I reached up for the shoulder strap. The pilot made to don his headset.

"Just checking here," he said, eyes front. "You want me back on Sunday afternoon, right?"

"That's correct."

"And you don't know where you're going?"

Anywhere Luke chose. If he didn't care, we'd pin a map up on the wall and throw some darts.

"I'll be making up my mind in Ottawa."

"Off on an adventure, huh?"

"Something like that."

"Well, as long as it's in Canada, anywhere within two-thousand clicks of Ottawa is fine. Basically, up to Moosonee, over to the east coast, or west as far as White River. Any further and we'll have to land for fuel."

"Two-thousand kilometres ought to be enough."

"Cash again?"

"Just like today."

"I don't mind hanging round the airfield all afternoon, but you know, if you want to save yourself some grief, you should call me on my cell an hour or so before you want to leave. That'll give me time to file a flight plan."

"Will do."

He clamped the headset over his cap and spoke into the mike.

"Don't get me wrong or anything, Mr. Ase," he said between confirmatory chatter, "but I gotta tell you, I've never seen anyone with eyes like yours before."



Ottawa. Civil-servant city. What else is there to say?

My taxi dropped me off outside the bar I'd chosen off the Web, D'Arcy McGee's, on Elgin at the corner of the Sparks Street Mall. I'd never been to Ottawa and had some time to kill, so I sauntered up to Wellington with all the other tourists for a gander at the country's seat of Parliament.

I gawked a while but didn't feel moved to patriotic fervour. The buildings' jaundiced stonework looked more suited to a jail than a home of representative democracy. Rows of lancet windows gave them a hermetic, inward-looking air. The only thing that truly caught the eye was the flag atop the Peace Tower. The little patch of red and white against a too-blue sky was like the vision of a country fluttering beyond the reach of its electorate.

Back at Elgin, I parked myself against a planter filled with ornamental grasses and geraniums. The street was meant to be a showcase, but all it seemed to me was wide and hot. Straight ahead, a sea of concrete led up to the War Memorial. An amorphous blob of bronze dripped off the granite arch. Life-size figures huddled underneath. From where I was, they could have been a press gang or a conga line.

Byron showed up early, strolling down from Wellington. He gave no sign of having noticed me and headed straightway for the bar. I sat a while longer, studying the office buildings lining Elgin. They conveyed my notions of the civil service perfectly: mean-spirited, dehumanizing, self-important.

After Byron, no one else went in the bar, and none of the pedestrians outside seemed to be lurking. I straightened up, brushed off my jeans and crossed the street to join him.

D'Arcy McGee's was dark oak, brass, and ersatz Tiffany. Its main attraction seemed to be the privacy it gave. Divided into little rooms, it made the ideal place for bureaucrats to plot and backstab after work.

Byron had a half-sized pitcher on the high, round table he'd

selected near the window. I ordered from the bar, “whatever he’s having.”

“Sleeman’s Honey Brown?”

“Sounds good.”

I went to join him. He raised his glass but didn’t speak until my beer arrived. Watching while I poured, he pulled a cellphone from his pocket. Head tilted quizzically, he thumbed a button.

“Joshua Byron?” a tinny but unmistakable voice began, “*I have a message to relay from David Ase. He said to call you at the number on this card. I hope I haven’t gone all butter fingers and misdi-alled, or somebody’s really going to wonder what this is all about.*

“Anyway, Joshua Byron—is that your real name? *It sounds like a porn star I remember from the eighties. Died of AIDS, I think. But then, who didn’t? Oops. Sorry. Getting carried away. Voice mail does that to me, especially when I’m calling from a pay phone and there’s all that pressure not to waste my dime. Dime? Ha! That’s a laugh.*

“Now, where was I? *Oh, yes. David says to meet him Thursday at two p.m. at some place called D’Arcy McGee’s. Apparently, you know where that is. I haven’t got a clue. In any case, sounds like one of those macho pubs where every stool-bound athlete fancies himself an expert on micro-brews and single malts.*

“Meantime, *you’re not to say a word to your superior, and you’re to do whatever it takes to keep her from mustering the heavy artillery against poor David. You’re to come alone. That’s implied, I think, isn’t it? Sounds like what I’ve been doing for years. Hah-ha.*

“Anyway, *David says he’ll give you what you want then. I’m not going near that one with a ten-foot pole. The thing is, the alone bit seems terribly important, so you’d better respect it. David says he’ll know if you’re lying.*”

Byron flipped the cellphone shut. “‘He’ll know if you’re lying?’ A bit over the top, don’t you think?”

I’d run a lot a scenarios in my head. Most started *You’re in a shitload of trouble, mister.* None included humour.

“Would I be right in guessing that was the lush you’ve got taking

care of your apartment? Raymond Kiefer, I believe. Master decorator. Accredited in faux finishing, trompe l'œil and Victorian stencilling. Has a flat on Jarvis Street.”

“Stay away from Raymond,” I said darkly.

Byron didn't seem to notice. “He's looking after Marion Harper's place, too, isn't he? Funny how your psychic next-door neighbour hasn't been around all summer.”

“Marion goes home this time of year. Don't read too much into it.”

“Hmm—,” he put a finger to his chin and glanced upwards, “—let me see. Marion Harper. Hails from Warkworth. Rumour has it her family's pissed because she never does, in fact, come home for the harvest anymore. They say her piccalilly used to be the best around.”

“Where the hell's Warkworth?”

“Near Peterborough. Cow country. I hear they make a cheddar there that's pretty good.”

This was all wrong. Byron knew I'd stumbled onto something big. The BRAZIER files I'd sent were more than proof. MacKenzie wanted what I knew so badly she was threatening to have me charged with murder. How come he wasn't champing at the bit for more?

No hint of menace... no dissimulation on his part... instructions via Raymond followed to the letter... some sort of game...

What was going on? He was holding something back, but I didn't know him as I'd gotten to know Roy, and couldn't, in a bar with other people around, get past his schooled—and very good—defences.

He mistook my expression.

“Don't sweat it, David. You're just not very good at covering your tracks.”

“Good enough, apparently, to keep you in the dark about my whereabouts these past weeks.”

“True.” He nodded thoughtfully and sipped his beer. “So, how do you want to play this?”

“Subira made a threat. It worked, obviously, or I wouldn’t be here. Am I right in thinking the initiative was hers entirely? Please don’t lie. I really will know if you do.”

“Let’s just say I tried to talk her out of it. What happened there, anyway, with the dead guy?”

“I’m an orphan, Josh,” I answered with that in-your-face, deal-with-it tone that sounds like truth and generally gets people to back off. “I grew up in a foster home and wound up on the streets. I sold my ass to survive. That guy was a trick who courted Death to get his rocks off. She finally consented to a kiss.”

“Poetic. What you’re saying is, the guy was into kink and you were the poor bastard doing him when things went west. It’s still manslaughter.”

“I’m not interested in how the Crown interprets it. I’m trying to make sure it never gets that far. Has Subira alerted the police?”

“No.”

No, *Not to the best of my knowledge*. No, *I don’t believe so*. Just, *No*. I hadn’t been expecting him to be so unequivocal.

“Then I need your guarantee she never will. With assurances she won’t decide to put the screws on my friends, either.”

“Sounds reasonable. As long as your friends don’t start smuggling anthrax into the county.

“But you know, David—and don’t take this the wrong way—you’re not exactly bargaining from strength. I can give you all the guarantees you like, but what’s to say I’ll honour them?”

“Simple, Josh. I’ll know. I really am psychic.”

His eyes narrowed sceptically. Or doubtfully—with Byron, it was hard to tell. But he wasn’t howling with laughter.

I dove in.

“Back in 1940, the man I know as Dr. Colton, was stationed overseas. He had a vision that predicted Hitler’s aerial attack on Coventry . . . ”



I'd had one final, non-negotiable demand for Dr. Colton—that when he cleared the Farm, at least a part of Chancery be left behind. Byron and MacKenzie would be onto me like flies on shit if not only did they find the place abandoned, but nothing there corroborated what I told them. I was in Ottawa. A Psychic Fair was set to start on Friday night. It would be the first place they'd go looking for me.

I was gambling on two things. One was that Dr. Colton wouldn't risk his shot at Jena by having Luke and me escorted from the Fair by irate CSIS officers. The other was that Byron was a decent guy. His emails made him out to be, but who can tell from email?

Dr. Colton's perfectly-turned phrases turned out to be an asset in the telling of the Caucus' tale. Saying much while spilling little was a Sunday in the park. I used first names only. The Society for Psychological Research became *a club of paranormal researchers*. CISAP was *a sixties-style commune*. The suicides resulted from *a member's bad reaction to his medication*. Jena stayed *Madame X*.

Keeping Luke out of it was easy. I'd had lots of practice.

Byron didn't interrupt. He didn't even touch his beer. Everything I said was being memorized uncritically. Questions would come later.

And they did.

He polished off his pitcher, made a wry face at the glass, and stared across the table.

"So you're one of these primary psychics?"

"An empath, yes."

"And your friend, Kirin, too?"

I nodded.

"The three psychics who killed themselves—all victims of some sort of psychic blow-out?"

"You could put it that way."

"Why drowning?"

"The imprint came from deep in the transmitter's subconscious. Dr. Colton described it as despairing and erotic. Water has a lot of meanings. Read a book on dreams."

“And the three who disappeared—BRAZIER?”

“They’re scary people, Josh. You’ve seen the files.”

“That I have.” He didn’t sound convinced.

“The Caucus doesn’t have some sort of ideology they’re trying to preserve, Josh. They’re not a cult. They have no agenda to promote. Their politics aren’t in conflict with the status quo. They’re just trying to protect themselves by staying out of sight.”

“So where do you fit in? You mentioned memory loss in one of your communiqués. You said you’d lived among these people, that they could help you to remember. But Caucus member, David Ase, appears to have played hooky from your story.”

“Last time I checked, it wasn’t me you were investigating.”

A muscle flickered on his jaw. “Get real, David. You’re not that naïve.”

“No. You’re right. I’m not. For example, you’ll have noticed I withheld the Farm’s location, too.”

He pushed back from the table and scribbled in the air to a waitress at the bar. “Whatever,” he said carelessly.

“*Whatever?*”

The waitress brought his credit card and tab. He signed it with a flourish. From her *Thanks*, he’d tipped her well.

“Those files you sent? They got Subira re-assigned. Our neighbours to the south don’t like us playing in their sandbox. The eagle got its feathers ruffled when she started poking into BRAZIER. INSCOM has a boner for the project. Subira’s re-assignment, as they say, came from the highest levels. Spy-talk for ‘you pissed off the Americans.’”

“Re-assigned?”

“Taken off cult-watch. The file on Cassandra Island has been closed. For good. Subira won’t be coming after you. She knows which side her bread is buttered on, career-wise.”

“What about you?”

“Same-old same-old, one notch higher now Subira’s in another section.”

“And me?”

He crossed his arms and gazed up at the ceiling.

“As a source, David Ase proved unreliable. His first reports appeared to back up some of our suspicions, but subsequent intelligence proved hazy and confused. Nothing could be verified.”

He looked back at me.

“It is my opinion David was delusional.”

Then he stood.

And winked.

And left.