

A painting of a boy's face and legs. The boy has short, spiky grey hair and large, bright green eyes. He is wearing blue denim jeans. The background is a textured, abstract mix of colors including white, brown, and purple. The overall style is expressive and somewhat somber.

A NOVEL BY PETER SCHAFFTER

**The
Binbrook
Caucus**

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PART
ONE

Chapter 1

PROLOGUE – EYES AND APPLE PIE

IF EMERALDS WEPT, their tears would be the colour of my eyes. The clear, chrome green is so intense the pupils drink it in and seem to vanish under certain lights.

Marion, who lived and worked next door, was jealous as all hell.

“I need the props,” she used to sigh. “Cards and tea leaves, palms and birth charts. Otherwise my clients wouldn’t give me the time of day. But you? You’re lucky. Insta-otherworldly.”

A communicating door linked our apartments, never locked but seldom used. Marion preferred the corridor outside with its lemongrass and curry smells whenever she popped over. We lived above a row of shops in Little Italy, but Asian pressure on the edges of the neighbourhood had supplanted memories of Tuscany with memories of Singapore. The café and the bridal shop below us—Gato Nero and Lucia’s, respectively—still claimed the street for Rome, but the culinary fugue upstairs foretold a second fall.

“It smells so good,” she’d always comment, lingering in the hall.

“Doesn’t it?” I’d answer, motioning her in.

She’d smile, happy of an ally, unaware of what the ritual revealed: Marion Harper wished that she were someone else. Advancing toward sixty, her hair had gone that driftwood shade of Anglo-Saxon drab you see on Tilley-ed women haunting birding stores and Third-World shops. Ageing so *undifferently* preoccupied a small,

disgruntled corner of her mind. In adolescence she read Nin and Woolf, wrote poetry to trees, and defined herself by all the things she wasn't. In latter days she clung to borrowed otherness—the smell of Asian cooking, which she loved as an idea more than with her nose—to reinforce a flagging sense of nonconformity.

Did she know I knew? Hard to say. She scarcely knew herself. She was good at what she did—very good—but her Tarot cards and birth charts couldn't tell her what I got from just the colour of her hair and four small words.

It smells so good...



Whenever clients called—their first time, anyway—their gaze inevitably landed on a clipping from the *Sun*, framed in ebony and hanging in the space between two deep-silled parlour windows. *Rags to Riches* screamed the big, bold type. Underneath, a little smaller, *Jobless Man Hits Jackpot*. Alliteration must have been the headline fiat of the day.

At some point in those visits, the telephone would ring. The computer in my study was set up to make the call. I'd excuse myself just long enough for clients to get curious and read that David Ase, age twenty-eight, had won the undivided spoils of the largest Super 7 ever, a record still unbroken. The photo with the article was staged: a functionary handing me a cheque. From the rictus on his face, one could easily suppose a Gollum in his head, muttering and hissing, "*Mine, all mine, my preciousss.*"

The story plumbed its subject with the insight of a comic book. Where were you when you found out? What were you doing? How did you feel?

And, of course, the one that always has them hanging on their seats: *What will you do now?*

Four years old, the story wasn't accurate. Hustler's what I told them when they asked about my job. A male prostitute. An escort, if you like, though that's just fig-leaf talk for what amounts to

lounging at the curb while men drive by and check you out for bulges in the places they're supposed to be.

Perhaps the paper thought it wasn't work.

Could have fooled me.

There's more to hustling than a pretty face and shaking what your momma gave you. The real trick, what brings the money in, is getting in a client's head and giving him exactly what he wants. If he doesn't have to spell it out, if you just seem to *know*, a tip is sure to grease the bills already in your wallet.

But it's never easy turning into someone else's fantasy. You have to split yourself in two, one half empty like a vinyl waterbag, the other sensitive to clues. When they start pouring in you let them fill your empty half. Your skin remains your own, but its shape is contoured from the inside by a stranger's need. Do it right, and your client thinks he's lucked into the greatest fuck and soul-mate of his life.

With more money than he'd ever spend and all his life ahead of him, you'd think a man who'd sold his ass since seventeen would look for something else to do. Something unrelated. Something easier. Hustling is no Sunday in the park. There are dead nights. There are rainy nights. There are nights so stinking cold your thighs cramp up with palsy.

But there are good nights, too, when johns descend like Manna. Something special happens then. You get inside the heads of six or seven different men and discover that you like it there. The power to become what someone else desires draws you back and back and back. The control you wield is absolute, utilized or not. Servant first, you end up being master.

Not an easy thing to put behind, even for a Super 7 jackpot.

With the winnings breeding in accounts around the world, I still got into people's heads. I still established, from the tells they dropped like pennies through a pocket tear, who they were, where they were headed, what they craved. They forked out big for having someone *understand*.

Just like my former clients.

The difference was I didn't have to strip and sport a ready-made erection.



“What do you suppose the chances are?” Marion asked me two days after I'd moved in. Despite an August heat wave she'd come knocking with an apple pie, still warm and redolent of cloves and curiosity. “Two of us, winding up as neighbours, neither of us knowing?”

“The chances of not knowing? Pretty good, I'd say.”

“No, I meant about the other part. Winding up as neighbours. We hardly practise what you'd call a common occupation.”

“I wouldn't be so sure. Not around here, anyway.”

I'd counted thirteen signs within a five-block radius, all with variations of the Eye-in-Palm motif. Most advertised Madame—not Signora—Somebody-or-other ready to reveal all: *Money, Health, Career, Love*. Hand-painted, none looked new. At least a few of the Madames had long since journeyed to the other side.

My own sign, in the window of a room I never used, was yellow neon. *David Ase, it said, Psychic Counsellor*. I'd plugged it in on Tuesday. Marion had waited—or not—till Thursday before dropping by.

“We're in the same profession,” she'd announced, holding up her fresh-baked ploy for snooping. “May I come in?”

Arching crust, generous filling, deft crimping... farm raised... two brothers... takes the room she's had forever when she goes home in August and the corn is coming on...

Normally I guarded against dislocations in my days, but I'd known this one was coming. I took her welcome-wagon gift.

“Thank you. And yes, please, come in. You're Marion.”

She paused inside the door and looked around.

“No need to play me for a rube,” she said distractedly. “My name's on the mailbox downstairs. And I didn't come over for—whatever it is you do. If you can, shut it off.” She broke off her in-

spection. "I'd like us to be friends."

"Pie, then? Or something to drink?"

"Brandy and tonic if you have it. Orange juice otherwise. Save the pie for yourself. I made two."

I headed for the kitchen while she toured the living room. When I came back her eye had landed on the black-framed clipping.

"Is this authentic?"

"Yes."

She took the sweating tumbler with her Hennessey and Schweppes, squeegeeing the bottom with her thumb.

"How much did you win?"

"Enough to lobotomize the past. Or portions thereof."

"Ooo, a man of mystery. Do tell. An outlaw past or just conventionally juicy?"

"Closer to the former, I'm afraid."

She sipped her drink and raised her brows.

And waited.

Finally the brows came down.

"And you don't intend to talk about it. That's all right. I won't pry. At least you weren't a grifter."

Shrewd. If I'd been running psychic scams, it wasn't very likely I'd have carried on. Not after lucking out so big.

Marion turned around and cast about for seating. The problem wasn't lack of chairs. The room's high ceilings, plaster walls and whitewashed mouldings had, to my eyes, wanted to be overfilled with worn-but-decent furniture, like those claustrophobic daguerreotypes of British spiritualists' salons. Raymond Kiefer—upstairs neighbour at a former digs and master of excess—had tracked me down a madman's omnium-gatherum of fauteuils, bergères, hassocks and causeuses in stolid woods and bourgeois fabrics.

"I'm glad you're not bilking widows," she said, settling on a brocade wing-back. "I was worried. We're none of us beyond chicanery but outright swindling I can't tolerate. You have the looks for it, you know. They're real, aren't they? Your eyes? At first I thought they must be contacts."

I nodded.

“Extraordinary. Do you mind?”

She gestured me to squat in front of her, then cupped her hands around my face. At her touch I prickled with the urge to pull away, but a grey, familiar quiet opened up and killed the reflex. I’d seen too many eyes before, staring at—not into—mine, been subject to too many forward hands.

“Extraordinary,” she repeated. “A tremendous asset. Like your lottery. Anyone might think you’re blessed.”

“Or psychic,” I said, getting up.

“Are you?”

I went over to a burgundy *méridienne*, a damask dromedary of a couch that Raymond had unearthed before he drank away the rest of his commission.

“What’s the matter? Can’t you tell?”

“I said before I’d like us to be friends,” she answered sweetly. “You don’t bullshit me, I don’t bullshit you.”

“Then your answer is, I’m not.”

“Good. Now that that’s established, could you rustle up a napkin?”

She held her drink an inch or two above a side table.

Brothers Tom and Jared... Jared hates Jerry—a good thing... calls her father Daddy... mother is Mama, accent on the second ma...

I handed her a coaster from an inlaid walnut box.

“How old are you?” she asked, studying the coaster’s tea-rose *découpage*.

“Thirty-one.”

“Too young for all this bric-a-brac. Unless you’re into séances. That isn’t what you do, is it?”

“No, although at times, it’s true, I feel like David Sludge, not David Ase.”

She set the coaster and the tumbler down and sank back in her chair.

“If I recall my Browning, Mr. Sludge, the Medium, was a misan-

thropic charlatan, as base and filthy as his name. Is that how you see yourself?”

“People pay me for a gift I don’t possess. It’s not that big a leap. But I was trying for a joke.”

“I’m aware. I didn’t want you thinking it had gone over my head.” She rolled her eyes. “*Browning.*”

Silence followed, oddly easy in the August heat. No anachronistic thrumming of a fifteen-thousand BTU disturbed my Antiques Roadshow parlour. A westering sun, glinting off the storefronts across College Street, had flushed the room with salmon pink.

“What’s your angle?” Marion asked.

“I help people.”

The corners of her mouth tightened.

A teacher before fortune telling... maths and sciences and English... keeps in touch with gifted students... one especially who’s recently resurfaced...

“It’s what we all do,” she retorted, “those of us who aren’t just in it for the money. What I mean is, what’s your hook? Cards? Astrology? Channelling?”

“Untangling knotted auras? Dangling crystals over contumacious genitals? No, nothing like that. I listen to my clients, establish their concerns and give advice.”

She harrumphed. “Nice soundbite. Hardly an answer.”

“It’s all the answer there is. I don’t use Tarot. Tea leaves are something I strain out when I’m playing mother. What I know about crystals comes from sleepless nights with Shirley Maclaine. I listen, observe, ask questions, and tell people what they need or want to hear. That’s all.”

“Why all this then?” She waved her hand around the room, acknowledging the décor—overdone or not—as perfect for the practice of divinatory arts. “Why not psychiatry?”

“Can’t be bothered with the schooling.”

Another answer that didn’t sit well. Her eyes went heavenward again.

I shrugged.

“People get defensive around shrinks. They resent it when a therapist appears to know them better than they do themselves. It makes them feel unspecial somehow—statistical, not unique. A psychic’s insights have the opposite effect, reinforcing singularity instead of undermining it.”

“Bravo,” Marion clapped. “A lovely speech. Beautifully rehearsed, like everything you’ve said. Tell me—do you really have so much to hide?”

Hard on her clients, mostly male... investment brokers... a judge... an Anglican minister with his eye on the bishopric... some philandering married forty-somethings wondering if they could have their cake—or tart—and eat it, too...

“You said you wouldn’t pry.”

“I did, didn’t I? Damn. Hoist on my own petard.”

She took a deep pull from her glass and held it forward by the rim.

“Top-me-up?” I asked.

“You *are* psychic.”

As before, she swiped the bottom of the refill I brought back. “You know,” she said, aligning it dead centre of the coaster, “I think we’re getting off on the wrong foot. I’ve a good feeling about you, but you’re too quick by half. Normally that scares me. Sociopaths like the mask of cleverness, and they’re not unknown in this business. Still, I can’t shake the feeling we’re playing at a game whose rules you haven’t bothered to explain.”

“You’re actually not far off on that,” I replied, “and I really should apologize. The little time I spend with others in this business always veers into unspoken competition. Anything you can divine, I can divine better. I’m not sure what it is—are all psychics monomaniacs who hate to be one-upped? At any rate, it turns me off. I can smell cold reading at a hundred paces and immediately clam up.”

“Well, it’s a reflex wasted on me. We’re not in competition. I don’t believe in clairvoyance, clairaudiance, automatic writing, auras or past lives. You needn’t worry I’m a loonie or a monomaniac. And in my case you’re confusing cold reading with garden variety nose-

parkerishness. Which surprises me. You don't usually make mistakes like that, do you?"

No mistake. A statement ending with a question is square one of reading cold, even when it's uttered—as Marion had done—with vibrant overtones of friendship and complicity.

"Tell me how you operate," I sidestepped. "I'm intrigued. You're the first psychic I've met whose belief system runs as shallow as my own."

She exhaled softly through her nose. She'd get through my defences some other day.

"There's nothing magical in what I do. I deal in patterns, not the paranormal. A spread of cards. A birth chart. The lines on someone's hands. Things anyone can read if they bother to learn how. True, it does require some skill to make the leap between the Seven of Cups, the Hanged Man and a client's faulty liver, but it's ordinary intellect, not a capital-G Gift. Mostly it's just common sense, which has an almost perfect record when it comes to seeing what the future holds. Ask any parent."

"You don't believe in psychic ability at all, then?"

"That coincidence can be dissected to determine where the moment's headed I don't doubt. But that's it. My clients can believe whatever other nonsense strikes their fancy. Truth is I encourage it. That's the shady side of fortune telling. If I could I'd dispense with all the falderal and tell them, minus props, what's visible to anyone. But I'd need eyes like yours to do that, wouldn't I?"

Out of sight, the sun was dropping quickly. The rosy mote-filled light descended into blue and shadow.

Marion reached for her drink with the languorous exertion of someone getting tipsy.

"Here I came over to find out about you and somehow you've got me talking about myself. You must be very good. Well, I'm glad. We're going to get along just fine."

She hoisted her glass.

"To new friends. And to coincidence. I mean, what do you suppose the chances are?"

Chapter 2

A SEAGULL'S FLIGHT

WHEN I WAS seventeen I woke up in a doorway in an alley—knees bent, head back, spine against the wall. To my left, a cargo door: steel, graffitied over, with a padlock rusting on the hasp. Across the way, old brick buildings slick with rain. Overhead, spent storm clouds shuffled in a pre-dawn sky. The whine and rumble of a garbage truck cut through the humid stillness.

Where was I?

I had no memory of walking—stumbling?—here. No memory of choosing this one alcove from another. No memory of sinking down and waiting until sleep had taken me past caring about memories at all. No memory, in fact, to tell me even if I knew what city I was in.

Down the cracking asphalt, an oil barrel barfed out pizza slices, orange rinds and sardine tins beside a loading dock. A small black cat with eyes like grass was nosing round the bounty. A decaying scent hung in the air—deeper, more primaeval, than the smell of trash. I closed my eyes. *Water*. Not far off, fish and algae rotted round the pilings of a quai.

Eyes still shut, I raised my head and let it fall toward my knees. No dizziness accompanied the movement. My arms were at my sides. I lifted them and laid them on my thighs. Sleep or something heavier still weighed them down. I forced my eyelids open on a view of mounding crotch. I needed to relieve myself but couldn't till the

swelling went away.

How long had I been here?

I rubbed my jeans. The clammy air had made them soft. They didn't feel thick and stiff the way they would had they been drenched the night before. The rains had come and gone, then, while I slept. How long ago? And how long had they lasted?

A gull screeched overhead. I looked up, wondering, if I followed, would it lead me to a waterfront where I could get my bearings? When I reached the shore, would I, turning round, see a skyline that I knew?

My erection finally subsided. I stood up cautiously to pee. My sinews groaned, but not beyond what sleeping out of doors accounted for. I unzipped and let go in the middle of the alley. The small black cat with eyes like grass stopped sniffing at the trash and watched. I *tsk*-ed and saw a flick of ears, a quivering of tail.

While my urine bubbled and bled off, I studied my surroundings. The buildings were four storeys each with mammoth windows sectioned into panes. If the garbage by the loading dock were any indication, there might be lofts inside.

As my stream began to dwindle I looked down, realizing then that even if I didn't know precisely where I was, at least some things were as they should be. My shoes were canvas hightops, black and frayed. My jeans were tight and faded, rolled up at the cuff. My T-shirt—crew-neck, white—was snugged in at the waist. *James Dean*, I thought. I'd been teased with that before.

By whom?

The doorway that I'd slept in had a stoop, as good a place as any to return to and take stock. My feline watcher must have found me seated more inviting than when standing, for she—even at a distance I could see her teats and swollen belly—inched toward me, pausing at invisibles as if I weren't the object of her interest.

When she got close enough I *tsk*-ed again and wondered whether she was wild. If behind the windows here were lofts, she might belong to someone. She hemmed and hawed, then sauntered over and began to wind herself around my legs.

I dangled my left hand to brush her fur as if by accident. When she gave no sign of cat offence I provisionally scratched her tail. She meowed but pirouetted and came back for more.

The dance of introduction over, I stroked her absentmindedly and thought my situation through.

Wherever this place, I'd gotten here somehow, either under my own steam or brought and dumped. The posture I'd awoken in suggested choice, not force, but I felt my head for lumps in case. None, as I'd expected. A blow that wiped out memory would surely leave a pounder in its wake.

I broke off petting my companion and untucked my T-shirt, raising it to look for scrapes and bruises. My chest, with its familiar darkish nipples and down of sable hair, revealed nothing. Neither did my abdomen. I squeezed my legs for tender spots but none cried out.

My pregnant furry friend butted an impatient head against my shin. I ran a hand from tail to neck, raising pelt, then scritch'd behind her ears.

"Do you have a name?" I asked and thought: *Do I?*

An answer rose: *David Ase*. And with it, like a bit of flotsam, *seventeen years old*.

I tugged a wallet from the left back pocket of my jeans—a kin-aesthetic reflex out of step with full amnesia. Cracking it, I thumbed, then counted, twenty hundred dollar bills. That put paid to being mugged unless the thieves were after my ID. No official cards, no photographs, no addresses or phone numbers were lurking in the pebbled leather slots.

What leads a seventeen-year-old to wind up in an alley with no memory of getting there? An alcoholic blackout? A party gone from wild to stupor? I cupped my hands around my mouth. No fruity stink of stale spirits. Drugs? I checked my arms for tracks. I peered beneath the waistband of my jeans. I removed my shoes and socks and pried my toes apart. The skin between was clean. I tried recalling if I'd ever taken drugs this way. Nothing surfaced. Which didn't mean I hadn't sniffed or swallowed them, but what could pos-

sibly have left a memory gap so utter?

I closed my eyes and tried to summon something from the night before. I knew—from reading, surely—that past a certain stage of chemical intoxication, the recording functions of the brain shut down. Experience and learning stay intact and can, if fuzzily, be called upon—a tavern drunk still walks and talks and pounds the table for another beer—but nothing new gets registered. If something similar had happened, what came before should still, by rights, be in my head.

The universe beyond my closed eyes stretched out to forever. I waited for an image to appear—a gauzy face, a fragment of location, some remembrance of volition to be *here* or *there*, do *this* or *that*. None came. None at all. It seemed that where last night should be was only hollowness, a block of mental space a shade of silver like a mirror with no world to reflect.

Can anyone recall when dreams begin? Track down the moment of their onset? Dreams arrive burlesques intact. We do not so much enter them as are inserted incognoscibly. When awareness dawns we do not ask: Where was I before? Were we to, *in bed asleep* most likely wouldn't come to mind. A little history precedes the first act of a dream, and the history is given whole. We never recognize the instant of beginning. We simply *are*, as in real life we simply are, and go from there. Few recall the moment of their birth, and birth inside a dream's the same; we join the drama and react, unable to remember when or where we were before it started.

Waking in the alley, I'd come to in a dream whose nominal beginning was *I don't know where I am or how I got here* but whose prologue, given whole, was everything that made me me. Since how I got here wasn't going to solve itself behind shut eyes, perhaps eyes-open and the *where* of here might make a better starting point.

In the time that I'd been sitting on the stoop with my ever more demanding mom-to-be, the city past the confines of the alleyway had come to life. The clouds had lightened to a pearly grey, hinting at a valiant sun. The garbage truck, still audible, had gathered an accompaniment of tires on wet pavement. A breeze began to stir.

I stood and raised my arms—thumbs joined, fingers pointing back—then bent forward, dropped my arms, and let their weight unlock the muscles of my back until my palms were resting on the pavement. The beginning of the Sun Salute. I'd obviously done it many times before. I held the bent-in-half position, then reversed the spinal roll. Mentally, I went through all the stages of the exercise, confirming what was evident: somewhere, somebody had taught me this. Mom-to-be watched on, then twisted round and licked her ass, mocking yogic efforts to emulate her kind.

Cats are cats. If they suffer conscience or the acid of regret, they've kept their secret hidden. The promiscuity that brought this one to me would lead her to forget our tryst the moment I was gone. So it was me, and only me, who needed a goodbye.

I stroked her back.

“So long, little one—I hope someone's looking after you.”

Then I rose and started walking with the half-formed plan of following a seagull's flight.



Paris has the Eiffel Tower, Rome the Coliseum, New York the Empire State—man-made marvels so distinctive, so imposing, they don't so much identify a city as shout it at the world.

I'd barely gone a dozen metres before changes in my trigonometry revealed an engineering fanfare visible for sixty kilometres around: Toronto's CN Tower. At least that solved the question of what city I was in. Inside my head, the mirror space where memory should be began to glow with lines and shapes, the geometric phosphor of the known.

The Tower to my right, I must be heading south. Thus, the street the alleyway decanted off ran east and west. I knew that if I crossed it and went on, I wouldn't reach the water—Lake Ontario, whose greenish, rotting odours had been blowing inland—without first surmounting railroad tracks, the Gardiner Expressway, and other barriers that cleave the city from its shoreline.

The east-west street was called The Esplanade. I recognized the name and had a sense of where it was but not much else. My knowledge of the city here seemed hazy, as if this were a neighbourhood I'd passed by many times but never bothered to explore. Uncertain what direction I should go, I chose the obvious—west, toward the soaring concrete needle whose tip was broken off by clouds.

North of me, I knew, was Front, and at the nexus of two streets called York and University was Union Station. Why the Esplanade seemed unfamiliar while a street just one block north felt known made little sense, but having thought of Union Station, I decided to head over.

A few blocks on I came to Market Street. Turning right because it seemed to speak to me, I climbed a not-completely-unfamiliar slope past cozy-looking restaurants to Front.

I wasn't sure what time it was. Despite the nighttime rains the air was summery. A hidden sun had risen not too long before. Traffic on the street was mostly blue and yellow taxis. It had to be five-thirty or approaching six. Train stations never close, or, put another way, are always open, making Union at this hour a wise decision. My stomach growled at the thought of breakfast.

Heading west on Front, I crossed first Church, then Scott, then Yonge, then Bay, suffering the oddly dislocated feeling that my knowledge of the city came from someone else. At Yonge I passed a centre for the arts, and while I couldn't think of any show I'd seen there, I was pretty sure I could have found the cloakrooms in the dark.

It was the same with Union Station. I had no memory of waiting for a train or standing in a boarding queue, yet I made my way directly to the lower-level food court without pausing first to wonder where it was.

A mmmuffins counter girl was stocking shelves with Danishes. I bought two lemon and two cherry and a coffee, paying with a hundred dollar bill. The girl, whose name tag said Charlene, flashed a funny smile, annoyed at handing out her float but physically at-

tracted.

“You have awesome eyes,” she said.

I took my change and thanked her.

Breakfast bag in hand, I settled on a long black bench upstairs. Backed by steel mesh, it made the brick I’d woken up against a cushion by comparison. I scarfed the Danishes—when had I eaten last?—then cracked the sip tab of my coffee. The milky liquid on a stomach full of comfort food began to make me drowsy.

I knew who I was. I knew what city I was in. Physically, I felt okay, not suffering the backwash of a bender. My clothing was familiar. A surreptitious nose-check of my pits revealed my shirt, at least, was relatively fresh. That meant I wasn’t homeless.

Or did it? Who carries twenty hundred-dollar bills around? The money must have come from somewhere. Something told me that it wasn’t from a bank.

Homeless... home...

Where *was* that? Had I run away? I clearly knew the city, but like someplace I’d gone visiting, not someplace where I lived. I roused myself and found a bank of telephones. Less with disappointment than surprise I discovered the directory had not one single Ase. Was my name all that uncommon?

I went back to the bench—the only seating to be had—and polished off my coffee, watching ticket holders backpack, hoist and roll what of their lives they couldn’t do without toward the loading gates. Their hidden histories, secret points of origin and unknown destinations complemented perfectly my current situation.

Union Station’s lofty hall dwarfed everyone inside, dampening all sound while simultaneously echoing the sussurus of dialogue. From time to time loudspeakers chimed a five-note chord, followed by a voice intoning town and city names. *At-ten-tion... VIA... train ... from... Wind-sor... Cha-tham... Glen-coe... . . .*

Around six-thirty by the station clock the five-note-chime announced a train arriving from Niagara Falls: *Saint... Ca-tha-rines ... Grims-by... Al-der-shot*

Grimsby. That name rang a bell. Not the sombre peal of an an-

swer, more like the hard-to-pinpoint tinkle of an inkling. Grimsby—close to Hamilton, the steel city harboured round the west end of the lake.

In my mind a line of energy appeared, neither visible nor felt yet somehow both, joining me to Hamilton. The city's name had colour, or something very like it—the red of the familiar, the sienna of nostalgia.

I headed for the phones again and called directory assistance. “Hamilton” and “Ase” I replied to curt, recorded prompts. Shortly afterwards an operator came on line and asked me for the spelling. A clicking of computer keys, then: “I'm sorry, sir. We have no listings for that name.”

The drowsiness of breakfast hadn't gone away, so I visited the washrooms and splashed water on my neck. In the mirror afterwards I saw a mop of thick black hair and luminescent emerald eyes. Small wonder the reaction of the mmmuffins girl.

Think, I told myself. *Think back. If not to last night or to yesterday, then to the day before, or the one preceding that.* I had to have been someplace. I had to have seen someone.

Some years later I read Augustine's *Confessions*, chuckling at his famous quip: *The mind commands the body, which forthwith obeys; the mind commands the mind and meets resistance.* Ordering myself to think, I might as well have told myself to levitate.

I finger-combed my hair, dried my neck with paper towels and tried to look like someone with a place to go.

The city past the station doors had come to life. Front Street was a wall of cars. Commuters choked the sidewalks, scurrying toward their days, certain of the homes they'd be returning to at night. Some bumped into me and turned around to stare.

No one comes from nowhere. I had to have a family. Surely I had friends. I must have gone to school.

But where?

In the hollow, not-quite-silver void of memory I sensed a shift like tiles in a fifteen puzzle sliding into place.

An image formed, or rather an impression—more idea than ei-

detic—of a school: long and low in front, an added two-floor wing behind, farmers fields around the playground, post-and-wire fences.

With the image came a name: Mount Hope Public School.

Green terrazzo hallway... grade one at the far end... grade two at the other... grade three in the middle... across from that, grade four... grade five opposite grade one...

No other classrooms glowed with *I know this* except the library whose second-storey windows gave on fields of corn.

Mount Hope—a farming village south of Hamilton. I'd gone to school there. That explained the resonance of Hamilton before.

Against a tide of bodies, I went back inside and took a final stab at 4-1-1. I didn't really have to hear the operator's *Sorry* to know "Ase" and "Mt. Hope" were not a match. If I couldn't call up memories of school past grade five, I must have moved away.

How old was a student in grade five? Around eleven? That seemed right.

Seventeen subtract eleven.

Six years of my life were gone.

Chapter 3

GLASS WALLS

I'D JUST TURNED off the shower when I heard the knock. Drying hastily, I pulled on jeans and answered.

Marion, of course.

“How would you feel about coming to the fair?” she asked, bustling in instead of making culinary comments from the corridor.

I shook water from my ears and towelled my neck.

“Meet me in St. Louis, Louis’?”

She eyed me up and down.

“You’d make a lousy Judy Garland.”

“Not something I aspire to. What fair are you talking about? It’s too early in the year for pumpkin pies and hayrides.”

“The Psychic Fair. Down at the Convention Centre.”

“The Convention Centre? What’s the matter? The TravelLodge not big enough for those things these days?”

“Psychics are a booming business.”

“Apparently.”

“Will you come?”

“In another lifetime, maybe.”

“Hear me out.”

“What’s to hear? I showed up at the TravelLodge—or was it the Best Western?—once. It felt like a cheap bazaar with the merchants hawking fibs instead trinkets.”

“So you’ve been to one.”

“Some things even Madame Harper doesn’t know. Want some coffee?”

“Why ask a question when you already know the answer?”

“Manners.”

“From a man who greets his guests half-naked?”

“‘Guest’ is pushing it.”

I left her to the comfort of her wing-back chair.

After doing up the *grand salon*, Raymond Kiefer, champion of chintz, had wanted to go at my kitchen too. I’d balked. Kitchens should be bright and airy, as if basking in a fake Ikea sun. In fact, Ikea’s what I wanted, but Raymond, having lost on overdone, insisted on Georg Jensen. Same thing but a whole lot more expensive.

I hopped up on the cobalt-tiled counter while the coffee maker—twenty bucks on sale at The Bay—finished its dyspeptic gurgling.

So the Psychic Fair was coming up, and Marion wanted company. That was odd. She’d had a booth the year before, and managed on her own. What was different this year? Not the guts to ask. Marion was fearless when it came to asking favours, be it fetching drinks or plunging her john.

Doctoring two mugs of coffee, I decided to accede. But not right off the bat. I’d let her do a little talking first.

“I hate these do’s as much as you,” she called as I was coming down the hall. “So many fakes, and all so terribly sincere.”

I handed her her mug.

“Is there a word for that, I wonder? Psychics who detest their colleagues? Something like misogyny?”

“Fraudulogy?”

She snorted in her coffee, unprepared for how it sounded.

“Good stuff,” she said, recovering. “You must have an in downstairs.” The café, Gato Nero. “The stuff Ermanno sells me never tastes this good. But I’d enjoy it more if you got dressed. A woman my age with a man of your charms—anyone might think you were my gigolo.”

We’d never talked about my former life, but Marion had nearly

raised the spectre more than once.

“Hang on,” I said. “Back in a flash.”

I returned tucking in a T-Shirt. She nodded her approval.

“Much better. Though it’s high time you went out and got a real wardrobe. It’s not like money’s standing in your way. That fifties rebel thing has got to go. Especially as all it does is draw attention to your eyes. They’re fine for clients, but in mundane social intercourse, they’re really quite distracting.”

“What would you have me wear? A smoking jacket? Silk pyjamas?”

“Anything so long as I don’t feel like I’m talking to a pair of tourmalines.”

“Do you sit up nights with a thesaurus? Last time they were chrysoprases.”

“Shall we talk about the Fair?”

“If you must.”

She took another hit of coffee.

“You’re wondering why I’m asking you, and why this year and not last. The answer is, because I feel like it.”

“A persuasive rationale. Remind me of it next time I get stopped for speeding.”

“Which isn’t going to happen any time soon, is it? You almost never use that car of yours. Weekends only, near as I can tell.”

“I like to walk.”

“No, you don’t like going out.”

“I’ve seen everything I want to see?”

She wasn’t buying it.

“Maybe I’m just shy?”

The look she gave me could have withered winter cabbages.

“Okay,” I said, “consider this. I’ve got the means to do what keeps me happy and I’m doing it. Didn’t someone say contentment is the highest goal in life?”

“Hobbes. But the idea was hardly new with him. It’s been around at least since Buddha.”

I held out my hands, palms up.

“In company like that I rest my case.”

“Not so fast. I’ve watched you come and go—when go you do. Your routines never vary. You see clients between two and seven, with a break at five for dinner. Your sessions never go on past the hour. I know you love to read so I’ll assume that’s what you do till bedtime. You’ve never had a guest stay overnight. Saturdays you shop, but only in the neighbourhood. Between one and four, you disappear, then re-emerge for supper at Il Vagabondo. Sundays you observe the fourth commandment, except those odd times when you take that car I’d kill for and head to points unknown, always coming home an hour after sundown. For contentment, that’s too rigorous.”

“I think you mean ‘obsessive.’”

“I didn’t want to be insulting.”

“Since when? Have you suddenly found Jesus?”

She stuck out her tongue.

“Besides,” I said, “there’s always you to keep me from my ruts. I had no idea I was watched so closely. What comes next? Sneaking in here while I sleep?”

I glanced over at the door between our flats.

“You’ve always known I was a snoop.”

“An unrepentant one, at that.”

She went silent then abruptly changed her tack.

“Do you have friends?”

Not exactly fishing... not exactly worried...

“There’s you,” I said.

“Don’t flatter. It sounds cheap. I meant anyone else.”

“Yes.”

I didn’t amplify. Marion waited, coffee cradled in her hands.

“Family?” she asked at length.

“Not that I know of.”

She looked down, then raised her mug and drained it. A good performance. By my reckoning, she’d emptied it some time before.

“My man of mystery,” she said lightly. “Did you make lots of coffee? I’d have some more.”

Slave by complicity, I did my duties and came back.

“What I’m getting at,” she carried on, “is that you don’t have a social life. Not that it’s any of my business—”

“Never stopped you before.”

“—but even you and I don’t do much of anything but sit around and think up clever things to say. Schmoozing clients at the Fair is a such a bore. I want company this year, preferably yours. Lobbing brickbats at our so-called peers ought to keep us both amused.”

Tone too breezy... too much emphasis on “bore”...

For the first time in two years Marion was hiding something.

More unusual, I couldn’t say just what.

Sensing hidden motives, most people call on intuition to discern the truth. I rely on observation—quite a different thing—and a gift for putting two and two together. Just then the gift had left me. In its absence, I looked instead at the geometry of Marion I carry in my head. Her need for something deeper than the favour she was asking danced like a square peg before a chorus line of round holes.

Never married... hasn’t had a lover since her thirties... pregnant once, terminated at the Morgentaler clinic...

I took a stab. “Is this like a date?”

She threw back her head.

“Oh, the vanity of men. No, David, it is not a date. I’m worried about you, that’s all. Call it the concern of an ordinary busybody, but I have noticed you don’t get out much and I really would enjoy the company.”

... worried about you. That, at least, rang true. So much it caught me off my guard.

“How long’s the Fair?” I asked.

“Just two days. The weekend.”

“I’ll do it, then.”

Her face fell comically.

“That’s it? I expected more resistance. Don’t wimp out on me. I want this to be fun.”

“If it restores things to their proper balance, I can only come one day.”

“That would be Sunday?”

“I withdraw the Madame Harper crack.”

Mission accomplished, she abandoned her coffee and made, uncharacteristically, for the communicating door.

“There’s one more thing,” she said. “Please—do wear something else. That bursting from the T-shirt look has got to go. I don’t want people drawing wrong conclusions. Tone down the hunk.”



Hunk.

It’s why I should have stuck to male clients. *Heterosexual* male clients. My looks passed underneath their radar, or, if they registered, only as a blip, a ghost that vanished on the next spin of their ego-dish. Unlike that afternoon’s new client, a woman whose antenna wouldn’t budge. Her name was Kirin Neemes. She said she’d seen my ad in *Now*. The ad contained my picture; she should have been forewarned.

“Darker and larger,” I said. “Plus a bit less hair. Then you’ll have it right.”

She had slightly exophthalmic eyes, which she widened in bewilderment. No frown lines creased her forehead.

A model... catalogue, not runway... one child, a daughter... never married... terrible luck with men...

“I don’t understand.”

She made it sound as if her intellect, not my abstruseness, were to blame.

“My chest,” I said. “The nipples are darker than you’re imagining. The aureoles are larger. And I have a tad less hair.”

From her look you’d think I’d been undressing her inside my head, not the other way around.

“And in case your interested,” I smiled, “I’m not. For reason number two.”

She kept on gaping. “You know what I’m thinking.”

“Not precisely. But you were wondering whether I’m available or

married-slash-gay. It's the latter of the latter I'm afraid."

Up till then she'd been perched forward on a claw-foot deacon's chair. Delighted and a bit in awe, she relaxed to the extent its pious back allowed.

"That's amazing. How do you do that?"

Sometimes I just smiled and let my clients draw their own conclusions. Not this time.

"Good guesses," I replied.

"No way. You knew what was in my head."

I shrugged. "Shot in the dark."

She had curiously flat features—ideal for photographs at any angle—and very straight blond hair. Not just the frown-avoidance trick, but all her gestures kept her at her pert and photogenic best. It wasn't vanity. She'd gotten excellent professional advice and practised. Practised hard, for underneath the magazine veneer spun a maelstrom of confusion and a fragile edginess that made me think of sparrows mindful of the hawk.

"You've visited a lot of psychics," I said.

"How did you...?" She stopped. "Right. Of course. If I'm here ..."

"No, it isn't that."

I'd only said it to keep conversation going.

"What, then?"

Her eyes really were too large. She didn't so much look at things as peer at them, as if by working at it she could bring them into focus.

Wants to be liked... trusting... too much so... sensitive to others' feelings... overwhelmed by them...

"You're getting something," she insisted. "I can tell. What is it? Are you getting something from me?"

With variations, every client asked me that and always for the same two reasons. One was vanity, the narcissistic thrill of harking to a verbal mirror. The other, far less frequent, was the fear some hidden flaw—or rarer still some undeveloped virtue—was impinging on their lives. Kirin straddled both. She wanted me to tell her all

about herself—a regrettable prerequisite to trusting I was psychic—but she'd sought me out with a less frivolous agenda. Something was consuming her.

"You were good girl growing up," I said, "closer to your father than your mother. Your mother's mother was a drunk. You were pretty as a teenager and even though you hated it, played the proto-prom-queen well to make your Daddy smile.

"Later in your teens you fell in love with a photographer, an older man who got you into modelling but proved be an asshole. You stuck with him far longer than you should. Your reaction, when he dumped you, was to find another guy who might well have been his moral twin. Virile men attract you so testosterone grenades make up the bulk of your relationships.

"You have a daughter, about six, whose name is similar to yours—Karen or Carla, something like that. Her father, whom you hate, is a manipulative SOB who uses your daughter to control you for the sheer nastiness of proving that he can. Shall I go on?"

"Oh my god," Kirin whispered. "My daughter's name is Carlin. How could you possibly know that?"

On cue, the phone began to ring. I excused myself to let her snoop and ponder.

She'd reached the *Sun* article when I got back.

"Did you use your powers to predict this?" she asked.

No inverted commas around 'powers'... a real believer...

"It was a Quick Pick. No one can predict a lottery."

"Then why's this here? Don't people ask?"

"I don't always give them the same answer."

She heard the smile in my voice.

"You mean you lie?"

"If that's what someone needs."

"And you don't think I do?"

I let her figure that one for herself.

She finished reading and moved over to a love-seat done in floral chintz, more her style than the torture rack she'd picked before.

"You can have a cigarette if you like," I said.

She lit up gratefully before it crossed her mind to wonder how I knew she smoked. I answered when I saw the question reach her eyes.

“You sat down next to that,” I said, pointing to an ashtray that had drawn her like a magnet. “You’re a model and it helps you to stay thin. More simply, I can smell it on your clothes.”

She took a fast drag and blew the smoke to one side.

“Are you like this with everyone?”

I went for disingenuous. “Like what?”

“Honest. Straightforward.”

“Better you should know right off what I can and cannot do.”

“But you are psychic, right?”

“The proof, as grandma used to say, is in the pudding.”

She tugged at her cigarette and turned away, exhaling in a focused stream. When she looked back, the frown she’d bypassed earlier was shadowing her brow.

“But you don’t have a grandmother.”

Her eyes had changed. She wasn’t peering at the world anymore. Instead, she had the inward-looking gaze of someone high on acid.

She shook her head and gave a quick apologetic smile.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know where that came from. I just got this flash of you as...I don’t know...an orphan. Someone who wouldn’t have a grandmother. I mean, one you knew.”

“You’re right. I invented grandma to lend weight to my clichés.”

Her attention was still elsewhere. Another drag on her cigarette, another sideways plume of smoke, and she posed the question that had brought her here.

“Why do I just... know... things about people?”



Steve Smith, a.k.a. Red Green, the comedian, claimed the three hardest words for a man are *I don't know*. I found them a relief. My pseudo-occupation required lies, half-truths and silences. Context and expedience excused what elsewhere would be called deceit.

Admitting ignorance kept me on the straight and narrow.

But some clients wouldn't let me speak those three short words. They thought it meant I must be keeping something from them.

Marion, who considered that the future, or at least its outlines, could be read in random patterns, made guesses when she didn't know. If she proved right, her clients posited, *post hoc*, she'd seen it in the cards. But if she got it wrong, the miscall got forgotten. It's no fun dining out on psychic mispredictions.

I didn't work that way. If I didn't have an answer I just said so.

"But you *have* to know," some clients countered. "Why won't you tell me?"

I suppose I could have made up something about Destiny, the Gift, uncertainty, bad vibes... the usual obfuscatory legerdemain professionals use to cover their tracks. But what would have been the point? Honesty was simpler. Lazier, too—an easy footpath through the psychic moral quagmire. I misled sometimes about the source of my intelligence, but never lied to fill in what it couldn't tell me. I'd had enough of lying when I worked out on the streets.

I couldn't answer Kirin Neemes. When I said as much, she simply shook her head.

"No, you know. I'm sure of it."

No pleading, no cajoling, just an utterance of faith—which I would have disregarded if I hadn't got the sudden feeling she was right.

I build maps of people in my head, three and four dimensional topographies of everything I note about them in a given context, physical and temporal. Build's perhaps too strong a word for something so reflexive. Map's not dead on, either. Sculpture is more accurate, a grey-white mental artefact whose size and shape and luminance determine true from false, constituent from adjunct, acquired from innate.

My map of Kirin came from the observable—the timbre of her voice in relation to her words, the gestures she employed to hide or show her feelings, her brands of soap, shampoo and perfume, her choice of clothes, the way she smoked her cigarette.

But something that I couldn't trace to sight or smell or hearing occupied the centre of my Kirin-map, a sizzling block of static like a snowy TV screen.

Stranger still, inside it, when I quieted my thoughts and stopped my senses, I caught glimpses of myself.



“Tell me about your glass wall again, Ferko.”

Had anyone been watching us, they might have thought the old man hadn't heard. He took a handkerchief he'd stuck between his wheelchair seat and thigh and dabbed some spittle from the corner of his mouth. His movements were deliberate and slow, as if the fragrance of the apple trees in blossom round the courtyard made him torpid.

Beaupré Manor's sliding doors whooshed open so a nurse could wheel a sunshine-weary resident inside.

“Ah, so you remember the glass wall,” he said, speaking with the left side of his mouth, internally translating from Hungarian to Magyar-coloured English. “That was some time ago. After you read Schneider's *Clinical Psychopathology*.”

“After you made me read it.”

“Made?” Behind glasses whose right lens was frosted to protect an unresponsive eye, a single grey brow rose. “As I recall, you couldn't get enough on the subject.”

“The idea was originally yours.”

“Yes, to have a sounding board. One not infected by dogma. But Kraepelin, Bleuler, Freud, Reich... I didn't think you'd be so thorough.”

“Yes, you did.”

A smile was beyond him but his good eye beamed. I mussed his thinning hair and kissed his cheek.

“Not like that,” he ordered, sounding less Hungarian than Prussian. “Properly.”

I bent over him and grasped his face, covering his mouth with

mine. His left hand squeezed my leg below the buttock. I started to go hard.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “The widow Pyper is watching from her window. I do so like to scare the horses.”

“You’re a tease,” I said, adjusting myself inside my jeans. “In more ways than one.”

He raised his handkerchief and patted more saliva from his chin.

“No more so than you. Always putting out but never saying what you want. Even as you kiss me now, so wonderfully you make me think my equipment works again, I still don’t know what fantasies you cherish in a partner. Shall we stroll?”

He fiddled with the joystick of his chair and manoeuvred it so we could circumambulate the walled-in garden. Grape hyacinths and primula played hide and seek among the daffodils and tulips still in bloom. *What money buys the infirm elderly*. Who knew? In time, I myself might end up here. At one point in my life, a provincial institution with surly staff and smelly hallways would have seemed more likely, not this almost-condo with its richly-tended pleasance.

“What do you want to know about the glass wall?” Ferko asked.

“You told me once, for schizophrenia, that Schneider’s first-rank symptoms weren’t enough to make a diagnosis. That it took intuition too, something you could sense around a patient like a thick, transparent wall.”

“Correct.”

The syllables were weighted with pedantically approving heft.

“Since you were never one for flights of lyric fancy, I’ve always thought you meant a feeling which could not be put in any other words. But now I’m wondering. Was it a visual impression too? Something you could see in your mind’s eye?”

“A difficult question, David. It was a bit of both, I think.”

“Would you say you reached your diagnosis from observable behaviours, subconsciously collected, or was it in the real sense of the word a hunch?”

“A hunch, yes. But more. In forty years, I made only one mistake.”

“Did you ever wonder where your glass wall came from?”

“Fleeing the invasion in the fifties taught me the value of being pragmatic. If something works, don’t ask.”

“Sorry, Ferko, but I’m asking now.”

We reached an angle in the path. Ferko backed diagonally to navigate the turn and used the time to frame his answer.

“Holmes’ claim that the improbable is true when you’ve discarded the impossible should help me here, but doesn’t. If I divined the nature of a mental illness without concrete data, the improbable would be I read the patient’s mind, or that they conveyed their thoughts to me. But Schneider places thought transference in his first-rank symptoms for the reason that it simply isn’t possible. It has to be delusion. You see my problem? In the case of my glass wall, the improbable joins ranks with the impossible. Unless, of course, I too were suffering delusions.”

“But what if Schneider got it wrong? What if mind can speak to mind?”

“You would risk an auto-da-fe by suggesting Schneider got it *wrong*?”

His stroke had robbed him of the vocal subtleties of irony but not his pleasure in it.

“Seriously, Ferko.”

He mulled it over as we inched past clumps of lavender and ferny yarrow.

“I’d say, then, that we have a second improbability. That thought-broadcasting and thought-insertion—the clinical terms, as you know—are only *statistically* symptomatic of schizophrenia. That there may be times they actually take place.

“Why does all this interest you? Has one of your neurotic housewives crossed the line into psychosis?”

We passed into a Russian olive’s mottled shade. Ferko stopped and raised his hand, turning it to watch the play of shadow on his skin.

"I saw a first-time client a few days ago," I said. "You know how it works. People think I'm psychic because they don't realize how much they're telling me."

"Yes, I know," he said, still studying his hand. "I've been on the receiving end. If you hadn't proven that your insights come from simple observation, you might have made me question my position on the matter. You have a talent, David, but it isn't reading minds."

"My client—her name is Kirin, by the way—is believer-believer, if you know what I mean. Not a hopeful sceptic. She came to me because she's wondering if she herself is psychic. She gets flashes about people. They turn out to be true."

"A believer who merely *wonders* if she's psychic? Interesting. Like a Catholic who merely wonders if there's God." He made a sound that would have been a chuckle once. "In my country, those women who addict themselves to fortune-tellers always claim, with utter certainty, that they possess the Gift themselves."

"My problem with Kirin is, I think she may be right."

He broke off studying his hand. "Why do you say that?"

"Something that I saw. An image. Up here." I tapped my temple.

"Describe it, please."

"Like a TV tuned to every channel all at once."

"And when you... saw... this image, what was your impression?"

"That it fit. That it came from her, not me. That anyone with that inside them would go mad. I don't know how she lives with the confusion."

"Anything else?"

I tried to think how best to say it. "Recognition. An otherness both foreign and familiar."

"You felt no pain? There was no distress associated with this?"

"No."

He looked down, sucking in the left side of his mouth, as close as he could get to thoughtful pursing of the lips. Finally, he nudged the wheelchair's control and set himself in motion. Had he been walking he'd have clasped his hands behind his back.

“Four things spring to mind. The recognition aspect is most likely déjà-vu. Some sensory impression that slid past your eagle gaze and lodged in your subconscious. Your brain rewrote the data, coughing up an image you believed you recognized. The way faint odours in an stranger’s house can make you think you’ve been there in the past.”

“It’s possible, I guess.”

“As to your feeling the experience was extra-sensory, it could be that you slipped into your psychic role too fully. Like an actor when the spotlights die forgetting where his character leaves off and he begins.”

“I guard against that sort of thing.”

“As well you should. You cannot be too careful. Thirdly, consider that this woman—Kirin’s—credulity is charismatic. You were seduced. It happens, even to the rigorously sceptical.”

Some private memory brought forth the chuckle sound again.

We reached another angle in the path, bringing us in line with the sleek, post-modern back of Beaupré Manor.

“You said four things,” I prompted.

He brought his wheelchair to a halt before the sliding doors.

“You’ve read Medawar, correct?” he asked. “*Pluto’s Republic*, *The Limits of Science*?”

I nodded. My copies of both volumes bore inscriptions in Hungarian.

“Then you have to weigh the possibility—improbable, unlikely, or implausible—that your client has a real psychic gift and you’ve experienced your version of my glass wall hunch.”

Chapter 4

BLUE AS MIDNIGHT

HUNGRY, I ATE. Tired, I slept. Restless, I roamed.

The grey clouds of my alleyway awakening blew off by early evening. The sun turned coal-fire red and sank, sparking off a timeless run of gilt-edged mornings, hard-sky noons and flesh-warm nights.

Adrift in an enigma, spellbound by the summer days, at first I ranged the city hoping for epiphanies: sounds or smells or sights more than just approximately known. I bedded out-of-doors—in Étienne Brûlé Park, the Christie Pits, Allen Gardens, David Balfour—any place with lawn enough to melt into the gloaming past the glare of vapour lamps and vanish in a twilight world of black and silver-grey.

I bought a canvas knapsack and used it for a pillow. A Sally-Ann on Queen Street had some faded Levis almost in my size. I found a public baths nearby and used it when the funk of sleeping in my clothes became too much. The men there stared or glanced away a second late when I slipped off my briefs and squished them under-foot while chlorinated water leaked from ancient pipes and dribbled down my chest. Of the gawkers, one or two got hard but none made moves or even said hello.

I could have sought out help. Someone might be missing me, might have filed a report. Twice I made it to the marble law enforce-

ment palace up on College Street. Twice I kept on going. What would I say? How would I present myself? *Hello. My name is David Ase. I'm seventeen. I don't know how I got here. The last thing I recall is going to school in a village south of Hamilton. Six years of my life have vanished. Can you help?* It sounded crazy. They'd detain me on a charge of vagrancy. They'd put me in a ward. They'd send me off to juvvie hell. Worse, if no report were ever filed, I'd be a missing person looking for myself. Did I want the shame of finding out that no one cared?

Besides, help did not apply, or so my mind kept telling me each time a fibre-deep distrust of agencies and bureaus stalled the foot or froze the dialling finger making moves in that direction. What assistance did I need? I had my health. I had cash. For the moment, shelter was irrelevant.

I'd always been a loner—different somehow, set apart. In my bones I knew it even if I had no proof. If I thought of family at all, or friends, it was with curiosity, an abstract wondering that had no urgency or longing. My phone book check day one had shown that no one with my name lived near, and while Ase need not have been the way my guardians or parents called themselves, I felt no pull to research further.

Still, those mornings when I woke on dew-wet lawns, I felt the breach of six years like a hollow in my skin, a ghost of pain inhabiting my arms and legs and torso. Moments later, eyes wide open on the gold-limned parkland grass, I'd know in ways I didn't understand that more than memories were gone, that another part of me was missing, too—an amputation from within. Someone? Something? Someplace? I knew it by its absence, the way the blind from birth intuit sight.

Can hollowness have mass? Absence weight? I'd feel a heaviness, and longed to let it sink me in the ground. But I'd get up, remove my shirt—my jeans as well if no one was around—shake off the grass, and make a Sun Salute as a forgotten teacher once had shown me. The weight receded into bafflement, and I'd keep roaming in a city both familiar and unknown.

I spoke to almost no-one, except the waitresses and counter help who dished up blue plate specials. Whoever I'd become in the six years lost to me, I had a taste for liver served with onions, minute steak with gravy, and pale pork chops rimmed with shiny fat.

The city had two arteries whose intersection formed the centre of downtown. East and west ran Bloor, a vast commercial thoroughfare: clean and many-cultured, prosperous and public. North and south ran Yonge, equally commercial, but splintered somehow, not so tidy. If Bloor Street was Toronto's public face, Yonge Street was its heart, especially the section south of Bloor that headed to the Lake. The Strip I heard it called—vulgar, loud, and always on the move.

The city's real hub, however, wasn't Yonge and Bloor. I found it further south, in an all-night restaurant on College Street called Fran's. Even early in the day, the diners had the hardened, far-off look of nighthawks. Around the booths, waitresses in thick-soled shoes dealt out greasy menus. Faces that had seen it all took orders at the counter. Aproned beer guts jostled round the friers in the kitchen.

This was Toronto's basement hideaway, not so much its underbelly as its belly in an undershirt. With Boystown and the Church Street hookers just a block away, with Bay Street and the bankers not far off, with UofT nearby, and north and south the Strip, I sensed that if I stayed here long enough the whole of downtown might come walking in.

Hiding, move. Seeking, sit and wait.

My déjà-vu-like grasp of things was starting to wear off. My bearings now were mine. I knew Kew Beach from sleeping on the sand. I knew the Eaton Centre from the air-conditioned afternoons I spent inside. I'd felt the longing, lustful stares of men at Church and Wellesley. Less and less I asked myself: *Where does this memory come from?* Real knowledge was erasing any chance I had of wandering the city to a lynch pin recollection.

So, seeking I sat down, in a restaurant where missing years might stroll in any time, clap me on the back and say: "Hey, man, haven't

seen you in a while.”



The food at Fran’s was made to order for me: chicken in a basket, battered fish with fries, medium-rare Franburgers, thick ham steaks with pineapple. Mashed potatoes mortared up the holes on every plate.

I felt at ease. With every meal I understood that roaming I’d been going against my grain. Natural for me was sitting still—watching, listening—not wandering about in search of answers. Discovering the natural, the right-for-me, was in itself a kind of answer. Exploring it became a daily need. The patrons in the restaurant gave me something to connect to. Observing them, I felt part of things, which had a rightness to it, too.

The College streetcar stopped across from Fran’s. Red-and-silver cars pulled up, halting traffic in their wake. Then, like curtains being opened on a play, they’d ease away and leave behind a little cast of characters.

Most passengers went quickly to the subway, but those that stayed I studied, taking in their weight and height, age and bearing, clothes and hair. I’d predict where they were going.

That burly businessman: he’ll dash across the street and hail a cab.

The blue-rinse lady with the velcro sneakers: she’ll cross over at the lights and meet a friend.

That mother with her corn-rowed girls: she’ll stoop and take a Kleenex to her daughters’ cheeks then head toward the courthouse facing Fran’s.

That suburban jocklet in the baggy pants: he’s heard the Strip is hot but he’ll head north before he realizes all the action’s south.

In a minute they’d be gone, and another car would come. I’d study the new cast, look for telltale signs, and predict another clearing of the set. When they dispersed, a part of me went with them. It was as if, by figuring them out, I’d joined their lives to mine.



How long had I been homeless?

Living on the street had come so easily. My stash of money helped, but surely, if I'd known a different life, I wouldn't have so effortlessly found the beat of wandering by day and bedding down in parks at night. Nor would I have opted for the fluid commons of a restaurant instead of trying to find a place to call my own.

During daylight hours, the customers at Fran's were mostly older. It wasn't until nightfall, and especially after midnight, that a younger clientèle began to fill the booths. Many had the knowing, jumpy look that comes from living on the street. Had I been one of them? I started killing time where they hung out: on Dundas by the Eaton Centre, on Church Street where the pawn shops are, over by the Moss Park Armoury.

As with the men who onced me over at the public baths, the under-twenty drifters didn't speak to me. Interest was there: backs got turned but itched to turn again; social knots closed ranks but shuffled inwardly to get a better view. I didn't fit. My face was clean. I lacked the daub of beard beneath my lip. My jeans were snug, a throwback to another age. Not bruiser mean or junkie thin, my build said nothing about where I stood on the continuum of male pride.

Plus there were my eyes, two pricks of green I'd sometimes see reflecting out of storefront windows. They put the vagrant on their guard. Accepted as a member the species, I had grazing rights but only at the fringes of the herd.

There were others like me, exiled to the borders of the edge. Most had the far-off, far-gone look of drugs. One who didn't, though, stood out. I called him Cowboy. Lanky as a stickman, he'd have earned the nickname even in a barroom full of Stetsons. The heels of his boots were sharply underslung. A tooled buckle drew attention to his crotch. Blue eyes, blue as midnight, stared from underneath a dove-grey hat whose brim was smartly curled to the crown.

I couldn't pin his age. His face was long, an inch past handsome's limit. He could have been nineteen or thirty-nine. He swaggered when he walked, but only slightly, as if time had buffed the edges off a peacock strut. His boots and hat were natural extensions of a sinewy self-confidence that seemed to come from years, not imitation. Nobody cadged change from him or bummed a smoke the way they would have had he been merely passing through. Like me he was accepted, but only at a distance.

Most times when I saw him he was sitting on bench-back with his boots up on the seat. I didn't think he noticed me, but once, the cigarette he usually held between his first two fingers changed position and went inward so he cupped it in his palm. He studied it, then took a drag and raised his head, stretching out his neck to make a perfect line from chin to throat. Staring at the sky, he exhaled leisurely and I knew somehow I'd been acknowledged.

Acknowledged, though, was not the same as having someone call my name or cross the street to say hello.

Chapter 5

TELLURICS DOWN THE AISLE

YOU DON'T HAVE to be religious to feel outrage at a toupéed televangelist, and you don't have to start your every day with *Real Astrology* to feel cheapened by the hard sell of a Psychic Fair.

Marion's booth was E-14, halfway down a row of cubicles erected out of interlocking panels. The exhibitors had tried to make each space unique, but no amount of beaded hangings, spider plants or psychic iconography could hide the cube-farm uniformity.

"I'm lucky to have this spot," Marion opined breezily. "The woman selling crystals in the booth next door came over yesterday. She said she'd dangled carbuncles or some such over the floor plan and discovered tellurics running up and down the aisle."

"Oh, dear. Should we call housekeeping? Have them lift the carpet and lay down arsenic or something?"

Marion made a sour face.

"I didn't even know telluric was a noun."

"It's not. And will the friendly crystallographer be dropping by today?"

"I doubt it. The Sundays of these things are bedlam. A real zoo."

As if to underline, a female voice came over the PA: *Exhibitors, please note—doors will be opening in twenty minutes.*

"That should give us time for coffee," Marion said. "Why don't you scrounge some up?"

“Where?”

“Left at the end of this row, then right at the big aisle. Take another right past that silly eye-in-palm thing they’ve got hanging from the ceiling and follow the signs for the Food Court. There’s a coven of Wiccans just before you get to it, who, thank God, don’t look down their ash-staves at the humble java.”

“Wiccans? What are they doing here?”

“Olde English Magick Herbes.”

I followed her directions, checking out the food court afterwards. Hare Krishnas, a contingent from the Scientologists and some health food stores were selling smart drinks, herbal teas, and legume-heavy snacks. Not a stitch of meat in sight, leading me to wonder if the enzymes in a cow’s digestive system are believed to kill some psychic property of the grass they so deliciously convert to protein. The chanting, crunchy granola, and Test-Your-IQ sets seemed to sum up the Fair—show interest in anything alternative and you had to buy the whole shebang. Were this a Holistic Wellness Fair, no doubt it would be fortune-tellers steaming tofu dogs and frying soy burgers.

Heading back to Marion’s, I got accosted by a brunette carrying a stack of open boxes. The top one held what looked like cycling helmets sprouting wires. The lettering outside read *Interstate Industries Hemi-Sync*. For some reason, the girl mistook me for a Convention Centre employee and started complaining about an electrical problem. Apparently, theta-wave generators in the booth adjoining hers ...

I said I’d look into it.

Marion’s setup was simple—austere, even—compared to some of the other displays. She’d arranged a Tarot gallery from her flat on the dividers. Pin spots overhead lent highlights to the gilt Rococo frames and eighteenth-century Venetian cards. Two chrome and blue twill stacking chairs faced each other across an oblong table with its short edge up against the rear divider. A shaded lamp, a briefcase and a cash box rested on the tablecloth of plain maroon.

In the aisle she’d fanned out glossy leaflets on a pedestal. A

wooden easel held a slot board marked in twenty-minute segments. People were invited to sign up and choose a time. Cost per reading: forty dollars.

“Let’s dispense with this, shall we?” Marion said, hoisting the slot board off its easel. “You can chat up passers by and arrange for readings.”

“You want me scheduling appointments? What comes next? Dictation? Typing letters? Shopping for your wife? You’ve already got me fetching coffee.”

She ignored the crack.

“I don’t like this system anyway. Half the time, people don’t show up. And it has a kind of critical mass. The right number of names drums up business but too many just scares people off.”

“Do you want it out in the car?”

“Have your coffee first. The hordes won’t filter back here right away.”

She collapsed the easel, then popped her briefcase and took out a fraying copy of the astrological ephemeris.

I picked a leaflet off the pedestal. The colour photo was a few years out of date. The copy, without boasting, made Ms. Harper out to be sympatico and highly skilled. Change a few words here and there and it could have been a flier for piano lessons.

Marion, the working psychic.

I watched her smooth the tablecloth and check the bottoms of her framed Tarot for straightness.

“I hope those are insured,” I offered.

She eyed a Knight of Cups and made a small adjustment.

“They are.”

Exhibitors, please note—doors will be opening in five minutes.

I drained my coffee and hefted up the easel.

“Wait. You’ll need my keys.”

“Right.”

Head still cocked before the errant knight, she dug them from her skirt and passed them over.

The entrance to the Fair was dominated by a stage. It had been

empty when we first came in, but a squeal of feedback from the Klipschorns either side drew my attention as I headed out. Carpeted in undertaker red, the platform held a conference table draped in midnight blue, with throne-like chairs lined up behind. A microphone and jug of water sat in front of each of the five places. Against a spread of sequined drapes, a purple sign with symbols of the Zodiac around the border proclaimed in spangly letters *Jena's Psychic Nexus*. A minuscule, turbaned woman in outlandish lamé garb was dressing down a roadie near the speakers.

"Good company you keep," I said to Marion when I returned from playing gopher.

She looked pointedly around.

"Jena," I clarified. "Everybody's favourite late-night TV empress. You didn't tell me she'd be here."

"You should get your eyes checked. It's been plastered round the city for a month. She's our star attraction. Without her, the rest of us might just as well pack up our psychic shingles and go home."

"I hope that doesn't mean you think she's any good."

"Relax. She's a tawdry little bitch who's just this side of criminally cuckoo, but she draws 'em in. Now, help me with this table. I want to angle it so you can scoot in beside me without it looking like I'm blocking you against the wall."

"You want me sitting next to you? While you're giving readings?"

"You can stand discreetly elsewhere when I'm actually with someone."

"Discreetly?"

"Flash those eyes of yours into the aisle. It's bound to drum up business."

"I thought you didn't want a hunk."

Exhibitors, please note—doors are now opening.

The chirpy female voice became a routine interruption once the Fair kicked into gear. *Visitors, don't miss the demonstration of Kirilian self-photography taking place in booth D-7... For a short time only, Madawaallabu Press is offering free mandala posters...*

Sign up for life readings at Madame Glinska's display beside the centre stage... Any moment, I expected: *Shoppers, we direct you to the blue light special in lady's lingerie...*

"You have to pay for those announcements," Marion informed me. "Like everything else—the pin spots, this table, that chair you're sitting on..."

"I hope it's worth it."

"My fee for readings covers it. I'm never out of pocket at the end."

"And it nets you clients?"

"Half my regulars first showed up at one of these shindigs."

In between announcements, New-Age Muzak floated in the air, heavy on the Pan flutes, overlaid with ambiance provided by the sibilance of synthesized sea sounds.

It took fifteen minutes for the curious to find our tellurically-favoured aisle. Meantime, we had a good view of two other displays. One sold dream catchers, dangling from rails like so many fragile snowshoes. The other, draped in Virgin Mary blue, offered the services of Megan Starchild, chiromancer.

"Chiromancer?" I asked Marion.

"I'm not sure. Either she divines the future from the spines of fresh-killed poultry, or cracks your back and listens for the echoes of past lives."

Marion's first client started off by studying the dream catchers.

"Him," I said to Marion.

She inspected the trim, khakied buttocks and polished loafers.

"Why?"

"Why he wants a reading or why I know he's coming over?"

"Both if you're that good."

"He's faking interest in those dream catchers. Watch his head. It makes a circle every time he looks at one. Those things are round, small enough to scan with just your eyes, but if you felt observed and wanted to convince your watchers you were studying them closely, you'd exaggerate the movement of your eyes to the point your whole head got involved. He's putting on a show and we're the

audience.”

“Or he could just be killing time.”

“That nattily turned out, this early in the morning, in a backwater aisle at a psychic fair?”

And why the cock-proud shoulders screaming, *I got laid last night*, and the nearly visible electric tingle in his skin?

“Plus, he’s positioned himself in front of the mirror at the back of the display. The sight line’s over here.”

“So what’s he want?”

“You tell me. You’re supposed to be the fortune teller.”

“Humour me.”

“He’s the perfect son of a perfectly rich father, decent, not spoiled, practical, and with a good head for business. He’s not prone to questioning, and so far, life’s surprises have been small. But recently he met a girl so spellbinding he’s paralysed with wonder. He thinks it’s Destiny, but like the clever little suit he is when not decked out in Gap, he wants some guarantees. What better place to get them than a fortune teller? He’s so besotted with this girl he’s convinced himself that seeking psychic help is normal. Required, even. The Psychic Fair just now, just here, a few blocks from his million-dollar condo, tell him something strange and magical is taking place.”

Marion rolled her eyes.

“How romantic. Or was that the wolf of cynicism dressed in Hallmark sheepskin?”

“Find out for yourself when he comes over. Which, if I read the itch in his Florsheim’s aright, he’s about to do.”

“Some shtick you’ve got, spotting athlete’s foot at twenty paces.”

“It’s a gift. What can I say?”

I stood and eased myself past Marion’s chair just as Mr. Dream Catcher turned around. Retro Clark Kent glasses topped a boyish snub nose.

“Her name is Marcy, by the way,” I said to Marion. “Or Mary, or Macy. Something like that. And charge him extra. He won’t become a regular.”



“How do you do that?”

Marion was gathering up cards from a reading with a woman with concerns about some business choices.

“Practise.”

“I didn’t ask how to get to Carnegie Hall,” she retorted. “You knew that woman was in publishing, *and* that her little press was going down the tubes. How?”

“Would you believe I chatted her up? While you were busy with that ageing hippy.”

Her nose wrinkled. The ponytailed scarecrow had smelled as if he hadn’t bathed in years.

“What about that funny little man you knew was in the mob? *In olive oil?* Give me a break.”

“We live in Little Italy, remember? Some of those types at Gato Nero are for real.”

“You *know* him?”

Before I could answer, a broad-beamed, sensible-looking woman entered Marion’s booth. Few would have guessed she was beside herself with worry over the emotional health of her Great Dane.

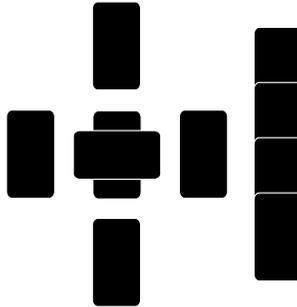
“I’m not asking you to part with secrets,” Marion persisted twenty minutes later, having given reassurances that Telmah—Hamlet backwards—would pull out of his depression, while planting doubts that Louise, the woman’s Corgi, might be headed for a sickly spell, “but I wouldn’t mind the skinny on a couple of your tricks.”

“I notice things.”

“And I don’t? I’ve been telling fortunes since before you sprouted pimples, but you take the cake. How do you do it? I’d really like to know.”

I’d really like to know. It had the same ring as when earlier that week she’d said *I’m worried about you.* Something was up with Marion. The map of her I carried in my head remained unchanged, but the hues were growing warmer like a colour-tinted black and white.

“There’s no special trick. I read people like you read Tarot. I know enough about the cards to recognize you use the Celtic Cross—two cards superposed at right angles with four cards placed above, below, left and right to form the rough shape of a cross. Beside you lay out four cards in a column.



“The cross, read up from the bottom, represents the id, the ego and the superego. From left to right it represents the past, the present and the future. The two crossed cards themselves—the ego and the present—form the heart of an enquiry. The four cards on the right give added insight into character.

“Each card has a range of attributes whose meaning in a spread can only be decided by its placement in the whole. It’s way too much for logic, so fortune tellers make up stories based on information weaselled from their clients. If they’re good at it, their stories make a tenable prediction.”

“There’s more to it than Colonel Mustard in the kitchen with a candlestick, you know. I thought you didn’t use cards or paraphernalia.”

“I don’t. Sorry—have I trod on professional toes?”

“You could wear your learning a little more lightly.”

We broke off for a lovebird couple on the cusp of nuptials. Both were hugely overweight and thought they’d found true bliss when all they’d done was settle for a shared unhappiness. I listened in with half an ear while Marion convinced them Fate, not common sense, was urging them to think before they lumbered down the aisle.

“The point I want to make,” I said when there was room to

move again, “is the ‘how I do it’ is the same as you, except instead of cards my spread is everything I note about a person. A woman’s brooch could be the Nine of Wands. Her perfume the Tower Reversed. The way she asks a question the Eight of Pentacles. Her choice of Clairol like the Page of Cups. I form a mental image, a sort of map, then figure out a story that explains the separate parts.”

“Guesswork, in other words. Like the rest of us.”

“*Informed* guesswork. I’ll admit my powers of observation are a little above average. Something I acquired in a former life.”

“Oh?”

A troupe of seniors dressed in sweatshirts reading “Woolwich Golden Age Centre” was shuffling in the aisle, egging each other on like schoolkids on a dare.

“You handle this,” I said. “They’re here on a lark—as if that isn’t obvious. Is it okay if I beg off for a while? It’s nearly noon.” I rubbed my stomach. “Gotta feed the beast.”

“Take your time. I don’t need lunch. And I know you’re dying to check out the other booths.”

She grinned nastily.

“Pity you’re not telepathic,” I responded. “That blue-rinse flock out there prevents my uttering the epithet that springs to mind.”

I got out of my chair for the hundredth time.

“Maybe you can catch the show,” she added, squaring off her cards. “From what I heard yesterday, it’s a hoot.”

Behind the seniors, still debating who’d be first to have the small remainder of their futures read, I bumped shoulders—arms, actually—with a short, hugely-muscled man whose biceps would be thighs on any normal human being. Probably a Woolwich Centre orderly. My *Sorry* got a look at first annoyed, then curious. I felt him staring as I walked away.

I wandered over to the food court and ordered dahl, biryani and raita from the Hare Krishnas. It wasn’t half bad, though I’d have preferred a hamburger and fries. I slipped a twenty in their poor box. An orange-robed acolyte took notice and blessed me in the name of Lord Krishna.

Marion had said I should take my time getting back and, truth was, the Fair did have a certain road-accident fascination. It was easy to see why it needed the fluorescent hell of the Convention Centre to contain it. Aisle after aisle of astrologers, channellers, palmists, spiritualists, life readers, graphologists, aura healers and medicine women—none of whom looked even vaguely aboriginal.

Unlike Marion, most didn't charge, but money could be spent, and was, on hand-drawn Tarot decks, posters of the Zodiac, charts for palmistry and iridology, varnished yarrow stalks and bronze coins (Real Authentic Reproductions!) for consulting the *I Ching*, herb-filled pillows, sage and cedar smudges, and crystals, crystals, crystals.

Slickest were the high-tech booths promoting user-friendly mantic software, gizmos to enhance a person's psychic energy, and gadgets to induce a state of lucid dreaming—the wired cycling helmets I'd seen earlier.

Seminars were scattered around the perimeter, curtained off in makeshift auditoria. I looked in on one: *Psychism in the New Age*. The audience was mostly camouflage fatigues and shaven heads. When the speaker mentioned Hyperboreans—Nietschze's supermen, the mythic basis of the Aryan obsession—I caught on why.

I found the Wiccans once again and sipped their brew outside a nearby booth whose glitzy poster and brochures belonged inside a travel agency. Cassandra Island, I discovered, flipping through the slickly typeset pages, offered psychics a professional retreat in the mystic wilds of northern Ontario "...for learning, growth, and healing." The scenery looked gorgeous—if you like rocks and trees, rocks and trees—and the cedar cottages quaint in a flawless, Disney sort of way. Big money backed the operation—proof, if it were needed, that the psychic biz was booming.

It's not often I get startled, but someone's fingers touched my elbow and I jerked, sloshing coffee down my jeans.

"Oh, jeez. David. I'm so sorry. I thought you knew I was behind you."

Now how would I know that? I thought crossly as Kirin

Neemes rooted in her shoulder bag and handed me a wad of Kleenex.

“No harm done,” I said, daubing the results of having someone think you’re psychic from my legs.

“God, I feel like such an idiot. I was so sure it had to be you.” She interrupted herself to deposit soggy Kleenex in a garbage pail at the back of the Cassandra Island booth. “It’s just that I’ve had this feeling all day someone was watching me. No, that sounds funny. Kinda paranoid. What I mean is, someone was, you know, *aware* of me. When I saw you there . . . ”

Dressed as she was in hip-huggers and a pale blue pullover, every heterosexual male in the place would have been aware of her.

“. . . you thought it must be me.”

“Well, yes.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

We had an awkward moment. The psychic game demands a master/supplicant relationship that falls apart outside a psychic’s carefully controlled environment. I should have realized I might run into someone at the Fair and had gambits at the ready for the start and rapid close of any conversation.

“Are you here with someone?” Kirin asked, falling on convention.

“I’m helping out a friend. My next door neighbour, in fact. Marion Harper. She’s in E-14.”

“Your next-door neighbour? What does she do?”

“The usual. Cards, palms, birth charts. She’s very good at it,” I added, defending Marion from my own faint praise.

“And she lives next door? Did you arrange that?”

“Coincidence.”

Overhead, the New-Age Muzak cut out.

In five minutes, we have the pleasure of presenting the star of this year’s Fair, renowned TV personality, Jena, and her Psychic Nexus. If you have questions about love, money, health . . .

“Have you ever seen her?” Kirin asked.

“Only on TV, when I’m having trouble sleeping.”

“What do you think? Is she for real?”

“Marion suggested I might enjoy the show,” I hedged.

Kirin made a face.

“It’s okay. I think she’s awful, too. But I want to have a look. Will you come with me?” Sensing I was waffling she added: “Don’t be a scaredy-cat. It’s not a come-on. You told me you were gay. I’m a model. Believe me, I know what that means. Please?”



Kirin studied a Cassandra Island leaflet while we waited for the show to start. I took in the set up. A microphone and cordons were arranged ground level centre-stage. A camera pointed at them while another targeted the audience. A third was aimed toward the stage. Bigscreen monitors on either side displayed the purple Jena logo.

I looked around for Jena’s aides—her eavesdroppers and pick-pockets—but couldn’t make them out. Crowds bring on a kind of sensory overload, the way the brightly coloured boxes in a supermarket blind me to the one I really want.

A throb of kettledrums began to issue from the Klipschorns, followed by a fanfare that moved quickly into Jena’s chorus-of-angelic-voices theme. The music faded and a disembodied carney-barker’s voice spied the crowd into applause.

Five women filed on stage and took their places at the table: Jena in the middle, dark and swathed in gold; her Nexus—blond, white-robed and hatchet-faced—on either side.

Kirin nudged me.

“Do you think she’ll have one of her fits today?”

“We should be so lucky.”

“I saw it happen once. It was horrible. I couldn’t watch.”

“Really? A woman chewing Alka-Seltzer, rolling back her eyes and gargling like Regan in *The Exorcist*? Great stuff, if you ask me.”

“God, you’re such a cynic.”

“No, cynical is having *grand mal* seizures on demand.”

Jena settled quickly into patter she'd honed nightly at the outer limits of the thousand-channel universe.

"*Hel-lo*, Toronto. I'm feeling energy up here. *Goo-ood* energy. This city be an awesome place. The cards are cracklin'. Omru's here, burstin' with the love. He wants to talk. He's strong today. *So-oo* strong. You feel it, girls?"

Not one of her white-robed assistants could be called a girl—not by a long shot—but they nodded anyway with varying degrees of mystery, sagacity and smugness. Jena carried on in her bizarre accent—bad Jamaican with a touch of Cockney pasted onto flat, New Jersey vowels.

"Omru is me spirit guide. You heard about Omru? You watch my show? You know he's good. He talks to me because he loves you. He talks to me through the cards. In the place where Omru lives, there is no past. There is no future. There are no secrets. All is one. If you got trouble in your heart, you got problems, you got questions—ask. The answer's in the cards. The answer rests with Omru."

The floor mike near the stage had already grown an eager queue, marshaled by a redhead with a buzz-cut and a fussy chinstrap beard. A purple sweatshirt bearing Jena's logo hung from broad, clothes-horse shoulders.

Actor-singer-dancer-model fag, I thought unkindly. *Show-biz wannabe*.

"Hi, hon—what's your name?" Jena asked the first rube he let through the cordons. The big screens showed an average guy who almost certainly drank beer, played eighteen holes on Saturdays and had a union job. "No, let me see if I can get it." She put a hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. "Mike? Is that it?"

"It's Mark."

Jena beamed.

"Was I close?" she asked her cohorts. "Tell me, was I close? I'm tellin' you, this place is good. Can you feel it? Can you feel the power?"

Murmurs of wise-woman agreement from either side of her.

“So, hon, what’s troublin’ you? ’Cause I can see you got a problem. A girl, right? You got love trouble written on your forehead.”

Mark—an apposite name—made to speak but was pre-empted from the stage.

“No. You know what? I change’ my mind. You don’t tell me nothin’. Not a word. I’m gonna crack these cards and deal you a spread. You just listen what I say an’ tell these good folks here if I *know* what’s goin’ on. Can you do that for me, hon?”

As if he had a choice—on camera, before a crowd, bullied from the stage. The big screens cut to Jena deftly dealing out a Tarot spread.

In person, she was good, the way Madonna used to be: not much of an artist but one hell of a performer. Her cold-reading skills were rudimentary—transparent even to the credulous—but through hectoring she managed to inveigle confirmation of her Gift from every mike-bound sucker. If someone balked or didn’t cry *But that’s amazing!* fast enough, she turned toward her Nexus—a toadying Greek chorus wearing wigged-out, Sphinx-like smiles—for approval and accord.

To her credit, she played the information from her aides down in the audience effectively, always reading slightly wide of centre. *Mike* instead of *Mark*. Terribly convincing.

“Tell me about this one, sweetie,” she demanded of a wide-hipped woman wearing tight red Spandex. “This one here.” She pointed to a card. “I’m seeing a man, a big man. Older. Lots of grey hair. And a beard—no, a moustache. I big thick ole moustache. And a mole. No, not a mole. *Somethin’* wrong with the side of his nose. You got some grief with this one. Somethin’s troublin’ you.”

The woman’s jaw dropped.

“Oh my god, it’s my father. Here, look.” She dug inside her shoulder bag and produced a wallet big enough to count as carry-on luggage. Photographs in plastic sleeves cascaded out when she un-snapped it. She held them to the camera. “See? It’s my dad. He has this tumour on his nose. Here—can you see it? The doctors don’t

know if it's malignant or not. He's in the hospital right now. Can you tell me if he's going to be all right?"

The audience had taken to applauding every one of Jena's hits.

"How does she do that?" Kirin asked above the clapping. Her voice sounded odd, as if she'd started half-believing in the sham.

"She's wired under her turban, with plants throughout the audience. Ever hear of Peter Popoff? A faith healer, back in the eighties. Used the same trick. Omru, like God, probably communicates on a frequency of 39.17 megahertz."

She flicked her head as if my answer were irrelevant.

"You're not thinking of going up there, are you?"

Her eyes peered forward with their hard-stare gaze. Her knuckles whitened on her shoulder bag.

"She's going to do it," she murmured to herself. "She's going to do it."

Mid-sentence, Jena faltered. The oiled motor of her patter seized. Her arms went rigid and her fingers splayed across the cards. Her eyes rolled back. Froth leaked from the corners of her mouth. The crowd let out a gasp of titillation. The camera zoomed in tight. Her Nexus, of a body, rose and started uttering encouragement as if she were in labour, not suffering a seizure—which by all accounts she wasn't or their lack of action would be criminally negligent.

Sounds began to issue from her mouth, and it was true what I'd said earlier: she could imitate the Mercedes McCambridge trick of speaking over a half-swallowed raw egg, a strategy the venerable actress used to voice Pazuzu, the Devil in *The Exorcist*.

"Hear... strong... too... strong... see... hear... too... strong..."

The gargling continued, raising echoes in my head. The audience around me shimmered, fading to a far off place. For a moment, all there was was Jena's "*strong... too... strong...*" reverberating like a siren song, disgusting or contrived or not.

The charade began to make me sick. A door slammed shut inside me. The audience grew solid. The reverb remained, but coming through the speakers. Jena's nonsense segued into invocations to her

spirit guide, Omru. No doubt about it, though; she'd had me, even if her act belonged with double-headed calves in jars and poultry-eating geeks.

Kirin grabbed my arm. "David..."

I turned to find out what she wanted.

Turned to see her white as linen.

Turned to see her eyelids flutter.

Turned to catch her as she crumpled to the floor.

Chapter 6

JOURNEYS THROUGH BOOKLAND

I CAN'T REMEMBER rain that first summer in the city. It must have come since through July and August everything stayed green. But if it fell, I don't remember seeking shelter when I slept or swilling coffee all day long inside a doughnut shop.

In September all that changed. As if in anger at itself for having let Toronto slip unpunished through the summer, the temperature dropped by ten degrees. Winds set in, corralling rain ahead of them. For three straight days the streets and sidewalks sombered to an oily grey and sizzled under vengeful showers. Storm clouds hid the CN Tower. Veils of water lashed the glass of office buildings, pelted rooves, and crushed the summer blossoms out of city-planted gardens.

There was no escape—no awning broad enough, no doorway deep enough to cower from the downpour or outwit the crafty winds. The reality of shelter finally hit me. Anomalous or harbinger, the change in weather ripped the scrim off summer. Behind it lay the chill of fall and winter's unforgiving freeze.



I owe the rain.

The first day found me pacing, caged, the Eaton Centre's

glasses-in length, hoping for the sky to clear. When by dark it hadn't, I hopped a turnstile and rode two stops up to Fran's. Hours crawled by, broken up by cups of coffee and enough requests for food to keep my waitress happy. Sallow and hard-faced, she banished others to the elements when change they'd cadged outside the doors could not be stretched beyond a Coke or pot of tea.

By one a.m. I had to choose between a sleepless night at Fran's or finding cover out-of-doors. I paid my bill, aware that in one day my wallet, formerly half full, was suddenly half empty. I rode the subway to High Park and climbed the rafters of a picnic shelter. There I slept—contorted, damp, but mostly unmolested by the weather—until dawn or something like it woke me up.

My Sun Salute that morning greeted only water dripping off the shelter roof. More pulled and stretched than limber, I squelched through High Park to a doughnut shop near Keele and ordered coffee and a cruller. Neither brightened up the day. If anything they dimmed it down because I had to break another twenty.

I couldn't face a second day of shopping mall confinement. The endless no-choice sameness made a prison of a city that, till then, had offered only roving space and freedom. Almost nowhere was I welcome to spend time unless I wanted to spend money. Galleries were out, even if I had the interest. So were the museums. Ditto restaurants, except to eat. Boredom and security patrols ruled out the Bay Street Terminal. I could have subways back and forth from Kennedy to Kipling, but rattling through tunnels would have felt like prison, too.

I owe the rain.

It led me to a haven.



In the time it took to get to Yonge and Bloor, the weather popped some steroids. Beefed up, it loosed a strong-arm torrent aided by a pugilistic wind. I summoned courage in a stairway at the back of Hudson's Bay, then sprinted through the downpour to the one place

I could spend the day, not money. All day, any day. Shelter from the street, cover from the rain, warmth in winter, cool in summer . . .

Underneath the colonnade around the Metro Library, I peeled off my T-shirt, wrung it out, and worked it on again. It clung like wet Saran Wrap to my skin. I shrugged into my knapsack and headed for the doors.

I'd passed the library a dozen times or more, when the spirit moved me north instead of south on Yonge. I'd registered the huge red-brick facade, expansive as a dam, without feeling any pull to go inside. The building looked shut in upon itself—solid, weighty and indifferent to passers-by. The colonnade around the bottom with its plate-glass view inside did nothing to invite. A bank tower had more warmth.

But through the doors the world turned inside out, or so it seemed. Mass turned into weightlessness, solidity to air. The building was a shell enclosing space. Lots and lots of space, six unobstructed storeys' worth. A crystal elevator glided up to balconies, not floors. Trailing plants glowed green in light so perfectly diffuse I couldn't see my shadow. The blond wood of the catalogues looked warm to touch, like desert sand.

Most intriguing, just inside, a sculpted beachscape tempted eyes to scan horizons far beyond the walls.



For the next four years, I'd sail past those walls on a bookland odyssey whose every destination was a starting point. Ray Bradbury would lead to Bierce and Poe. Poe would lead to Locke. Locke would snarl me in philosophy but take me on a twisted path to Browning. Browning caught me up in painters, then brought me back to Byron, Keats, and Shelley. From there to Blake and on to Frijhof Capra, where *The Tao of Physics* led to the *I Ching* and Jung. On and on, back and forth, fiction to phrenology, mystery to medicine, botany to bobsleds. Any time I had no place to go, any time I needed an escape, any time *too-poor-too-tired-too-hungry* I

had refuge, hushed and cosseted, where people trawled the stacks or asked librarians for help—but mutedly, like a movie with the sound turned down.



I found an empty table and claimed it with my knapsack. A woman shelving books pointed me toward the periodicals. I came back with the *Toronto Star*, the *Sun*, and *Eye* spindled onto reading poles. Damp and cold but warming up, I spread them open to the classifieds.

The rain beat on outside. My clothes and sneakers dried and started giving off an earthy smell. My eyes went down the columns: Apartments, Jobs, Careers, Rooms. I begged a pencil, circling anything that looked promising. The checkout desk was happy to make change. I started making calls.

“Hydro not included.”

“The job’s already taken.”

“Do you have your licence?”

“No fridge, no stove.”

*“The subway out to Kennedy, then take the 105 to Lawrence
...”*

“Nine-fifty, first and last.”

“Minimum wage.”

“Are you bondable?”

“Key deposit.”

“Uniform not provided.”

“In by ten, no exceptions.”

“Two evenings a week.”

“Twelve-hundred, first and last.”

I took the papers back. My eyes felt gritty so I visited the wash-room and splashed water on my face. Afterwards I peed while an older man with glasses eyed me from two urinals away. I flushed and left as he began to stroke himself.

I took the silent crystal elevator to the topmost floor. The bal-

cony arrangement let me watch the people down below. Their movements looked rehearsed. I could almost see the lines connecting them in something like a dance. Almost, but not quite. A crowd of people didn't tell as clear a story as the individuals debarking off a streetcar outside Fran's.

My back grew tired. I straightened up and rubbed the muscles underneath the waistband of my jeans.

An empty carrel beckoned in the stacks. I took a thick book from the shelves and cracked it wide, then in the study booth's high-sided privacy put down my head and slept.



Someone touched my shoulder. I stirred and raised my head. The library had shrunk. Brightly-coloured spines filled metal shelves along the walls. I was curled up in an orange plastic chair. A book was open on my lap. Tarmac, fencing, and a not-yet-planted field stretched out beyond the windows.

"Here, you might like this."

A kindly voice. An understanding look. A perfume happy with the smell of lilacs.

The school librarian, Miss Kelly, handed me a book. *The Forgotten Door*, by Alexander Key. The cover had no picture, just shades of blue and green, like northern lights. I closed the one I'd dozed off over. *Norse Mythology in Tale and Pictures*. A glossy, full-page Thor with cartoon lightening bolts went back to being memory pressed flat by printed words.

Miss Kelly vanished.

And re-appeared. The field outside was tall with corn.

"When you need to get away." She smiled and gave me *Dandelion Wine*. "Bradbury is good at night, by flashlight, when the others are asleep."

A year, a second passed.

"Are they teasing you at home again?" Miss Kelly touched a knuckle to my cheek. "I'll have Mr. Johnson call and see if we can

put a stop to it.”

Then I was outside the Mt. Hope Public School. A banner hung across the entrance: *Home of the Mustangs*. The schoolyard was empty but I knew, inside, pupils squirmed at desks and raised their hands while teachers taught and scratched out blackboard sums.

I started for the village on a cracking sidewalk overhung with maple trees. There, across the road, was Mrs. Oldfield's. She taught grade seven and was rumoured to be strict. There was Harris Electric with its fading signs for Philco-Ford and Westinghouse. There the Glanbrook Township Fire Department with yellow trucks outside.

I reached an intersection with a four-way flasher. Straight ahead, the old feed Co-op. Left and right, Homestead Drive, shaded by catalpa trees and chestnuts. I turned left, setting off for home...

...and got woken by another hand. The old man from the washroom.

“I wouldn't do that here,” he winked. “They'll throw you out for sleeping.” His voice was soft. A filigree of tenderness wound through his rueful sexual desire.

“Thanks.”

He walked away, but part of him—an afterglow—stayed behind to counsel, offer help and fall in love.

The dream stayed with me through the afternoon. The memories were real; no quixotic dream mutations marred their flow or placement. At closing time, I took them from the library and carried them the drenched blocks down to Fran's, where, over fish and chips and lemon pie, I walked them through again.

Homestead Drive...

A squat, brick building with a faded barber pole. A Quonset curling rink. A machine shop and a church. A doctor's house—clapboard, white, with shutters painted black. A town hall with a park out back: swings and whirligigs, a hot-dog stand, a tufty softball diamond, baked at noon but gold and green near sundown.

Nothing stirred. No vehicles crept up the road. No breezes shook the willows, oaks or Manitoba maples. I could almost *see* the

smell of distant cow dung, taste the zinc in a cicada's whine, hear the bell-tone cool of summer shade.

A dip in Homestead Drive, spilling houses down to Highway 6. The smell of apricots from someone's backyard tree. A quarter-mile gap giving out on unploughed fields.

Ahead, another church, four-square with a belfry. Across the highway, hemmed by pines, a narrow property and long, long driveway rising to a farmhouse nearly hidden from the road: steep peaked wings, flaking gables, sagging porch. Around the back, a rusting Massey-Ferguson and Chevy up on blocks. A rotting barn, its doors pulled wide, exhaling smells of sawdust, oil and gasoline.

Someone in the restaurant lit up a cigarette. I didn't see the match get struck. I only caught the flare, which seemed to spread across my eyes. The pines beside the driveway faded, leached by yellow flame. The vision started melting like a jammed frame in a film projector. First the laneway vanished, then the rusting tractor, then the paraplegic Chevy. The yellow light grew white, burning off the house and weedy lawn in front of it. The barn remained, then angry orange filled the dim interior. Flames licked up the splitting wood. A wave of heat crashed over me. A vice clamped round my head. Smithy hammers clattered in my skull. Red-hot needles pierced my eyes. A savage poker stabbed me in the guts, evacuating breath and, in an instant pure with white-hot pain, all knowledge of myself.



“You okay?”

Strong hands gripped my shoulders. A foul smell filled my nose.

“Can you hear me?”

My eyes slid open. A dove-grey Stetson tilted inches from my face. Rain dripped off the brim. Blue eyes, blue as midnight, studied me from underneath. My eyelids fell again.

“Hey, you—don't do that.” Cool fingers raised my chin. “Stay with me.”

I struggled to look up. I'd made it from the restaurant and

slumped against a wall. The brick had scraped a raw patch on my spine.

“You on anything? E? Meth?”

I tried to answer, but my throat was full of phlegm. I coughed and shook my head.

Cowboy held my chin a moment longer.

“You need help?”

I wasn't sure. The rain was bringing me around but I felt empty, weak, not certain I could stand.

Cowboy waited.

“I think I'll be okay,” I finally got out.

He took my hand and pulled me up. My jeans were heavy, sodden on my legs with a squishy warmth around my buttocks. I leaned against him for support.

Cowboy grimaced.

“You don't smell so good.”

“I shit myself.”

“Can you stand on your own?”

I straightened up, fearing any second that the white-hot pain would strike again. Cowboy tensed, ready if I fell. Nothing happened. I moved my head from side to side.

“I'm okay, I think.”

College Street was empty of pedestrians. Intermittent cars sloshed by. A streetcar stopped. Nobody got off.

“Can I get you to a hospital?”

Police, do-gooders, social agencies. . .

My face must have reflected how I felt.

“Don't like 'em much myself,” he offered. “What happened in there?”

“I don't know. I was remembering something and—.” No, I didn't want to go there. I started shivering. “How did I get out here?”

“I was in the booth behind you when you started acting funny. I thought you were stoned. Guess not. Something you ate?”

I shrugged helplessly.

“I left some money on the table for your bill.”

“I can pay you back.” I looked around. “My knapsack. It’s inside. It’s got my wallet.”

“I’ll get it for you.” He walked away then turned around. “You okay alone?”

I nodded, teeth chattering.

When he came out again, he kept the knapsack and his distance.

“You got a change of clothes in here?”

“Not really.”

“Gonna have to do something about that. You live around here?”

“I don’t have a place.”

“I’m over on Jarvis. Can you make it that far?”

“I think so.”

“I got some jeans might fit.” He looked me up and down. “Bit tight, though. Mind if I walk ahead? You just plain stink. My name’s Pete, by the way.”

“David.”

“We’ll skip the handshake. Least ways, till you’re clean.”

He slung the knapsack on one shoulder and set off. Even hunched against the downpour, he swaggered slightly.

By the time we got to Jarvis, I’d stopped shivering. The warmth inside my pants was oozing up around my scrotum. I longed to rip my jeans off there and then and let the hard rain wash me clean.

Cowboy—Pete—turned at a rooming house and beckoned me behind. In a backyard hemmed by sumacs, he uncoiled a garden hose.

“Strip.”

I bent over and untied my sneakers, then dropped my jeans and underwear and peeled off my T-shirt. He neither looked away nor flinched from what he saw.

“Turn around.”

The water from the hose was even colder than the rain. It hit me like a spray of needles, playing back and forth across my buttocks, down the crack and finally my legs. Pete ordered me to face him,

then hit me with the spray again, aiming carefully around my pubes.

“Okay, come on.”

He unlocked a side door and went down a flight of stairs. A grimy runner stretched between a bedroom on the left and a bare room on the right. A kitchenette was tucked beneath the steps.

“Bathroom’s that way,” he said, pointing to the empty room. “Take a shower. Use my towel. It’s the only one.”

The shower was a metal stall with wooden slats above the drain. Rust scabs pocked the sides, and the wood grew slimy when the water hit it. A bar of Ivory still with its name sat in a scummy wire dish. I soaped myself all over, even scrubbing at my hair, then rinsed and sudsed again. The pressure from the shower head was strong, melting kinks and knots I didn’t know I had. Weak with gratitude, I sank down on the slats and stayed that way until the water started to run cool.

The single towel smelled sweet, like drying grass. I wrapped it round my waist and wondered why when there was nothing left to hide from the man who’d hosed me down.

Pete was in the bedroom in a change of clothes, his Stetson drying on the wall. His hair—light brown and short—still bore the imprint of the hat. The room was small with not much furniture: a mattress on the floor, a fruit crate on its side with scattered change and condoms, a dresser painted white.

He was on the mattress, picking a guitar and humming out of tune. He stopped when I came in.

“I got your sneakers from outside. The rest is in the trash. Hope you don’t mind. No laundry facilities here.”

He put the guitar aside and rummaged through the dresser without getting off the bed.

“You got underwear and shit?” he asked. “Scuse the choice of words.”

“In my bag.”

“You’ll have to spread it out to dry. Here, try these.”

He handed me a pair of jeans exactly like the ones he’d just thrown out. I took them with my knapsack to the empty room. I

had to double-roll the cuffs, but at least I could fit into them.

“Okay,” he said appraisingly when I came back, “that’s that. Now, get some sleep. I don’t know what happened back there at Fran’s, but whatever it was, you look fried.”

He hoisted his guitar, turned off the lights, and left. I peeled off my borrowed jeans and lay down on my back. After several minutes, I edged closer to the wall and pulled the sheets and blanket over me. I hadn’t slept with covers in four months.

In the dark, the sound of Cowboy strumming his guitar was like a lullaby.

Some time later, I became aware of him undressing. By the faint light from the basement window I could see that he was hard. He slid under the sheets, his back to me, as far away as possible. The effort not to turn and touch me, make me hard like him, stopped his breath. His heart was beating fast; I could feel it through the mattress. If I’d moved, done anything to grant permission, he’d have given in.

Instead, we lay in stillness, far across the bed.

“Pete?” I said.

“What?”

“Can I call you Cowboy? Instead of Pete?”

He didn’t answer right away. Yellow oblongs from the headlights of a car slid round the walls. He breathed, letting go of something he’d been holding in since getting into bed.

“Sure. Why not?” A different kind of giving in. “Everybody else does.”

Chapter 7

SCEPTICISM'S RAMPARTS

LEASED KIRIN down so she was sitting with her head between her knees. We were near the back of Jena's crowd and no one paid attention. A woman fainting couldn't hold a candle to the *grand guignol* on stage.

"I feel like such an idiot," she muttered while I fanned her with the leaflet she'd been reading. "I hate it when this happens."

"What?"

"Low blood sugar. I should have grabbed a chocolate bar."

"Good luck finding one."

"Yeah, I know. Granola city."

She gave a shaky laugh.

"Think you can stand?"

"In a minute. Feels nice down here."

I waited for a bit, then helped her up and out of doors. The clear May sunlight hit us like a revelation. She hugged herself despite the warmth.

"God," she shivered, "that was awful. Did you feel it? That thing that happened? I thought she'd gotten right inside my head. Everything went sort of echo-y, and then it was like, I dunno, just her and me and . . . Did you get that? What was it?"

"Cheap theatrics with assistance from the sound man."

She started pacing in tight circles.

“No. I *felt* something. Like she knew that I was there. A connection. You know?”

She still looked pale. Her lips were drawn and bloodless.

“Want me to take you home?”

She shook her head. “You don’t have to.”

“I’ll feel better if I do.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’ll go tell Marion.”



We stopped at Wendy’s on the way where Kirin polished off a Baconator, king-size fries and chili.

“Been dieting too hard,” she said, washing down the carbs with root beer from a bladder-buster. “Guess my body’s telling me to take a break.”

Her place was in the north end of the city, in a ’50s-style suburb. Cookie-cutter bungalows marched up and down the street, sequestered from each other by obsessively square hedges.

“I feel like something stronger,” she announced, opening a milk chute by the kitchen door and pulling out tequila and a margarita mix. “Screw the calories. You want anything? Help yourself. There’s Coronas in the fridge.”

I peeked inside the makeshift cupboard. Bailey’s, Amaretto, and an uncracked bottle of Crown Royal. I slipped it from its purple velvet bag.

“You saving this?”

She looked up from breaking ice into a blender

“Never drink the stuff. It’s from a shoot I did a couple of years ago.” She punched the blender on. “Glasses are over here,” she shouted above the clatter. “Have as much as you want. Take the bottle with you if you like.”

I poured myself two fingers while she spatulaed green sludge into a salted glass that could have doubled as her daughter’s wading pool. With a sombrero and chipped writing on the sides, it looked

like something lifted from a bar.

“Cheers.” She held the glass for me to see. “You like? It’s from this tacky little theme park off the I-95 called South of the Border. First place you hit crossing into South Carolina.”

“And did Carlin like her trip to Disney World?”

She stared. “How...?”

“Single mother, roadside theme park, highway to Orlando? A pretty easy guess. Did you stay at Disney World?”

“No. Further up the coast. Ormond-by-the-Sea. Carlin had more fun there chasing sand crabs on the beach than visiting Mickey and Goofey. I think she was too young. *Shit!*”

She struck her forehead with the heel of her hand.

“What’s the matter?”

“I just remembered. My car. It’s still at the Convention Centre. *Fuck!* How could I be so stupid?”

“No biggie. Where’s your phone? I’ll call a tow truck.”

“It’ll cost a fortune.”

“That’s okay. I’m rich, remember?”

She handed me a cordless and hunted through a cupboard for her Yellow Pages.

“You really don’t have to do this,” she said as I punched in a number.

“Beats driving back to the Convention Centre.”

She fed me her address, plus her car’s coordinates and plates, then looked around distractedly while I finished up with credit card details.

“I don’t get you,” she said, taking back the phone.

“In what way?”

“That line about being rich. It sounded cheap.”

“It *was* cheap.”

“But it’s such a guy thing. Help the chick, flash some cash, get in her pants.”

“Your point?”

“You’re not trying to jump my bones.”

“Your blood sugar’s still off. You’re not making any sense.

Wanna go back to Wendy's? I think you need a Frosty."

She forced a smile and took a hit of lime-green slush.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "It's just me. Always trying to figure things out. You were teasing, right? About being rich?"

"Well, I am."

"Yes, I know, but..." She shook her head in frustration. "There I go again. Figuring out. Second guessing. I'm never sure when people say things like that. I'm always scared of being called an idiot."

Carlin's father... the photographer... Burke... vain... muscled... coiled like a prison riot waiting to explode...

"It's all right," I reassured her. "You can take me at face value."

She drained her margarita, then started picking at the salt around the rim. Her nails made a tinkling sound against the glass. For the second time, the not-quite-visual impression of a blast of TV static filled my head. I held it for a moment, with as strong a feeling as before that I was catching glimpses myself in clear but stroboscopic flashes.

"No," she said, looking up, "I'm not so sure I can. There's something funny about you. I don't know what it is. It isn't like I think you're lying or anything, but it feels like I can't believe a single word you say."



I thought Marion was pissed at me for leaving her to deal with the Psychic Fair alone. She didn't come around for several days—not for coffee, not for drinks, not even with some piddling task for manly me to do.

I was just as glad. Spring fever, or perhaps the Fair itself, had brought a spate of curious first-timers from the woodwork, meaning hours of toil in front of the computer. Databases had to be compiled, profiles put together, research done. A psychic always comes prepared. The problem was, even with GNU/Linux software and a T1 line, it always took more time than I expected. The World Wide

Wait.

Some busy little server god-knows-where was taking its sweet time when my telephone began to chirp. I picked it up and checked the call display. Marion.

“David,” she whispered in a hand-around-the-mouthpiece hush, “I have to make this quick. I’m with a client. The thing is, he seems terribly interested in you. He says he saw you at my booth, but, well, I don’t quite trust him. He’s sly. He keeps turning the conversation around. And he’s damn good at it, too. I know we never talk about your past, but you’ve hinted more than once at skeletons. I’m a bit concerned. Could you come over? Use the door between us. I’m in the kitchen.”

She rang off without letting me ask questions. I stared at the monitor. The file I’d been after had come up, but it might as well have been in Sanskrit.

Skeletons. Yes, I had a few.

I pushed away from the computer. Maybe it was nothing.

I never understood why Marion’s and my apartment were connected. None of the six across the hallway were. But we were only two, with great views onto College Street. My best guess was the builder had put family next door. Well-treated family, since Marion’s apartment was as overlarge as mine.

I let myself in quietly. The door opened on her kitchen, not her living room. She was at the counter fixing tea. Earl Grey by the smell.

“Good,” she whispered. “You’re in stocking feet. Follow me down the hallway and slip into the bedroom. There’s a Krieghof on the wall just inside the door. Behind it I’ve got one of those fish-eye things. It looks out through the barometer in the living room. I’ll make sure I don’t block your view. The tea’s for him. He asked for lemon, but I’m going to forget it and come back. Tell me if you recognize him.”

“A peephole? Why, Marion, you old fraud.”

I followed her in step in case the floorboards creaked. The Krieghof in her bedroom lifted easily. Behind it gleamed the brass-

rimmed pimple of a fish-eye lens. I took a breath and pressed my nose against the wall. Marion had better be getting excited over nothing. Money buys insurance from the past, but *forces-majeures* are never in the policy.

Contrary to what she'd said, she was in the way, at least at first—a pin-sized head and hulking shoulders. No sound came through the lathe-and-plaster wall, but I got an impression of hostessly fussing.

Finally, she moved aside, giving me a clear, if rounded, view of a spread of cards and the man whose fortunes they presumably held.

Hugely-muscled... biceps would be thighs on any normal human being...

I stepped back and breathed again. Just the orderly I'd jostled near the gang of seniors at the Psychic Fair. He'd given me the eye. No skeletons there.

I rehung Marion's print and waited till she passed the bedroom door, then followed her, step-in-step again, back to the kitchen.

"Well?" she demanded.

"It's nothing," I assured her. "We bumped body parts outside your booth at the Fair. He gave me, not exactly a vertical stare, but one that lingered long."

She frowned. "Funny. I didn't peg him as being gay."

"Neither did I. But then, I was in a hurry for lunch."

"I wonder why he's being so goddamn subtle asking things about you."

"What sorts of things?"

"How old you are, how long I've known you, what I think of your 'abilities,' your clientèle. I told him quite a bit before I realized who was pumping whom."

"You make it sound like fun."

"Don't joke. I was getting worried."

"Tell you what—if he keeps fishing, be direct and send him over."

"I might just do that."

"What's his name, by the way?"

“Joshua Byron. I can’t tell you what he does. He’s a tester. You know, one of those clients who wants me to divine his occupation to prove how sensitive I am.” She hooked her fingers around ‘sensitive’.

“Ho-hum.”

“Indeed. Well, I’d better scurry.”

“Don’t forget the lemon.”

Back at my computer, I had trouble concentrating. The profile I was putting together on twenty-eight-year-old Gillian Murdock, investment strategist at TD-Canada Trust, resident of The Beaches, owner of a late-model BMW, holder of seventeen credit cards and nascent white-collar criminal was complete enough for me to wow her with my psychic acumen when she came by in two days’ time. I typed :wq to save and close gillian_murdock.xml, then leaned back from the monitor.

A desert night-scene filled the screen: cacti, tumbleweed, a yellow moon. The transparent terminal I usually worked in covered half the screen, sprinkling the blue-black sky with file names and directories. I sat there, staring, till the screensaver kicked in. Creeping fractal frost replaced the Arizona nocturne.

Finally I nudged the mouse to melt the frost, launched my browser, hit Alt-b for Bookmarks and scrolled to *Canada 411*. When the page had loaded I sat forward and typed JOSHUA and BYRON in the little blanks.



Beaupré Manor called at two a.m. Ferko’d had another stroke.

Just a small one, Mr. Ase, nothing to worry about, but his file says we should call you any time...

I waited until morning to drive out. Ferko had been taken to the General for tests, but the phone voice reassured me he’d be back by nine.

Eastbound on the 401 the sun was dazzling. I had to switch the AC on and flip the leather visor. By the time I got to Beaupré it was twenty-four degrees outside according to the car’s external sensor. I

parked inside the shadow of a towering blue spruce and used a side door to go in.

Ferko was asleep, the top half of his mattress at a restful forty-five degrees. Tubes snaked to his nostrils from a moustache of adhesive tape. A monitor stood watch over his vitals, which, to my unpractised eye, looked vigorous enough.

I got a double latte from the ground-floor cafeteria—Beaupré being much too tony for a simple Bunn machine—and took it back upstairs.

Hospital bed and monitor aside, Ferko's rooms looked nothing like a nursing home. The furnishings were his, an abbreviated version of the shaded townhouse floors they used to occupy on Birch Street close to Rosedale.

I settled in a comfy chair with fleur-de-lys upholstery, passing through a ghost of me who used to choose the same chair after suppers, which was Ferko's time for reading, or for holding forth about his day, or trying to fathom how a hustler with his memories behind a wall of pain could be so good at seeing in the hearts and minds of others.

Asleep, he looked no different than he had back then, those mornings after, when, the night's transacted fucking over, he invited me to sleep with him instead of in my room. Sometimes a second partner would be spooned around him and I'd have to get up gently so as not to wake them if I wanted orange juice or just to catch some solitary Zs. Funny how that worked. Ferko always paid for sex as if I were a colleague he would never ask a service from for free.

My latte had gone tepid when at last he stirred. His eyelids fluttered and an arm jerked underneath the sheets. I got up and kissed him on the forehead, sweeping back his thin but still-there hair.

“David.”

He sounded weak but not confused. I've never known another human being who could wake up quite as lucidly as Ferko. His eyes roved about the room—assessing, confirming—then came back to me.

“It has been seven years,” he said, taking care with every word, “since you woke me up like that.”

“You must have read my mind. I was just recalling.”

“You’re far too young to be remembering like that.”

“I’m not in my twenties anymore.”

“You’re still too young. When I was your age you were not yet even born.”

I smiled; the taunt was old, familiar.

“How are you feeling?”

His forehead wrinkled while he mentally palpated all his faculties.

“Well, I think. But tired. The stroke was small. No damage. Or, if there was, my brain has found a way around it. As brains will do.”

“Can I get you anything?”

“Some water.”

I raised him with an arm behind his shoulders, then held the glass and tilted it toward his mouth. He turned his head to signal when he’d had enough. I put the glass aside and eased him back. He closed his eyes, exhausted.

A doctor Endicott-Ellis came by a quarter of an hour later. She wore an extra-long name tag and introduced herself as Eileen. She asked if I was family. I told her no.

“Just friends, then?”

Her voice held just the right amount of irony. I liked her right away.

She checked the monitor and sat down next to Ferko. He greeted her with a professional regard that came through even in his weakened speech. From my chair, I watched them spend the next five minutes going over scans. Ferko offered up prognoses on the images as if the patient in his bed were someone else. Dr. E-cubed gave no sign of finding it unusual.

Ferko’s animation vanished when she left. He lay quietly a long time, gazing at the ceiling.

Finally he looked at me with eyes gone for the first time truly

old.

“So now you see, David, why I wouldn’t let you stay? You could not have given me this kind of care.”

“I realize.”

He blinked, stalling while he hunted round for words. *Nearly beaten . . . enough to feel submission’s tempting pull . . .*

“And my pride would not have had you tending me in any case.”

“Thank you, doctor, for that bit of truth—seven years past due.”

“You knew it anyway.”

“I did.”

“That wondrous skill of yours.”

“In this case, hardly.”

Silence. I watched him breathe. On the monitor, his heartbeat slowed. Between each spike I saw plateaued intimations of the future.

But not today . . . not for some time yet . . .

“David?”

I went over to the bed and took his hand.

“What?”

“How much longer do I have?”

After so much time, so much rigour . . .

“I can’t predict the future, Ferko. You know that.”

A little sigh escaped him.

“No, I suppose not.”



Would it have hurt to lie?

No easy answer came as I headed back downtown. The Parkway south for once deserved its name—a parkway, not a parking lot. The sky was clear midmorning blue; the towers of the city looked like pristine foil cut-outs. I nudged up to one-forty, set the cruise control, sailed through the dips and curves and mulled the question over.

I told futures all the time. Barring acts of Fate—and even those

could sometimes be predicted, so strong the trait of self-fulfilling prophecy—what I learned about my clients, what they told me in a thousand different ways, was enough to make their futures nothing more than simple math. Lust divided by *I-want-so-much-to-help-him* equalled pain. Chubby thighs times supermarket diets equalled sentimental choices that were always disappointing. Inferiority plus envy equalled guile and only fugitive success. The more data I acquired, the more complex the equations. But I had a head for algebraizing human interactions and geometrizing feelings.

Ferko's fascination with my speed at sizing people up had never wavered from the rationally curious. He used to show me off at dinners—who could blame him? a respected older man with an intriguing young companion—getting me to dazzle friends and colleagues with my so-called psychic skills. It wasn't empty trophying. When the paprikash and dumplings had been cleared, when the guests had all gone home, he'd pick my brain about the clues and tells they'd dropped till satisfied that every hit could be explained.

But like Houdini in his rage to debunk mediums, a part of Ferko wanted to disprove himself, to stumble on the truly unexplainable. I liked to think it was the Magyar in him, prowling gypsy-rough and superstitious round the walls of reason.

Small or not, his stroke had raised the spectre of mortality. No amount of careful discourse, not with me or with his specialist, could hide the fact. And in the helpless child-time that follows on a vis-à-vis with death, Ferko's gypsy had snuck in through scepticism's ramparts, mocking, not unkindly, an ordered life of fact and scientific data.

How much longer do I have?

I'd had a choice: affirm the Ferko that I knew, in just the way I had, reminding him not I, not anyone, can really know future; or lie and tell him what, somehow, I knew to be the truth.

You've a ways to go, my friend.



Marion's mystery man, Joshua Byron, was at Gato Nero's marble counter with a small espresso and a paper open to the Sports.

Not just anyone fit in at Gato Nero. First of all you had to be Italian. Secondly you had to be a man. Last of all you had to be past fifty. If you weren't, you moved too fast, you talked too much and didn't know *merda*. Silvered Mylar on the windows kept pedestrians from peering in. Dusty shelves around the walls held boxes of *biscotti*. No one ever sat down at the two small tables set with folding chairs.

If you properly belonged in Gato Nero, if you just *fit in*, you said *Ciao* to Ermanno behind the counter, spent a little time catching up, then made for the back room—twice as large as the café itself with a sign that read, in English, “Social Club”. The air inside was blue with smoke, the pool game never-ending.

Ermanno always greeted me as Signore Ase and sold me coffee from his private bin. Though young and not Italian, I was wealthy and deserved respect. Marion, who chose to disregard the semiotics of the place, got talked about behind her back.

Yet there was Byron, fitting in as if he'd sat across the counter from Ermanno all his life.

“Signore Ase! *Come sta?*”

“*Bene*, Ermanno. *Bene*.”

“You need coffee?”

“Always.”

“Just a minute. I get it for you.”

He found a paper bag and started spooning pre-ground coffee into it. I never asked him where he got it. The grind was fine as talcum, the colour black as India ink and the smell like burning rubber.

While I waited, Joshua Byron did the best feigned lack of interest I had ever seen. His eyes moved across the paper—reading, not pretending. When he flipped the page, he went straight to the continuation article. He crossed his legs, but only to get comfortable. Nothing in the way he reached for his espresso said *I'm trying not to look at you*.

“Here you go, Signore,” Ermanno announced, stapling the paper bag.

“*Grazie*, Ermanno. How much do I owe you?”

“Same as always.”

I took a twenty from my wallet. “Keep the change.”

“Thank you, Signore. You are a good man.”

“Have a nice day.”

“You too. We see you soon. *Ciao*.”

He grabbed a rag and started wiping down the Gaggia.

I went to the door.

“Mr. Byron?”

The paper at the counter rustled.

“If you’d care to follow me upstairs . . . ?”



The extravagance of seating in my *grand salon* forced visitors to make a choice.

Male clients mostly went for armchairs, the territory easily defined and marked. Older gay men, those who still believed that gay entailed elegance, selected a divan or love-seat. Women often asked where they should sit, or were drawn to fabrics that accentuated or played down their virtues or their flaws. Lesbians alone possessed the sense to go for comfortable.

Some crafty clients, sensing that their choice would be revealing, parked their asses anywhere but where they really wanted. Their sessions always started with me asking why they’d come to see a psychic if they hoped to keep things secret.

Byron didn’t take a seat at all. He leaned against a window sill.

“Did your neighbour give you my description?” he began.

“No,” I answered truthfully, “she didn’t. Just your name. From the questions you were asking, she wondered if I might know who you were. We don’t normally share intel on our clients.”

“Like you don’t share that?”

He used his chin to indicate the door between our places. Its

function wasn't obvious; it could have been a closet.

"You're an observant man," I said.

"Do the two of you run some sort of scam?"

"Any bamboozling we do, we keep it to ourselves."

"Have you known her long?"

"Since I was a baby."

Bald-faced lies—even better conversation stoppers than the truth. What was Byron going to say? *That's not what she told me?*

"That's not what she told me," he replied. "How did you recognize me, then?"

"From the Psychic Fair. You're short, but with those muscles, hard to miss."

Chest out a millimetre... palms pressed flat to pneumatize his shoulders...

He wasn't, in fact, bad-looking—the kind of man whose face stays stuck at twenty while the rest of him grows up. Or, in his case, out.

"What's your interest in me, Mr. Byron? And please don't say: 'You're the psychic—you tell me.'"

He cracked a smile. "You do read minds."

"No. I hear it all the time."

"Do you have trouble reading me?"

"Not especially. Do you have trouble answering questions?"

He left the window sill and started circling the room, inspecting this and that. After downstairs' flawless mimicking of total lack of interest, pretty corny stuff.

"You might say, I'm looking for someone special."

Even cornier.

"Marion wouldn't do?"

"No. She was good—"

"—but you didn't really go to her to have your tea leaves read. What sort of special person?"

"It's a little hard to say."

"You'll know him when you see him?"

"Something like that."

He picked up a silver vase designed to hold a single rose. More of Raymond Kiefer's bric-a-brac. He warned me never to put flowers in it. *Déclassé*.

"What exactly does a psychic counsellor do, Mr. Ase?"

"Amongst other things he addresses people face to face."

Byron set the vase down in precisely its original location. Then he sat—in Marion's chair.

Left leg crossed... head resting on the back... too obviously casual...

"As far as I know," I said, "no one else in the city uses the term. Psychic counsellor is open-ended. It could mean someone who counsels *because* he's psychic, or someone who counsels *about* being psychic."

"And you do which?"

"Both. And neither. My clients pretty much determine for themselves."

"Been at it long?"

"Six years."

"Many customers?"

"Enough to keep me busy."

"Do they come back?"

"If you mean, do I keep a string of suckers, no."

"But some of them depend on you."

"Psychics, Mr. Byron, like hookers, shrinks and churches, tend to garner regulars."

"You've practised that."

"I have."

"Do you believe in what you do?"

"Oh, yes. Wholeheartedly."

Another outright lie, one not so deftly dealt with. He sat up straight, displaying his upper body like a cobra opening its hood.

Decision reached... a final stab at ruffling me...

"Do you have any idea why I'm here, Mr. Ase?"

"I'm developing a theory. On the surface of it, though, you're here because I asked you in."

He thought it over. *No fear of seeming slow... attentive to the nuances...*

“And you can throw me out, that’s what you’re saying?”

“Not physically, perhaps, but yes, that’s what I’m saying.”

“Are you this cold with all your clients?”

“You’re not a client, Mr. Byron.”

He shook his head, defeated.

“Nothing fazes you, does it?”

“Many things faze me. Just not you.”

He thought that over, too.

“Fair enough.”

He pushed up from the chair and explored the room some more. *Memorizing... not because he needs to... out of habit...*

My clipping from the *Sun* kept him busy long enough to speed read every period and comma, then he pulled a curtain back.

“Would you humour me in something?” he asked, contemplating College Street.

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“Whether you intend to pay.”

He let the curtain fall.

“You hardly need the money.”

“No. But my services aren’t free.”

“How much will it cost?”

“One-twenty.”

It was obvious he wasn’t going to pony up.

“You can always find your someone special somewhere else,” I said. “Except you won’t. Your mind’s made up. You don’t need me ‘pretending you’re a client’—what you were going to ask—in order to determine my effectiveness for what you really want.”

“Which is?”

“I haven’t got a clue. But you should know that I’m unlikely to agree. Agencies of any kind make me uneasy and I have a particular aversion to those that serve the interests of the government. Correct me if I’m wrong, but you’re with CSIS, right?”

He cocked an eyebrow. Nothing much fazed him, either.

“However,” I went on, “I’ll admit to being intrigued. I’m not sure why. I read too much, I think. Come back on Monday around two. And bring your partner. Or should I say your boss? A woman, right? You can make your sales pitch then.”

Both eyebrows rose this time.

Chapter 8

AN OLD-FASHIONED GIRL

WAS IT THE wall of pain I'd headlonged into or the aftermath of living on the street?

I slept for days, in long, deep stretches broken only by the need to pee, the growling in my stomach and the sound of Cowboy going up or coming down the stairs. Up, I'd be alone for hours. Down, it meant a stripping off of jeans, a folding back of sheets, and quiet breathing lengthening to sleep. A sharp, sweet scent came off him then—a mix of sweat and mens' colognes.

He came and went and occupied his rooms with total ease. Whatever noise he made was that of someone on his own. Any time our waking coincided he said little and demanded less.

"There's stuff in the fridge," he told me, sitting on the bed while smearing Dubbin on his boots. "And I got you a towel of your own."

Another time he bought us take-out coffees, but instead of chatting took his to the other room and picked up his guitar.

*Hear that lonesome whipporwill
He sounds too blue to fly...*

"Doing okay?" he enquired once or twice. "Gonna sleep yourself to death, you know?"

The rainy weather carried on. Dawn to dusk the bedroom was

in twilight. Time became irrelevant. If I fell asleep at night and woke up in the dark, had hours had passed or minutes? I'd get up long enough to have some bread and margarine, relieve myself and climb back into bed.

If I had dreams they never rose to consciousness.



The third day—so I reckoned—the basement brightened suddenly and buttery, warm light poured in. Cowboy, in the kitchenette, began to whistle. Half-asleep, I listened to him don his boots and set off up the stairs. I was on my back and staring at the ceiling. The perforated tiles had gone sepia with age. A water leak had left behind a shit-brown South America.

Leaky roof... a stained, age-jaundiced ceiling...

The room dissolved around me. I was in Mt. Hope again—in bed, a child. Evening sunlight wound through bamboo curtains. Outside on the lawn below, the squeal of girls at play. In single beds across the room, two boys traded brags and planned the next day's mischief. Another bed, beside me, was unoccupied. Down the hall, a young girl cried. A man's voice groused above the TV: "Do something, will you? I'm going crazy here."

Weary footsteps on the stairs. A woman shushing through an open door.

Three boys, three girls... dormitory rooms...

The air was hot and smelled of summer dust. The ceiling sloped at forty-five degrees. The roof leaked, leaving splotches I found animals or landscapes in depending on the light. Sunday school pictures dangled crookedly from nails.

The scheming boys went on, whispering just loud enough to let me know I wasn't in their plans.

Then I was at breakfast.

A table with two leaves, the cracks between them filled with crumbs. Nine chairs all around. No one sitting next to me. A sour gas-stove stink. The smell of eggs and sausages.

The man alone gets hot food from the skillet. The rest of us get cereal, and toast from stacks on plates.

“David wet his bed again.”

The oldest girl has spoken. *Nyah nyah nyah-NYAH nyah*. No one comes to my defence.

“I’ll bet he turns out crazy like his mom.”

The woman looks up sharply. The girl pretends she doesn’t see.

“Crazy moms have crazy kids.”

Between forkfuls, the man grunts: “Shut up, Caroline.”

Another voice chimes in: “It’s not like it’s a secret. Everybody knows.”

And another: “I wonder what it feels like when you jump? Do you really see your whole life flash in front of you? That’d be cool.”

“She didn’t jump. She was only going to.”

“Yeah—with company.”

A round of titters. I look at Caroline, the girl who started it. I can’t hate her even though I should.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she snaps. “It’s creepy.”

I keep on looking. She falters, reaches for a slice of toast. . .

A car honked out on Jarvis Street. Half a second later, a crash of metal and the hiss of glass shards showering the pavement. I got up to have a look, but the accident was too far down the street.

From the light, I guessed it was mid-afternoon. The trees had started turning while I slept. Red and yellow leaves stood out against a chicory-blue sky.

Three days earlier, maybe four, a memory had brought me to my knees. Now I’d had another one and. . . nothing. I’d been young this time, maybe six or seven. Did that mean the fire that had burned a swath through consciousness was temporally closer to my missing years? The pain had scared me good, and I didn’t want to tempt it wondering. But now at least I knew a little more. I’d grown up in a foster home. My mother had been crazy. The other kids were scared of me.

I turned away and went to gather up my underwear and T-shirts in the other room. My knapsack had a funny smell as if the rain

that drenched it hadn't been too clean. I didn't need a shower but took one anyway to figure out my moves. Cowboy wasn't home. If I went out, I'd have to lock the door. There'd be no way to get back in. Was I even welcome to return? Cowboy's world was one where kindness was the solid earth, but solitude its oxygen.

No, I had to leave. I couldn't stay forever in a basement. Cowboy would be somewhere if I needed him. The city-zones we occupied were not so very different. Besides, I'd gotten by just fine before. Bed-sleep hadn't softened me that much.

Decision made, I towelled dry, got dressed and left.



The air outside was crystal clear. Spindly shadows zebra-striped the house with Cowboy's rooms. The sumacs at the back were all ablaze. The grass glowed green the way it only does in fall. The house itself was yellow brick, trimmed in black and fronted by a covered stoop. A birch tree shed its leaves onto a little square of lawn. It was chilly in the shade; by nightfall I'd need something more substantial than a T-shirt.

I was shrugging on my knapsack when a pink-faced man with thinning hair turned in toward the house. Loaded down with groceries, he struggled up the stoop, dropped his bags, rubbed his back, and felt around for keys. His paint-daubed shirt was open. Underneath, the cotton of an undershirt stretched tight across a little gut.

"Are you a friend of Pete's?" he called.

Was I?

He found his keys, but instead of going in he turned around and came back down the steps. The smell of booze preceded him.

"Raymond Kiefer." He held out his hand. "I own this dump."

"David."

He kept the handshake going. His eyes were grey and webbed with veins. The liquor reek was deep, as if the alcohol were anchored to his bones. For all that, he didn't seem the slightest bit unsteady.

"I'll take a wild stab and guess you're not a customer of Pete's," he said, letting go at last.

He wanted me to find it funny, but I didn't know the setup so I couldn't get the joke.

"No."

"One word answers. *Très intelligent*. We'll have to watch our step. I was trying to be ironic, dear. You do know what irony is, don't you? 'The native eloquence of we people of the fag.' No, you wouldn't get that either. O'Neill. Tedious and tortured. Be glad you haven't read him. Now, are you planning on hanging around here a lot?"

"I don't know."

"Three words. We're making progress."

"What I mean is, I don't think so. Pete was just sort of helping me out."

"Was he, now? Let me guess—and he didn't even touch you. No, don't answer that. He didn't. Saint Pete. When he's not screwing half the balding queens in town, he's so decent it makes my teeth ache. Well, in case you do come back, you'd better know, I have a rule. No customers. I'm an old-fashioned girl. Bring home anyone you like. Bring an orgy. Bring the Blue Jays and the Maple Leafs. Just don't bring customers. How old are you, anyway?"

"Seventeen."

He winced.

"God, to be so young. Well, now you know the rules, have a good day. Or night. Or whatever. Maybe I'll see you around."

He ambled off in a cloud of fumes that really didn't smell so bad.

"Irony," I called after him. "A mode of speech where the intended implication is the opposite of what is said."

"My, my," he exclaimed, his back to me. "Not such a dullard after all. Perhaps we should invite him round for tea? Let him see the etchings?"

He climbed the stoop and bent to get his groceries.

"Don't mind me, David," he grunted. "I'm an over-the-hill lush

rapidly ageing into a nasty queen. It was nice to meet you. I hope you do come back.”

I'd seen used clothing stores on Parliament the other side of Allen Gardens, so I set off for the park, two blocks away, and cut across.

The dummies in the window of *L'Avion Rose* were white and dressed in purses, hats and scarves. One of them had both arms sheathed in rhinestone bracelets. Folded at their feet were sweaters, shirts and faded jeans.

A jowly woman reading at the register glanced up, alerted by the bell above the door, then proceeded to ignore me. The only other customer was male, around my age, trying hats and mugging in a mirror. The racks of clothing didn't leave much room to navigate. He grinned as I squeezed by and doffed a grey fedora.

I didn't want a bulky coat. I tried some leather jackets, but none fit well and most were too expensive. I settled on a thick, plaid shirt and fleece-lined denim vest.

I kept the shirt on while I paid, and crammed the vest inside my knapsack. The top flap wouldn't close, so I shoved my wallet to the bottom for security.

On the street, I stood a while and let my eyes adjust. The sunlight warmed my shirt, which had a pleasant, musty smell.

I heard the tinkling of a bell and turned to see the hat guy sidle out. Bareheaded now, he sauntered several metres, then twisted round and pulled the flattened grey fedora from the waistband of his jeans.

He waved me over.

“Hey, dude.” He punched his booty into shape and modelled it. “What do you think?”

His build was slender and he had a baby face. The fedora made him look like he was going out for Hallowe'en.

“Nice,” I said.

He tilted up the brim.

“Which way you headed?”

“Yonge.”

“Wanna share a joint? I got some buddies waiting in the park.”

Had I ever smoked? I wasn't sure, but it felt good to be invited after months of feeling shunned.

“Sure.”

He set off quickly with a little bouncing step.

“I'm Max.”

“David.”

“Have I seen you around?”

“Could have.”

“Where do you hang out?”

“Around.”

“Yeah? Where do you crash? Ever been to Covenant House?”

“No.”

“Cruel place, man. You don't want to go there. Too many rules. You got folks?”

“No.”

“My old man's a drunk. He hit on my sister, so I whacked him with a two-by-two. Had to go to the hospital. I can't go home now. What happened to your folks?”

“I don't know. I lost some of my memory.”

“Yeah? Bummer.”

He kept bopping along, asking questions, not listening to the answers, till we hit the edge of Allen Gardens. He stopped and looked around, then made a beeline for a maple tree ablaze in neon orange.

Max's buddies occupied a bench staked out with jackets and half-empty Cokes. One wore a red bandanna knotted on his scalp. The other had FuckYou! tattooed across his knuckles.

Bandanna spoke up first.

“Hey, dude. Nice hat.”

Max lifted the fedora and twirled it on one finger. Faster than I could see, FuckYou! leapt up and snatched it, holding it at arm's length and dancing on the balls of his feet. Max made a lunge but FuckYou! frisbeed it to Bandanna, who vaulted over the back of the bench. Max fainted and got to him, but the hat was already sailing back to FuckYou!.

They carried on for maybe a minute, then suddenly, the game got serious. Max pivoted on one foot and kicked up-back with the other. The foot struck FuckYou!'s chest. Bandanna had the hat again but Max kept his attention on the staggering FuckYou! An easy leg-hook had him on the ground.

Max dropped down and jammed a knee in FuckYou!'s windpipe.

"Tell him to give up the hat," he growled.

FuckYou! started to go red.

"I want my hat."

FuckYou! couldn't breathe. His eyes grew large.

"The hat, asshole."

FuckYou! opened his mouth. Nothing came out. Max let up a bit.

"Give it to him, man," FuckYou! gargled. "He's gonna kill me."

Max choked him off again. Bandanna shrugged like *what's the fuss about?* and handed Max the hat. Max put it on and spent a while getting it just right before letting FuckYou! go.

"Don't ever touch the hat," he said to both of them, getting to his feet.

FuckYou! rubbed the hollow of his throat. "Whatever you say man. Shit. That fuckin' hurt."

Ruffled feathers settled. FuckYou! struggled to his feet and brushed himself off. Max didn't introduce me. Neither of his buddies showed any curiosity. Bandanna reached behind his ear and pulled out a joint, holding it toward me as a way of asking if I wanted to join in. I nodded. He lit, took two deep drags and handed it to me. Following his lead, I puffed twice and passed it on to Max. So it went—puff-puff-pass, puff-puff-pass—as the joint made three full circles ending at FuckYou!

I hadn't noticed how beautiful a day it was. Or had I? Every blade of autumn grass was clear, distinct. The sunlight on my front was building fire in my solar plexus. The cool at my back was spicy and refreshing like the scent of peppermint. Whenever I looked up, blazing maple leaves sparked something like a memory, a recollection more of time than place that filled me with an aching to go

back, go back, go back. The city sounds of horns and brakes wove softly through the air. Not soft in volume; soft to touch, like fur.

Max, Bandanna and FuckYou! were talking lazily. I slipped my knapsack off and set it on the bench.

I don't know how long I sat. One moment, I was in a world of my own; the next, Max was there beside me with my knapsack on his lap. He had it open and was pulling out the vest I'd crammed inside. Next came a T-shirt and some socks.

And then my wallet.

"Check this," he said, pulling out the bills. "Nice stash."

Bandanna whistled. FuckYou! grabbed the money. I tried to stand but Max was faster, rising in a blur and blocking me while FuckYou! divvied up the cash.

"Hey, man," I said, "don't do that. It's all I've got."

It sounded whiny and pathetic.

"Them's the breaks," Max taunted. "We shared with you."

He jammed a sheaf of bills inside his pocket with a wide-eyed look of *Whatcha gonna do?*

"Please," I tried again. "I need that money."

"Don't we all? Looks like you're gonna have to find some somewhere else."

There was nothing I could do. One of me and three of them. Max had shown his prowess in a fight already and I'd never match his skill. Even if I could, the dope had made me sluggish.

I glared. All I had was words, and vengeful, violent images forming in my head: Max, crumpled on a washroom floor, a straw stuck in his nose; Bandanna, holding his gut, eyes wide with shock, blood spilling from his mouth; FuckYou!, naked on a shower floor, bleeding from the ass.

"Two of you are going to die," I said. "One of you is going to wish he could."

Futile words, dope-inspired, but I couldn't stop myself from saying them.

"Whoo-hoo," Bandanna hooted. "Listen to the big man."

FuckYou! tugged his arm. "Let's get outta here, man."

Max leaned over me.

“Which ones, *David*? Who’s going to die? You think you can take me? You won’t even *find* me.”

His eyes weren’t threatening, or even cold. What he said was simply true. I wouldn’t find him. Or his buddies. I wouldn’t even look. It didn’t matter now.

“Come on, man,” FuckYou! urged. “Let’s go!”

His eyes on me, Max straightened up and moved away. Bannanna and FuckYou! backed up with him in wedge formation. Max did his bouncing step and whirled about. The other two turned with him. All three sashayed off, laughing and jabbing each other in the arm.



The dope buzz gripped me while I flip-flopped from anxiety so fierce I had to hug myself to acquiescent calm that had me feeling I’d get by.

When Allen Gardens settled back into its state of mundane beauty, I quit the park and trekked up to the Library. I don’t remember what I read. Poe would have been right: “*There was a dim mist over all the earth, and a warm glow upon the waters, and, amid the rich October leaves of the forest, a rainbow from the firmament had surely fallen...*”

At closing time I still had no idea what to do. Dusk had settled over Yonge Street and I needed food. Out of habit I walked down to Fran’s. It wasn’t till I turned at College that it truly hit me: I’d be washing dishes if I didn’t find some cash.

Hunger won the battle with my pride. I parked my knapsack in a doorway and started calling out for change from passers-by.

It took two hours to pry the coins I needed from the puckered rectums Torontonians call pockets. Toward the end, I discovered that the game I played alone at Fran’s—predicting people’s destinations when they exited the streetcar—had a real-world application.

If I paid attention, some pedestrians appeared to move in chan-

nels separate from the others, leaving colourless but lucent tracks that spoke to me and said: *This one*. The final fifteen minutes netted most of what I needed for spaghetti, rolls, a salad and some cherry pie.

I left the greasy warmth of Fran's around eleven. The autumn chill I'd lost my stash of money getting ready for had fully settled in. The denim vest and flannel shirt were plenty warm as long as I kept moving, but not enough to let me bed down out of doors. I'd vacated Cowboy's thinking I'd survive, but that was when I had a safety net of twenty-dollar bills. Now I knew I couldn't. Not alone.

To stay in motion I walked up to Bloor and over to High Park, several kilometres west. I wandered to the southern end then started on the long hike back to Jarvis.

It must have been past two when I knocked on Cowboy's door. He wasn't home. I tried the window at the back but it was nailed shut. A sensor lit the front stoop like a runway so I couldn't wait out Cowboy on the steps.

Alone at night had never bothered me. I'd even grown to cherish it, wrapping it around me like a blanket while the city slept its not-quite-dormant sleep. But as cars passed by on Jarvis Street, their headlights glittering in bits of glass left over from the crash, a feeling, not of loneliness or panic, but of ended-ness came over me. The hollow scooped inside me by the years I'd somehow lost had suddenly expanded. My skin felt like a membrane stretched around a pulsing void.

Months ago I'd woken in a dream and carried on as if the dream would never end. Standing outside Cowboy's, fighting shivers while my breath made wisps of vapour in the air, I knew it had.

I paced from Allen Gardens down to Dundas Street and back again till Cowboy finally showed up.

It was dawn before he did.

Chapter 9

SPOOR IN CYBERSPACE

JOSHUA BYRON ARRIVED at two, on time but unaccompanied.

“Subira will be here shortly,” he announced, settling in a club chair. His strategy was obvious. Make me edgy waiting in my own apartment.

It wasn’t going to work.

“Coffee?” I asked. “It’s from downstairs.”

“Espresso?”

“Just ordinary filter.”

“That’ll be fine.”

I left him in the parlour, which he no doubt went over thoroughly again. I didn’t mind. The room was just a set.

While the coffee brewed, I slipped into my study and did a little googling. Subira, it turned out, was a woman’s name—Egyptian—which established, in a roundabout way, that she was, in fact, Byron’s superior. It worked like this: he hadn’t bridled when I suggested his partner was his boss—a shot in the dark, admittedly—something that, now I knew for sure she was a woman, he would certainly have done. A man like Byron, short but pumped up, would have found some way to let me know, however subtly, that I was wrong if it were he who called the shots in any male-female partnership.

As for Subira, I’d assess her when I met her. I was, however,

forewarned. A woman, possibly of North African descent, who'd climbed high in the white- and male-dominated Canadian Security Intelligence Service.

I called to Byron down the hall to come and doctor his own coffee. It was either that or look like I was anxious to play host.

"Nice kitchen." He leaned against the counter. "Did you have it redone?"

"I should think that's obvious, Mr. Byron. I appreciate the effort at small talk, though."

"Call me Josh."

"As you wish." In my head, he'd still be Byron. "Call me David." He nodded. "David. Can I ask you a question?"

"Why bother asking when you're going to ask anyway? Is that something they teach you to do at spy school?"

"Spy?" He pursed his lips in an effort not to smile. "Is that what you think?"

"To be honest, like most Canadians, I have trouble believing we have a functioning intelligence agency at all. But you do work for CSIS."

"True. And that's been puzzling me. You knew. Before we met it seems. How?"

"Research. I had your name from Marion."

"What sort of research?"

It cost him not to preface it with *May I ask . . . ?*

"Better you don't know. For all concerned."

He frowned into his coffee. "The internet?"

There didn't seem much point denying it. "The psychic's twenty-first century Blue Book."

He looked up, puzzled.

"Spiritualists in the nineteenth century used to circulate a book—blue, obviously—with detailed information about clients who were known to make the séance rounds. It never crossed the clients' minds that little Tommy calling from the other side was speaking through a medium less flesh and blood than ink and paper. What we call 'hot reading' in the psychic biz."

“You said you didn’t scam.”

“I don’t, but the more I know about a client the easier it is to do my job.”

“Which is? You weren’t too clear on that.”

“To make my clients feel special and unique. To listen and to understand. To help them see the silliness of hiding things from others and uncover things they’re hiding from themselves. Mostly, though, I just make common sense a little magical. The transfiguration of the commonplace, to use a phrase from Muriel Spark.”

“Noble. It still doesn’t tell me what you do.”

I sighed.

“I give psychic readings, Mr. Byron. Josh. Take that to mean whatever you like.”

“I take it to mean you think you’re sensitive and sympathetic. So far all I’ve seen is arrogance.”

“I don’t suppose the way you’ve gone about approaching me has anything to do with it.”

He took a gulp of coffee, staring past my shoulder, trying to convey a sort of worldly apology for doing things he had to do. I didn’t buy it. He was checking out the clock above the stove.

Loosening of bunched trapezius... flicker of anticipation near the eyes...

“Three minutes more,” I said. “Where is she now? Downstairs at Lucia’s killing time? I hope it’s not too boring. I don’t imagine they have much by way of gowns for CSIS brides.”

He drained his mug, straightened up and rinsed it in the sink—all the proof I needed I was right. To give him credit he was good at hiding tells, which only made his slip-ups more apparent.

“The databases you hack into—which ones are they?”

“The word you want is crack, not hack. Unauthorized computer entry. Hacking only means you like to mess around with code.”

“Would you call yourself a hacker?”

“I run GNU/Linux, which means I’m a little smarter than your average computer bear, but no, I’m not a hacker.”

“How do you gain access then?”

“Money. There’s no lock, virtual or real, it can’t pick. But before you read me the riot act, I should point out that the information I gather on my clients comes mostly off the Web. Everyone leaves spoor in cyberspace.”

“Have you broken into CSIS?”

“No. Consider that a freebie.”

“Then how...?”

“Total lack of information. Other than an Ottawa address, a social insurance number and an Ontario driver’s licence, there’s no trace of you. I won’t list everywhere I checked; that would be truly telling. Your name is real—I’d know if you were lying—yet you don’t exist except at the required official level. I asked myself how that could be. I guessed intelligence.”

“Sixth sense?”

“I’m psychic.”

He tilted his head. “Are you?”

I walked past him to the hallway intercom, waited for a count of three and spoke into the grill.

“Come on up,” I said, wishing I could see his partner’s face when she heard the unexpected *vox ex machina*. “It’s the first door on your right.”



Subira MacKenzie was a knockout, with tawny skin, waves of blue-black hair, huge brown eyes and a wide straight mouth the colour of ripe plums. Little evidence of her paternal genes, Anglo-Scots presumably, came through.

Right off the bat, she insisted on first names. The informality rang false, even though it carried over to her clothes—simple slacks, a plain white blouse. Lines from classic Hall and Oates ran through my head:

Oh-oh here she comes

Watch out boy, she’ll chew you up

Byron seemed easy around her though, which bumped him up a notch in my estimation. Men who partner comfortably with women, especially when the woman holds the reins, are a breed apart.

“Sorry I’m late,” she offered after introductions. “Traffic.”

I glanced over at Byron. His face showed nothing.

“No problem,” I said. “I hear the lineups for Lucia’s fitting rooms are bumper-to-bumper this time of year. See anything you liked?”

It was her turn to glance at Byron. A ghost of movement in his chin confirmed he hadn’t said a word.

She took it in stride.

“Joshua said you were good. Apparently he was right.”

“What else did he tell you?”

“That you’re the man we want.”

I looked pointedly from one to the other, she with her exotic features, he with his pneumatic, blond good looks.

“In other circumstances, from either one of you, I’d take that as a compliment. Tell me, does CSIS ask for headshots when they let you in the service?”

Subira smiled indulgently. “Joshua also said I’d have trouble with you. Something about a knee-jerk reaction?”

“‘Aversion’ is the word I used.”

“We’ll see. You did agree to meet us after all.”

“Curiosity. It isn’t every day Canadian Intelligence comes calling.”

“Yes, and I understand congratulations are in order on that score. You made Joshua right away.”

“I wouldn’t overestimate his subtlety.”

“And I wouldn’t underestimate yourself. Now, do you have someplace we can sit around a table? It’ll be easier to talk and I have some things to show you.”

Her chatty tone was utterly contrived. I hiked it up one icky-sweet degree.

“Why not just stay here? More cozy, don’t you think?”

Her buttons weren’t easy to push. She settled on Raymond

Kiefer's awful damask *méridienne* as if it were exactly what she wanted in the first place. The two-seater gave her room to open up a zippered briefcase—more like a portfolio—and spread out several files.

I stayed standing. Byron, from the club chair, acknowledged that I'd kept the upper hand with a smile so faint it could have been a trick of light.

Appreciation . . . admiration . . .

In some contest that had just begun, apparently I'd won round one.

"Do you know why we're here?" Subira began.

More than just an opener . . .

"Your partner asked me the same thing."

"Would you like to take a guess?"

There it was—she wanted to find out if I could see inside her mind. My third eye rolled.

"Is that germane to why you're here?"

"Not really. But you are a psychic."

"And you're hoping for a demonstration."

She dipped her head. "Well, yes. Who wouldn't?"

"Why not tell me what you want?"

"Of course." She picked out a manila folder. "Are you familiar with this outfit?"

The file was stamped with an official-looking string of digits. Big block letters marched across the index tab.

"What? No *Top Secret* blazoned on the front?"

From her laugh, one might almost think she found it funny.

I flipped the folder open. A photo-filled brochure obscured the documents beneath. *Rocks and trees, rocks and trees . . .*

"Cassandra Island? They had a booth at the Psychic Fair. That's about all I know."

"You've never heard of them?"

"No."

"It's a retreat for psychics."

She said it like a challenge.

“And that’s supposed to mean I’m *au courant*? Sorry, I don’t have much truck with the group hug set.”

She forgot to laugh this time.

“You’re not familiar with them?”

“Ms. MacKenzie—”

“—Subira—”

“—Ms. MacKenzie, is there some part of *No* you’re having trouble grasping?”

I handed back the folder. Byron, quiet until then, spoke up.

“Cassandra Island, the retreat, isn’t an island at all. It’s located on Dawe’s Lake in northeastern Ontario, near an island of the same name. Why they set up on the mainland is anybody’s guess. Infrastructure probably.

“Dawe’s Lake isn’t huge, but it’s situated near some minor ski hills so it has its share of year round cottagers—Anglo cream from Ottawa who don’t want lakeside getaways in francophone Québec. The capital’s about two hours away. The nearest town is Paxton, population twenty-five hundred.

“The retreat is publicly traded and listed on the TSE. The majority shareholder is a numbered company owned by the previous landholder and two partners. Doors opened in the early nineties. Their mission statement, in the file Subira gave you, lists a mandate covering education, practical training, research, counselling and career assistance to professional psychics or anyone wanting to try their hand at being one. In addition, they let out their facilities to any group who can afford them.

“The property covers about fifteen hectares and includes a main lodge holding up to thirty guests, plus several smaller cabins. The population is, of course, in flux, with a live-in staff of five. Other help, as needed, comes from Paxton and its environs.”

I cut him off.

“What is this? A speech to whip up new investors? Do you want me to buy stock?”

“No, David,” Subira answered quietly. “Nothing like that.”

They held a little eye conference. I couldn’t read what passed be-

tween them. My wondrous skill, as Ferko called it, couldn't tell the dancers from the dance.

Like lovers, though they've never been... same smugness built on partnership... same hidden canker of unspoken differences...

"David?"

It was Byron speaking.

"Sorry."

I flicked away the puzzle pieces sliding round inside my head.

Subira handed me another file.

"Have a look at these."

Nothing in her voice gave any indication what the folder held. It might as well have been some legal documents she wanted me to sign. *Just check these over, will you, see that everything's in order*
...

It wasn't legal documents.

A man's eyes, frozen wide in death, stared nowhere in a harsh-lit eight-by-ten. Lank, wet hair stuck to his skull like seaweed on a log. Foam bubbled from a cyanotic mouth. A slice of swimming pool cut across the top edge of the picture. The photograph was clipped to documents, the top one a certificate of death.

Underneath, a second photo. And a third. In the second, a woman lay on concrete with a stain of water spreading out from under her. Her naked breasts sagged to her sides. The third one showed a bloated male, still in sodden clothing, stretched out on the grass. His features—even his eyes—looked as if they'd been dipped in dirty paraffin.

I tossed the folder at Subira.

"You'd better have a fucking good reason for showing me this."

She squared off the contents.

"We do," she said evenly. "I'm sorry if it shocked you."

"Bullshit. That was planned."

I glared, daring her to contradict me. She didn't. For a moment, her connection to her partner vanished and I got the measure of the woman.

Never, ever to be trusted... false in all her words... a child-

hood of deceit, drunk in at the teat of a clever, grasping mother...

Byron poured oil on troubled waters.

“As you can see, the victims in those photos drowned. All three were suicides. None had a history of depression or other mental illness. None left a note. Subsequent investigations into family, health, relationships and finances gave no clue as to why they’d killed themselves.

“There’s no doubt that they were suicides. The naked woman entered a Vancouver hotel pool late at night, took off her bathing suit and knotted both her ankles to the bottom of the ladder.

“The victim on the grass was in a river in Nebraska, his pockets filled with sinkers from a local tackle shop. No evidence of foul play.

“The other guy’s from St-Lazare outside of Montreal. They pulled him from his private pool. He’d used duct tape to attach a pair of dumbbells to his legs. His girlfriend heard him get up in the night. She found him in the morning.

“Aside from drowning, the victims had other things in common. Notably, all three were psychics. The woman in Vancouver did transactional analysis and also gave life readings. The guy in Nebraska was a mentalist whose shtick was getting couples to confess their infidelities in public. The Montrealer charged four hundred bucks a pop for psychic readings with the rich in Outremont.

“Another thing they shared was the timing of their deaths. All three died within a few days of each other. The swimming pool deaths were reported immediately. The guy in the river didn’t get discovered until much later, but a missing person report had been filed around the same date as the other deaths.”

Byron stopped. His laying out of facts had a surreal quality, as if I’d stumbled into *Murder on the Orient Express*. My stage-set parlour didn’t help. Hercule Poirot could not have done it better.

Except Poirot had never spooked me. Byron did.

“The suicides took place about three years ago. Three separate agencies filed reports—the RCMP in BC, state police in Nebraska, and the Sûreté du Québec. They only came to our attention because CSIS, and our intelligence brothers to the south, monitor crime

databases for certain key words. One of them is ‘psychic.’”

“Psychic? Why?”

Subira answered for him.

“Cults. Joshua and I operate within a branch of CSIS that assesses potential threats to Canadian security posed by quasi-religious and paramilitary organizations.”

“And which are psychics? Quasi-religious or paramilitary?”

Nothing worked on this woman—not insults, not confrontation, not sarcasm.

“As you probably know,” she carried on, “cults form around a nucleus of mysticism. Their belief systems focus on redemption or salvation—enlightenment, ascension to a higher plane, escape to another planet—some sort of spiritual reward for members abrogating responsibility to the cult collective.

“What distinguishes cults from tamer secret societies is the messianic nature of their leaders, typically male, charismatic and sociopathic or psychotic. They claim for themselves, in addition to receiving divine or alien revelation, supra-human powers not unlike those claimed by psychics—clairvoyance, foreknowledge, mind-reading, gifts of healing.”

“So every psychic is a budding Marshall Applewhite or David Koresh?”

“That’s overstating things.”

“Is it? You’re the ones keeping tabs on psychics.”

“We don’t keep tabs. We gather data and correlate it under headings useful for determining trends that may have an impact on national security and the safety of Canadian citizens.”

“Which,” Byron put in, “may be the case here. Subira?”

She passed me another manila folder.

“The contents of this one aren’t so distressing,” she reassured me, reading what was in my face.

Again, three photos, this time snapshots: an older woman wearing a conical birthday hat; a bride with baby’s breath woven in her hair; a man on a beach with his arm around the shoulders of an adolescent boy. The documents underneath were missing person re-

ports.

Byron provided commentary.

“The birthday woman vanished two and a half years ago on the way from her Willowdale home to a hairdresser’s appointment. She sold hand-drawn Tarot decks from a website and gave readings herself.

“The newlywed disappeared eight months later, in Calgary. She worked in an occult bookstore and claimed to have the ‘gift of comfort’. Which, according to Calgary General’s palliative care unit, where she volunteered, she did. In spades.

“The man on the beach went missing from Halifax ten months after that. He worked with autistic children, claiming to be able to psychically ‘guide’ them toward normal interaction in the world. In one case, documented at Mt. Alison University, it appears he could.”

He stopped. I closed the cover on the missing psychics and looked up. He and Subira both had their eyes on me.

“Am I supposed to make something of this for you?” I asked. “Are you warning me? I still don’t know what you want.”

Subira glanced at Byron. I knew what she was thinking. *For a psychic, he isn’t very good.*

I passed her back the photographs and decided it was time to sit down. It looked as if they were going to go on playing roundabout for a while yet.

“Three suicides,” Subira said. “Three disappearances—”

“And three years ago,” I interrupted. “Should I be getting down a tome on numerology?”

Byron’s mouth twitched upward, perhaps the cumulative effect of the other shots I’d taken at her. I was beginning to warm up to him. Or at least to feel that if my life were on the line, I’d gamble on him long before her.

“Six psychics,” Subira continued, emphasizing *six*, “who, spread out geographically, and, other than the similarity of their professions, plus, in the case of the suicides, their deaths, have *one*—,” another bit of underlining,”—thing in common.”

She let it hang, expecting me to exercise, if not some psychic

ability, at least a little deductive reasoning.

“Cassandra Island,” I said.

“All six had some connection with the place. The Montreal suicide was a shareholder. The Vancouver woman and the man in Halifax gave seminars there from time to time. The others had been visitors. In one case, for a six-week stay.”

“Haven’t the RCMP or the OPP investigated?”

“The RCMP and the Ontario police aren’t even aware of the connection. There’s nothing for them to connect. The suicides and disappearances took place in completely different jurisdictions. Neither one is the kind of incident that receives much in-depth investigation.”

“You, on the other hand, seem to have put a lot of effort into it.”

“We have. Joshua, would you explain?”

Over to you, Mike.

“When the three suicides came to our attention, we smelled the possibility of cult involvement. ‘Likelihood’ would be more accurate. The victims’ professed psychic abilities, the identical manner of death and the coincidence of timing fit the profile of cult suicide. Canadian Security officers in the three jurisdictions uncovered the Cassandra Island connection.”

“Didn’t you say one of the victims was American?”

Byron struggled not to quip, *And your point is?* He shrugged, half apologetically.

“We’re an intelligence service, David.” *What can I say?*

“Preliminary investigation of the retreat turned up nothing. They’d never applied for charitable or religious status. Their taxes were paid up. Their finances were squeaky clean. Background checks on the majority shareholders turned up no suspicious affiliations. We sent an officer to Dawe’s Lake, but she reported nothing unusual. In fact, I understand she enjoyed her stay. Nice people—if a bit flaky—decent food, interesting seminars. No sign of an organization within an organization. No hint of covert screening. No unusual contact. She said she’d go back if she had the chance.

“CSIS doesn’t have the unlimited funding of some of our inter-

national intelligence brethren. Keeping an eye on cult activity has a lower priority these days than monitoring terrorism. We didn't have the resources for a continuing surveillance of Cassandra Island and were forced to put it on a back burner.

"When psychics started disappearing, we had no trouble connecting them to Cassandra Island—we knew what we were looking for. However, it took all three disappearances before sufficient funds were allocated to mount a protracted undercover investigation. That operation, like the one before it, came up zero."

"If you didn't have the resources to pursue it," I said, "why didn't you pass it on to an agency with a more public mandate to look into cults? The RCMP, for example."

Byron and Subira answered simultaneously.

"We do not provide security assessments to the RCMP—"

"CSIS does not share intelligence with the RCMP—"

Oh.

"Our problem is this," Subira said. "We're certain Cassandra Island is a cult recruiting ground. The precise constitution of that cult remains unknown, but its presence and influence have become apparent through three identical suicides and three abductions or voluntary disappearances. Our attempts at contact and infiltration have so far failed."

"And so you've come to me."

"Yes."

"You want me to go undercover."

Her face softened prettily; she'd made her pitch. "Nothing as dramatic as that."

"What, then?"

"We'd like you to go up there and spend some time, that's all. Make an effort to get to know the people in charge, as well as the guests. Be on the lookout for anything unusual. If you spot or sense something, report to us."

"And if someone from this supposed cult approaches me?"

"Let us know, then steer clear. As of now we have no information whatsoever. A person's name, or the manner of contact, are all

we need to start mounting a proper intelligence operation.”

“And if nothing happens?”

Byron replied. “Then that’s the end of it. Until another psychic drowns or drops off the face of planet Earth.”

He sat forward with his hands clasped and his Popeye forearms on his knees. He looked like a deeply caring Hummer.

“We need someone with your qualifications, David. We surmise our operatives turned up nothing because they weren’t psychic.”

“I hope you’re aware how funny that sounds.”

He gave a little grunt. It might have been a laugh.

“It’s possible—likely, even—that potential inductees are vetted. Anyone without a history in the profession might be suspect. Equally, anyone without an aptitude for it might not be considered.”

“Or maybe Cassandra Island really is a hotbed for people with psychic abilities and they read your operatives’ minds.”

He blinked. MacKenzie seemed content to let him deal with my reaction.

“So what you’re looking for is somebody to act as bait. A psychic with sterling credentials.”

“In a nutshell.”

“Why me?”

“Your appearance.”

He stared past me.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your looks,” Subira said flatly. “Your eyes, in particular. Joshua feels they give you a certain charisma. I agree. Human nature being what it is, you’re likely to attract attention. Make a better magnet.”

“I’m flattered. But aren’t you leaving something out?”

She gave me a blank, questioning look.

“My fee. You are going to pay me, aren’t you?”

The blank turned stony. Byron kept on looking elsewhere.

“Would it be fair to say, then, that aside from my ‘qualifications’ and my physical appearance, my being well off, to use an entirely inadequate euphemism, factors into your choice?”

She made to speak but decided against it. Enough had already

been said about funding and allocation.

“What happens if I just tell you to take a hike?”

She recovered her voice.

“You may not want to do that.”

I raised my eyebrows. She took another folder but kept it to herself, leafing through it idly.

“You’re an interesting man, David. As far as we can tell, you didn’t exist officially until four years ago, when you walked off with the biggest undivided jackpot in Canadian history. Shortly afterwards you applied for a birth certificate, a social insurance number, a driver’s licence and a Canadian passport—in that order. The affidavit for your birth certificate lists your father as unknown, your mother as Margaret Ase, mentally incompetent and believed deceased, your probable place of birth as Hamilton, Ontario, and your family ties as ‘no known relatives.’

“There is no record of you at all until sixteen years ago, when your name begins to crop up in Toronto police files for various misdemeanours, primarily vagrancy and trespassing. Then, eleven years ago, Royal Bank records show you opening a joint account with the man who subsequently stood for you in your birth certificate application, one Ferenc Anhalt. The account remains active for four years, then once again, you drop off any sort of radar until three years later when you emerge as a one-day front page item.”

I could feel Byron enjoying this after I’d confronted him with the similar fruits of a computer rampage.

“So you see, we have a problem,” Subira went on. “The present government hopes to impress our neighbours to the south with a tough, proactive stance on terrorism. A closed session Bill passed in Parliament grants CSIS sweeping powers in this regard, similar to the War Measures Act. Included are the right to search without a warrant and the freedom to hold indefinitely any citizen on suspicion only. I’m sure you can see how, in other hands, your file might be a source of some concern.”

She looked up just long enough to let me know she wasn’t done.

“In addition, Revenue Canada may want to dig into the Royal

Bank account you held with Mr. Anhalt. Naturally, this would involve a thorough investigation of not only your finances, past and present, but Mr. Anhalt's as well. As you know, with Revenue Canada, one is always guilty until proven innocent. I assume you and Mr. Anhalt are close?"

She closed the file as delicately and deliberately as a dinner guest folding up her napkin. Byron, still perched forward, wore a studiously neutral expression.

Doesn't like this... she's gone too far...

I stood and went to the door.

"Ms. MacKenzie, Mr. Byron—take a hike."

Chapter 10

BEG, BORROW, STEAL OR SELL

COWBOY NEVER ASKED how long I planned to stay. Neither did he kick me out. As fall slipped by, a yellow house on Jarvis Street became the place I set out from each morning and returned to every night.

“You got four choices,” Cowboy said of getting by. “Beg, borrow, steal or sell. It’s either that or go to work. Borrowing’s a bitch and begging’s not my style.” A rare grin split his face. “An’ I guess you could say anything’s a job if it’s what you gotta do.”

I went for begging.

Unlike other indigents, who daylong claimed a doorway or staked out a patch of sidewalk, I let the hour determine where to hit up passers-by. Mornings, the commuters streaming out of Union Station could be panned like gold, though most times all I netted was a grinchy silt of dimes and quarters. At noon MuchMusic types on Queen Street might dislodge a loonie from among their credit cards. Later on, malls that funnelled shoppers in one end and out the other disgorged regulated flows of chumps.

In the evening hockey fans, rowdy if the Leafs had won, were happy to fork out.

It *was* a job, if job means daily misery in order to survive. Too soon, the smell of harbour ice replaced the spice of autumn. Snow came early in December—not the fluffy flakes of Christmas cards,

but grainy stuff that wouldn't melt or freeze. The bottoms of my jeans turned white with slush. The skin around my ankles reddened into scales. Sores sprang up around my mouth from gnawing at cracked lips.

And ever-present were The Looks, the three Toronto seemed to know: Contempt, Mistrust and Fear.

Some days weren't so bad. *It was the best of times...*—except there really was no best, just a hiccup in the worst. Sundays, I could scarcely cadge enough to buy a Happy Meal. So much for Christian charity. Thursdays—why, I never knew—I might have coins to spare on luxuries: a tube of Crest, a scarf, new shoelaces. And time *was* money, or perhaps the other way around. A stranger's sudden whim to generosity could cut the hours holding out my hand in half.

But at least I didn't have to make the rent. Raymond, upstairs, let Cowboy have his rooms for free.

"He gets huffy sometimes," Cowboy warned. "Decides he has to rent the basement out. Makes me skedaddle when he does. I don't mind. Keeps me on my toes. Plus it never lasts. A month or two—three, tops—and the basement's free again."

We shared his bed like travelling companions when the motel's double rooms are full, but otherwise made no attempt to merge our lives.

Night was Cowboy's time. He slept past noon and bunked down in the morning. I rose early, and my days were spent away. Any time our paths crossed Cowboy's native comfort in his own society kept conversation small. A sketched salute was all the greeting or farewell I got when coming in or going out.

But we did talk sometimes, easily. Cowboy wasn't shy. His world was clear. He never spoke of doubts, or fears, or wishes. He rarely asked a question if the answer didn't help with a decision. Spades were spades. A thing was true or it was not. Cowboy never qualified his frankness.

"I love the street," he said. "It has a pull. It makes me feel strong. Standing on the sidewalk, watching headlights come around

the corner, waiting for the one that slows, the window rolling down ... A real outlaw high.”

He didn't dwell on Max, Bandanna and Fuck You!

“Punks come and go,” was all he said. “You won't run into them again. Even if you do, your money's gone. They'll get what they deserve. Move on. Vengeance is a killer.”

He took it on himself to guide me round the fringes in Toronto: the Super Save on Bloor Street where past-due produce was available for free; the poultry guy who gave away the parts of chickens no one wants; missions where an extra scarf or pair of gloves cost nothing; food banks where a plea of hunger was enough to melt the hearts of volunteers who didn't want bureaucracy to interfere with charity.

And stores where stealing stuff was easy.

It felt familiar, somehow, strolling in and chatting up the clerk while Cowboy pilfered from the shelves. He showed me different ways of slipping stolen items into purchased ones, how to block a camera, and all the little tricks that make a cashier look away.

“God helps those who help themselves,” he'd say, a box of Trojanz underneath his hat, a can of tuna in a folded weekly, underwear inside his shirt. “So help yourself. Just don't get greedy.”

Mostly, though, he left me on my own. Which was nice. It gave me time. Lots and lots of time. So much so that time began to lose its shape and meaning.

Does time even have a shape?

Those early morning hours, when it was winter still, and dark, Cowboy slipping into bed would often waken me. Was time, then, the black monolith of drowsing there beside him?

The night before, it would have worn a different aspect, narrowing to pain in one direction, opening on beauty in the other, like a cornucopia. From the wide end I could step out into magic, since my recollections of Mt. Hope—what nothing stopped me from remembering—were nearly photographic. I could scout around the foster home, pick Queen Anne's Lace beside the lane, spend hours in the twilight barn with engine blocks and jerry cans, wander to the

pond out back and wade in till I sank.

Provided I traversed the path of least resistance—backward to the open end—I could summon much. But turn around and move the other way, toward the missing years, and a hum of electricity set in, a prickling intimation of a wall of pain I never wanted to confront again.

A monolith. A cornucopia.

Time had other shapes. Or rather time encompassed other forms. The small, quicksilver node of *me*. And future nodes, round and bright with promise. In between, filaments like silver nerves. I could cast a strand from *me* to *future*, hook a chosen moment, then reel myself toward it, anchored there as if the future were immutable. Yet-to-be became as fixed as memory, compensation for the memories I couldn't touch, the time-road that I couldn't travel.

The trick of mind was useful. It got me through my days.

"Endure, enjoy," Cowboy liked to say, "that's all the choice you've got in life."

Enjoy.

I liked waking in the morning, padding to the empty room and running through the Sun Salute. It didn't matter now I didn't know who'd shown it to me. The limbering of muscles and the loosening of vertebrae would make me hard. I'd shower in the rusty stall and jerk off on the wooden slats.

Drying off and putting on my slush-stained jeans, I'd circumvent what lay ahead by fixing on the day's next pleasure: coffee and a doughnut, once I'd begged the change. Latching onto that—living/seeing it before it happened—I could brave the walk to Union Station for an hour in the cold approaching strangers.

Endure.

I wasn't really there. The lake-wind and the freezing stares of angry wage-slaves wouldn't last forever. They were ghost-time to be gotten through, already gone because I'd cast a part of me to breakfast—sure to come, already fact.

And so it went throughout the day. I'd see a future in my head and anchor it. My next meal. Fifteen minutes in a heated con-

course. Two hours at the library—even on those days Toronto's meagre charity dried up. Cheap Chinese food, or the sometimes promise of a hamburger at Fran's. The warmth of Cowboy's rooms. Bed. Sleep.

Each pleasure had a shape and place in the geometry of thought and time. Predicting it I made it real, moving disconnected through the harsh times in between.

But another trick of mind was working, too, one so subtle that I hardly noticed it, perhaps because it was the very thing that lulled—or lured—me to the subway entrance, crowded sidewalk, busy mall.

Holding out my hand for change, I had a chance to study people—waves and waves of them—each encounter like a brief affair. From their boots and scarves, their size and gait, their posture, hair and vanities; from the way they looked at me or turned away; from the colour of their cheeks and how much steam their breathing made; from their voices if they spoke, or the hardened muscles in their jaws, I could read them—*know* them—maybe better than they did themselves.

This lawyer's wife has left him and he hates the world. *Don't go up to him.*

Another jilted husband, only this one feels connected to the suffering around him. *Can you spare some change?*

That woman in her forties, staring with a look that says both mother-love and lust. *Don't call her ma'am and she'll pull out her wallet.*

That bearded guy—he gives cigarettes to bums instead of money. *Too bad I don't smoke.*

You can't get blood from stones—and Toronto was a quarry—but I was good at spotting softer stuff that, pricked, would always bleed.

Like Cowboy, I'd begun to love the street.



TS Eliot, whom I wasn't to discover for a while, didn't know

Toronto. The cruelest month is February. Snow or not, there's no escaping bleak midwinter. Cloudy days, the temperature rises, so the moisture off the lake cuts through your clothes. Sunny days, it drops so low the hairs inside your nose turn crisp.

Cowboy hit the jackpot: two weeks in New Orleans as some rich guy's boy-toy, all expenses paid. The day of his departure, Raymond slipped on ice and took a tumble. His back out of commission for the next ten days, he took to knocking on the basement door and shouting *Yoo-hoo—anybody home?* as a prelude to some chore like spreading salt or carting out recycling bins of empty liquor bottles.

Initially he watched me from the front door, shivering, but finally decided to invite me in.

"The etchings, darling. Come and see the etchings." He turned and hooked the air behind him with his finger. "Shoes off first."

I left my sneakers in the vestibule and followed. Halfway down a narrow hall he stopped and, with a flourish, slid a French door open.

The space beyond was something from a garish dream, like twenty rooms crammed into one. Burlap covered one wall; small blue tiles another. A third was hung with velvet drapes. The fourth was papered in vermilion with a pattern of gold grapes. Silver clouds hung weightless in the ceiling. Tiny lightbulbs twinkled in a chandelier that looked like teacup porcelain.

The floor had seashells all around the edge. A stringless grand piano housed a dusty fern. Where the keyboard should have been, a hamster ran inside a cage. Guppies nosed the edges of a square glass vase with scummy-looking water. Pedestals in dark wood, light wood, bamboo, brass and marble held a hundred little boxes, each one different from its neighbour. Some were stone, others metal, others shell. A few were carved but most were smooth.

Dismembered bits of furniture, like bombing victims, filled whatever space remained: legs from chairs and tables, cabinets without their doors, drawers without a home.

"You like?" Raymond asked.

I didn't know what to say.

"Are you going to stand there with your mouth open or are you coming in? Mind you, the mouth breathing thing is terribly appealing."

"You live here?" I asked.

"No, darling. I live upstairs. This is where I work."

"Doing what?"

"Making fantasies. Come." He picked his way toward the burlap-covered wall. "Here, feel this."

The wall was smooth as satin. I peered closely and discovered every fibre, floor to ceiling, had been painted on. I could even see the brush strokes used to make the jute look twisted.

"You put this on here?"

"I did. Check out the tiled wall."

Even knowing what to expect, I couldn't quite believe the little cobalt squares weren't real. I traced the grout around them with my fingers. Perfectly flat. Silky, even.

"The drapes are a bit *de trop*, I admit. Did they fool you?"

They still did.

"And the wallpaper's just plain tacky. But wouldn't you know? It's what everyone wants. I'll redo it someday. What do you think? Flocked? Moiré?"

I ran a fingernail over what appeared to be a not quite perfect join. Even that wasn't real.

"You do this for a living?"

"*Mirabile dictu*, yes. That's Latin, sweetie. 'Wonderful to relate.' Believe it or not. The churches in Quebec and the Rosedale wifey-poops still put bread and butter on a craftsman's plate."

"Everything here is fake?"

"*Faux*, dahling. *Faux*."

"That's French for fake, right?"

"Ooo—aren't you the clever little snake. Yes. Here, look at this."

He handed me a box of polished, deeply-veined green stone. It weighed almost nothing. I removed the lid. The underside was just plain wood. Inside it sat a little disk of polished stone, green and

veined but subtler than the box.

“Faux malachite and real malachite. Now really, which would you rather see beside the make-up mirror? The plain-jane real thing? I think not. Mother Nature’s such a dowdy little hack sometimes. Malachite should scream at you from twenty paces. Fantasy, darling. Broad strokes. Bigger than life. It’s what you *want* to see that counts.”

I handed back the box. He passed me several more, with comments. *Porphyry, abalone, alabaster, tortoiseshell...*

“I paid twenty for the chandelier. In Canadian Tire money, no less. Now it looks like Meissen porcelain. You wouldn’t believe how many of those I’ve had to do. Pretension reigns in the salons of the rich. Or the not quite rich enough. Thank God. I’d be homeless otherwise.

“Now, do you want a coffee or something? The kitchen’s upstairs.”

The staircase was mosaic, the banister white marble. A sound I’d dimly been aware of in the show room grew: a woman screeching in a way that set my teeth on edge like nails on a blackboard.

“*La Divina*,” Raymond said, shutting off a boom-box in the kitchen. “I just adore her. Oh, but poor thing, I can see it in your face. You don’t know who I mean. Maria Callas. The Great One. Don’t they teach you anything in the school of hard knocks these days?”

The kitchen looked plain enough, with a gas range, Melamine counters and a table set with floral placemats. He hadn’t wiped them off and there were crumbs. I swept at them surreptitiously as I sat down. They didn’t budge. Both the crumbs and placemats had been painted on.

Raymond opened a tin of Folger’s and dumped coffee into an electric percolator. The chrome appliance could have been the offspring of teapot and a rocket ship. It burbled commentary while he chattered on about his famous clients, none of whom I knew, and homes in places that I’d never heard of.

When it stopped he poured two mugs and set out cream and

sugar.

“Now, David,” he said, sitting at the table, fixing me with an expectant look, “tell me about you.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Cat got your tongue?” he asked, but not unkindly. “Should I have put the cream out in a saucer?”

An unhappy man... as faux as all his boxes... broad strokes on the outside... inside just as empty...

What did he want? What did he hope to hear? I watched him silently and let an image form.

“I don’t know who I am,” I said.

“My dear, at your age no one ever does.”

“No, I mean it. I’m not sure who I am or where I come from. I think I know, but there are pieces missing.”

It was just the thing to say, even if not strictly true. I had no doubt of who I was. But the confusion, the uncertainty, made him feel trusted and looked up to. He could play the wise and sympathetic ear. Inside my head a piece of him clicked into place.

He sat back and crossed his legs.

“Do tell me it’s not drugs.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, that’s a relief. Drug tragedies are so banal. You’re not banal, are you?”

I could see him thinking *You do know what banal is, don’t you?*

“No, of course not,” he answered for himself. “Anyone can see that. Look at you. Those eyes. Wherever did you get them?” He smacked himself on the wrist. “Oh, dear. *Quelle question*. You’ll think I asked you up to fuck.”

“Well,” I smiled, knowing that he’d like it, “you did say something about etchings.”

“*Touché*, darling. *Touché*. There’s more between those lovely ears than anyone might think. And you are beautiful, you know. If you doubt my motives, there’s the proof. I never tell a boy I want to bed he’s beautiful. It’s *too* demeaning. I can’t bear to think I’d ever sound that desperate. Besides, I can’t bring myself to come between

true love.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Darling, don’t go dumb on me. You and Pete. Unless...” He put his hand to his mouth. “Oh, Lord, tell me it isn’t true. You and he still haven’t...?”

I shook my head.

“Child, you don’t know what you’re missing. You’re not straight or something, are you?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just... I mean... he’s just letting me stay. For a while, I guess. I don’t have a place of my own.”

“Tell me what I don’t know. Where were you before?”

“Out of doors. On the street.”

“And before that?”

“I’m not sure.”

“A cuckoo. A changeling. Moses in the reeds.” He threw up his hands. “Do you at least know where you come from?”

“A place called Mt. Hope. I think.”

“You think?”

I nodded. “Pretty sure.”

“Is that where you know Pete from?”

A phantom breeze raised gooseflesh on my neck. The kitchen went all bright and shimmery.

“Pete comes from Mt. Hope?”

“So he says.”

“Mt. Hope, south of Hamilton?”

Raymond snorted.

“South? You could say that. Very south. West Virginia, in fact. ‘Near the Big Sandy River,’ wherever that is. Sounds like *Duelling Banjos* territory to me.”

The room went back to normal.

“That’s not the place.”

He heard my disappointment.

“No, I guess not.” He studied me with genuine concern. “Have you seen anyone about these ‘missing pieces’ of yours?”

“I don’t have any money.”

“Silly me. Of course you don’t. But have you tried to go . . . back home? To Mt. Hope or wherever it is?”

“I’m scared to.”

“Did you run away?”

“I can’t remember.”

He sipped his coffee. He wanted to ask more, but something held him back.

“How do you know Cowboy?” I asked to fill the silence. “Pete, I mean.”

“Cowboy? That’s original.”

“He lets me call him that.”

“I’ll bet he does. Here’s the story. Pete was on the hustlers’ block one night when I was shopping—and I don’t mean for Spaghetios. I’m a sucker for the tall, lean type who look as if their legs belong around a bucking bronco. I guess that’s what you get for being taken to the Calgary Stampede at an impressionable age. Anyway, we got to talking—ha-ha—you can imagine how *that* went, and the rest of it is history. A twenty-dollar blow job in Queen’s Park and now I’m hooked.”

“Do you and he still—”

“—get it on? Fuck? Make the beast with two backs? Do the dirty? Yes, darling. It’s called trade. I get laid; he gets his rooms. You didn’t know?”

“I didn’t ask.”

“And he wouldn’t volunteer. Perhaps that’s why I like him. I can make believe he’s decorous and proper while he’s fingering my backside. No, that’s not fair. I have a soft spot for him, God knows why. Do you suppose it *is* because he’s sweet and decent? Oh, dear—what am I saying? Oscar was right. Sentimentality is the cynic’s bank holiday. It might be time to throw him out again. But there’s you, now, isn’t there? What will you do? What *do* you do? To get by, I mean. I thought you were like Pete, but anyone can see I got that wrong. Your virginity is painful.”

“I used to have some money. I beg from people now.”

“Well, dear, you won’t be doing that forever.”

“I know.”

“Have you given any thought to what you will do? No, don’t answer that. Of course you haven’t. I can see it in your face. Ah, the sweet uncertainty of youth. What I wouldn’t give.” He gazed imploringly to heaven. “But enough of that. It’s time for mother’s milk. I work better when I’m hammered. You’ll have to run along.”

He pulled a Gordon’s bottle from a cupboard underneath the sink as I polished off my coffee. Mug of gin in hand downstairs, he waited while I tied my shoes, then held the door.

“David—?” He touched my shoulder. “I hope you’re not offended. I’m a terrible old queen. I can’t help myself. Sometimes it feels as if the only fun I get these days is trashing all the things that used to matter. But, you know, if things ever get really desperate or you need to talk . . .”

“You’re just upstairs.”

He made big lips and kissed the air.

“Sweet thing. Now fuck off.”



I struck it rich the day Cowboy returned. Forty bucks in just three hours. I spent the afternoon and evening in the library, then gorged myself at Fran’s: ham steak with pineapple rings, mashed potatoes, peas, a Caesar salad and two wedges of cherry pie with ice cream on the side. *À la mode* they called it on the menu.

There was a puddle at the bottom of the stairs when I got back to Jarvis Street. Cowboy’s duffel bag was open on the bed, spilling shirts and dungarees. The bathroom mirror was dripping, and his towel was still wet.

The hustlers’ block, where Raymond said the two of them had first met up, began at Bay and Grenville, north of College Street, not far from Fran’s. I figured Cowboy might appreciate my finding him to say hello, and after all the food I’d had, a stroll back wouldn’t do me any harm.

I walked over via College Street and turned up Bay. A Caddy

dealership, incongruous in old stone quarters, lit the Grenville corner with fluorescent showroom light. A gangling blond, easily two metres tall, slouched against the wall. His face was pocked with acne scars. He watched me pass with feigned indifference.

Further on, a car cruised by, pinning me with headlights.

Grenville is a dinky street, just two blocks long. It starts at Yonge and crosses Bay. Shortly afterwards it makes a dogleg around Women's College Hospital, changes names to Surrey Place, and finishes at Grosvenor. After dark it's quiet as the grave, even with The Strip nearby.

Across from Women's College, two shadows with their faces cloaked in hoodies stood like sentinels beside a streetlamp. Like the blond, they too affected not to check me out. A leather jacket squeaked inside the shelter of the hospital's side door. Its owner queried softly, *What's up, man?*

Ahead, at Grosvenor, a Malibu pulled over. A passenger got out and tipped his hat. Cowboy, wearing sheepskin that I hadn't seen before.

He watched the car drive off, then, spotting me, he jogged across the street.

"Hey, David. What's happening?"

He didn't seem the least surprised to see me there.

"I saw you were back. How was New Orleans?"

"Full of fags. 'Bout what you'd expect."

"Have a good time?"

"Drank a lot of chicory. Ate beignets and po'boys. Saw the inside of more drag bars than I care to see again."

"Not much fun?"

"The music was all right. Got this new jacket out of it."

"Glad you're back?"

"Could do without the cold, but yeah. The guy that took me was getting on my nerves. Been like this while I was gone?"

"Worse, mostly."

He jammed his hands inside his pockets.

"Not sorry I missed it, then."

Headlights turned the corner at the hospital and stopped. A hoodie ambled over.

“Slow night,” Cowboy said.

“Not many customers?”

“Not many selling, neither.” He nodded back to where the Malibu had let him out. “Him back there? Normally I wouldn’t do him, but I didn’t have much choice. I got this jacket and some warm time in Louisiana, not much else. We call him the Old Spice guy. Here, smell this.”

He lifted up a corner of his collar. The fleece smelled like the perfume counter at The Bay.

Down the street, the hoodie got inside the car. Cowboy touched his hat as it slid by.

“That’s Scott. His brother Daryl’s the other one down there. He won’t stick around now Scott’s gone. They come as a pair. Most times they don’t sell. Just broker things. Claim their Daddy’s rich. Could be. They’ve got this big black Lincoln. Cruise around here in it sometimes.”

A white Caprice on Grosvenor made a left. Cowboy turned to face it. It slowed but carried on, then slowed again near Daryl.

“Rental car,” Cowboy said. “He’ll come around again, ’less there’s somebody he likes on Grenville.”

“I saw a guy near Bay Street.”

“Tall, blond, bad skin?”

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“Stretch. I don’t know his real name. Nobody does. He doesn’t talk to anybody. Rumour is he undercuts. Maybe he’ll get lucky.”

Across the street from Daryl, the guy who’d whispered *What’s up, man?* stepped forward from his doorway. He stood a moment, looking left and right, then wandered up toward us. I felt a flash of eyes, a quick once over, then indifference. His leather jacket had a raw, rank smell like grease and sweat combined.

“Hey, Cowboy—what’s up?”

“Not much.”

They spoke as if I weren’t there.

“Any action?”

“Old Spice guy. I haven’t been here all that long.”

“Scott got picked up.”

“Yeah, I saw.”

Another car crept by, a blue Cierra. It signalled right at Grosvenor but stayed put.

“You mind?” Cowboy said.

He started for the car, which immediately bolted round the corner.

Cowboy came back and shrugged.

“Must have wanted you,” he said to leather-jacket.

“Nah, he’s been around a few times.”

“Nervous Nelly?”

“Or a looker. I’m gonna go see. Catch you later.”

He snugged his jacket and walked off.

The temperature was somewhere around minus ten—not bitter cold, just enough to make your nostrils drip. Cowboy started pacing. I kept in step beside him.

“Raymond says you come from a place called Mt. Hope.”

“You been talking to Raymond?”

“He hurt his back. I did some stuff for him.”

He nodded. “He’s an okay guy.”

“I know.”

“Chew your ear off?”

“Yeah.”

Blinding high beams swept around the dogleg. Cowboy angled closer to the curb. The car, a Honda, drove by fast to let us know the driver wasn’t there to shop. It made a left at Grosvenor and beetled toward Queen’s Park.

“He said it’s in West Virginia.”

“That’s right. Fayette County.”

“Where I grew up’s called Mt. Hope, too.”

“The one near Hamilton? They got an airport?”

“That’s the one.”

“Mt. Hope, huh? Looks like we almost got a little thing in com-

mon.”

“Why’d you leave?”

He thought it over. “Needed to be somewhere else.”

“Why here?”

“Seemed like far enough.”

“Ever think of going back?”

“You’d have to drag me there. You staying out a while? I’m going for a spin around the block. Wanna come?”

“Okay. Sure.”

No one passed us heading along Grosvenor. The few cars out on Bay Street signalled turns at empty intersections. When we reached the Grenville corner, Cowboy nodded to the tall blond, Stretch, who dipped his head and looked away. Daryl had quit his post across from Women’s College Hospital. No sign of the leather jacket Cowboy hadn’t introduced me to.

We sniffled for a while in the cold. Three sedans rolled by. Cowboy recognized them all. *That guy’s the organist at some fancy church. That one never tips. That’s George, the taxi driver. Real fat. Good for a free ride when he’s on duty if you jerk him off.*

“Do you know everyone out here?”

“Toronto’s not that big.”

“How long have you been doing this?”

“A while. Longer’n most.”

“Is it really all that great?”

“Keep coming back, don’t I?”

A green Corolla sidled past, made a right, then came around the block again. It stopped ten metres short of us. I could see the driver’s glasses through the windshield. They looked like little moons. Cowboy sauntered down and touched his hat. The door swung open. I figured it was time to go.

I was turning onto Grosvenor when I heard the door and Cowboy’s boot heels clicking on the pavement.

“Didn’t work out?”

He looked away as if I’d asked him something tough. He’d caught up quickly and his breath was coming out in melon-coloured

wisps beneath the sodium vapour streetlights.

“You busy?”

“No,” I answered. “Why?”

He raised his hat and scratched his head.

“Want to make a buck?”

Chapter 11

COMING UP WITH TWENTY-TWO

“BRAVO,” MARION APPLAUDED when I told her about showing Byron and MacKenzie to the door. “I can never steel myself to be that rude, even when it’s called for.”

“Not so’s I’d ever noticed.”

“David, really. I couldn’t insult someone I actually dislike.”

“Do you think there’s anything to this cult of theirs?”

“It’s possible, I suppose. Provided your visitors had their facts straight. CSIS does have a reputation for putting two and two together and coming up with twenty-two.”

“Have you heard of this place, Cassandra Island?”

“Honestly, David—when are you going to join the real world? They’ve been around for at least a decade. Buzz is they’re on the up-and-up—inasmuch as anything to do with psychics can be.”

“‘Up-and-up’ meaning what, exactly?”

“Well, aside from touchy-feely, find-your-inner-Jena weekends, I’m told they host workshops on self-employment, marketing, ways to maintain a client base, that sort of thing. A woman who used to see me got a nice little business going thanks to them. But is it all right for us to be talking like this? You know, high level hush-hush and that sort of thing?”

“If you really cared you’d have asked sooner. Frankly I can’t see what difference it makes. That is, not unless you’re head poobah of

the next Temple du soleil, which is how our friends from CSIS made Cassandra Island sound. But no, they didn't tell me not to talk about it."

"Perhaps they thought it was implied."

"More fools them."

Marion sat quietly a moment, staring at her second brandy and tonic. Joshua Byron and Subira MacKenzie had made for a long recital.

"It's a shame you threw them out," she said, spinning ice cubes in her glass.

"How so?"

"You could have been a hit on the cocktail circuit. Spies, cults, suicides, disappearances. It isn't every day an opportunity like that comes along."

"Opportunity is hardly what I'd call it. And it's not supposed to happen, period. Not in real life."

"Winning a lottery isn't supposed to happen, either."

Nor, I thought, is waking in an alley with six years' of your memory behind a wall of pain.



Ferko's reaction the following Saturday was soberer.

His colour had returned. The monitors were gone. So was the oxygen feed. Only the IV drip remained.

"It was not the wisest thing to do, David."

Surprisingly, his speech had gotten better following the stroke. He had less trouble forming words. If I closed my eyes, I could almost hear the impish host who used to disconcert his guests with, "*David, tell us everything you can about the good professor here.*" Or "*... my colleague, Dr. Murchison.*" Or "*... my old friend, Judith,*" which he pronounced *YOU-deet*.

"I don't deal well with threats."

"Few do. But I would not have acted as you did."

He handed me a glass beside his bed.

“Would you mind?”

Over running water in the bathroom, I called out: “Do you think I should relent? Get in touch with them again?”

I unwrapped a straw, bent it to a drinking angle and took the water back. Ferko rolled it in his mouth as if it were Lafitte-Rothschild. A little dribbled down his chin. He dabbed it with a corner of the bedsheet.

“For myself,” he said, handing back the glass, “I am unconcerned. The taxman will not find me easy to harass. But you? In Hungary, before I fled, those in power did exactly as they wished. I imagined I’d escaped all that in Canada. But more and more, even in this country, citizens are not safe from those agencies whose *raison d’être* is security.”

“What do you suggest I do?”

“Go along with their request. Your heart need not be in it. It is usually enough to observe the forms. Were this the time of Torquemada, I would wear the biggest crucifix I could lay my hands on. Expedience is the key to survival when in danger from the state.”

“Danger’s a bit strong, don’t you think?”

“The CIA, in fiction and in fact, has no reputation for respecting freedom. Or life.”

“The two I saw were CSIS, Ferko. This isn’t the US.”

“No? The elites who run this country seem determined to prove otherwise.”

“But can CSIS really be so scary? Any time they make the news, it’s for yet another blunder. Remember when some poor schmuck left sensitive documents on the seat at a hockey game? It was front page news. They’re hardly in the same league as the Hungarian Secret Police.”

“If you wanted to disguise your competence, what better way than playing at the bumbling fool?”

“The two I saw, the word I’d use is hokey, not bumbling. Over-rehearsed, like colour commentators. I couldn’t take them seriously. Not until that woman showed her claws.”

He turned his eyes full on me. “And will she act upon her

threats?”

I knew what he was asking.

“I honestly can’t say. I could read the partnership but not the partners. She stayed pretty much a closed book. Him I had a bit less trouble with, but then we’d met already.”

He started plucking at his blanket.

“Your skill attenuates with numbers,” he enunciated carefully. “This we know. But there were only two of them. I have seen you flawlessly assess around a table set for eight. That you couldn’t read this woman speaks of discipline, physical and psychological, which by itself should put you on your guard. Your past, both what we know and what we don’t, puts you at risk. You could suffer if she uses it against you.”

“So you think I should go to this Cassandra Island place? Scope it out the way they ask?” I shook my head. “It’s ridiculous. Like something out of *Le Carré*.”

“What harm would it do?”

“You know that all my life, I’ve kept away from record-keeping agencies. That invisible, I feel safe.”

“A not unjustified paranoia.” He savoured the oxymoron. “But it’s too late now. They have come to you. In your place, I’d appease the gods of state.”



I paid a call on Raymond Kiefer later the same day.

Ten years earlier, he’d sold the yellow house and moved up in the world. At least that’s how he put it. The place he bought instead—a tall Victorian with real bow windows and a circular, peaked tower—was two blocks north.

“But it’s across the great divide—,” Carleton-College Street, which distinguishes upper Jarvis from lower, “—and snuggled up beside the Kremlin.” The Kremlin was the grimy former home of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, also known as Mother. “What more could any self-respecting faggot want?”

From the start, Raymond occupied the upper storey, renting out the other two: the main floor and the spacious semi-basement.

The main floor had a gym-sized living room and marble fireplace. For five years after Ferko's stroke, the sound of Callas drifting down the flue had dogged me like a Banshee, screeching in the bedrooms, down the halls, and even in the big porch off the kitchen. The only place I could escape her was the shower. I grew to loathe *La Traviata*, though I loved the flat.

I'd be there still, if Raymond hadn't moved his mother in.

I parked out back and walked around. Waiting on the broad front steps, I tried to peer inside my old apartment but was thwarted by a froth of ruffled sheers.

"Sweetie!" Raymond greeted me in cut-offs and a cloud of gin. "*Quelle surprise!* What brings you to the heartland? Do come up. Let me show you what I'm working on."

He led me up the stairs and to the sun porch at the back. Paint and thinner blended with the smell of booze. Cans of brilliant pigment held a dropsheet on the floor. In the middle was a small, three-legged table.

Raymond waved me over.

"Do you love it?"

It looked like marble. Inlaid on the top—*trompe l'oeil* but perfect—was a compass rose, each ray a different coloured mineral. The figure glowed like morning through a stained-glass window.

"Lapis, turquoise, carnelian, onyx... The onyx isn't perfect. And I think I'll change the porphyry to verd antique—"

"It's beautiful," I interrupted. "Who's it for?"

"The American Hysterical Society. They want a sample piece. Why does that remind me of the old lady who, instead of sectional, told her decorator she wanted a *sexual* couch for an occasional piece? So—drinkie-poo?"

"Rye."

"Coming up."

He shambled to the kitchen and came back with twice the quantity of rye I could consume and still stay standing.

“Cheers, darling. Have a seat. I’m going to go on working.”

I settled in a lumpy armchair. Raymond took an artist’s brush and dipped it in a tin. The brush looked like it only had about three bristles on it. The paint resembled liquid gold. He deftly added highlights to the onyx ray in his design. How he did it drunk escaped me.

Blessedly, La Callas wasn’t on. Sunlight filtered through his hanging plants. The wicker furniture, all white, looked bathed in seawater. It reminded me of my porch when I lived downstairs.

“Do you realize we’ve known each other fifteen years?” I said.

He glanced up. “The years do toddle by, don’t they?”

“Would you say I’ve changed?”

He put his free hand to his cheek, Jack Benny style.

“*Hmmm*, I wonder—street urchin to gazillionaire. Yes, I’d say you’ve changed.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“No, sweetie. I didn’t think it was.”

“Do you remember when I moved downstairs?”

“I’m a lush, not a victim of Oldtimer’s disease. That mad Russian you were hiding out with had a stroke.”

“He’s Hungarian.”

“And still cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs. Urging you to escort—,” he hooked his fingers around the word, “—while paying all your bills. That’s against the sugar-daddy rules.”

“I don’t recall you bitching when I paid a whole year’s rent up front.”

“Hypocrites are born of second mortgages.”

“Do you remember how I seemed when I moved in?”

“Listless and lethargic? Or just bummed out and bored?”

“That about covers it.”

“Poor thing. Your hard-on wasn’t in the escort business anymore. You had offers to be kept, but turned them down. Most days you were up here killing time with auntie Raymond, waiting for the world to throw you something to replace the high of fucking for a buck.”

“That obvious, huh?”

“Honey, more obvious than that and you’d have had a scarlet letter on your back. You weren’t having any fun. Then you started with your psychic readings—,” more visible quotation marks, “—another one of Count Vlad’s crazy ideas. Someone should have explained to him that spotting boners in a business suit doth not a psychic make. My, that came out tortured, didn’t it? Time for another drink.”

He laid his brush across the paint tin and listed to the kitchen. When he returned he sat down on a sofa facing me.

“So, then, what’s this all about?”

“Patterns. Rhythms. Cycles. Mine especially.”

“Can’t help you there. The only pattern I know is get up, have a coffee, feel like shit and hit the gin. Works for me.”

“Sorry, Raymond. I’m not letting you off the hook. A long time ago, you said if I ever needed to talk—”

“Ah, but darling, you were young and gorgeous then. I can’t be held accountable.”

“Yes, you can. Let me ask you this. You’ve seen me through several incarnations, right?”

“Street kid, beggar, hustler, kept boy, psychic, filthy *rich* psychic?”

“Yeah, them. Which one made me happiest?”

“Oh, my, you *are* serious. Does this means I have to drop my role as quipper of bon mots?” He took a gulp of G&T. “Let’s see. Happy.” He thought about it some. “Well, I’m not sure you’ve ever been. But then who is? I mean, look at me. Actually, don’t look at me; it’s too depressing. Better you should ask me when you’ve been *unhappy*.”

“And that would be?”

“When you’re not doing something you shouldn’t. When you’re on the inside, not the fringe. Whenever other people aren’t inventing lives for you to play act at—a john who wants a stand-in for his captain-of-the-hockey team best friend at school. Or a horny honky shrink Henry Higgins-ing your Audrey Hepburn. Goodness, all

those aitches. I'm running out of breath. The point is, when you try to settle down, become respectable, you get bored. The Zippety goes out of your do-dah. That's what happened when you moved downstairs."

"I'd been with Ferko for four years. I thought it was a phase, what everyone goes through when an epoch in their life draws to a close."

"David, sweetie, you read too much. Your sentences are coming out pre-edited. I liked it better when you couldn't string two words together."

"You would. You did all the talking."

"Bitch."

I raised my drink. "Learned it from a master."

Raymond raised his, too. A little bit sloshed over the lip. He didn't seem to notice. His eyes were going cloudy and unfocused.

"You were better for a while when you started with your psychic readings."

"That's what I thought, too."

"But it didn't last, now, did it? A year later, you were moping around auntie again. Then you won that lottery. Money can't buy happiness—blah-blah-blah—but if it buys the things that make you happy what's the difference? You travelled, got yourself another place, bought off portions of your past and settled into getting into people's heads instead of in their pants. But here you are again, talking to a drunken queen about your empty life."

"Did I say empty?"

His far-off gaze was getting far-er.

"You were at your best when you and Pete were kings of Grenville Street. Footloose, fancy free, depending on the kindness of a steady stream of strangers. The memory won't go away. If you're looking for a pattern, start there.

"Too bad you didn't hook yourself on drink back then. The buzz is so reliable. What a friend we have in Gordon's. No matter where you are, it's never further than your local holy water fount."



My sometimes Sunday ritual that Marion had yet to figure out was that I snuck off to Mt. Hope. That weekend, I indulged.

The route I took there never varied—QEW to 403, 403 to Hamilton, then south on Highway 6. The first leg's just as numbing as it sounds, with box stores, malls and hotels whizzing by. The sameness makes you feel you could be anywhere. But then you hit the 403 and sweep around the west end of the lake. Hamilton comes into view and suddenly you realize that where you are's no longer where you were.

Hamilton's a city split—vertically, not horizontally. Lower town surrounds a bay that's charcoal blue on sunny days and dotted with white sails. Freighters ply the waters, dropping ore and hauling steel from the Stelco and Dofasco plants. Torontonians who seldom come this way maintain that's all there is to Hamilton: steel, and smog, and burly men in wifebeaters.

They're wrong.

Inland from the harbour rears a vast eccentric landform like a massive butte with just one face. The hundred metre rise is treed, obscuring access roads so steep you wonder if you'll make it to the top. When you do, the street names change to Upper-This and Upper-That and Hamilton continues. The bluff's official name is the Niagara Escarpment, but to locals it has always been *The Mountain*.

Non-Hamiltonian's deride the name, imagining the Rockies where the Mountain wouldn't cut it as a foothill. What they're missing is that height is not the only measure of a mountain.

The Mountain stands between two worlds: the Golden Horseshoe down below, a sprawling megalopolis that stretches from Niagara Falls to Oshawa; and rolling, well-farmed tableland above.

Development along the brow has yet to turn malignant. It doesn't even peter out; it simply stops, five kilometres south. The vegetation softens, as if going up the Mountain were a change of latitude, not altitude. The pine and spruce that practically define the

northern landscape of Ontario give way to broadleaf copses. Willows flourish. Roadside flowers overtake the gravel berms. Teasels spike above the pampas grass that grows in every ditch. Fields of sod and dark green soybeans intersperse with pasturage that reaches to the shoulders of old Highway 6.

The light is different, too, the sky a little paler, as if filtered through a haze of motes kicked up by farmers' ploughs. The countryside is criss-crossed by concession roads whose names recall the landmarks of a simpler time: Stone Church Road, Whitechurch Road, English Church Road, Trinity Church Road.

I parked as always in the parking lot of St. Paul's, Anglican, a little south of English Church. The single house across the way looks like a child's drawing: too much roof, a chimneypot, and centred windows bracketing a small front door. That day, a tattered net was strung between two canted poles out front.

The right side of the property slopes down to meet a bottomland that spreads out from a shallow creek. Pine trees on the left side screen a vacant lot next door, where Queen Anne's lace and purple vetch have taken over what was once my foster home's front yard. The house is gone, and so's the barn; the long, long driveway ends at overgrown foundations.

The first time I drove out—I didn't get a license until after I won big and did a lot of things to make myself official—I was itching to explore. I parked the car, unlocked the door, went to put my foot down...

... and slammed into a wall of pain so fierce I almost fainted. It was a hot day, I remember, but for fifteen minutes afterwards I shivered like I'd fallen through a skin of river ice.

I could look, but not get out. Some spell prevented it—the bad Queen's rosy apple with a poisoned core. Yet I couldn't help returning, like a peeping Tom who can't resist the perilous but aching need to cloak himself in night and drink in other people's lives.

The front door of the house flew open. Four kids scrambled out and started volleying a bright red ball across the ragged net.

I put the car in gear and headed down to Homestead Drive.

Homestead's like a tributary, branching off old Highway 6 and merging back with traffic at the south end of the village. Nothing on it ever changed. The clapboard house that used to be the doctor's office still had smart, black trim. The Town Hall where I sent a private eye to check on records still concealed a park out back. The machine shop, curling rink and barbershop—all untouched and varnished into place.

At Airport Road I hung a right, passing by the public school and cruising west a country block. Driving east held no attraction. This side of the highway, every road was like a line of force, the straights and curves and intersections glowing with enchantment. East, the magic vanished. The lines of force turned grey and dead. Nothing called me there. I tried exploring once, on Whitechurch Road, but U-turned half a kilometre later.

I meandered south on farm roads till I came to Caledonia, a gypsum-mining town along the banks of the Grand River. Like Mt. Hope, the main street is impervious to time, with shops whose orange brickwork looks as hotly terra cotta as it did a century ago. I stopped for fish and chips, had a Blizzard at the Dairy Queen, then took the highway north again and pulled in at St. Paul's.

The sun was getting low, burnishing the bottomland and firing wisps of cloud with pink. The kids had left their ball outside, a red splotch on the evening lawn.

The creek that forms the bottomland is fed in part with run-off from a pond behind the vacant lot. A muddy channel joins the two, thick with lime-green algae when the weather's hot. The pond itself is wide, spring-fed, and deep enough to swim, although you have to wade through silt before the bottom starts to drop. As you do, minnows dart around your legs and crayfish skitter under rocks. Cattails on the far side shelter turtles and spring peepers.

But however much I wanted to, I couldn't squelch through silt or swim across. I couldn't hunt for frogs' eggs in the reeds, or upend turtles with a stick. I couldn't happen on a nest of snakes and keep one in a jar, or lie down on the bank and look for castles in the clouds. Something always stopped me. All I had was memory. I

couldn't even see the pond from here.

The day before, Ferko, musing presciently, had asked:

"Do you still drive to Mt. Hope?"

"Sometimes."

"Is it still the same?"

"It is."

"I'm becoming worried, David. Your settled life—the riches, repetition, ritual—how long has it been? Four years? It's done you good. The therapist in me approves."

"But what comes next? Who you are is locked inside your missing years. Visiting Mt. Hope may not be how to find them. Perhaps the key is lurking somewhere other than the past."



I ate supper at Il Vagabondo, a block from my apartment. Fettuccine with gnocchi in a cream sauce—the Italian equivalent of a plate of home fries doused with Heinz.

At home, I checked my messages. Two from clients cancelling their visits later in the week, and one from Kirin Neemes. I fixed myself a rye and ginger, took it to the study and dialled Kirin's number.

"I hope it's not too late," I started off.

"No, it's fine. I'm a night owl and I don't have any contracts right now anyway."

"What's up? You left a message. Did you want to schedule an appointment?"

"Maybe I should?" It sounded like she didn't know the proper etiquette. "I really just wanted to ask you about something."

"Shoot. If I can't help over the phone, we'll book some time."

"Oh, okay. What I was wondering is, do you know anything about that retreat for psychics up north? The one with the booth I met you outside of at the Fair?"

I smiled. Coincidence. It happens all the time. Making something of it is a psychic's bread and butter.

“As a matter of fact, I was asking my neighbour about it a few days ago.”

“Really? Why?”

“The subject came up.”

“What did she say?”

“Good things. They’re on the up-and-up. Why the interest?”

“I’m thinking about going. I got my tax return, and Carlin’s with her father. I was reading the brochure, and it sounded like something I ought to do. I mean, I have all these questions, you know, about stuff, and I thought maybe—”

“When?” I cut her off.

“I dunno. Next week some time?”

“How long?”

“A week, maybe? Ten days? I checked online. They’re not booked up or anything.”

The first time Byron called he’d tucked a card beneath the rose vase. I’d wondered at his choice of paperweights but hadn’t thrown it out. It was on my desk beside the mouse. I picked it up and flicked it with my thumb.

“Feel like company?”

Chapter 12

WHAT COLOUR IS A MIRROR?

WHO CAN'T REMEMBER their first time?

Not old, not young, not fat, not thin, not handsome, not a dog—the out-of-towner in a green Corolla sticks out just because he was the first.

Cowboy told me what to charge.

“Go higher if you think he’ll pay, but don’t go any lower.” Then, acknowledging my greenness: “He wants fancy stuff, say no.”

I walked toward the car with the strange sensation that a glacial soul had stepped inside my skin. My legs moved forward on their own. It felt as if no action was of any real consequence. In such a state, I could do anything.

He wanted me to blow him. I’d fantasized about that often, but the size and taste of someone in my mouth was still unknown. I knew what felt good, though, what made me cum. It had to be the same for others.

So I sucked him off. He grew impatient and began to stroke himself. His fist banged up against my mouth. I pulled back. He slowed and asked me hoarsely if I’d jerk off while he watched.

I hadn’t been aroused at first when I got in the car, but as soon as he’d unzipped a switch got thrown. I was hard and ready. Side by side, we masturbated in an empty office parking lot. Eyeing my prick greedily, he asked me if I’d cum. A dislocated part of me re-

sponded: “*Twenty extra.*”

Knowing that he’d see me blow, his strokes got even faster. I couldn’t hold it in and shot a load up to my collar. He moaned and loosed his own wad while my cock bobbed up and down in dwindling, dry spasms.

He reached across my lap and pulled some napkins from the glove compartment. I could tell he wanted to get rid of me as fast as possible. He paid the price I’d set plus premium for cumming, then drove me back to Grosvenor, both hands on the wheel and his eyes fixed straight ahead.

In less than twenty minutes I’d made more than in a whole day’s worth of begging.



I didn’t know it then but wisdom had it: save your load. Cum too early and your evening’s shot. Maybe not forever, but long enough to lose a trick or two. Johns expect a stud who never quits. That’s a hard one to pull off when your prostate’s working overtime. Women fake; men cannot. Limp is limp is limp.

It isn’t so important when you’re out for cash to party with. Otherwise, you hold off till the last guy of the night. Sometimes you get lucky and he wants to take you home, which means more money and a place to sleep.

But as long as I had Cowboy’s rooms, the protocol of managing arousal didn’t matter. Even on the coldest nights I made enough to feed myself, with extra for some brand new jeans or King Treads when my sneakers died.

My rhythms soon matched Cowboy’s: late to bed and late to rise. If the night before permitted it, I’d treat myself to breakfast, usually at Fran’s but sometimes at the nearby Golden Griddle—the Golden Girdle—which had better bacon. Then on up to the library to spend the day in comfort wrapped in other people’s thoughts.

At closing time I’d buy a supper out of last night’s stash, and in the downtime afterwards, saunter back to Jarvis for a nap. Cowboy

would be there sometimes, playing his guitar and humming out of tune.

I began to understand the pull of hustling he'd talked about. The street was like a magnet. Even in the winter slush, trekking out to Grenville-Grosvenor filled me with anticipation. I was going on display. However bad the night, I felt alive standing in the weird orange twilight, staring down the headlights. The mystery of me—the missing years, my rebirth in a city both familiar and unknown—became irrelevant. Like the hero of a book I read, *The Outsider*, there was only *me* and *now*, an object of desire, a receptacle for other people's fantasies.

In another book, I came across a poem. Coy about its subject, I knew right off the bat that it was talking about me.

Slender boy
—no euphemism there
when an opened door—

he stands
clothes-conscious

invoking law
and men's desire
and,
somewhat invisible
(a universe is fluid with
dark and lights
around him).

He is a sun,
which touches him,
and arrogant
to have planets bound,
circling.

*Slender boy--
not for those who seek,
but those who stare*

and wonder.



That spring, Raymond kicked us out.

The signs had been there from the end of March: small, mostly useless repairs to the plumbing in the kitchenette; a couple of floor tiles replaced by linoleum several decades whiter; curt greetings, as if *Hello* tasted like a dose of medicine.

“Don’t sweat it,” Cowboy reassured me when the news came down. “We got a week or two till someone’s desperate enough to pay the rent he wants. That hard up, they won’t stay long. Either that or Raymond’ll kick ’em out. There’s never any lease. He wants income, not a tenant. Least ways not a tenant who expects a real landlord. I think he gets disgusted with himself for being a drunk with a hard-on for Stetsons. Every time he throws me out he takes the pledge. Guess that’s how come it never lasts. At least the weather’s warming up.”

And it was. By the second week of May, when I sold my winter clothes and packed my knapsack, the thermometer had cracked the twenty mark.

I’d survived the year before and I’d survive again—with the difference that I wasn’t worried about stretching out a fixed amount of money. Three cold months of servicing the lonely, the hidden and the scared had built me up a string of regulars. Ken, the restaurant designer from St. Catharines. Doug, the lawyer who rented two-hundred dollar a night rooms for thirty-dollar blow-jobs. John, the Dutchman with a condo in the west end who’d fallen for me. Barry, the fat guy from down east who cruised in a delivery truck that smelled of rotting cabbage and tobacco.

Which is not to say the money flowed.

“Thirty? I’ll give you twenty.”

“Twenty-five.”

“Will you cum?”

“Get real.”

I usually told the hagglers to fuck off. On slow nights, sometimes not. The really cheap ones got a rep. They knew better than to stop for any but the newest of the new kids on the block. Fresh young faces learned, though, or got warned—by me, by Cowboy, or the brothers, Scott and Daryl, who rarely tricked but knew the street like no one else. Only Stretch, the pock-faced blond, was regularly seen to drive off with the cheapskates. Even then, they’d cruise for hours first.

But most nights all it took was one or two less mingy guys and I’d be set. When the weather’s warm and you can sleep outdoors, when the only entertainment you require comes off the printed page, when you don’t turn on, tune in, drop out, how much money do you need?

At times the sex itself was just the satisfying of a client’s need to cum while being touched by other hands than those connected to his wrists. Sex isn’t sex when, to quote a Sondheim song, you’re making love alone—even if it’s free, and almost always better.

Some clients only wanted to jerk off, drinking in my hard-on with their eyes. Others wanted me to suck them, or to suck me, or to get a hand job. Guys in little cars were fine, but guys in big cars took forever to get off. I’d end up counting strokes, waiting for their muttered quasi-warning, quasi-plea *Oh, man, I’m gonna cum*. If I was blowing them, I always upped the price when I suspected whiplash might result from servicing their grudging cocks.

But there were times the johns weren’t after sex, at least not only. Holes deeper than their mouths or asses yawed. The need for company. The replay of a memory. The hope for fantasy at last made flesh. Filling up those holes, I found I had a gift.

I could become a mirror.

What colour is a mirror? Could one describe itself without referring to the world it reflects? Using skills I’d practised begging on the

street, I walked to every idling car with absolute neutrality. Neither fast nor slow. Legs bowed neither in nor out. Posture neither stiff nor slouched. Expression neither vacant nor responsive. Nothing to intrude on what could be a budding fantasy, a portrait painted at a distance on my skin.

Inside the car, I'd let impressions fill me. Hundreds of them—thousands—each falling into place with the irreversible but random certainty of beads in a kaleidoscope.

The car itself: *model? size? colour? age? transmission? upholstery? temperature? odour? cleanliness? upkeep? mileage?*

The man: *tall or short? fat or slender? young or old? long-haired? short-haired? brushed or gelled? cologne? how much cologne? in shape? getting there? losing tone?*

Complexion... clothing... posture... ticks The pieces all meant little on their own, could even be deceiving, but together told a story.

Speech revealed the most. Not the words themselves, the absurd pretence of normalcy—*How ya doing? Cold tonight. Whatcha up to?*—but everything behind them. Listen to the music of a sentence and the secrets of a man sing loud. I'd learn not only who he was, but who he wanted me to be as well.

And what he wanted, I became.

At first it wasn't easy. To look in someone's eyes and know the person that they're seeing isn't you, to be what someone else's lust dictates, to be filled with history and personality that don't belong to you—it's a kind of rape.

You can't, however, rape the paid.

I'd split myself in two. There'd be me—the real me—observing, and a new me born of someone else's psyche. The second me was pure response. It fed, not on its own desire, but on stimulus it gave the john. The more it turned him on, the more perfectly it fit, the more aroused I got. I was a blank erotic slate waiting to be dreamed upon. And just like dreams, where you don't realize you're god, the client never knew he was creating me.

But for all I did it every night, there always came a moment I'd

recoil: that first touch when the fantasy collided with reality; when I no longer had the option to assert myself; when, in context, it was just too late. Did some part of me despise the lie that was to come? Was I scared of letting go? Was becoming someone else a kind of death?

I knew a place inside my head, calm and silver-grey, where fear and instinct, even muscular response, could not intrude—the same place I retreated to when times were rough and only future pleasures got me through.

Breathing was the key.

In to four.

Block for two.

Out to six.

Again.

Again.

Again.

The grey would spread like mercury. The urge to flee would vanish. In its place, a smooth reflecting surface unaffected by whatever was projected on it. I could welcome, then, this turning into someone else. Invite it, even, like an actor stepping into character.

Acting's easy when the audience is feeding you your lines.

Chapter 13

ONLY ROUND THE MOON

I DIDN'T LET Josh Byron know about my trip with Kirin. Sussing out Cassandra Island had developed some appeal, but no way did I want his boss imagining her threats had worked.

My only preparations were to cancel all appointments, check the long-range forecast, and download Google maps for transfer to my laptop. We'd decided to go up in Kirin's GPS locator-less old Honda. That way if she wanted to leave early, she wouldn't have to call on my good graces.

Her music for the trip turned out to be a schizophrenic mix of Indigo Girls and Shaggy. The joyous harmonies of breakout feminism crashed up against *Picture this, we were both buck naked, bangin' on the bathroom floor* as Toronto petered out and the fields of Prince Edward County rolled greenly to the Lake.

We spoke little on the 401 to Napanee, even when we made a Timmie's stop for coffee and some doughnuts. Music was a safety zone for Kirin, a sonic island she could camp out on when chit-chat wasn't easy. Self-consciously aware we hardly knew each other, she retreated into humming *Girl, you're my angel, you're my darling* and *The closer I am to fi-ine*.

Off the highway, heading north on 41, she turned the music down.

"What did you do before?"

Before you started working as a psychic... before you won the lottery...

“Not much of anything, really.” I did my imitation of the Mona Lisa’s smile.

“I don’t believe you.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

Her eyes slid off the road. “What do you mean?”

“Only that you’ve said it before.”

“Right, I have, haven’t I?” She looked ahead again. “So, what *did* you do?”

“I was a kept boy. And, to use a phrase from yellow journalism, a high-priced escort. Before that, I sold my ass from curbside.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Not a bit.”

“You hustled?”

At least she had the terminology correct.

“In a nutshell, yes.”

We passed a rock-strewn pasture with some sooty-looking sheep. A log barn crumbled in the middle. The smell of shit seeped through the dashboard vents.

“What was it like?”

“Sometimes easy, sometimes rotten. Sometimes work, sometimes play. It had its ups and downs.”

“And ins-and-outs?” She flushed and gripped the steering wheel. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. It might have been a terrible time for you.”

“It’s all right, I’m not made of glass.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“And I’m not your mother’s mother, nor your daughter’s father. There’s no need to tread on eggshells around me.”

More farms went by, interspersed with rockface scarred from blasting. Atop the granite, blueberries were growing wild, judging from the roadside stands that offered them for half the price you pay in town. The stands were shuttered but in August would have

SUVs and Winnebagos parked for half a kilometre back.

“Is that something in my aura?” she asked. “Something you see? My grandmother *was* an alcoholic, the meanest kind there is. You knew without me telling you. And Carlin’s father—”

“—Burke—”

“See? There you go again. How come you know that?”

My laptop was up front between the seats. “Simple,” I said, patting it. “I looked it up.”

“Before or after I came to see you?”

“After.”

“But you knew so much about him.”

“What can I say? You have a way about you that says ‘grandchild of a drunk.’ It doesn’t take a genius to figure out your history with men.”

“It’s that obvious?”

“Does it bother you?”

“Sort of, yeah.”

“If I said I saw it in your aura, would that help?”

“Do you see auras?”

“Only round the moon when there’s weather coming.”

I knew what she was hoping I would say. *I see things, Kirin. I know the secrets of the heart and mind. I have the Gift.* And it would have been so easy. I’d never balked at lies before. Why then?

“What was he like?”

The man who kept you . . .

“What *is* he like. We’re still in touch.”

She raised a tailored brow. “You mean you still . . . ?”

“No. He’s an older man. Partially paralysed now. Stroke.”

“How much older?”

“Forty years.”

“Rich?”

“It seemed so at the time. My perspective’s changed a little.”

“I guess it would. Was he good to you?”

“Extremely. And not just in the material sense. Although that, too, of course.”

“What did he do?”

“Head of psychiatry at Sunnybrook for twenty-five years, then in private practice. He liked thorny cases, ones that kept him hopping. He used to call initial consultations ‘auditions.’ That should give you some idea.”

“How long were you together?”

“Four years.”

“Did you love him?”

“He was insatiable in bed, considerate in everything, loved to share his knowledge, and never could resist the urge to stir the shit.”

“But he wasn’t meant for you.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know. A feeling I get. Like you’ve never been in love.”

“Do you see that in my aura?”

She punched me lightly on the shoulder. “Don’t make fun.”

“I’m not.”

Just trying to make a point.

We made a stop for gas at Kaladar where Highway 7, the Trans-Canada, intersects with 41. A little further on, the landscape started changing into True North Strong and Free. Spruce and cedar lined the shoulders. Gangly birches struggled to survive. Profoundly asymmetrical Jack pines capped sheer pink granite crests. Skeletons of drowned trees rose from glaring water pooled in bogs.

“He was your mentor, right?”

Back to Ferko.

“Yes.”

“And you paid him back in sex.”

“A Greek arrangement’s what he called it. He said the Greeks knew something we’ve forgotten, that erotic tension motivates a teacher. Viewed that way it’s hard to say who paid whom for what.”

“And this thing you do—psychic counselling—it was his idea?”

I mentally gold-starred her psychic scorecard. Focused on the road, she was making leaps and coming up with answers.

“Is that another ‘feeling that you get’?”

“I don’t know what else to call it. But I’m right, aren’t I?”

“You are.”

We swept around a curve. A small lake glittered through the trees ahead.

“What was his name?”

I looked over at her. “Why don’t you try telling me?”

“What do you mean?”

“I think you know.”

She laughed nervously. “Like a sort of psychic test?”

“You’ve been flirting with your intuitions for the past few minutes. Why not go all the way?”

“What do I have to do?”

Take my hand... concentrate... focus... focus on the energy between us...

“Nothing,” I said. “Just pull a name out of a hat.”

“That’s all?” She sounded dubious. “I dunno, how ’bout... Frank?”

The road turned glassy for a moment. I blew out a long breath.

“What?” she asked, mistaking my reaction.

“His name is Ferenc,” I said. “Hungarian for Franklin.”

“No way. You’re kidding.”

Suddenly I understood the image I’d gotten from her twice of static coalescing into pictures of myself. We were the same, or very nearly. She was taking in enormous quantities of data—her “flashes”—but lacked the discipline to make them all cohere.

“I call him Ferko. It’s a diminutive, not exactly Frank, more like Frankie. In Hungarian, the last thing you’d expect him to be called. He enjoys the way it ruffles stuffy feathers.”

Kirin gripped the wheel at ten and two, peering at the road like those old men in hats who crawl along the highway with a trail of thirty cars behind.

Highway 41 took us through the settlements of Cloyne and Northbrook and past the entrance to Bon Echo park. In places we could see Lake Mazinaw, the jewel in Bon Echo’s crown. I read somewhere Walt Whitman found it paradise on earth.

A little past Bon Echo, I began to notice traffic on the other side

was coming down in little clumps. Construction signs appeared, then bulldozers and finally an orange-vested flagman.

“Ask him how far the roadwork goes,” I said to Kirin.

She rolled her window down and got the news: twenty kilometres of stop-and-go single lane.

I leaned over.

“We’re trying to get to Dawe’s Lake. Is there any way to bypass this?”

The flagman—young and deeply tanned—took off his hardhat and scratched his head.

“Well, if you don’t mind going back a ways, you can take a right at Cloyne. That’ll get you over to Fourth Line, which goes straight up to 78. Or you can stay on Fourth until you hit Bourne Road. Either one’ll take you to River Road. Hang a right there and just keep going till you see the lake.”

Kirin made a three-point turn and took us back to Cloyne.

Fourth Line turned out to be a gravel road and anything but straight. At one point what we took to be a country lane split off a big left curve. Two concessions later Kirin noticed that our route was now identified as Curley Road. I pulled the laptop from between the seats and booted up. Four zooms on the map and I could see where we’d gone wrong.

“That was Fourth Line back there,” I told her. “But it looks like Curley Road veers over to High River so I think we’re still on track.”

We carried on, silent in the way lost travellers get. The gravel turned to hardpack, then to washboard, but eventually decanted us on River Road. High River, to our left, was a muddy ribbon stippled with bright sunlight.

“I hope Dawe’s Lake is cleaner than this,” Kirin said. “I brought a bathing suit.”

“It’ll be cold this time of year.”

“I swam in high school. Synchronized. We used to call it Sink-or-Swim. I got used to cold water.”

We passed through Paxton, a nowhere-looking town tucked between the river and a wooded ridge. North, the ridge became a cliff,

glittering with schist and mica. Cedars with their roots exposed clung gamely to the side. Across the water, docks with power boats and seaplanes spoke of cottages behind a scrim of conifers.

“Why are you doing this?” Kirin asked.

Why are you coming to Cassandra Island?

“I need a break.”

“That’s all? With the kind of money you’ve got you could take a break in Monaco.”

“Good point. Truth is, I’ve been looking for an excuse to check this place out.”

“And I provided the excuse?”

“Said like that, it sounds awful. What I mean is, I don’t have a lot of friends. I was sort of hoping you and I . . .”

She nodded. *Not a lot of friends in her life, either.*

The crest of rock and trees veered east while the road stuck to the riverside. Ahead, a concrete arch bridge spanned the water.

Kirin slowed.

“Is this where we turn?”

“It’s either that or swim.”

Halfway across, I could see where High River widened into Dawe’s Lake—a blinding finger of water ringed with pines and dotted with small islands.

Kirin’s mood grew somber as we headed north again.

“That’s not all, is it?” she said. “There’s more to your coming along than you’re letting on.”

No doubt . . . no insecurity . . .

It felt odd being told about myself. Odd, but not disquieting. And if Kirin were like me, I knew I’d have to tell the truth.

“You’re right,” I said. “I’m on a secret mission for Canadian Intelligence, spying on Cassandra Island to discover if it hides a cult that kidnaps hapless psychics and occasionally sends them to their deaths.”

This time, she didn’t punch me lightly on the shoulder. She swatted me. And hard.



With memories of the Psychic Fair still fresh, Cassandra Island came as a surprise.

After jogging down a shaded lane, we pulled into a parking lot marked off with railway sleepers. The smell of sun-baked creosote greeted us when we got out.

Kirin stretched and breathed a liberated lungful.

“I could get used to this.”

“Cottage country at its finest.”

The brochure photos hadn’t lied. The cedar lodge, set off against a deep blue sky, had the rich orange hue of ’50s Kodachrome. Dawe’s Lake twinkled prettily. Several hundred metres out, the treed mound of Cassandra Island rose above its own reflection.

Kirin popped the hatchback, tussled with a hockey bag, and slung it on her shoulder while I hauled my suitcase from the back seat of the Honda.

“Ready?” I asked, shutting the door with my hip. “Let’s go see if the rooms match the view.”

The lodge was built of square-hewn logs, neatly pointed, freshly stained. Dormers marched along the roof. Inside, the wide-plank flooring gleamed with Varathane. A braided rug in pale blues and russets held a sofa and some chairs. Dried flowers in wicker sconces graced the walls. Martha Stewart would have approved.

A ponytailed blonde at the reception desk, tippy-tapping at a keyboard, looked up as we approached.

“Mr. Ase and Ms. Neemes?”

We must have been the only guests slated to arrive that day. Still, it was a nice touch, greeting us by name.

“David and Kirin, please,” I said, flashing her a thousand-watter. “And you are . . . ?”

“Debbie. Welcome to Cassandra Island. Your first visit, right?”

The smile may have been too much. She glanced from me to Kirin. *Anything between them?* she was wondering. *Just friends?*

“Let me show you to your rooms. When you’ve settled in, come

back down. I'll give you the tour." She opened a drawer and took out keys. "This way."

She led us to a landing on the second floor and down a panelled hall. The doors on either side had numbers done in whittled pine.

"You picked a good time. We're not too full. Both your rooms have views toward the lake."

She opened number six and waited to see which of us would take it. I moved first.

"Now, remember—whenever you're ready, come down and I'll show you around."

The room smelled faintly of vanilla. I tossed my suitcase on the bed and set about transferring jeans and T-shirts to an antique dresser. The clothes I had to hang—flannel shirts, a windbreaker and vest—went in a closet stocked with solid maple hangers.

I splashed some water on my face in the standard-issue bathroom—water glass in paper, wafers of unopened soap, midget bottles of shampoo—then cranked the bedroom window open.

The sun was getting low, casting shadows on a broad expanse of lawn that sloped toward the rocky shore. Flanking it were cabins nestled in the trees. A flagstone path led to a fire pit with limestone benches. A long black dock stretched out into the lake.

Kirin tapped and let herself in.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" she said, coming up beside me. "I'm glad I did this. I already feel . . . something. It's so peaceful." She continued looking out. "Not many people around."

"Perhaps they're at an afternoon séance."

She turned.

"Don't do that. Not here." *Don't burst my bubble.* "I'm confused enough. I don't need someone making fun all the time."

"You're right. It isn't fair. I'll keep my tongue in check."

She searched my face, looking for an answer to the unasked question: *What makes you such a cynic, anyway?*

"Shall we go downstairs?" I said.

Debbie heard us coming and looked up. "Your rooms okay? Ready for the tour?"

She came around the desk and gave us both a neatly printed sheet of paper.

“Since this is your first visit—you heard about us at the Psychic Fair in Toronto, right?—I’ll explain a bit about how we operate.

“What you have there is our schedule for the next two weeks. As you know, we’re a retreat. The idea is to get away. But we’re also here for education and support so there are always seminars and workshops going on. No need to sign up for them, by the way. They’re mostly led by guests who volunteer when they arrive. Six times a year, we hold focused training courses. For those we bring in paid instructors. The rest of the time we try to make sure at least one acknowledged psychic is in residence.”

“I understand you rent out to non-psychics, too.” I made *non-psychics* come across as faintly xenophobic.

“During the winter. The Bridle Valley hill’s not far from here. Don’t worry. Your visit won’t be interrupted by a gang of ski jocks. Now, if you’ll come this way?”

She led us to a set of double doors.

“The dining hall. Breakfast is from six to nine. Lunch is eleven-thirty to one. Dinner is from six to eight. Meals are buffet. If you have special dietary needs, speak to the cook. His name’s Axel. He’s always in the kitchen—,” she pointed to a door behind a bank of steam tables, “—and doesn’t mind rustling up snacks if you get hungry.”

I stepped inside the empty room. The high cathedral ceiling echoed. The furnishings—long plank tables, ladder-back chairs—were of the everything-in-native-wood motif. Two framed posters caught my eye. One was from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. First officer Will Ryker’s hand brushed the tush of empath, Counsellor Troi. A cartoon bubble had her saying: “Captain, I *sense* something.” The other was from an *X-Files* episode. Its bubble had a fortune teller saying: “You will meet a blonde. Or a redhead. Maybe a brunette.” If memory served, the caption was verbatim. Someone at Cassandra Island had a sense of humour.

“Over here,” our guide went on, “is the library.”

She stood aside and let us take in floor-to-ceiling books. In deference to its only occupant, a grey-haired Asian man, she dropped her voice.

“We have an excellent collection of books on a variety of subjects: psychology, paranormal studies, anthropology, Eastern mysticism, fortune-telling. You’ll notice some of them are behind glass. They’re very old. If you want to study them, the key is at the desk.”

The Asian man glanced up. Debbie led us quietly away.

“That was John Wu Shen. An authority on the Chinese *Book of Changes*. He’ll be giving lectures.”

“Do you participate in any of the activities?” I asked.

She flushed, crediting my question with more than I’d intended.

“I don’t have any sort of special gift. This is a summer job. I’m a student at Trent.”

“Are you from around here?”

“Bourne. It’s east of Paxton. Now, here’s the conference room . . .”

Medium-sized, devoid of windows. Long tables, braided rugs, and carts of multi-media equipment.

“The meditation room . . .”

Simplicity itself, with Lauren Harris arctic scapes bejewelling the walls.

“And down here, the lab . . .”

Two adjoining rooms, separated by a wall whose top half was a sheet of glass. Both rooms were clad in sound-absorbing tile. A counter ran the length of the dividing wall. The room beyond held monitors not unlike the one in Ferko’s room.

“Lab?” Kirin enquired.

“More of a practice room,” Debbie amended. “It was originally hoped Cassandra Island would encourage scientific research into psionic phenomena. That didn’t happen but the lab proved popular with guests. The equipment lets them work with biofeedback.”

“Can anyone use it?” I asked.

“Sure. Get Mr. Sheffield—the Island administrator—to show you how. Speaking of whom, he’ll want to meet you. I can take you

to his office now, or, if you'd rather, you can catch up with him at supper. You'll like him. He's a great guy."

I looked at Kirin to see which she preferred.

"I'd kind of like to settle in first," she said. "Maybe have a nap and freshen up."

"Right," said Debbie. "And you, David?"

"The same. Thanks for showing us around."

"My pleasure. If there's anything you need, don't hesitate to ask."

"I do have one question," I said. "Where is everyone?"

"Oh, that," she laughed. "Down in Paxton, at the Rainbow Grill. We don't have a liquor licence so just about every afternoon somebody gets a gang together. The Rainbow's sort of our unofficial watering hole. Don't be surprised if you get invited."



The missing guests returned when I went later to retrieve my laptop out of Kirin's car.

A small blue schoolbus with Cassandra Island's logo on the side disgorged a laughing, rag-tag group who, by the time I'd collected Kirin in response to a vigorously clattered dinner bell, were already in the dining hall swarming the buffet. Behind it was a blond-haired giant wielding a carving knife with frightening panache. His infrequent smiles showed teeth that looked like they'd been smithied in a Nordic forge.

"He's hot," Kirin whispered in my ear.

"And gay."

"You wish."

I scooped some mashed potatoes on my plate. "If you say so."

Kirin helped herself to fiddleheads and stared.

"Damn. I think you're right."

"Looks like coming here was a good idea."

"What do you mean?"

"Your sensitivity's improving already."

“Fat lot of good it’s doing me. I’m straight. I don’t need gaydar.”

She flirted anyway, but the knife-wielding god—obviously Axel, the cook who’d whip up something between meals—carved her rare roast beef stonefaced. However when I asked for pork, I got a flash of glacier-blue eyes. It looked as if my scouting trip for CSIS was going to have an unexpected perk.

Most of the diners were clustered under Deanna Troi’s sumptuous hips. Only the Asian scholar we’d seen in the library sat apart, an open book for company.

Kirin and I took a table near enough the group to welcome invitation. Friendly taunts and laughter filled the hall. The New Age flakes Cassandra Island’s promo copy seemed to have been written for must have been in hiding.

When we got to coffee Kirin’s eyes took on a nico-junkie’s wandering, desperate gaze. She started fidgeting with empty cream containers.

“Outside?” I suggested. “I’ll keep you company.”

She stood up gratefully, mug in hand.

“Yoo-hoo!”

A happy-looking woman in a flowered muumuu waved us over. Kirin muttered *Shit* but flashed some model-perfect teeth.

“You must be Kirin and David,” the woman gushed, all bright red lipstick and pencilled brows. A cap of auburn hair, of a shade unknown in nature, wiggled on her scalp like a badly seated wig.

“Guilty.” I lifted a hand in greeting. Kirin did the same, adding a self-conscious *Hi, all*. “And you are . . . ?”

“Irene.”

“Resident nosey-parker,” the man beside her piped up.

“Social director from hell,” someone else remarked.

Irene dismissed them with a wave. “I check the guest list for arrivals. It’s how I knew your names.”

“And how she rooks you into things,” another wag contributed.

“Oh, hush. Now—who’s going to scoot over so Kirin and David can join us?”

Kirin’s look grew panicky.

“Can we take a mini-raincheque on that?” I asked. “We were just going outside.”

Kirin held up her pack of cigarettes by way of explanation.

“Don’t be silly. Nobody’s going to die if she smokes in here.” Irene looked pointedly around the table. “Anyone who doesn’t like it can be the one to go outside for a change.”

“No, really . . . ” Kirin demurred.

“Nonsense. There’s no reason for you to be treated like a leper. Axel!” The blond giant looked up. “Is there an ashtray somewhere?”

He vanished to the kitchen and returned a moment later. Irene ordered two of her companions to another table.

“So,” she asked me while Kirin lit up, “what do you do? Psychically-speaking, I mean.”

“It’s a little hard to describe. The term I use is psychic counselor.”

“As in you counsel psychics, or counsel people using psychic means?”

“The latter, mostly.”

“But how *wonderful*. What’s your special skill? I’m a channeler. I re-unite people with their former lives.”

“Most of whom her clients died to get away from in the first place,” a woman in horn-rimmed spectacles put in. She was thin and wore a pleated skirt, which made her look like a librarian.

“Careful, Margie,” Irene said, “or I’ll tell them what you do.”

“She’s an aura healer,” the man across from me confided with a wink. His buckskin vest and moustache made him look as if he ought to be out roping calves. “With a speciality in male dysfunction.”

“Really, Don,” Margie chastised. “That’s only part of what I do.” She took a sip of what I’d have bet was tea, not coffee. “You make it sound as if I hump my clients.”

“You mean you don’t?”

“Only if they’re hung.”

Everybody roared. When the laughter died, Irene asked again:

“Really, David—what’s your special skill?”

“I read people,” I answered. That sounded bald so I added: “In the present,” which garnered a few chuckles. “I see who they are, *where* they are, and where they’re headed. I know what’s troubling them, what mistakes they’re going to make. You could say I sense the person people try to hide.”

Irene clasped her hands. “What a marvellous gift.”

“Better watch it, Irene,” the cattle-rancher guy named Don cut in. “I hate to think what he could sense from you.”

“Chippendale fantasies.”

“More past lives than Mehitabel.”

“A closet full of polyester muumuus.”

“Her real hair colour.”

Irene absorbed the insults.

“You’re all drunk,” she said, crossing her arms.

“Guess you shouldn’t have bought that last round at the Rainbow, eh?”

She ignored the quip and spoke to me again.

“Seriously, David—you can read the thoughts of others? Know what they’re feeling?”

“As long as I can remember,” I answered, mentally adding *but not by psychic means*.

Actually, it felt good to lie directly instead of dancing, as I usually did, around the truth *with* the truth. Hell, I was supposed to draw attention to myself. I could make up any story I wanted.

“Marvellous,” Irene repeated, then turned her attention to Kirin. “And what about you, dear? What do you do?”

Kirin, who’d been smoking nervously, tamped out her cigarette with rapid little movements.

“I model. I mean, that’s what I do professionally. I’m not sure I have a psychic gift.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Margie down the table said. “Anyone can see you have a talent.”

“See?”

Kirin shook her head as if trying to clear her vision.

“Your aura, dear. There’s a purple glow around your heart and in the space between your eyes. That’s your gift. I’m surprised you wonder. I’d have thought you felt it all the time.”

“I think maybe I do,” Kirin said, warming up. “Feel it, that is. Feel *something*, anyway. All the time.”

“Is that why you’re here, then?” Irene asked. “To find out what it is?”

“I guess so.”

Irene studied her with kindly eyes that made me think of Yoda.

“Well, you’ve certainly come to the right place. I can’t imagine a safer spot or more helpful people.”

“Do you come here frequently?” I asked.

“Every couple of months,” she said proudly.

“So she can whip whoever’s here into a spirit of co-operation. Right, Irene?” The speaker, at another table, rose. “David, Kirin—I was hoping to catch up with you. Tom Sheffield. I manage this crazy place. I was planning on welcoming you but Irene’s already taken care of that. I’m starting to think we should put her on salary.”

He shook hands with Kirin, then with me. His grip was warm and his appearance just about as far as one could get from a Jim Jones or David Koresh. Despite the crowd, I had no trouble reading him, or what was on the surface anyway.

Thirty-seven, a decade older than he looks... not a native of the region... Vancouver, from his accent... Toronto educated... put himself through school... loves the out-of-doors... plays hockey... not married... will be some day...

“Are you the owner, then?” I asked, reverse confirming what I knew from Byron and MacKenzie.

“Just the guy who keeps things running. And takes the flak when they don’t.”

Been here since the start... thinks it’s the greatest job in the world...

“It must be quite a challenge.”

“You’d be surprised. Half the time, this place just runs itself. There’s always someone like Irene around. It’s amazing really.”

“Do you yourself have psychic gifts?”

Across the table, Don snorted.

“Tom? He hasn’t got a psychic bone in his body.”

“This from a man whose only skill is finding oil for companies too cheap to pay a real geologist?” Sheffield taunted.

“You’ve got it backwards, Tom,” Don replied. “They pay me more.”

“Good thing, too, or you’d never be able to afford a cabin to yourself.”

“Hey—I like my privacy.”

“No,” Margie interjected, “you like a place to entertain the ladies. A word of caution, Kirin: if Don offers to show you his divining rod, just say no.”

Kirin giggled, not her usual nervous laugh, but a happy, childlike sound. Don wiggled his fingers at her with a look both lecherous and utterly unthreatening.

Irene clapped her hands. “Okay, everybody. Enough teasing. Kirin, David—we’re glad to have you here. I hope you’ll get involved. Did you get a schedule from Debbie?”

I nodded.

“Good. Don’t expect it to be carved in stone. We go with the flow, as you young people say. I’ll be holding workshops on hypnotic regression. Margie likes one on one, so if you’re interested in aura manipulation, talk to her. Reggie, over there—,” she pointed to a stick-thin man incongruously chowing down on chocolate cake, “—knows more about Tarot than anyone. His seminars are great. And Mr. Shen,” she said respectfully, “lectures on the *I Ching* every day at ten.”

“Carved in stone,” Mr. Shen said without looking up from his book.

“And you, David, perhaps you’ll contribute something?”

“I’m not sure what I have to offer. I suppose there are a few . . . external . . . aspects to what I do. Perhaps I could give a little talk on sizing people up?”

“Wonderful. How long are you here?”

“For the week.”

“Well, then, I’m giving you a day to settle in, after which I’m going to hold you to that talk. And you, Kirin—I get such a good feeling about you. I’m not sure what or how, but something wonderful is going to happen while you’re here.”

Heads bobbed around the table. Somehow she was right. It was Kirin’s life, not mine, Cassandra Island was about to change.



After sunset, I sat crosslegged on my bed with my laptop open. A fire crackled in the pit outside. Kirin had gone down to join the group. Sounds of conversation echoed off the lake.

“Report to Joshua Byron, CSIS,” I typed. *“Cassandra Island.”*

Would he ever read this? Most likely not. But if his boss, MacKenzie, decided to cause trouble, a record of my stay would force her to back off.

I doubt anything I have to say will help in any way. You already sent your people to Cassandra Island and they didn’t find a thing. No doubt I won’t either.

By your own admission, you approached me in the hope I’d draw this cult of yours out in the open. What you didn’t say--were at great pains *not* to say--was that even if I don’t, you hope my psychic skills will sense them anyway.

Sorry to disappoint, but my impressions at this early stage confirm what you’ve already heard. I came up here with one of my clients, Kirin Neemes. The drive was lovely; the place itself is even lovelier. There’s money here. Lots and lots of it. You said their finances were clean so I won’t speculate if some consortium hell-bent on hastening the End of Days is funding them (tempting thought that is; I own all the X-Files DVDs). The psychic business is a billion dollar industry. A retreat for psychics isn’t

half as flaky as it sounds.

I stopped, reflexively hit Esc:w to save my work, and read over what I'd written. "Supercilious" sprang to mind. It might make Byron smile, but was sure to get MacKenzie pissed. She wouldn't like disdain, however chattily concealed. Part of me thought: *tough shit*. The other part remembered Ferko's warnings.

Outside, someone started playing a guitar. Voices joined in, far away and plaintive on the cool night air.

*Je m'appelle Jean, Jean Batailleur
Je m'ennuie tant que ça m'fait peur
Chus orphelin abandonné
Sous la plein lune, on m'a laissé*

A haunting song, full of pain, but somehow perfect for a fire by a northern lake. *Chus orphelin abandonné... I was an orphan, left to die; left beneath a full-moon sky.* Cajun genius Zachary Richard's ballad had been a hit even in English-speaking Ontario.

I went back to writing, trying to stick to facts.

I've met some of the staff: Debbie, a local girl who works reception; Tom Sheffield, the Island administrator; Axel, the cook. They all seem quite contented with their jobs.

I also met some of the current crop of guests. One--Irene--appears to be a focal point, but she's an open book. I'll retire my psychic shingle if she's concealing anything more sinister than the urge to be a sheepdog. Concerning the others, I can only comment on the way they interact. (I have no special skill at reading groups. Even my ability with individuals diminishes in crowds). Briefly, for a transient group of oddballs, they get along remarkably well. No signs of cliquishness. Only one stands apart, an I-Ching scholar named John Wu Shen. I'm not sure if he's an invited

expert or just a frequent guest. Either way, he's held in high esteem, no doubt because he's Asian, an authority and keeps to his own company.

The Ballad of John the Scrapper died away. I sat there staring at the laptop but I couldn't think of anything to add. I saved the file, typed `sudo iwlist wlan0 scan` to verify Cassandra Island's WiFi link, then uploaded what I'd written to Toronto.

The renewed murmur of conversation drew me to the window. I set my laptop on the dresser and looked out.

Silhouettes were grouped around the fire, mostly to one side. A solitary figure sat across from them. What seemed to be a chin-high phallus rose between his knees. The murmurs died. In its place came music, lonely and exotic, from an instrument I realized must be a Chinese fiddle—two-stringed, played upright. Mr. Shen, it seemed, had many talents.

Past the fire, the gently rocking swell of Dawe's Lake bathed in light from poetry by Walter de la Mare.

*Slowly, silently, now the moon
Walks the night in her silver shoon*

Déjà-vu. Ferko liked to deconstruct it, but standing there, taking in the scene—the sombre trees, the rocky shore—I really felt as if I'd seen it all before.

I shook my head. *Canadians*. Seen one Tom Thomson landscape, seen 'em all.

Chapter 14

THE FIREFLIES ARE OUT

RAYMOND LOST HIS taste for playing landlord in September. Cowboy plied his charms, and before the month was over we were back. Good thing, too. Nighttime lows were dipping below zero.

“What’d I tell you?” Cowboy said, ritually sweeping with the former tenant’s broom. “Nothing to worry about.”

A lot less optimistic about Raymond’s change of heart, I’d spent the summer cultivating regulars who wanted me all night. By the end of August, almost any evening I could count on one to pick me up. Sometimes when they showed up early I’d just tell them to come back. They never got upset. Though lying to themselves—did they really think I saw them as Samaritans helping out a kid whose looks were only incidental?—they understood that lodging for the night took second place to real money made by sucking dick in parking lots.

Mostly inoffensive, their only real flaw was gullibility. Hustling’s a con and cons are based on being credible. If a scammer pulls that off his mark’s a victim, not a fool. But buying love at curbside? Gullible’s the only word for anyone who thinks it’s real.

Gullible, and tedious. And none more so than Ken, the restaurant designer from St. Catharines.

While acknowledging the future value of his hotel room for winter nights that otherwise might find me sleeping on a subway grate, I

grew to dread the polished grill and squared-off headlights of his station wagon coming down the street.

Middle-aged, moon-faced and balding, his routine never varied. Always around two, and always on a bad night, his shamelessly suburban retro-wheels would sidle by a time or two before he stopped. He never rolled the window down or cracked the door or even looked at me until I'd gotten in. He had a knack for knowing when my night was almost over and that no one else was going to pick me up.

We'd circle round the block. Why, I never knew. He showed no interest in threesomes. Then he'd ask me about Cowboy. He'd been Cowboy's regular before and imagined he was cheating on him now. As if Cowboy gave a damn.

Then off to his hotel, so few blocks away we could have walked in half the time.

Upstairs in six-fifteen—always six-fifteen—Ken would order up two bourbons and a club. I didn't like the bourbon and no amount of mayo saved the dessicated clubs. Afterwards he'd deke into the bathroom, douse himself in Polo, and come back in his underwear. He'd watch me strip and comment on the hard-on I'd worked up while he was gone.

In the following half hour he'd let me service him. We'd stick at it till he came without a sound, then he'd set his travel clock and douse the lights. I'd have left then if I could, but he never paid till morning. Besides, the point of putting up with him was room-insurance for the winter.

His breathing whistled when he slept. It never bothered me. In fact I found it soothing, perhaps because it signalled liberation from a man so bland I wondered if he had a soul.

Deep in the dog days of August, Ken drove by and picked me up as usual. Back at the hotel, the air conditioner in six-fifteen was on the fritz. Instead of changing rooms, he haggled to stay put. The sex that night was slippery but over fast. Afterwards, for once, I couldn't sleep. It didn't trouble me. Eyes half closed, I cast a thread ahead of me to David Balfour Park with its certainty of morning

cool several hours hence.

The whistling of Ken's breath was like a lonely peeper early in the spring. My mind, already in the future, began to roam in dreams I'd yet to have. I didn't notice when, instead of being *like*, Ken's breath *became* a little frog in spring, then two, then twenty, then two hundred—a glee-club racket of spring peepers trilling round the pond behind my foster home.

And that's when I remembered.

I'd had an imaginary friend.

There were four beds in the upstairs room that, spring and summer, smelled of heat and cow shit from a farm across the highway. Only three were occupied: mine, and the boys who hatched up plots they'd never let me in. The fourth one, almost touching mine, had rumpled sheets but no one ever slept there.

Yet in the memory Ken's breathing had set off, I heard a whisper from the empty bed.

The fireflies are out.

"I know."

Let's go see.

"We'll get caught."

Aren't they all asleep?

I did a mental tour of the house. The two boys sleeping in their beds across the room. The toddler and the two girls down the hall. The foster parents in their squeaky iron bedstead. No one stirred.

"It's safe."

Let's go.

I slid softly out of bed and tiptoed to the door. The threshold had a board that creaked unless I hugged the frame. A splinter caught on my pyjamas as I inched around.

"Hold on," I whispered.

Take them off. It's muddy out there anyway.

No, not here. Creeping downstairs naked didn't seem quite right.

The stairs themselves were treacherous. Any one might make a sound. I stuck close to the banister and tested every one. Lifetimes

passed before I reached the bottom.

In the safety of the kitchen I got out of my pyjamas and stuffed them round the screechy storm door spring.

The air outside was sweet, a little cooler than indoors, just enough to really feel naked. Gravel bit my feet as I crossed over to the barn. The half-moon light was just enough to see my way around. The field behind had long, wet grass that cooled my soles and made them hum. The tingle seemed to travel up my legs.

There.

To my right, a pale green light winked on and off. A moment later and a metre distant, there it was again. A second prick of phosphorescence answered. And a third. And a fourth.

There'll be way more by the pond.

“Tons.”

Race you there.

And I was running, fast and hard. Even more lights started flashing, rising up in front of me and etching sparkler trails in the dark.

The pond lay still, an inky pool spreading out from reedy banks. I leaned against a willow tree whose branches swept the surface. Heart pounding, out of breath, I felt as if the world had stopped. I alone was energy and movement. The atoms in me whirled while the universe had come to rest.

I looked up. Across the pond, threaded in cattails, a million fireflies were putting on a show.

“Awesome.”

Told you they'd be out.

I was watching fireworks and seeing neurons flash inside a floating brain. Some vast intelligence was talking to itself, blinking in a code I couldn't understand.

Let's swim across.

Vestigial fear of creatures lurking in the night-black water held me back.

Don't be a scaredy-cat. Bring the matches.

A woodpecker had gashed a nest into the willow's trunk. Abandoned now, its edges grey and smooth, it held a stash of goodies

lifted from the foster home and Mr. Dale's Hardware: rubber bands, a penknife, a steel-edged ruler, a pouch of Drum tobacco. My fingers found a metal cylinder of kitchen matches. I clutched it tight and waded into silt, then deeper till the water reached my waist. Kicking off, I sidestroked to the other side.

The ground was marshy, and though galaxies of fireflies still wheeled, I hadn't braved the night-pond just to watch. Feeling with my hands, I located hollow stalks of last year's reeds, pulled them up and jammed them in a swampy patch of rotting vegetation.

Light them.

I unscrewed the metal cylinder, shook out the paraffin-dipped matches, and scratched one on the sandpaper inside the lid. It flared bright yellow, blinding me a second, then settled to a steady flame. I held it over top a hollow reed, and *pffft!*, a soft blue light appeared, attached to nothing, dancing in the air.

Light the others.

I held the match above the other stalks. Six flames jiggled in the air like wickless candles while the gases in the marshland lasted.

One by one they petered out.

"We should get going back."

Not yet. No one's going to miss us.

A midnight creature scampered off as I swam over to the other side. I found a flat space free of willow roots and stretched out on my back. Overhead, the stars were fireflies affixed to blue-black cloth. Drops of water trickled down the inside of my thighs and made me hard.

"I wonder why it does that?"

Dunno, the lazy silence said. Feels good.

I rolled over on my stomach. A warm breeze played across my buttocks. I laid my head on folded arms and murmured thoughts aloud. Some were answered, others not.

My imaginary friend came up with an idea.

Let's cut the tires on the truck.

I got the penknife from my stash.

"You think they'll blame us for it?"

Nah. They'll think of Paul and Jimmy.

"Are you sure?"

Duh-uh.

"They're afraid of us. It's why they're mean."

Yeah, I know. They're scared...

Ken turned over in his sleep. The pond, the dark, the fireflies all vanished. Only my erection stayed, hard and adult-sized. I checked the clock. Six-thirty. The alarm was set for seven. I didn't want Ken waking up and finding me aroused. He might want seconds and I'd have to go along.

Half an hour gave me time to slip into the bathroom and take care of things.



"You see this?" Cowboy asked, holding up a soggy copy of *The Sun*.

He'd come looking for me at the library. Fresh December snow was clinging to his hat and jacket.

I shook my head. Thoreau wrote, *All news as it is called is gossip*, and I pretty much agreed.

He crouched beside my carrel. "Take a gander."

CHILD WATCHES FATAL STABBING blared the front page headline. Beside it was a colour photo: crime scene tape, legs crooked like a Swastika, quantities of blood. A portrait of a freckled boy—a school picture, judging from the sky-blue background—occupied one corner. Details on page two.

Cowboy flipped the page.

Page two's photos were in black and white. A full shot of the victim showed his T-shirt soaked in blood. The source was obvious: a gash dead centre of his abdomen. The inset close-up of his face looked like a mugshot.

Except it couldn't be a mugshot since the guy was wearing a bandanna knotted on his scalp.

The story's facts were few:

The victim—Michael Nemecek, early twenties, known to the police—had been attacked outside the washrooms of an East York mall. The time had been near closing. The child witness, answering the call of nature, had “heard voices in the corridor.” Peeping out, he saw “one man hit the other one in the stomach.” Fearful, he’d retreated to the safety of a cubicle. His mother, worried by his absence, had sought him out and found the victim “. . . dead, you could see it in his eyes.” The police “suspected drugs.” Follow-up on page fourteen (“. . . see *Kid*”).

“That one of them?” Cowboy asked.

I looked the pictures over. “Yeah.”

Cowboy nodded. “I thought maybe. You said the guy with the bandanna would get stabbed.”

“I was buzzed.”

“You called it right.”

“Wishful thinking.”

“Don’t suppose you want to hit the track and do some wishful thinking there?”

“Sure beat getting robbed in Allen Gardens, eh?”

He stood and buttoned up his sheepskin.

“Nippy out there. You sticking ’round?”

I was working through Zelazney’s *Amber* books. “Till closing.”

“Heading out tonight?”

“If the snow lets up.”

“Bad time of year. Not much going on.”

The Christmas season, with its cold and emphasis on family values, had put a damper on the traffic circling Grenville-Grosvenor.

“You want that?” he asked, pointing to the *Sun*.

“Nah.”

He tucked it under his arm.

“I’m going to go kill some time at Woody’s.” Woody’s was a bar on Church Street where Cowboy sometimes picked up happy-hour trade. “And maybe see what I can lift from Super Save. Need anything?”

Nothing came to mind.

He snugged his hat and fixed the brim. "Catch you later."

"Later."

I went back to reading, untroubled by the fate of Michael Nemecek. The year before, he'd had a hand in robbing me. I'd wished him dead and now he was. Things work out that way sometimes. Prescience plays no part.

In fact, prescience is nearly always absent when, in retrospect, we feel most we should have had it.

Chapter 15

HSAO KUO

Report to Joshua Byron, CSIS
Cassandra Island

Coming here with Kirin Neemes turned out to be a good idea. She models and has looks to spare, and because we landed here *en couple*, as it were, speculation has been rampant. Everyone's chummed up to me--the men to check if she's off-limits, the women to find out if I'm available. With little effort I've had one-on-one's with nearly everybody here.

So far, I've seen no indication of anything even vaguely cultish. The staff could be employees at any summer lodge, and from the guests I get only varying degrees of harmless self-deception coupled with an eagerness to have the self-deceit confirmed by people of like mind. No one strikes me as an outright fraud. They all believe in what they do, or rather, believe they **can** do what they claim.

I've scouted the grounds, for what I'm not exactly sure. Scary stickmen à la Blair Witch Project? Nothing like that anywhere. The lodge itself seems not to have off-limits rooms. I've stopped short of tapping walls for hidden corridors.

I've taken part in workshops. Two of them. The first was with the woman named Irene. The subject was past lives. Whether she unearths them is, I guess, a question of belief, but one thing's certain--she's a skillful hypnotist. I volunteered to be a subject and very nearly got seduced into a full hypnotic state. She's so damn likable you just want to go along with her. The fictions I invented--no hard facts, just fragments drawn from history and reading--caused a stir.

The second workshop, held in Paxton at the Rainbow Grill, was on Tarot. A guest named Reggie demonstrated ways to tailor readings based on clues picked up from clients. Tarot 101, but Reggie used a few of us as guinea pigs, and three beers on it started to get fun.

I also heard a lecture on *I Ching* (the Chinese *Book of Changes*) by Mr. Shen. The man intrigues me. This morning when I went outside to exercise, he joined me by the lake. We did a Sun Salute together. Later I watched him lead Tai Chi. Last night I heard him play a Chinese fiddle. I'm no expert but it sounded great. Today he got into a discussion about hypnosis with Irene. In short, the man's a polymath. He makes no claims to being psychic. I gathered, from his talk, that his interest in *I Ching* is philosophical, not oracular.

I've scheduled a workshop of my own. The subject will be similar to Reggie's, viz cold reading. Since you want me to stick out, with my laptop's aid and some snooping of the sort you disapprove of (though, as Ms. MacKenzie took delight in demonstrating, you yourselves engage in), I intend to do a little showing off.

I stopped and contemplated wiping out the dig at Subira MacKenzie. *Appease the gods of state*. No—I'd leave it in. I could always edit later. I was doing as they'd asked; no one said I had to

brown nose. And, as far as I could see, my unfunded visit to Cassandra Island was going to be a monumental waste of time.



“Did you see him?” Kirin gushed at breakfast the next morning. Her skin was glowing from an early swim.

“Who?”

“The new guest. He came in last night.”

“How could I? I only just got up.”

“Are you always this grinchy when you get out of bed?”

“Only while I wait for the caffeine to make it from my stomach to my brain.”

“He’s dreamy.”

“I thought past the age of sixteen, girls no longer used that word.”

“Shows how little you know. We don’t stop using it, we just get more selective about who we apply it to.”

“To whom.”

“What?”

“‘To whom’ we apply it.”

“You *are* testy.”

“It’ll pass. Tell me about him.”

“He joined us at the fire. His name’s Roy. I guess he’s been here before. He greeted Mr. Shen like an old friend and said hi to a couple of the others.”

“Let me guess. He’s between five-ten and six feet, has dark hair, blue eyes, stubble, calloused hands and buns to die for.”

“You did see him.”

“No, just put together a working class picture of the kind of guy you go for.”

“You could get annoying, you know that? I suppose you won’t believe me if I say he’s blond and willowy?”

“No, I won’t.”

“Well, you’re wrong about his eyes at least. They’re hazel.”

“Win some, lose some.”

“What makes you think he’s working class?”

“Roy’s a hick name.”

She started to protest, but scanning through her mental list of Roys she clearly wasn’t finding many Ph.D.’s or lawyers.

“Okay, if you’re so smart, tell me this: Is he single?”

“Now who’s being testy?”

She made to swat me across the table.

“Whoa! That’s liquid gold you almost made me spill.”

“Addict.”

“Look who’s talking, Miss Matinée Milds.”

“Are you going to tell me?”

“If he’s single? Let me ask you something. Was Irene there at the fire last night?”

“Yes.”

“Then he is.”

“How do you figure?”

“Because if she was there, you already cornered her, and if she’d answered no, you wouldn’t be doing your Thumper imitation over breakfast.”

“Jeez. You’re fast.”

“How I make my living.”

“You? A living? That’s a laugh.”

“Figure of speech. I’m going back for seconds. You coming?”

Kirin twirled a spoon over a bowl of yoghurt. “This is fine.”

Breakfasts, I’d already noticed, were quieter than dinners. But if noise was lacking, homey smells were not: eggs, bacon, toast, pancakes, porridge, coffee. I’d already had a plate of waffles but my tummy was still rumbling.

I helped myself to scrambled eggs and beans, and had Axel cut some ham. He took more time than necessary laying two thick slices on my plate.

Returning to the table, I dug in while Kirin dipped her spoon in yoghurt and did soft-core porn things to lick it clean.

“There’s something you’re not asking me,” I said between

mouthfuls of delicious pig.

“Most people say, ‘There’s something you’re not *telling* me.’”

“In your case it’s ‘not asking.’”

“Oh? And that would be?”

A few days at Cassandra Island had already done her good. An unexpected coy and playful side of her was coming out.

“Do I stand a chance with him?”

She laid her spoon down. “Well? Do I?”

“Damned if I know. Futures aren’t my strong point. Maybe you should talk to Reggie. Ask him what the cards say.”

She winced. “I’d look like such an idiot if word got around.”

“True that. But if you’re really wondering, maybe I can help. Last night, did this guy sit near you, or you near him?”

“How do you know we sat together?”

“It’s hard to tell the colour of a person’s eyes by firelight unless they’re practically in your lap.”

“Not yours.”

“Don’t get sidetracked. Which was it?”

She made a show of thinking. “He sat next to me.”

“Then why are you wondering?”



Kirin’s dreamy guy turned up at the tail end of my workshop that afternoon.

The weather being early northern summer glorious, all glittering greens and platinum light, I held it out of doors. The group that gathered crammed the benches circling the firepit. Word of my past lives “recovered” by Irene the day before had gotten around. Even Don put in an appearance. I guess oil diviners want the edge cold reading gives as much as anyone.

At my request, Kirin wasn’t there—I’d claimed shyness—but when Roy, whom I recognized immediately, made his way toward the firepit, I suspected he’d come looking for her. He stood a ways back from the group, arms folded, while I finished up.

“In short, study Gail Sheeney’s *Passages*. Memorize it. Knowing where they are on life’s journey is the best place to begin when sizing up new clients. Establish age first. Check the hair, the throat, the neck, the hands. Unlike faces, these don’t lie.

“Age is like a frame around the picture—the story—you develop from things like dress, body language, mannerisms, speech. Once you’ve got it pegged, move from the general to the specific. Let each step provide you with a context for the next part of the story.

“Lastly, be completely honest with yourself. If you accept yourself for who you are, both your foibles and your strengths, the easier it becomes to make the leap from your own experience to your client’s particular variations on the common human themes.”

Most of it was nonsense. I’d gotten the idea for Gail Sheeney’s book from an article on the Web. From there I’d fleshed out directions for doing what, if you couldn’t do it already, you’d never learn. Since most of the people at the workshop knew each other, I demonstrated the principles myself on marks I’d picked the night before at my computer. A few red faces and lots of laughs in, I’d convinced everyone that, tips and tricks aside, I had a rare and special gift for seeing into people’s hearts and minds.

When it was over, Irene beamed as if I were her protégé, gushing *Marvellous!* so often it wore a groove in my ears. Don clapped me on the shoulder and pronounced *Impressive*. Jocelyn, a Kirilian photographer and friend of Margie’s, enthused about the emanations of twin she claimed was trying to break free of my body. Ruggerio, from South America but living in Québec—some sort of healer—felt I must be “blessed.” Reggie, more mundanely, invited me to Paxton for a beer. I declined.

Roy hung back till everyone dispersed.

“Sorry I missed that,” he said. “Sounds like you were hot.” He offered me his hand. “Roy Calhoun.”

“David Ase.”

His grip was several pounds-per-square-inch overfirm.

“Is this your first visit?” he asked. His eyes—bronze, not hazel—said he really didn’t care.

I flexed my fingers. "Yes."

"I didn't see you at the fire last night. An early sleeper?"

"Catching up on quiet time. And getting ready for today."

"Your name came up a few times."

A challenge... a teaser to see how I'll respond...

He occupied space the way a resting cannon occupies a battle-ment: poised and solid, with mass and density far greater than its volume indicates. I had the feeling if I picked him up he'd easily weigh twice he appeared. We locked eyes. Alpha arrogance informed his clear, wide-open gaze. I broke off first, not caring for the staring match.

"What's your specialty?" he asked.

"Psychic counsellor."

"Really?"

A statement, not a question, conveying total lack of interest. Dismissal, even, as if he'd met psychic counsellors before and didn't much care for them. I had half a mind to get him to define the term since I myself was never sure exactly what it meant.

"You?" I asked.

"Mechanic. Outboards, float planes."

"A rare gift."

He stayed silent long enough for the irony to sour.

"It's not the sort of answer I expect up here," I apologized.

"I have gifts. I just don't use them."

"Kind of an odd place for you to take a holiday, then, isn't it?"

"Some people understand."

"Like Mr. Shen?"

His eyes widened fractionally.

"My friend, Kirin, said you seemed to know him," I explained.

"John and I go back a ways. Kirin—the girl with the long hair and nice tits?"

"I can think of more appropriate ways to describe her."

Either he didn't catch the chill in my voice or was impervious to it.

"She's with you?"

“We came up together.”

“Known her long?”

“Not very.”

Roy looked past me to the lake.

Self-contained... too much assurance... no grey fuzziness of doubt... the inside and the outside match... a perfect fit... too perfect... The man could lie to me and I, for once, wouldn't have a clue.

“Where are you from?” he asked. As before, I got the feeling he already knew.

“Toronto. You?”

“Brantford. I work from a marina on the Grand River.”

“Near Caledonia?”

“Just outside Six Nations Territory.”

“I may have seen it, then.”

“You travel down that way?”

“Sometimes.”

“Family?”

“Nostalgia.”

No curiosity. He continued looking at the lake. His thought, if it extended past his ego, was unconcerned with me.

“You're interested in Kirin,” I said.

His eyes travelled slowly back to mine. “Is that a problem?”

I knew Kirin's story. Roy Calhoun would make another chapter she could do without. But I could hardly say that.

“No.”

He nodded. Seconds passed. Finally, he offered me his hand again.

“Nice meeting you, David. Hope to see you around. Enjoy your stay.”

He walked off, the scent of male trouble wafting after him.



The remainder of the afternoon and evening went as they had the

day before, the only difference being that, after typing up another non-report for Josh Byron, I joined the campfire.

Kirin was there. Roy was there. The unfulfilled erotic tension was so evident I wished they'd leave and get it over with. Which, in time, they did, to everyone's ribald relief.

I felt adrift once they were gone. The fire licking cedar logs, the sparks careening upward into blackness, the flickering orange glow on faces laughing-talking-singing didn't move me as they should. I'd enjoyed playing *The Amazing David Ase*, but now the act prevented me from truly joining in. I couldn't be both star and audience concurrently. With Kirin gone—in more ways than one—loneliness began to settle in.

A splendid moon—gibbous, for the literary—had risen over Dawe's Lake. A swath of lunar tinsel glittered from the shore. Out on the dock, an ember flared. Someone by themselves, smoking. I left the fire and went down. One person I could handle; it was the group that made me feel alone.

The figure on the dock was giant-tall and dressed in white. Axel. As I got close, I caught a whiff of something far more pungent than tobacco.

The dock was planked with squeaky two-by-fours, but Axel, staring at the black dome of Cassandra Island, maybe seeing in his mind the far side of a fjord, didn't turn till I got level with him—if head by shoulder counts as level.

He proffered me his joint, a big cone that looked tiny in his fingers. I took a lungful of the resinous smoke and handed it back.

He gestured across the water. "Is beautiful." His accent was pure Euro-trash.

"Yes," I spluttered, fighting off a coughing fit.

"Like home. How the trees meet the water. I want to reach out and touch them."

"Home. Norway?"

"Lavik. On Sognefjorden. It is the biggest fjord, in the south west. There are many resorts."

"I've never been."

“My village is not near tourists. Some places, the mountains fall nine hundred metres to the water.”

Cassandra Island topped off at around fifteen.

“I use my imagination,” he said. “Out here, the dark . . .”

“Homesick?”

“Only when I smoke.”

He smiled. A Valkyrie’s spear would shatter on those teeth. My knees went weak. The dope must have already kicked in. Axel took another drag and passed the joint.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“David.”

“David . . . ?”

“Ase.”

“The one they have been talking about.”

“They?”

“I do not speak much when I work. I listen.”

The joint went back to him. Our fingers brushed. The contact made a bee-line to my groin.

“I thought it would be you. I see your face, I make the math.”

“Do the math.”

He smiled again, illuminated.

Up on the lawn, a guitar started. Ruggerio, the healer. Tonight instead of Zachary Richard it was a ballade sung in Portuguese or Spanish.

“Do you spell it A-C-E?” Axel asked.

“A-S-E.”

He took a long pull on the joint then two staccato ones and flicked it in the water.

“From the way you say it, I thought maybe so,” he said, his voice pinched from holding in the smoke. “I asked backwards. In case I was mistaken.”

He exhaled slowly, teasing smoke out through pursed lips.

“It is a name from my country. We do not say it as you do. It is not a family name. It is for girls. Peer Gynt’s mother, for example.”

“I know.”

My words came out too sombre, weighty through a haze of dope. The *déjà-vu* of my first night swept over me again, understandable this time because of all the THC. My attention fixed on Axel's hair. Somehow, *blond* was painfully familiar, in a way that firmed up what the Nordic giant's brushing of my fingers had begun.

"It is from an old word," he mused. "It can mean many things. God, for example. Or healer. Or," his eyes swung from the island's pine-swept shore to me, "a tree-covered mountain."

His eyes seemed to have grown into the deep, blue pools poetasters moon about.

"One you can touch?"

He raised his hand and drew the inside of his index up my cheek.

"Yes. Touch."



I didn't see much of Kirin the next day. Or the day after. Or the day after that.

She continued to participate in things but Roy was never far away, a magnet for her quick, approval-seeking glances. I was tempted to ask Margie, whose specialty was auras, if she could see the bubble of possessiveness surrounding her.

When a friend goes gaga over someone new, the range of what you can or cannot say gets narrowed to *I think s/he's great* or *I think s/he's great*. It's either that or silence. I went the silent route.

I also went the absent route, lest Kirin's sensitivity construe the silence for exactly what it was. Which proved not too difficult; new lovers never want the baggage of old friends. Cassandra Island's flexible dining hours, the size of the grounds, and the privacy of my room kept contact to a superficial social minimum.

Evenings, when I might have felt left out, Axel filled the breach.

I'd shot my bolt too early in the week, playing psychic star as soon as I arrived. It had been fun showing off, a sort of retrograde

vacation to an epoch when my bread and butter came from being on display. But when no one sidled up to me with veiled propositions, when no cryptic notes were slipped under my door, when the campfire stayed a campfire, not the locus of some esoteric rite, the glamour dimmed.

Byron and MacKenzie had been out to lunch on this one. Something odd was going on—three psychics dead, three missing—but Cassandra Island played no part. I'd done my best and come up empty-handed. I really didn't mind. It gave me fuel to ridicule MacKenzie, whose threats still had me pissed. Payback would be fun.

However part of me was disappointed. Nothing beats a change to miss routine, but sometimes missed routine just hammers home how humdrum life's become.

Years before, I'd needed small but certain pleasures as fixed points to help me through my days. That trick of mind no longer served its purpose but I'd built a life around it anyway. With so much money, nearly everything brought pleasure now, but only of the modest kind. My life, whose former graph looked like an outline of the Rockies, had, quite simply, flatlined.

I'd been hoping, quietly, Cassandra Island would provide excitement. Maybe even intrigue. Now, with Kirin smitten by a man who brooked no competition and my lure-the-bad-guys mandate shot, the remainder of my stay had turned into an exercise in perseverance with the same-old same-old waiting back at home.

Saturday, our final day, the weather turned to rain. Woolly fog descended, hovering on the lake and twisting through the dripping conifers. The island, for all that it was visible, might as well have been a million miles away.

After breakfast I went walking by myself, shrouded in a Gortex windbreaker. Then, because the day called out for nesting, I chose the lodge's library to while away the hours.

Lamps with parchment shades cast warm light on the orange-y cedar walls, cheering up the room the way a fire does when twilight falls. The fog outside looked dark as dusk.

Mr. Shen, alone with books spread out in front of him, looked up as I came in.

“David.” He nudged up wire-frame glasses that had slipped down on his nose. “I thought you might be by. It’s a good day for reading.”

I glanced around the empty room.

“Apparently no one else thinks so.”

“Ah, but no one else here reads like you do. Don’t look so surprised. A scholar can always tell. Come, join me.”

He cleared a space beside him at the table.

“Are you the David Ase I read about? The one who won the lottery?”

“That’s me.”

“Funny. Your name stayed with me from the newspapers. Strange how that is. Were you a practitioner before it happened?”

“For a few years.”

“It must have helped your business.”

“Ironically, yes.”

His face went still. In repose, the corners of his mouth turned up, giving him a gentle, almost beatific smile.

“Ah, yes,” he said after a moment. “I see. When having extra clients didn’t matter any more. Were you surprised to win?”

“Of course. Who wouldn’t be?”

“A psychic, I should think.”

His expression didn’t change, but his black eyes twinkled. Twinkled *knowingly*.

“Did you always have a gift?” he asked, serious again.

“At least since I was seventeen, though I didn’t know it then.”

“Seventeen.”

Apparently the word meant something to him. He savoured it, rocking in his chair like someone nodding with their body. Numerology in Chinese culture has an almost sacred status. I wondered if he’d tell me what was special about seventeen.

Instead he asked: “How does one not know a thing like that?”

“It came to me in bits. I didn’t grasp that all the pieces were

related. Like a blowup from a newspaper where all you see is dots. With time, I gained some distance. The picture coalesced.”

I mentally apologized to Mr. Shen for my deceit, misdirection by omission. The picture that had come to me was not that I was psychic, but that I could pass for one who was.

“Fascinating. Can you tell me more?”

“It wasn’t the easiest period in my life.”

“Ah. Of course. Forgive me.”

Outside, a storm cloud hidden in the fog dislodged a clot of thunder—not a startling clap, more like a pensive rumble.

“Do you know the *I Ching*?” he asked, nodding at the books in front of him.

“Somewhat. I read translations when I was younger.”

“Yes? Which ones?”

“The Wilhelm-Baynes, of course, and James Legge. Plus commentaries by a man named Wing.”

“RL Wing. I know his work. Beautiful interpretations. So the *I Ching* interested you?”

“Because I read more than one translation?” I shook my head. “At one point in my life, I kind of camped out in a library. Anything I didn’t understand, there were always other books nearby to help.”

“I should infer, then, you had trouble making sense of it?”

His question had a ribbing overtone, as if he knew me all too well. Subira MacKenzie had tried something similar, with her breezy we’re-already-friends approach at my apartment. But where with her the motive was control, with Mr. Shen it came off as indulgence.

“Not really,” I conceded. “Even young, I had a head for context and component parts. How a part is coloured by the whole, and the whole is coloured by its parts.”

“Do you mind?” He took a slender, silver pen. “I’d like to write that down. I could use it in my seminars.”

He pulled a Hilroy tablet close. Exquisite letters—drawn, almost, not written—flowed beneath the ballpoint nib.

Capacity for utter concentration... control without rigidity... aware but not self-conscious... impulses in synch with execution

... no grey fuzziness of doubt... the inside and the outside match
... a perfect fit...

... like Roy Calhoun. Except that Roy-inside-my-head was like a piece of jet, smooth and black and somehow ominous, while Mr. Shen was more a wave-worn pebble, a piece of quartz that, picked up on the beach, would prove translucent. With neither could I get beyond the surface, but where one had walls around himself, the other had put frosted windows.

Mr. Shen stopped writing. He thought a moment, then quickly drew six lines, stacked vertically, the middle ones complete, the lower and the upper two divided by a gap: a hexagram from the *I Ching*, one of sixty-four created out of similarly whole and broken lines.



He pushed the tablet over. “Do you know this hexagram?”

“Not by name. The trigrams—,” the three lower and three upper lines, “—are *Kên* and *Chen*, Mountain and Thunder, but I don’t know what the hexagram is called.”

“Would you care to guess its meaning?”

The *I Ching* hexagrams are complex mini-pictures of sixty-four archetypal human situations. A hexagram is read from bottom to top. Each of its six lines occupies a “place”. Each place is like an evolutionary step. The first place represents entering a situation, the sixth place, leaving it. Places two and five are considered “central”, that is, central to the beginning, and central to the end. Places three and four are in transition.

Solid lines are yang—firm, bright, active. The broken ones are yin—yielding, dark, inert. Neither one has moral value by itself. Hypothetically “correct” solid or broken lines are assigned to each place: the first—or lowest—should be solid; the second broken; the third solid; and so on.

The significance of any line depends on five related factors. Is it

solid or broken? Which place does it occupy? Is it “correct”? Which kind of line stands immediately above it or below it? And which kind of line occupies the place three steps away?

For the last two, the rule of thumb is that if one of the lines is solid and the other broken, they have an affinity that influences both, and, as a consequence, the meaning of the hexagram.

Additionally, the hexagram is split into component *trigrams*, called the lower and the upper. Owing to the binary nature of solid and broken lines, eight figures of three lines apiece are possible. Each has a set of characteristics, derived from the arrangement of yin and yang lines, and a descriptive name, like Mountain, Thunder, Wind or Lake. A hexagram’s two trigrams give further indication of its meaning. As do the so-called nuclear trigrams, formed of lines two to four and three to five.

Which is to say that guessing what a hexagram means is like trying to guess an oak tree from an acorn, and vice versa—simultaneously. Five millenia ago, Chinese scholars straightened it all out. The *I Ching* was a compilation of their labours. One doesn’t guess with the *I Ching*; at best, one memorizes.

“Tell me what you see,” Mr. Shen encouraged in a way that told me I’d zoned out for several seconds.

“Two active lines,” I said, “enclosed by four inert ones, like a good idea thwarted by external factors. Mundane factors rule the hexagram. Creative energy would have to work within that limitation. It’s a ‘light under a bushel’ situation. One that can’t be changed. You’d have to work within it.”

“What of the two trigrams?”

“The lower one’s the Mountain, which suggests remaining still, but the upper one is Thunder—explosive upward movement. Thunder wants to pull away from Mountain. The four inert lines keep the tendency in check. That’s both good and bad. Good because they give stability, bad because they hamper action.”

“Do you get any feeling out of this? Any emotional response?”

It seemed an odd sort of question.

“Intense frustration. There’s all this energy,” I pointed to the

solid lines, “but it can’t move the way it wants to.”

“And if a person were in such a situation, what does the hexagram advise?”

“Don’t aim too high. Don’t rock the boat. You can’t accomplish much. Work within established norms. Be conscientious. Dot your eyes, cross your tees, then check and double check them. Humility is probably the attitude to cultivate. That, and caution. A lot of caution.”

Mr. Shen tilted his head to one side. The warm light of the room reflected in his glasses. His skin, the colour of old ivory, seemed to drink it in.

“When you look at this hexagram,” he asked, “what do you see? The lines alone or something more?”

“What else is there?”

“A picture. A story. A world. Something self-contained, where what means one thing in one circumstance means something quite different in another. A mental construct that communicates itself to you entire.”

What he was describing sounded like the way I figured out my clients. I hadn’t thought of it before, but the *I Ching* hexagrams were very like the images I built of people from the clues they gave. Lines of force, areas of radiance, none of it exactly visual, all of it contained and self-defining.

“You could say that, I guess. Why do you ask?”

“Your interpretation makes you sound like someone who’s been studying *I Ching*. I know this isn’t so from what you said. Therefore I conclude your intuition is remarkable. I’m fascinated by that quality of mind. Why some have it and others don’t. How does it work? What does it *look* like?”

From the intonation of his final question, I was sure he seldom asked it in the company of others.

“Your reading wasn’t perfect,” he went on, “but it touched on something I’ve been pondering.”

He took the pad and drew three lines: one broken, one solid,

one broken.



“Do you know what this trigram is?”

“Yes. *K'an*. Water.”

“And why does this arrangement have that name?”

“The active principle, the solid yang line, is hemmed in on both sides by yin. Yin, in this case, has the quality of earth. So it’s like a stream, with banks on either side.”

“Are you aware it also sometimes translates as ‘The Abysmal’? In other words, a place of danger, like a chasm?”

“If I knew that once, I’ve forgotten.”

“Do you notice anything particular about this trigram,” he tapped the page, “and the hexagram? It’s called *Hsao Kuo*, by the way. Wilhelm-Baynes translates it as ‘The Preponderance of the Small.’”

I studied the two for a second. The similarity was obvious. The hexagram had the same structure as the trigram except the lines were doubled. I didn’t say it though. Mr. Shen, watching me, read it in my face.

“*K'an*,” he said, “is water, energy contained, and danger. *Hsao Kuo* appears to be the same, but doubled, therefore deep water, great energy mightily contained, and grave danger. It seems self-evident. Yet neither King Wan, who first interpreted the hexagrams, nor his son, the Duke of Chou, address themselves to the similarity,”

“Perhaps they felt they didn’t need to.”

He gave me an approving look, like a teacher who’s confirmed his student’s making progress.

“That is how I see it, too,” he said. “The meaning of *Hsao Kuo*—one might even say its warning—is quite clear. No need to spell it out.

“Now, David, I must get back to work. You’re leaving tomorrow?”

“Yes. First thing.”

“Then perhaps we’ll meet again sometime.”

Dismissed, I went to check the shelves for something thick to curl up with.



Kirin and I checked out early the next day and were on the road by nine.

The rain had not let up, and though the fog was gone, everything looked grey—Oz to Kansas when compared with the trip up. If there’d been at least some mist, the weather might have had a melancholic charm. Instead, we got a lowering sky of shuffling, leaden clouds.

Kirin tried to mitigate the mood with New Age diva, Enya, on repeat. One song sounded like the TV ad for Philadelphia cream cheese, with words that might have been *Sail away, sail away, sail away* or *Save the whales, save the whales, save the whales*. It bugged me every time it came around.

Kirin’s thoughts were ever on her new-found squeeze. Every kilometre was an addict’s hour deeper in withdrawal. With the cynicism of the unattached, I found it hard to muster much compassion.

We stopped at Kaladar for coffees, which, once we were sizzling down the asphalt toward 401 again, thawed the lock on Kirin’s vocal chords.

“What do you think of him?” she asked, eyes straight ahead.

I think s/he’s great . . .

Why ask for an opinion you don’t want? I took a mental breath and plunged.

“In your place, I’d go screaming in the opposite direction.”

She tittered. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Not a bit.”

“No, really. You can’t mean that.”

“I do.”

“Why?” She sounded genuinely puzzled.

“He’s not a kind of man I get along with.”

“That’s it?”

“What else can I say? I didn’t care for him.”

“But why?”

“He’s too—” I couldn’t find the word for it, “—too *male* for my taste.”

“But I like that in a man.”

“Right. Silly me.”

Her eyes swung over sharply. “You don’t approve.”

“Does it matter? If he makes you happy . . .”

She didn’t rise to the cliché—proof, if it were needed, how deep her hormones had their hooks inside her head.

We passed under a bridge. The drumming of the rain clicked off for half a second. Enya moved into a ballade about marble halls and knights and maidens.

“He’s unbelievable in bed,” Kirin mused. “He got me doing things . . .”

It wasn’t seemliness that left the sentence hanging. For the next ten kilometres, happy thoughts enveloped her, the kind that leave damp spots on the upholstery.

“I think you’re just jealous,” she announced, quitting planet Eros. “If you’d got laid . . .”

“Who says I didn’t?”

Her jaw dropped.

“No way!”

“Way.”

“Who?”

“Who do you think?”

Her hands came off the wheel long enough to mime a fork and carving knife. Her sawing motion looked like someone jerking off.

“Bingo.”

“Bastard. You could have told me. I didn’t have clue.”

“Gee, I wonder why that is?”

I squirmed preemptively against the shoulder punch I knew was coming.

“What was it like?”

“Fun in a grunty sort of way. English wasn’t his strong point.”

“I’ll bet. He looked like the kind of guy who stares into your eyes and makes you think there’s no one in the universe but you.”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “It was kind of like that.”

“Will you be seeing him again?”

“Not planning on it.”

“How come? Drop dead gorgeous, good in bed and likes you?”

“You left out strictly casual. Shipboard fling.”

She shook her head with an exasperated sigh—the disdain of someone new in love, or lust so deep as makes no never mind.

I stared out the passenger-side window. Rivulets of water crept across the glass. Hydro wires dipped and rose like sinus waves. The thunk of wipers on the windshield chased the New Age sounds of Enya from my mind. A rawer voice popped in my head:

*With those windshield wipers slappin’ time
And Bobbi holdin’ hands
We finally sung up every song that driver knew...*

Kirin ejected the CD and rooted through a stack of jewel cases. It came as no surprise to hear the sawdust twang of Janis Joplin next.

“It’s like we share the same brain,” I said.

Her mouth twisted in a half smile. She didn’t even ask what I was talking about. Two songs in she started humming and didn’t speak again until we’d reached the 401.

“He lives in Brantford.”

Roy again.

“I know.”

“He has a trailer on the Grand River. He spends the summer there.”

“Planning on joining him?”

“It would be nice for Carlin once school gets out. What do you think?”

It was as if the former conversation hadn’t taken place.

“Are you asking my professional advice?”

She thought it over. “Nah.”

“How about as a friend?”

“People only say that when they don’t approve of what you’re doing. Or who you’re hanging out with.”

She returned to silence. We fell behind a poky flatbed in the right-hand lane. Impatient SUVs streaked by, showering us with spray. Janis parched her way through two CDs of heartbreak and good times.

Nearing Oshawa, forty minutes from downtown, Kirin found her voice again.

“I don’t think I can fight this, David.”

Knows her patterns... asking me to understand... trying to apologize...

“If you feel you have to fight it, shouldn’t that be saying something?”

“Maybe fight’s not the right word.”

It came out sounding like a question.

“Maybe,” I replied, “it is.”

Chapter 16

A LOW, SLEEK, SILVER JAG

CATCH YOU LATER. Cowboy's final words as he left the library, the tragedy of Michael Nemecek—Bandanna—tucked under his arm.

I went back to *Amber*, “The Courts of Chaos”, but had trouble getting into it. The library felt hot, even though I seemed to be the only one who noticed it. I visited the washroom and splashed water on my face. It didn't do much good. Perspiration popped out on my forehead and my arms stuck to the carrel. From my T-shirt came a smell that left unchecked would blossom into full BO.

By closing I was eager for the air outside, but half a block down Yonge I started shivering. A nasty breeze was blowing off the lake, the kind that cuts through winter clothes and actually smells cold. My stomach felt peculiar, too, as if the chill were scraping out a hollow in my abdomen.

Fran's held no appeal, so I stopped at a falafel counter north of Wellesley. The chickpea sandwich helped but I wound up throwing half away.

Things were quiet on the block. I spotted Cowboy down by Women's College Hospital, his back against the wall and one leg crooked so that his boot was flush against the brick. A dark sedan, its headlights dimmed, idled at the curb. Tatters of exhaust whipped round the side. The wind caught in my eyes and made them tear.

Halos flared around the streetlamps. The vignette by the hospital glazed over for a moment, then seemed to split in two.

I blinked and shook my head. The double image vanished, but something wasn't right. A tracery of brass surrounded everything in sight. Cowboy shrugged and pushed off from the wall. The rear door of the car swung open. Cowboy ducked his head and clambered in.

The headlights were searing and I had to look away, but as the car rolled by I turned and saw two men in business suits up front with Cowboy in the back, his dove-grey Stetson pointing straight ahead.

All at once a wave of nausea hit me. The hollow in my stomach blew up like the airbag in a steering wheel. Not bothering to signal, the car turned left at Grosvenor. The nausea redoubled, as if the dwindling taillights had hooked my belly and were reeling out my guts. I stumbled to a lamppost. The street began to shimmer. The sedan turned right and entered traffic circling Queen's Park. I tracked it with uncertain eyes.

Suddenly my stomach spasmed and I vomited, splattering the sidewalk and my boots. The heaving carried on long after I had nothing left to puke. My clothes were drenched with sweat and my teeth were chattering like castanets.

I tried to leave the lamppost but the world began to spin, and I sank down on the slushy sidewalk with my head between my knees.



I didn't see the second car turn onto Surrey Place, rather felt its headlights as a pressure on the right side of my face. Expecting them to pass I didn't bother looking up, not even when they stopped.

"Are you all right?"

The voice was formal, with an accent like Dracula's. I wanted to say *Yeah, fine, go on* but even thinking about talking me made me queasy. I wagged my head from side to side. The car door opened

with a quiet *snick*.

“Can you stand?”

Strong, thin fingers probed the armpits of my jacket. I let them help me up, but as soon as I was standing I began to retch again. I gripped the stranger’s overcoat.

“Tell me where you live,” he said in his peculiar accent. “I will take you there.”

I spat out bile and stuttered Raymond’s address. The effort was too much. The street began to whirligig again. My legs went out from under me.

The last thing I remember was the undercarriage of a low, sleek, silver, E-type Jag.



Hot air on my face. A leather seat all pillowy and warm. The purring of an engine through the floorboards.

A blast of frigid air. Skillful hands supporting me up Raymond’s steps. A flurry of porch-lit concern. More hands guiding me indoors. Up the fake mosaic stairs. A near-accident outside the bathroom.

Down the hall and to a bedroom. Boots removed and clothing peeled. Some blankets and a bucket bustled in. Cool sheets that set me shivering again.

A dry palm on my forehead. Fingers prodding soft spots on my chin-neck-groin. Palpations on my abdomen. A thermometer, still bitter from a dunk in alcohol, stuck in my mouth.

A rosy bedside lamp switched on.

“Do you feel well enough to answer questions?”

I signalled yes.

“You are David?”

I nodded.

“My name is Ferenc. I am a doctor. How long have you been ill?”

“Since this afternoon,” I chattered. The inside of my mouth felt

like I'd eaten chalk.

"It came on quickly?"

"Yes."

"Have you dined on anything out of the ordinary? An unusual fruit or vegetable? Or perhaps in a restaurant you do not normally frequent?"

I moved my head from side to side.

"No? Ah, well, that is good. May I assume you are not unknown on the street where I found you?"

A snort from Raymond answered for me.

"So you have contact with many partners? Intimate contact?"

"I'm a hustler," I managed to get out.

"And more direct than I." He touched my shoulder. "I believe you have contracted a rotavirus. Stomach flu. Normally a childhood ailment, but if your system has grown weak from spending too much time outdoors..."

"You must be careful. These things can clear up in a day but sometimes take much longer. Drink a lot of water. I will come to check your progress."

He stood. The change in mattress level made me want to barf. I clenched my teeth till he and Raymond left then threw up in the bucket.

My eyes roved randomly about the room. The bedside lamp glowed feebly and I couldn't make out much—just phantom furniture, posts around the bed, a canopy of some sort overhead. Through the door I heard instructions being given.

Experimentally I let my eyes fall shut. Right away the bed became a midway ride. I opened them again and gazed straight up. It seemed to help.

After a while, the canopy developed auras—orange-red and yellow-green all around the edges. Blobs of colour like the ones that float behind closed eyelids bled across the drooping shadow.

I must have dozed. Raymond was beside the bed, setting out a Thermos jug and tumbler. A bolt of pain slammed through my bowels. I grabbed his arm and staggered to the bathroom, where I

voided sulfurous liquid. Standing made me woozy so I called for help back to the bedroom.

“Poor thing,” Raymond fussed, snuggling sheets and fixing blankets. “Are you warm enough? Is the light all right? Can I get you anything?”

He sat and poured a little water from the jug.

“You have to drink, but only baby sips till your tummy stops going flippety-flop. By command of his Excellence, Tsar Nicholas, your doctor friend. He has this idea you’re going to dessicate or something and then God knows what—you’ll shrivel up like a raisin? Anyway, if we don’t want hordes of Cossacks descending on the house, we’d better do as he says. He’s a psychiatrist, did you know? Not one of your regulars, I hope. Men like that. . . .”

“He’s gone, Raymond.”

“Gone? Who? The mad Russian?”

“Cowboy. He drove off. . . .”

“Oh, hush, now. You don’t know what you’re saying. Pete’ll be back before the night is over.” He kissed me on the forehead. “Now be a dear and get some rest. There’s a school bell on the table. Tinkle if you need me. I’ll be down the hall.”

He left the door ajar. Weak light from the hallway crossed a patterned rug and climbed the wall. Fixing on it wide-eyed brought relief. I tried not to think of Cowboy. I was certain I was right; he wasn’t coming back.

The beam of light began to waver, bleeding past its margins, vanishing at times, then reappearing. Tiny spots, like luminescent ashes, swam before my eyes.

The pricks of light turned into objects floating in the air: paper clips, HotWheels cars, sand dollars. Just by opening my hand, I could catch them in my palm. A bit of quartz. A penny. Zippo flints in a dispenser like the plastic ones at Dale’s Hardware. . . .



A spring day after school. Sunlight on my arms and warm wind

through my T-shirt. The maple trees still waxy green; the chestnuts sweet with popcorn blooms.

“Wanna steal something?”

“Like what?”

“I dunno. Let’s go to Mr. Dale’s.”

“He’ll catch us.”

“No, he won’t.”

“You sure?”

“I’ll make sure.”

“What if it doesn’t work?”

“It always works.”

Dale’s Hardware Store is wide plank floors and pegboards hung with shiny tools, the chiff of nails scooped from bins, and cloying bags of Weed’n’Feed.

Mr. Dale is alone behind the counter with a newspaper.

“Good afternoon,” he says, all properly. “What can I help you with today?”

Mr. Dale always treats me like an adult.

“Is it all right to look around?”

“There’s not much new to see, I’m afraid. This year’s Toros don’t come in till next week.”

“That’s okay.”

My unseen friend prompts me toward my favourite aisle, the one with all the little stuff: keychains, wax pencils, plumbs, retracting blades, rubber bands, folding rulers, penlights. My eye lights on a box of flint-dispensers. They’re clear and flat, with little plugs of flint in a channel up the middle. At the top, a wheel with a single notch snags the flint; a half turn and it drops out in your hand.

Mr. Dale is still behind his counter. I can see him just enough to get a sense of what he’s thinking. He’s nice to me but he’s not stupid. He knows boys steal.

“Is it safe?”

“He’s going to check real soon.”

If he catches me he’s going to feel betrayed. And if he goes to Mr. Bennett at the foster home, I’ll get the belt.

I feel as if I'm standing in the middle of a teeter-totter. Fear's on one end and my friend is on the other. His excitement tips the balance.

Suddenly, I'm not just in the aisle I'm in, but in another, near the back, the one with power tools. The image is as clear as where I really am.

Mr. Dale folds his paper and gets up.

I freeze and feel my heart rise to my throat. His footsteps move away. I grab a handful of dispensers and jam them in my pocket. The bulge is obvious. If he sees me I'm a gonner.

I scurry to the door. "Goodbye, Mr. Dale!"

"Oh," he says, emerging from the power tools, "there you are. Have a nice day. Enjoy the weather."

"Thanks."

My feet are quivering to run—down Homestead Drive, up the long lane to the house, behind the barn, through the grass and to the safety of the pond.

Is Mr. Dale following? I don't dare look back.

I break into a trot.

The trot becomes a headlong dash.

My imaginary friend thrusts up his fist.

"*Ye-ess!*"



I made it through the night, careening to the bathroom between bouts of fitful sleep. Raymond came in twice to swab my brow and make me drink. His well-intentioned, gin-soaked breath was more than I could bear. Both times I threw up.

Dawn crept in without my really noticing. The room was red—all red—a deep blood colour that made morning seem to grow out of the rosy bedside lamp. The canopy above me sprouted golden fringe with tassels. Ruby curtains flowed around a leaded window. The room's dimensions doubled in a gilt-framed mirror.

Rolling over, I struck something solid but invisible. I put my palm against the barrier that couldn't be there and discovered that the bed was only half the width it seemed. The rest was painted on the wall.

I turned back over. The scenery outside the leaded panes was fluffy snow on drooping spruces, long blue shadows and an ice-free brook that didn't flow. By studying the real shadows objects cast around the room, I was able to determine that at least the window opposite was genuine. I noticed that reflections in the mirror didn't move, and I couldn't tell for sure, but the patterned rug might have been painted on the floor.

"Brekkie!"

Raymond pushed in backwards with a tray. His good cheer vanished when he turned around and got a look at me.

"Oh, dear. Death warmed over hasn't got a pinch on you this morning, now has it? Shall we ix-nay the *petit-déjeuner*?"

I tried to smile and wished I hadn't.

"Not a problem. It's just a soft-boiled egg. Hate the things, myself. Mum'sy used to feed me them whenever I got sick. What am I saying? I'll bet the very mention of food makes you want to gack."

He set the tray down by the door, as far away as possible.

"At least try some of this," he went on gamely, bringing me a glass. "Flat ginger ale. Said to calm the tummy."

I took a sip and momentarily felt better. The reprieve was short. My bowels clenched. I sprinted to the bathroom.

"I must say," Raymond offered when I wobbled back, "you certainly look fetching in those briefs, but I'll bet you'd like some fresh ones. Where do you keep your unmentionables?"

"Dresser. Second drawer."

"I'll cart up T-shirts, too. Is there anything else?"

I'd grown a billion extra nerves. Everything was painful, from the flannel of the sheets to the smell of Raymond's aftershave.

"The light. It hurts my eyes."

Raymond drew real curtains over real glass.

"It's early still. Go back to sleep. I'll pop in from time to time."

He pulled the short chain hanging from the lamp, and crimson darkness swallowed me . . .



The two girls at the foster home are scared of me. I see it in their eyes, in the way they turn their backs, in the way they huddle close when I'm around. It's not just me who frightens them. Not belonging, being ridiculed at school—these scare them, too.

They hide their fear with scorn. They know exactly how to flip their hair and flounce away from anything that tells them who they really are. Their contempt for anything they do not understand, for what does not conform, is absolute.

I do not conform.

Their attitude should bother me. Instead I understand. They feel as I do, frightened and alone. I'd tell them but they'd never listen. They know I know their scorn is cheap. They know I penetrate their fears and live them as my own, which only terrifies them more. They think it gives me power. I'm the reason no one ever asks them to a birthday party. I'm the reason they trip playing volleyball. I'm the reason evil dreams disturb them in the night.

Unable to confront their loneliness, they form a club of two that tattles and tells outright lies.

The two boys, Paul and Jimmy, have been moved from home to home. They, too, have strategies for hiding from what truly frightens them. Mostly though, they're puffed up with the arrogance of boy-ness. They'd feel as the girls do if they had the sensitivity. They don't. They're boys. Masters of the universe. Everything is theirs by right.

I am the boys.

I am the girls.

I am too much them for them to let me in.

Lying by the pond out back, I talk with my imaginary friend. He isn't scared of anything. He has me and I have him. Our feelings are our own. No one else intrudes. Like the girls, Caroline and

Deborah, just like Paul and Jimmy, we form a club of two.

This is the only friend I'll ever have. I feel his love as surely as the love I feel for him. It is a fierce, exclusionary love.

I would die for my imaginary friend.



“Are you keeping up your fluids? Drinking, as I said?”

“Yes, doctor.”

“Ferko, please.”

He pronounced it *FAIR-koh*.

“Ferko.”

He'd dropped by in the afternoon, maybe of the first day, maybe of the second. Raymond had installed a small TV with no remote. The single channel had embarked on *Star Trek* back-to-back. Every time I found the energy to watch, it was Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, or Mr. Spock and Captain Kirk. The endless sameness made me lose all track of time.

“How are you feeling generally?”

“Like shit.”

“Has the vomiting stopped?”

“Mostly.”

“But the diarrhoea continues. There is no blood when you evacuate?”

“No.”

“Excellent. My diagnosis was correct. A simple rotavirus.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“True—you are sick, and I am not.” His accent gave the words a little lilt. “Now, please, I must take your temperature.”



Midsummer. Noon. The park behind the town hall in Mt. Hope. Underfoot the grass is scorched and crispy. Flies are breeding in the smell of cow manure. There's little shade so no one is around.

On such a day the baseball bleachers make a fine place to hang out.

I'm smoking cigarettes from Smittie's Groceteria. Getting them is easy. I ask Mr. Smith to make an ice cream cone. While he's digging in the freezer, I lift them from behind the cash.

The cigarettes don't taste too good. It's the smoke and fire that I'm really after. I have a lighter, too, a Zippo Mr. Bennett has been looking for for weeks. It's silver, with initials: TB. Mr. Bennett's name is Tom. I like its weight, the *snick* the lid makes when I flip it back, the smell of fuel coming off the wick.

The bleachers' wooden posts have tufts of grass around them where a mower cannot reach. I light a single stalk. The end flares up, then turns into a tiny ember crawling down the stem. Its retreat is fast, like grease on water fleeing from a single drop of soap. I light all the grass around the post and watch the noose of embers tighten round the wood.

"Do it over here."

I light the grass around another post. Then another. And another. A cloud of yellow smoke wafts through the bleachers. They start to look like gallows rising in the mist.

Dark red flame erupts. I run to stamp it out.

"Leave it. Let it burn."

Time stands still. I shouldn't listen, but the voice is just too strong. Excitement seems to quiver in the air itself. I feel it pull me in like quicksand in a jungle storybook.

"Come on!"

I hightail it across the baseball diamond to the hot-dog stand. Flames are ripping through the bleachers now. Black smoke races for the sky. Sirens will be starting soon.

"Cool."

The syllable is long, drawn out, and satisfied.



"Chicken soup, sweetie! Got the recipe from one of my clients'

mothers in Forest Hill. Adorable little Polish thing about four feet tall with an accent so thick you could spoon it over pierogies.

“Now, eat up or I’m going to call that doctor friend of yours and have him run up an IV. He left his number, by the way. I expect that’s so you’ll call him back and work out something in the way of trade.”

My fever had dropped, the vomiting had stopped, and the gratuitous nastiness of explosively voiding teaspoonfuls of foul liquid was happening less and less. My limbs still felt like jelly, but at least I could sit up in the disorienting half-bed.

“Did you bring crackers?”

“Melba toast. Better for the figure.”

Raymond balanced the tray on my legs, arranged the covers, and tucked a napkin in my T-shirt. Up close, I couldn’t smell the gin, and his eyes looked worried in a sober sort of way.

“I *am* going to be all right, aren’t I?”

“Of course, silly. You just caught some rugrat’s flu while servicing his daddy.”

“What’s on your mind, then?”

“Absolutely nothing, darling.” He framed his face with both hands and bared a Hollywood smile. “Happy as a lark.”

“So how come you’re sober?”

“Bitch. I’m perfectly capable of sobriety without just cause. Don’t worry your pretty little head. Eat up. Ve vant you stronk like bull again.”

Chicken soup, tapioca, Raymond, sleep; consommé, *Star Trek*, rice pudding, nap; more worrisomely sober Raymond, tea, arrow-roots, snooze...



Mrs. Chenoweth lives in a tarpaper shack. She’s about a hundred and fifty years old and has fruit trees in her back yard. Sometimes she offers kids passing by money to pick apricots and plums.

Everybody knows she’s a witch. You don’t stop at her place on

Hallowe'en. The candies might be poison. She sticks pins in her caramel apples.

Mr. Chenoweth goes shopping every Thursday afternoon.

Her door is locked, but breaking in is easy—just smash the pane of glass, lift the dirty lace and turn the handle from inside.

Her kitchen has a funny smell, not like rotting food, more like smells themselves so old they've started to decay. One entire wall is floor to ceiling pickles: dills, watermelon, bread-and-butters, mustard beans.

I didn't come here with a plan. Lying by the pond, I heard a whisper:

Let's break into Mrs. Chenoweth's.

The first jar at the top is dills. The zinc lid isn't easy to unscrew. I prise one out and take a bite. It's not quite what I'm used to so I put it back but leave it sticking out without the lid.

The next jar is more dills. I taste a sample and replace it, just like in the other jar. Soon, there's a whole row of Mason jars with pickles poking out.

I move onto the mustard beans, which are better than Mrs. Bennett's at the home. Then a row of pickled eggs, then cinnamon crab apples that look really funny when I take a bite out of their sides. Carrot sticks in brine, murky beets, yellow cauliflower...

By the time I hit the fourth or fifth shelf, I'm just tonguing juice and spitting in the jars.

"Check the cupboards."

Mrs. Chenoweth has metal cannisters of sugar, flour, oats, cornmeal. Each one has a silver scoop. I like playing with the scoops, jamming them in deep. I misjudge the flour and a white film settles on the counter. I trace my name, filling in the letters from a jar of ground black pepper.

This is fun.

I pour cornmeal on the floor, trace my name again and pour molasses in the letters. That doesn't look too hot. Anyway, I shouldn't leave my name. I scatter sugar overtop. The molasses still seeps through, so I scruff the whole thing up and attack the kitchen

counter.

My hands are gooey when I'm done. Everything I touch gets dirty. I dump out all the cannisters and make a mountain in the middle of the floor.

Next come the fridge and cupboards. Corn syrup, honey, milk, orange juice...

My exhilaration grows. I've passed some sort of test. I feel approval in a part of me I scarcely understand. My penis has grown hard, which gives me an idea. I unzip and, trembling, attempt to start a stream. It doesn't come. Breathing deep, I wait. A wire of heat snakes from my bladder.

Hold back? Let go?

Standing in the mess, I loose an arc of piss while my imaginary friend looks on.

Or is it my imaginary friend who pees while I look on?



I woke up ravenous. Sometime in the night, the flu had fled. My tolerance for *trompe-l'œil*, too.

I padded to the kitchen in my underwear.

"Saints preserve us," Raymond exclaimed. "Lazarus walks. Having a bit of trouble with the shroud, though."

His eyes went to my briefs.

"Me need food," I grunted.

"Does this mean I finally get my room back?"

"Send me the bill."

"Oh, goodie. This calls for a send-off breakfast. What's your pleasure?"

"Anything, as long as there's lots of it."

"Meusli with plain yoghurt?"

"I guess that'll have to do."

"Kidding, sweetie. How does waffles, bacon and scrambled eggs sound?"

"Like diner heaven."

“It won’t be too much?”

“Probably not enough.”

“Ooo—I do so like a hungry man. Go make yourself decent while I get started. I washed your jeans. They’re on the dresser.”

“Do I have time for a shower?”

“Guest towel’s on the back of the bathroom door. Now, shoo!”

Raymond pulled out all the stops. On my return, he dished up waffles, creamy eggs, and bacon from a plug-in grill. Coffee burbled in the percolator.

Every bite was better than the one before. Raymond watched while I chowed down. His concern at the beginning—*You’re sure your tummy’s up to this?*—melted as I tore through everything in sight.

I only glanced up twice. Both times I caught that funny, bothered-about-something look.

“What is it, Raymond?” I asked, sitting back, sipping on the finest mug of coffee in the world.

“What is what?”

“That thing on your mind. The reason for the good face you’ve been putting on.”

He left the kitchen and came back with a *Toronto Star*.

US National to Face Murder Charges

Canadian immigration agents last night apprehended Peter Gilleys, a native of West Virginia, in downtown Toronto.

The operation, described as quiet, brings to a close a search involving the FBI, Immigration Canada and the RCMP.

Mr. Gilleys was being sought in connection with a seven-year-old double homicide in the small West Virginia community of Mt. Hope.

Richard Call and Dean Wilson, aged eighteen, were found shot to death in Wilson’s pickup truck. Both were on probation following an assault on Wayne Smith, also

aged eighteen. Smith played defensive end for Mt. Hope's highschool football team, of which Call was captain.

Reports from the time of Call and Wilson's trial indicate dissatisfaction in some quarters with their lenient sentencing. The prosecution characterized the attack on Smith as a wantonly sadistic hate crime.

Smith was a known homosexual.

"We all know what happened," a spokesperson from the Fayette County Sherriff's Office said. "Pete Gilleys and Wayne Smith were real close, and what Dicky (Call) and Dean did to Wayne was awful. They should have gone to prison. But that don't give nobody the right to shoot them point blank through the windshield."

Gilleys, of no fixed address, is believed to have been in Toronto since shortly after the homicides.

"He wasn't trying to hide," said an immigration official, "which may be why it took so long to find him."

A date has been set for Gilleys' extradition hearing, which will proceed quickly.

"We are satisfied the evidence against him warrants expeditious handling of the matter," says Immigration Canada.

Upon his return to West Virginia, Mr. Gilleys faces charges on two counts of first degree murder.

"How did you know, David? I thought you were delirious, saying Pete was gone."

"I saw him getting in a car with two men."

"Well, that's not exactly breaking news, now, is it?"

"I don't know, Raymond. It just looked wrong. I had the feeling part of me was driving off with him. A part that wasn't coming back."

He took the paper. From the way he folded it, he was never going to throw it out.

"I didn't want to say anything while you were feeling so miserable."

“Thank you. That was really nice.”

“And I didn’t want you worrying you wouldn’t have a place to stay without Pete. You do, you know. Have a place. It’s free. For as long as you like.”

“Until you rent it out again.”

“Oh, I only did that to bug Pete. It was a game, you know? So he wouldn’t think I’d fallen for him totally.”

He stared down at the paper, worrying one corner. His mouth began to tremble. Suddenly, his whole face crumpled.

“Oh, god, David. What if they have the death penalty down there?”

Chapter 17

FINGER ME

...and while there does appear to be a link between Cassandra Island and the deaths and disappearances, I, for my part, neither saw, nor sensed, nor found myself engaged in anything remotely cultish.

I trust the attached are satisfactory and that you won't be bothering me again.

--

David Ase

How many ways are there to say exactly nothing?

I'd been sitting on the files all week, unable to decide if I should send them off or keep them as insurance. My mind made up, I started editing. Every sentence sucked, of course. Perfectionism and procrastination make the best of friends.

I couldn't seem to get back in the swing of things. Calls that had come in while I was gone went unreturned. Clients hesitantly asked if I was sensing something every time my concentration wandered. Even reading was a problem. I made not one, but two stabs at a brick by Neal Stephenson—a must, according the hacker who'd installed my Linux server. The novel should have kept me turning pages until dawn. Instead I couldn't get past chapter three.

Channel-surfing helped me through the wee hours of the

morning. In between the endless house and wardrobe makeovers, I landed on an awful lot of Jena's Psychic Nexus. Every hour it seemed, a station somewhere in the northern hemisphere was airing her. Like any couch-potato rubberneck, I couldn't blip away. Wouldn't want to miss a trademark Alka-Seltzer fit. I caught one finally, which galvanized me by association with things psychic and distasteful into calling Byron from the number on his card.

An answering machine picked up, robo-voiced and curt. I identified myself, said I had material to send, and asked him for his email.

UPS came calling with an envelope next afternoon. Inside was a folded sheet containing the address (sleemans@pet.csis-scrs.gc.ca) along with some instructions: *Use GnuPG. Finger me to get my public key. You know how to do that, right?*

Luckily I did, or I'd have called him back and wisecracked: "Put my lips together and blow?"

The same geek who had recommended Neal Stephenson, and whom I'd paid enough to keep in Coke and pizza for a lifetime, had tutored me on many things including GnuPG. It's a method for encrypting email that requires two "keys"; each about a thousand characters in length. One of them is public; you pass it out to anyone who wants to send you secret mail. The other one is private. You guard it like Fort Knox since it alone can undo what's encrypted with the public key.

"Finger" was the standard Unix command for getting public information on a user at a particular domain.

The problem with GnuPG is that once something's encrypted, you can't decrypt it—say, to change the text—unless you have the private key. Which, of course, you don't. It's in the hands of the recipient, in this case, Byron.

Bearing that in mind, I tweaked the last part six or seven times until it read: "... and that you won't be needing me again."

To the point and not as whiny.



Kirin called—eventually.

Marion was over, finishing her second brandy-tonic. I cupped my hand over the receiver, mouthed *Help yourself*, and headed for the study.

“Hey, Kirin. What’s up?”

“Nothing. No... well... not *nothing* nothing. Lots of stuff, really. Just nothing to worry about. That’s what you meant, isn’t it?”

“It was more of a generic ‘What’s up?’”

She tittered. “Right. Silly me.”

“So? What *is* up?”

“Like I said, nothing, really. I haven’t talked to you since we got back.”

“I guess that means that things are going well with Roy?”

“You do like getting to the point, don’t you?”

“My next-door neighbour might not agree.”

“Marion? The one with the booth at the Fair?”

“The same.”

“I’d like to meet her sometime.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Maybe arrange a dinner or something.”

As long as Roy stays home.

“Roy and I *have* been seeing a lot of each other,” she said as if she’d heard the silent rider.

“I’m so surprised.”

“Don’t be nasty. I know you don’t like him.”

“I hardly even know the guy.”

“But driving back you said—”

“Those were just impressions. Even psychics fuck up sometimes.”

“Big time. You were so wrong about him.”

“Well, then, I’m glad to hear it.”

“You don’t sound like it. Really, David, Roy’s... special. He’s been so good to me. Good *for* me. We spend hours and hours just talking. He’s teaching—no, I’m *learning* things. Things I never knew about myself. I wish I could tell you.”

No need. From her tone of voice, the honeymoon had only just begun.

“There’s so much you don’t know about him,” she went on.

“I might, if you got around to telling me instead of gushing.”

“I can’t really talk about it. I mean, it’s not something I can put into words. I’ve met some of his friends. They’re great. Totally accepting. Like they’ve known me all my life. Do you have any idea how good it feels not to be a trophy for a change?”

“Male friends?”

“Men and women. Why?”

Because the Roy I met was not the type to have a lot of female buddies.

“Idle curiosity,” I said.

“No, you’re thinking Roy’s the kind of guy who doesn’t really like women.”

“You got me there. Looks like whatever else is going on, your sensitivity’s improving.”

A funny silence followed, as if I’d touched a nerve.

“Is there something you’re not telling me?” Kirin asked.

“Is that another one of your ‘I don’t believe a word you’re saying’ questions? You’ve got to stop that. It kind of puts a damper on conversation.”

She exhaled into the phone. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s just that sometimes you say things—”

“For the sake of talking, like everybody else. And speaking of talking, we should get together. Can you pull yourself away from Roy long enough to come around for a drink?”

“Actually that’s why I called. I do want to see you but I’m going away for a while.”

“Let me guess—Roy in a trailer by the Grand?”

“It’s going to be cramped. Roy says it’s not really big enough for three—I’m going with Carlin after school’s out—but apparently there’s a shitload of summer things to do around there. I want Carlin to enjoy herself. Roy says we can take day trips to Lake Erie.”

“Port Dover’s nice. So’s Turkey Point and Long Point Beach.”

"I've never been. Typical Torontonionian."

"I drive down that way sometimes."

"Really? You should come and visit. Meet Carlin, get to know Roy better. Hang on a sec—he wrote down directions. I'll go get them."

I started feeling guilty leaving Marion alone and went down the hall to join her.

"Okay, David. Here it is. Take Highway 6 south from Hamilton to Caledonia, then turn right at Caithness Street."

I held up a finger to let Marion know I was nearly done.

"Yes. Highway 54. I know it. Before you cross the river."

... on an arch bridge like the one across High River... on the far side there's a hot dog stand that's served up footlongs since forever...

"Take 54 past Onondaga, then turn left at English School Road. Half a kilometre after the turn there's supposed to be a sign for Brantwood Park. That's where we'll be. I guess you'll have to ask which trailer's Roy's. Promise me you'll come and visit."

I assured her I would, then made telephone goodbye noises while Marion looked on, head cocked.

"Kirin Neemes," I said before she asked. "The woman I went to Cassandra Island with."

"Ah, the one who thinks she's genuinely psychic. Her confusion getting on your nerves?"

"What makes you ask?"

"Your promise to look her up had all the sincerity of a cocktail kiss."

"It's not her, Marion. It's the man she's seeing. And to be honest, I am a little annoyed."

Marion nodded. "You sounded it."

"I did?"

"Don't worry. I doubt she noticed. She hasn't had the benefit of being your drinking buddy for the past two years. What's the problem?"

"I was looking forward to having a playmate for the summer."

Marion swirled ice cubes in her glass.

“That’s the problem with single friends, isn’t it?” she mused. “As soon as they meet someone, they make you feel like they were only hanging around till something better came along.”

I raised my tepid rye and ginger. “Here’s to staying single.”

Marion clinked my glass. “A fine sentiment, David, but it’s not going to do you much good this summer, I’m afraid.”

“Why not?”

“I’m going home early this year. In fact, that’s why I’m here. I wanted to impinge on you to water my plants and keep an eye on the apartment while I’m away.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Day after tomorrow.”

“So soon? Is everything okay?”

“No one’s dying, if that’s what you mean, but there are some things I need to take care of.”

“For two whole months?”

“You know how it is with family.”



“Is anything the matter, David?” Ferko asked.

“Why?”

“You seem subdued. It’s not this outing, is it? Dr. E-cubed feels I’m up to it. You’ll have noticed in some ways I’m even better than before.”

It was true. He was speaking almost as he used to. His co-ordination had improved as well. Normally methodical and cautious, he was sailing down the boardwalk at Kew Beach as if his wheelchair were a go-cart.

“Plus, it feels good to have been in my car again—I shouldn’t say that, should I? it’s been yours for how long now?—and watch the world fly by.”

“I don’t drive *that* fast.”

“Jaguars choose their own pace on the open road.”

He tacked a little to the right to let a rollerblader clatter by. The perfect afternoon had drawn a stream of tanned male bodies to the boardwalk. Most of them were barrelling along on inch-wide wheels. Amblers were few and far between.

Ferko pivoted to watch the latest specimen go by and sighed. I mussed his hair and let him take my hand.

“I think I’m feeling lonely, Ferko.”

“Would you care to talk about it?”

“Is the doctor in?”

He dipped his head and fell professionally silent.

On the beach, families had staked out turf with blankets and umbrellas. A rail-thin skinhead sailed a Frisbee to his Doberman. Couples wandered near the shore, lost to everything but sun and sand and their own company.

“It’s silly,” I said. “I was looking forward to spending time with Kirin this summer. I find she’s comfortable to be around, even though she thinks I never mean exactly what I say. And I guess I thought it would be kind of fun to, I don’t know, hang out. But now she’s gone and shacked up with this guy she met at Cassandra Island. And Marion’s scarpered, too. Family, she says. Till September.”

“The redoubtable Madame Harper. You’ll miss her conversation. Your friends have all deserted you.”

“Hardly ‘all’.”

“We are talking feelings here, not facts.”

“Dumb, huh?”

Ferko slowed his wheelchair to a ruminative crawl. A JetSki whined out on the lake, sending up a squirrel-tail of water. The skinhead’s dog ran after it. A mother with two children pulled them close and scurried off.

“What’s really wrong?” he asked.

“I’m bored,” I said, surprised to hear myself.

“That doesn’t sound like you.”

“It doesn’t, does it?”

The JetSki faded out of earshot. Ferko’s wheels thumped along

the planks.

“Is this by any chance related to your missing years?”

“Sorry—I’m not following you.”

“Up till now they’ve been the motor of your life.”

“Only insofar as I try not to think about them.”

“Avoidance generates as much momentum as acknowledgment, you know.”

An errant cloud—a tiny ball of fluff in an otherwise clear sky—slid across the sun. The light went silver for a moment.

“When I won the lottery, I thought all that would change.”

“Because you had the means to re-invent yourself? No one can do that. No matter where you go, you always get there with yourself.”

I smiled at the aphorism. “Show me a self-made man, I’ll show you Bedlam?”

“Chesterton was talking about something else—how we are formed not just by individuation, but by context—but yes, the quip applies.”

“And how does this relate to missing years and being bored?”

“Simple, David. Your money lets you order things exactly as you wish. The difficulty is, that order had its origins in flight. Evasion from the mystery of you. You gilded over it but now the gilt is wearing thin. The puzzle of your missing years is starting to show through. Your lassitude’s a symptom.”

He stopped abruptly.

“Would you mind? The sun is getting hot. I’d like to take some shade.”

He spun himself to face the lake. I backed him off the boardwalk. He grunted, then gestured to a picnic table nestled in some larches.

“Over there, I think,” he said. “That way you’ll have a place to sit.”

“So, what should I do?” I asked as he aligned his wheelchair with the table’s end.

“Not what *should* you do, what *will* you do.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“Not necessarily. If you’ve paid attention all these years, you know that patients come to therapy because their strategies for circumventing pain no longer work. Have become, in time, more vexing to them than the pain they sought to flee.

“Your missing years have never ceased to be a source of pain. You’ve dealt with them—or rather not dealt with them, since in your case you cannot—by finding challenges that keep them in the background. The hardship of your life out on the street is an example.

“But now you are a millionaire, and Fate’s gift has deprived you of the challenges you need to stay distracted. As a result you’ve gone into reactive mode. You don’t seem to have much will for anything. This is actually a good sign. You *must* react—respond—not go seeking more distractions. That tactic now risks turning into crippling neurosis.”

“A fine summation, Doctor, but—what should I do?”

He looked off, his face a complex of indulgence and concern.

“Confront what is,” he said, as if it were that easy. “Confront what is. See where it leads.”



I inserted the CD in my computer, settled in a reading chair and picked up the remote. Without AC, the air in the apartment had gone muggy after sunset and my skin stuck to the leather arms.

Earlier my feet had stuck the same way to the floor as I padded from the TV to the fridge to my computer desk and back again. With nothing grabbing my attention, memories of Axel’s giant’s body had surfaced to the point I’d had to deal with them. Which ended in another kind of stickiness, but didn’t help the listlessness.

The remote control was growing warm from holding it. I couldn’t put this off forever.

The CD held an image of a tape recording Ferko’d made. A hypnotherapist—one Dr. Helen Behr—had come for dinner. She knew my story, but after supper asked to hear it anyway, “from the

horse's mouth." Her dark brown eyes—two marbles in an apple-doll face—had glittered with attentive interest. Afterwards, she and Ferko had discussed "the case".

Then, without warning, she'd begun to talk to me, explaining how she wanted to proceed. Her voice was calm and reassuring and as comforting as Campbell's soup. I sensed a trick. The intuition was confirmed when she broke off mid-sentence.

"Well, that's not going to work now, is it?" she said, unperturbed, as if she had an arsenal of things to try.

Ferko sipped his brandy. "I had a feeling David might put up a fight."

I protested. We'd talked about hypnosis often. If anything he'd been the cautious one, putting off this evening. I'd been the one who wanted to go through with it.

Dr. Behr worked hard to get me in a trance, but no matter what, I stayed immune. It was as if in wanting her to take control, I overdid it and absorbed her objectivity. Her gentle, patient words became my own voice giving me directions.

The mind commands the mind and meets resistance.

Unfazed, she asked if there were any music I particularly liked. Something calm and soothing. Nothing sprang to mind. My life, pre-Ferko, hadn't left much room for stereos. Ferko said he might have something, and withdrew an album from a cabinet devoted to LPs.

"Debussy," he said. "The pictures he creates inside my head let me float anywhere."

He put the record on and at the same time flipped a toggle on his reel-to-reel TEAC.

I'd never listened to the tape he made that night. He'd insisted that I take it with me when his stroke had forced me to move out. My geek-for-hire, whom I'd had encode and burn it, had returned it with her eyebrows raised and just one comment: *Weird shit, man.*

I thumbed the Play button. The drive whirred on, and moments later music filled the room: a flute, a harp and a viola, shimmering like sunlight on the surface of a lake.

Dr. Behr spoke:

“It’s lovely, Ferko. Thank you. Don’t you think so, David? Like summer breezes blowing on your skin. And water, too, with white light dancing on the surface. You know, my parents had a cottage north of Gravenhurst. We used to go there after school ended. I recall those summers perfectly, the days that started with the twittering of birds before the sun broke over tall pines far across the lake . . .”

Her voice became a bourdon to the Debussy as she recounted summers she had known, teasing me, seducing me toward a place where bright, fleet music was a Mt. Hope summer day.

“Where are you now, David?”

“By the pond behind the barn.”

“Are you alone?”

“My friend is here.”

“Your invisible companion?”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing?”

“Lying in the grass. I have something in my hand. A cigarette. No—a joint. I’m smoking dope. It’s very badly rolled.”

“Where did you get it?”

“From the barber’s son.”

Leather jacket, tattooed forearms, rumours about pregnant girls. . .

“Did he give it to you?”

“I bought it. With money from my mother’s purse.”

“Your foster mother?”

“Yes.”

“What are you feeling?”

“Lazy. Happy. Heavy.”

“What do you see?”

“Blue moths in the bullrushes. A turtle on the bank. It’s hot. The water’s calling me.”

Slipping out of cut-off shorts and underwear. . .

“Is your friend still with you?”

“Yes. We’re in the pond. We have a game.”

Staying under water till the need to breathe’s so fierce I feel my lungs inflame, my penis start to stiffen... I break the surface with a shout and tread in place until my friend has had his turn...

“Game?”

“A contest. My friend, he... likes the feeling.”

Legs jerking... air-starved sinews scrabbling to the surface... gasping, panting... eyes wild with excitement...

A stretch of music with no overlay of words. A clink of a glass, most likely Ferko setting down his brandy.

“What’s happening, David?”

“I’m stretched out on the grass. It tickles. The sun is hot. My skin is warm. I’m rubbing it. My friend seems realer than before. It feels like his hands on my belly.”

“Are you aroused?”

“Yes. I’m playing with myself.”

Imagining the unseen presence as a real person, warm like me... water droplets sticking to his skin... him rolling over, nuzzling... his hardness on my thigh... on top of me, rocking... grinning with complicity...

“Shit!”

“What is it, David?”

“Someone’s coming.”

No one comes back here, unless... I haven’t done my chores...

“David!”

Mr. Bennett calling me... no time to hide... naked, hard... a Ziplock bag of dope and rolling papers...

“What the—? What the fuck are you doing? Get up, you little pervert! Put your fucking clothes on.”

Struggling into cut-offs... penis jammed under the waistband... zipper barely closed...

Whack!

The blow comes unexpectedly. I fall down on my knees...

Whack!

Cheeks stinging, scalding...

Whack!

My brain jarred loose, jangling in my head...

Whack!

Tears burning in my eyes... fronthand... backhand... front-hand...

"... let no fucking weirdos in my house!"

Whack!... pricks of light, a swarm of glowing blackflies...

Whack!... the world goes bright, then starts to dim... Whack!...

"Stop it! Stop!"

"What is it, David?"

"He's beating me. He's crazy. I can't make him stop. On and on ..."

"Listen to me, David. Listen to my voice. This is Dr. Behr. I'm going to count backwards from ten. Every number is a step away from him. He can't hurt you if you walk away. When I reach zero—"

A sound of grunting, like someone being kicked.

"David?"

No response. Just music—flute, viola, harp.

"David?"

"It's stopped."

"Where are you now?"

"It's dark. And hot. I see slats of light. Dim shapes. The outline of a truck. I'm in the barn. My legs feel itchy. I'm covered with... grass. I've been mowing."

The unused hectare out behind the barn... the long, concealing grasses crushed and mulched beneath the blades...

"I smell gasoline. I spilled some filling up the mower. It's gone, but I still smell it. My hands are in my pockets. There are... things there."

"What sorts of things?"

"Rubber bands. A penknife. A pack of cigarettes. Other stuff. I want to hide it. There must be somewhere in the barn."

"Up there."

*The hayloft... tins of paint and varnish... broken garden tools
... decaying furniture...*

"You're sure?"

"He never goes up there."

*Paint and thinner fumes... a mouldy armchair ripped across
the back... a centipede that crawls out when I stuff my treasure in
...*

"No. Not that. Keep it out."

The metal cylinder of kitchen matches.

"David?"

"I'm sitting on the floor. It's cool. Cement. I have matches in my hand. I'm lighting them. When the flame gets near my fingers, I pinch the blackened part and watch the flame crawl up the unburnt part. Whoa!"

"What is it?"

"Where I spilled the gasoline, the air went *poof!* like a small explosion."

My imaginary friend is moving off.

"What are you doing?"

"You'll see."

A plastic jug of gasoline... a small dark pool of liquid spreading out on the cement...

"Light it."

A fresh match flares bright yellow.

"Drop it."

"Is it safe?"

"As if we care."

Another poof!, this time soft, like ears popping... a pool of sapphire flame, retreating from the edges as the gasoline burns off

...

"Cool."

"Yeah."

"It's going out."

"Pour on more."

A drop of gas... a steady golden trickle... a wavering blue

flame, hovering above the floor...leaping to the open jug like magic...

"The jerry can's on fire. The mouth is melting."

Beautiful, the way the plastic softens, widens, folds upon itself

...

"I can't put it out. I want to but I can't. I don't remember where I put the lid."

"Leave it. Let it burn."

"What's going on, David?"

"I'm running to the house to let them know."

A rustling from the CD, as if my body were re-living the event. A nasty buzz like an electric current started in my belly—a taste of what might happen if I kept on listening. Did I need to risk it? Dr. Behr's hypnosis hadn't been oblivious. I still recalled, as words, what in trance-state I'd recounted.

Hannah, my foster-mother, dropped her kitchen knife and scurried to the door. Oily smoke cascaded from the entrance to the barn. Grey wisps leaked through cracks between the siding boards.

"Tom!" she screamed. "Tom!"

From the living room, Mr. Bennett, watching TV, shouted *What?*

"The barn's on fire!"

"What?!"

He lumbered through the kitchen in his undershirt and briefs. Red flames darted out the big barn doors. Higher up, orange tongues licked the walls and scooted to the roof.

"Call the fire department, Hannah! Call the fucking VFD! My truck's in there!"

He broke the screen door in his haste to run across the drive. The heat already reached the house. He flung an arm protectively across his face and kept on going.

Rooted to the spot, Hannah raised her hand and started going *no-no-no* as he stumbled into roiling smoke and nearly solid flame.

Chapter 18

BEYOND THE AESCULAPIAN

DON'T IT ALWAYS seem to go that you don't know what you've got till it's gone?

Cowboy's absence brought about an unexpected change: Raymond took to playing Joni Mitchell for a while. He never gave a reason for deposing La Divina. Maybe Joni's girlish voice helped raise his flagging spirits. In the end the respite proved too good to last. Callas made a tragic comeback after Raymond took a trip to West Virginia.

The basement rooms just didn't feel the same. Cowboy's easy company along with Raymond's loony nosing at the edges of our lives had given me a home. Ill-defined and subject to lush's whims, but still a home. With Cowboy gone, all they were were sleeping quarters.

I missed him most of all when I was standing on the block. We'd always hung together. Even when he'd sauntered off to stretch his legs or rope a trick, his absence felt like company. I hadn't really shot the breeze with any of the other guys. They'd only ever spoken to him anyway.

Hey man, how's it hangin'?

Slow tonight.

The Old Spice guy is out.

Maybe Stretch'll do him.

A February cold snap killed the Grosvenor-Grenville traffic. Trade fled into crowded bars and seething clubs. So many men, so tightly packed, jumbled the impressions I got one-on-one outside. I couldn't even pick potential customers from guys too vain to pay. Brute salesmanship, not sensitivity, determined if I walked out with a paying john or went home empty-handed.

Clouds have silver linings, though, and mine was Dr. Ferenc. *Ferko*, he insisted. As Raymond had surmised, his interest in me went beyond the aesculapian—a word he taught me early on. He had a favourite club, Katrina's on St. Joseph, and any time I spotted him my night was guaranteed. Free drinks while he scoped the crowd. A proud ride in his purring Jag. The decency of snacks for me and any other boy he'd hired. Enthusiastic sex, a sumptuous bed, and hot food in the morning.

But unlike regulars whose patterns I could count on, Ferko at Katrina's—and later, when the weather started warming up, his Jaguar at the curb—was never a sure thing. Weeks would pass without my seeing him. Then, for days on end, I'd be eating Csabai sausages for breakfast with a side of Liptauer cheese.

He always paid, even when he only wanted company. It satisfied some urge bound up with courtesy and order. But it wasn't frosty commerce. He got a kick from having a relationship where he was using me as much as I was using him.

Indirectly, Ferko was responsible for Brian and me hooking up. Tuesday nights Katrina's held a stripping contest. The dance floor cleared, the patrons took to tables round the edge, and anyone who wanted to could strut their stuff. Mostly it was hustlers. Ferko liked to watch and sometimes purchase the contestants, so I nearly always made of point of dropping by.

He hadn't shown up yet the evening Brian took the floor. I'd been waiting for an hour and was getting set to leave when a slow piano intro clued me in the next dance would be special. "Slow" in male stripping means not only all the way but totally erect. Few contestants had the brass to try it.

I knew Brian from the block, though at most we'd only nodded

to each other. He had a round, cherubic face suggesting baby fat all over, but under lights with Bonnie Tyler torching out *Once upon a time I was falling in love, now I'm only falling apart* the fat looked more like muscle and by magic he became a godlet with a post-pubescent face and the bulges of a quarterback. His moves were slick, or as slick as can be managed when you're hampered by a hard-on.

Afterwards, with time a-ticking and my wallet thinning from the beers I'd had to buy, I left to try my luck outdoors.

The cold snap was abating. Stretch was out, wraithlike in the Caddy showroom light. Scott and Daryl cruised around, snug inside their Daddy's Lincoln, stopping for the guys they knew. Ensuing conversations, murmured through an open window, never carried far. Brokers, Cowboy'd said.

I staked a spot across the street from Women's College Hospital. Few cars passed. Last call was an hour away. The traffic would improve when losers at the bar game faced the fact they'd have to fork out for a blowjob or jerk off by themselves at home.

Brian showed up half an hour later, touring the block three times before approaching me and uttering the phatic greeting often made to Cowboy.

"Slow night."

"Bars are closing soon," I answered. "Business'll pick up."

A Grand Prix turned on Grenville, slowed in front of us and carried on.

"I saw you at Katrina's," Brian said.

"Yeah, I go there once in a while. I saw you dance. You win?"

"Nah. There's this guy likes to show up with all his buddies. They go apeshit when he's on so he always wins. He was there."

"Bummer."

Brian shrugged. "It's only fifty bucks."

He reached inside his pants and made adjustments to his crotch.

"Sorry. Had to tie off for the dance."

"Tie off?"

"Stripper's trick. Whack off till you've got a boner just before a

dance, then slip a rubber band around your dick. Hurts like hell but keeps you hard. You ever dance?”

“I don’t know how.”

“I could show you a few moves. You’ve got the look. Your eyes are something else.”

“Thanks.”

Up close, his baby-face revealed signs of wear. Tiny fissures spidered from the corners of his eyes. The pinkness in his cheeks looked raw instead of rosy.

He made another small adjustment. “Where’s Cowboy? Haven’t seen him in a while.”

“Extradited. Back to West Virginia.”

“No shit. Guess that means we won’t be seeing him again.”

“Guess not.”

“Were you guys lovers?”

“We sorta shared a place, that’s all.”

“The guys were curious. A loner like him, then all of a sudden he’s showing up with you in tow.”

“Did you know him long?”

“A coupla years, on and off. Enough to wonder when he partnered up with somebody like you.”

“What do you mean, like me?”

“Shit, man. Cowboy was—,” he looked away, trying to find the word, “—decent. Made it hard to, you know, *do* anything. Then you show up. Double-whammy. A walking conscience and a guy who’s pulling all our tricks.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, well, you wouldn’t. You were kinda off-limits. Because of Cowboy.”

“Cowboy scared you off?”

“Nah. Nothing like that. Cowboy just... *was*. Sorta like you. You’re different. The guys are kinda interested in how you do it.”

“Do what?”

“Fuck, man—every car that stops for you, you end up getting in. You’re hot, sure—half the guys would do you in a second—but

nobody's that lucky all the time. You got some kind of special kind of mojo or what?"

"I just say whatever I think a customer wants to hear."

"Right, like we don't?"

A gust of wind blew up the street. He turned his back, shuffling to stay warm.

"Fuck it. We're just jealous. You're okay. I shoulda talked to you before. Hey—you wanna go to Frans and get a coffee? My nuts are freezing off."



Cowboy's attitude had always been: Do no harm, and no harm done. Stealing, for example, was fine as long as no one felt the loss.

Not so Brian or the others who began to speak to me: Neil, the fresh-faced runaway who traded on his schoolboy looks to hook and blackmail pederasts; Magic, hyped on coke, whose quickie clients never felt his fingers in their wallets while his mouth was on their dicks; Shox, the smoldering hulk whose rough trade looks were anything but show.

The street began to feel different—charged somehow, alluring in a way that went beyond the high of selling sex. Who knew who'd be out on any given night, bullshitting or lounging with a ready *Hey, man, how's it hangin'?* Joints got passed around, my status changed to just-one-of-the-guys, and my luck with clients bandied as the stuff of common legend.

Things petered out at Jarvis Street. Raymond's funk post-Cowboy seeped into the basement. I got antsy hearing him upstairs stumbling from room to room. Luckily, Brian had a bachelor on Sherbourne, several blocks away, where I could crash. Shox or Neil bunked there sometimes, too, but never Magic.

"Sorry, man. No way I'm sleeping with a cokehead," Brian said, refusing him one night. "Nothing personal."

We shared his ratty futon—two, or sometimes three exhausted hustlers sleeping naked with no sex. No sex that is except for Neil,

whose drowsy penis rubbing in my ass-crack occasionally woke me up.

Scott and Daryl weren't as quick to let me in the club. Whenever Cowboy'd been around, they'd always managed to be someplace else—down the street, around the corner, doing quiet deals. Cowboy said they knew the street like no one else. He could have claimed the same about himself, but he and they were oil and water, he with his agenda and they with theirs.

I felt them watching me for weeks before their Lincoln finally pulled over to the curb. The encounter had the feel of an audition. Both looked straight ahead. Eye contact was impossible. I couldn't read them as I did my clients. Had there been just one of them, a wealth of clues might have arranged itself inside my head until I saw the silver-grey geometry of who and what he was. But they were two, and good at letting nothing slip. Long pauses in their conversation made me feel their minds were elsewhere. Either that, or everything I said was being sifted, judged and filed.

I'd long ago decided they were frauds, wannabes who couldn't cut it hustling. Both wore nerdy glasses and had pimply skin.

Turned out I was wrong.

Hard drugs weren't a big part of the Grosvenor-Grenville block. Except for Magic, no one hustled to support a habit. Those who tried soon disappeared. The money wasn't good enough. Recreationals, however, had a place—a big one, I found out with Cowboy gone—and Scott and Daryl were the major source. Of an evening, they might sidle by and murmur *E?* or *Hash?* to every hustler on the street. Deals struck and money fronted, they'd set up a meeting. Sometime later and deserted blocks away, one or other of them would appear—who knew which was which?—with baggies of whatever had been purchased.

Articles that fell off trucks got handled the same way.

They also played the go-between for men with special hankering: piss scenes, dungeon play, cutting. I never figured out how they connected with the buyers. Perhaps they dredged the Personals. But wherever they came from, Scott and Daryl's gentlemen paid well.

Very well. I got to hoping more and more I'd see their Lincoln pulling up and hear the quiet: *Wanna make some money?*



The police cracked down on hustling in the summer of that year. Plainclothes trawled in unmarked cars while uniforms in cruisers hassled any guy who didn't scam the moment they showed up. They got me twice—for vagrancy (standing in a doorway to escape the rain), and trespassing (walking off the sidewalk on the grass).

Brian hatched a plan to make up the financial loss. He laid it out one evening over day-old muffins in a booth at Frans. The muffins were half price.

“His name is Merrick. He's fat and gross and wears a ton of jewelry. Gold jewelry. He doesn't actually do anything, just takes pictures. It's kinda creepy. He pays good, though. A hundred bucks, upfront. You can keep that if you want. We don't have to split it. You'll be doing all the work.”

“I don't mind.”

“Nah, it's okay. Scott and Daryl figure we'll clear around eight hundred after their cut. The guy has a *lot* of jewelry.”

“He's not a customer they set you up with, is he?”

“You think they'd fence shit lifted from a guy they set up with a hustler? Get real.

“He lives over near the Valley, on Ontario Street. The area's pretty rough so he's got security, bars and everything, and an alarm he keeps set all the time. But here's the thing. There are two ways to disarm it. One's the keypad. The other's by unlocking the front door from the inside. I guess it saves a step if someone knocks or something.

“He's got this studio on the second floor with a bed and cameras and shit. He keeps his rings and chains and stuff downstairs in the bedroom. Takes off whatever he was wearing when he's taking pictures, too.

“Mostly, all you gotta do is keep him occupied while I'm

downstairs. That shouldn't be too difficult. You're good. The hard part's the alarm, but I got an idea. He hates being touched. Must be why he takes pictures. Anyway, the way I figure it is, if you put the moves on him inside the door, right after he sets the alarm, he'll freak and get distracted. The entrance is small and the lock's a Medeco—you know, one of those ones with a key on the inside?—but he never takes it out so all you gotta do is reach behind your back. He'll never notice."

"Won't it seem weird if I put the moves on him when he doesn't like being touched?"

"He doesn't know you know, now, does he? You're just a horny hustler raring to get going."

"He's got to hire me first."

Brian made a sound like *ffff*.

"Right, like that's a problem."



Brian stuck around at Woody's—Cowboy's happy-hour hunting ground—till Merrick had shown up then took a streetcar to Ontario to wait.

Merrick loved his jewelry all right. But even in a crowded bar that made it hard to size him up, instinct warned me not to praise the rings on sausage fingers or the gold chains in the rolls around his neck. Some men's peacock urge becomes a nightmare when their efforts at attention-getting work.

He kept his distance in the taxi, pressed against the door and toying with a pinkie ring. The diamond in it twinkled like a captive star.

Last of thirteen kids...parents Seventh Day Adventists... peculiar childhood illnesses that seemed to have no cause... blamed himself somehow...

The entrance was as Brian had described: the tiny vestibule, the keypad, the key left in the lock. I let him punch the passcode in, then pressed my crotch against his ass and ran my fingers down his

watermelon gut. He froze. Waves of fright came off him like the fear that horses are supposed to smell. I hung on till he squirmed away and stumbled to the safety of the hall.

Behind my back, I turned the key.

“P-p-please,” he stuttered. “D-don’t do that. Just... just go upstairs. I’ll b-b-be up in a minute.”

Upstairs was a single room—open, like an attic. A workbench held a row of lenses organized by size along with scissors, pliers, duct tape and some squares of coloured cellophane. Opposite, against the wall, an unmade bed and stands with silvery umbrellas.

A Polaroid was aimed toward the bed, and some other kind of camera I’d never seen before: a metal box with smoked glass on the top. The glass was etched with grid marks and the view was upside down.

“D-don’t touch that,” Merrick said behind me as I bent down for a look. “P-please. It’s very expensive.”

I straightened up and turned around. He’d removed his jewelry and taken off his clothes except his underwear. A smudge of pubes showed through the threadbare cotton.

“Over there,” he said, pointing to the bed. “And w-w-would you strip. Please?”

Don’t sit... hunker like a runner to unlace my shoes... flash a lot of armpit when my T-shirt’s coming off... don’t primp... he doesn’t like that... act a little shy...

Merrick’s hand was plunged inside his briefs. The cameras clicked and whirred. Was Brian in the house yet? How long would he need?

“Lie down. P-p-lease. On your back.”

Stretch out like a cat... head up on the pillow... touch myself... massage my nipples... trail my fingers down toward my crotch...

The man behind the cameras got everything he bargained for. I didn’t need to see the movement in his briefs. Even with no contact, his needs and wishes flooded me. It was as if his lenses worked both ways, capturing my image, feeding me his hunger.

“D-d-damn.”

He straightened up. His boner bulged across his thigh.

“I n-need more film. It’s d-downstairs. In the kitchen. Stay here. P-please.”

Shit.

He lumbered to the stairs. My hard-on started drooping like a time-lapse wilting flower and my heart began to race.

“While you’re in the kitchen,” I called loudly, “could you get a glass of water?”

His footsteps carried on.

I lay there listening. Where was Brian? Had he heard me? My jeans were on the floor beside the bed. I sat up and grabbed them, but scarcely had them to my knees when Merrick’s footfalls sounded in the stairwell. I slid them off and lay back down.

Something glittered at his throat as his head rose into view. Then I heard Brian’s voice behind him, growling: “Keep moving, asshole.”

The glitter was a carving knife.

I scrambled up and struggled to get dressed while Brian frog marched Merrick to the bed.

“Sorry,” he grunted. “Didn’t know what else to do. Thanks for the warning.”

He hardly sounded pumped at all.

“No problem,” I said shakily.

Merrick’s eyes were slewed toward the steel at his throat. Beads of sweat were trickling down his temples. Brian dropped the knife and shoved him roughly on the mattress, where he curled up foetally and started making mewling sounds.

Brian jerked his head toward the workbench. “Grab that roll of duct tape.”

Merrick kept on whimpering while Brian forced him on his back. I slapped a piece of duct tape on his mouth then wrapped some more around his ankles. Brian heaved him on his stomach, yanking back his arms so I could tape his wrists.

We rolled him on his back again.

“What do we do now?” I panted.

Brian looked around.

“Grab that camera, for starters.” He went over to the tripod with the square black box. “It’s a Hasselblad. Worth a fucking fortune. The lenses, too.”

Breathing calm... his movements sure... no panic in his voice

...

The penny dropped.

“You meant to do this all along.”

He unscrewed the camera.

“Yeah, well, I figured you’d be more convincing if you didn’t have to think about me charging up the stairs.”

“What are you planning to do about him? He wasn’t supposed to see you, remember? And I was going to be the guy upstairs—you know, the one with no connection to the break-in?”

“Don’t sweat it. I kept a little something back. Rumour on the grapevine.”

He came over to the bed and sat, balancing the camera in his hands.

“So you like taking pictures, eh?” he asked Merrick conversationally.

Merrick looked too terrified to answer even if he could have.

Brian set the camera down.

“I asked you a question, asshole. Do-you-like-taking-pictures?”

Merrick’s head bobbed up and down.

“And those would be... *hmm*, let’s see—,” he put a finger to his chin, “—pictures of boys?”

Merrick nodded, very quickly.

“Maybe even pictures of *little* boys?”

No nod this time. Brian raised his hand and brought it down on Merrick’s cheek. Merrick’s head snapped sideways.

“I said, maybe even *little* boys?”

Merrick signalled yes.

“Want to tell me where you keep them?”

Merrick squirmed. Brian’s hand went up again. Muffled squeals

issued from the duct tape.

“Um, Brian?” I broke in. “I don’t think he can tell you with his lips taped shut.”

Brian winked. “I know.”

He grabbed the knife and laid it flat on Merrick’s cheek then tore off the adhesive gag. Merrick bellowed like a wounded bull. Brian clamped a fast hand on his mouth.

“Another sound and I start slicing, pervert,” he hissed. “The only thing I want from you’s an answer. Yell like that again...”

He drew the knife down Merrick’s cheek. A thin red line appeared. Merrick bucked and tried to twist away.

Brian’s wink suggested he was acting out a script, but with Merrick’s terror clouding my internal sight, I couldn’t sense how far he’d go. What I could see, though—a single, sharp-edged detail in a blurry double image—was that Merrick would start hollering despite the threat when Brian took his hand away.

“Brian, wait.”

He turned around. His face said, *Who are you to call the shots?*

“He’s only going to shout again.”

I nipped a length of tape off with my teeth.

“What the fuck you doing, man?”

“What’s it look like?” I shot back.

He glared but snatched his hand away. I thumbed the strip in place.

“Right,” he said disgustedly. “Like now he’s going to tell us anything. I hope you got some better idea.”

“I do. But you’re going to have to leave us alone.”

“Huh?”

“Go downstairs. Wait. I won’t be long.”

He didn’t budge at first, then shrugged and stood up with the Hasselblad.

“We gotta find those pictures,” he said darkly. “You gotta make him tell us where they are.”

“Don’t worry. I know what I’m doing. Trust me.”

He went over to the workbench.

“You going to tell me what the fuck you plan to do?” he asked, gathering the biggest lenses.

“Like I said, just trust me, okay?”

He frowned but finished loading up and went downstairs.

I sat next to Merrick. He'd wet himself. His briefs were clinging to the shrunken nub inside. I stroked his cheek where blood had started clotting.

“I'm not going to hurt you, Merrick. Really. Just lie still. Everything'll be all right.”

He flinched but I kept stroking till he settled down. Then I took a breath and let him fill me just like any other guy I wanted to know everything about. His shame, his fear, his shyness and compulsions—all of it flowed into me. The puzzle-pieces slipped in place like tumblers in a lock.

“You never touch them, do you?” I said gently. “The little ones. The ones you really love.”

His head rolled side to side.

“You have a darkroom in the basement.”

His chin went up and down.

“You keep the pictures of the bigger boys down there.”

Another nod.

“But your little ones, the special ones, they're hidden, aren't they? In a safe behind a bookcase in your bedroom. It's not a combination safe. It takes a key. The key is on a chain you like to wear beneath your shirt. You had it on tonight. It's in the special box with all your other pretty things now, isn't it?”

He made a tiny sound, as if he might be crying. I stroked his cheek again.

“You'd like to keep those pictures, wouldn't you?”

His eyes screwed shut and tears oozed out the sides.

I stood and got a pair of scissors from the workbench.

“If you don't make any noise and stay here till we're gone, we'll only take a few, okay?”

The eyes screwed tighter and he made a little movement with his

chin.

I cut the bindings on his legs and wrists but left the gag in place. He rolled over, shuddering, and curled against the wall.

Brian nearly shit a brick when I went through his loot bag, found the key, unlocked the safe and handed him the pictures. They were innocent enough, except the models—none with pubic hair—were awkward, thin, and very naked. Every photograph was stamped with Merrick's name.

“Fucking awesome!” Brian slapped me on the back. “What the hell'd you do?”

“Just sat there till he told me.” How else could I explain it?

Minus Scott and Daryl's cut, we walked away with seven-fifty.

Seven-fifty *each*.

Chapter 19

HARMLESS AS A DISNEY PARK

HAD THE FIRE that razed the barn destroyed my foster home as well? I wondered every time I parked across the road. The house had never been in good repair. Perhaps it just collapsed. More than once I'd thought of purchasing the lot, but what would be the point? I'd never cross its boundaries. I couldn't step out and explore. I was stuck inside the car. The long lawn I'd once played on would forever be a memory beyond the tinted glass.

I'd driven to Mt. Hope after listening to Dr. Behr's tape. For the first time ever, it had felt like empty ritual. How long can the golden fuel of recollection last? The magic of the place refused to come. Had reliving what I said under hypnosis rent the spell?

Kirin wanted me to call on her and Roy. I wasn't crazy about spending time with him, but seeing her would give the day a needed lift. I put the Jag in gear and pulled out of St. Paul's.

A little past Mt. Hope, south of Whitechurch Road, the unaccustomed emptiness began to fade. Farms and rural businesses sped by, basking in a sun just newly at its summer prime. At Caledonia, the bridge had traffic backed up for a kilometre. It took nearly fifteen minutes to descend the main street to the river.

On Hwy. 54, heading toward Onondaga, I turned the AC off and opened all the windows. To my left, the waters of the Grand. To my right, fertile fields gifted to the Iroquois who sided with the

Crown when the Brits and Yankees came to fisticuffs. I began to envy Kirin and the summer she had planned.

Brantwood Park turned out to be a large mown flat with camper-trailers up on blocks. Weeds grew underneath and rust leaked from their door and window frames. A two-rut dirt track cut across the field.

The office was a single-wide converted to a store. Fishing lures and bug juice jostled next to Stokeley's beans and Minute Rice. The man behind the counter, a Mohawk with his grey-hair in a ponytail, wore a deep-billed cap that shaded eyes the colour of old leather. He was sorting postcards on a rack beside the cash. The cards read *Brantwood Park, Six Nations Territory* in yellow script, with views across the river from the flat. No rusting trailers anywhere in evidence.

"Help you, son?" he asked, squaring off a batch of cards.

"Can you tell me which trailer is Roy Calhoun's?"

"Blue and white one by the dock. You looking for him?"

"His girlfriend, actually. Tall? Long blond hair? Very pretty? She has a daughter."

"No one like that here."

"She's supposed to be visiting. She would have arrived last week. Maybe you haven't seen her yet?"

"I doubt it. There's nobody at Roy's, period. Hasn't been since last September."

"September?"

"End of the season. He rents the place year round but only uses it in summer."

"And he hasn't shown up?"

"That's right."

"Is that usual?"

"Normally he sets up end of May, beginning of June."

"He hasn't been around at all?"

"Nope."

"Not even to pay rent?"

"He writes post-dated cheques."

“That’s odd. His girlfriend is a friend of mine. She said they’d be here for the summer.”

“Did she say when they’d be coming?”

“Not exactly. ‘After school’s out,’ because of her little girl.”

“School just finished last week. Could be they haven’t made it yet.”

“Right. I should have checked. Sorry to bother you. I’ll come by some other time.”



I bypassed the Spadina cutoff from the Gardiner—my usual route home—and carried on to Kirin’s place in Scarborough instead. Her Honda wasn’t there but the small garage was open. A shirtless teenager with gold rings in his nipples pushed a smoking lawnmower across the lawn. He stopped when I pulled in.

“You looking for the lady who lives here?”

“Is she home?”

“Nah. Gone for the summer.”

“When did she leave?”

“Last week. Tuesday, I think.”

“Did she say where she was going?”

“She mighta. I don’t remember.”

“Caledonia? Onondaga?”

He shrugged. “Coulda been.”

“Any idea when she’s coming back?”

“She paid me in advance two months. I’m supposed to keep an eye on the place. Cut the lawn, clear out fliers. Stuff like that.”

“I don’t suppose she left a number you can reach her at?”

“She said there weren’t no phone.”

“How about a forwarding address?”

“She musta made arrangements at the post office. All I seen is fliers. You a friend of hers? I can take a message if you like. Tell her you came by or something if I see her. What’s your name?”

“David Ase.”

“Okay. I’ll try to remember. But I don’t think she’s coming back. Not till the end of summer. She had her Honda pretty loaded up.”

“You saw her leave?”

“Her and her little girl.”

“You live around here?”

“Over there.” He nodded vaguely across the street. “What about you? From around here?”

He couldn’t not have noticed that the Jaguar didn’t fit the neighbourhood.

“Downtown,” I said.

“Got anything you need done? Anything at all?”

I shook my head. “Sorry.”

He gave me the once over. “Too bad.”



There had to be an explanation.

Kirin’s house was empty. She’d left the week before with Carlin. Her directions to the trailer park were good. Roy himself had written them, or so she said. So why was Roy’s place empty? And where had Kirin gone?

Simple answer: she and Roy had started their vacation somewhere else. She’d mentioned day trips to Lake Erie. They might very well be there. Camping sites were cheap and the beaches suitably romantic.

“David? Are you sensing something?”

I had a client with me, a plain-jane, thirty-nine-year-old gay man. He saw me once or twice a month for psychic guidance through a love affair. The object of his interest, Craig, was only seventeen. Donald—”not Don, *please*”—didn’t need a psychic. A good psychiatrist or self-help book would have told him that his special bond with Craig had no higher meaning than the hormones of a man poised on the cusp of middle age. And that his would-be lover was a psychopathic little shit who withheld sex to spur him on to

more and more expensive gifts. I was scarcely better. In my own way, I'd been stringing him along. Donald didn't want the truth, and I was most assuredly not giving it.

"Sorry. Just a flash. Nothing specific. It may not even have to do with you."

"What?"

He sounded breathless, as if my flash might tell him the location of Atlantis.

I said the first thing that popped in my head.

"Water. Lots of water."

The Grand River. Lake Erie.

"Oh, but it *does* have to do with me! You're amazing. Craig wants to see Niagara Falls. He's never been. He mentioned it last week."

"I suggest you take him, then."

"Really? Will he . . . you know?"

"Sleep with you? That depends entirely on you. How you arrange the trip."

I could see the wheels turning when he left. A lazy road trip to the Falls; every tourist trap that caught Craig's eye; dinner with a lot of booze; Craig jumping Donald's bones to show his drunken gratitude. And when things didn't go like that, Donald would be back, hoping for another tip to help him into Craig's young pants.

Just a flash. Well, at least when Donald left, he left with hope.

I poured a rye and ginger after he was gone and took it to the study. Roy had said he worked at a marina. I sat at the computer, tapped the mouse, and googled "*grand river*" +*marina*. The results, all sixty-thousand of them, only told me there was more than one Grand River in the world. I tried the online yellow pages next and got a manageable list of numbers.

The first two hadn't heard of Roy Calhoun. I got lucky on the third.

"Roy? Yeah, he works here. Or at least he used to."

"Oh? How long ago was that?"

"Up until last month. He asked me for a couple of weeks off

then never bothered showing up again. You a friend?"

"Of a friend."

"He's not in trouble, is he?"

"No, nothing like that. I'm just trying to reach him. Actually it's my friend I want to reach. I don't suppose you have Roy's address?"

"He has a trailer up the Grand."

"I know. It's empty. But he has a place in Brantford, right?"

"So he says."

"Any idea where?"

"I never asked."

"Would you have it in your records?"

"Records? Mister, the only records I keep say I work alone."

"What about a phone number?"

"No offence, but I wouldn't give it to you even if I had one."

"I understand. Sorry to bother you."

I made to hang up.

"Say, mister—want to do me a favour? You see Roy, you tell him to give me a call. It's high season. I found me a replacement, but he sucks. I need a good mechanic. I should probably kick Roy's butt, but I'll take him back if he wants."

"I'll be sure to tell him."



Canada-411 online turned up exactly one Calhoun in Brantford, William R. It wasn't Roy.

Bell Canada's unlisted database—access courtesy of one disgruntled worker, sex, and payments to his bank account—held no number for Calhoun.

The postal substation in Scarborough refused to say where Kirin's mail was going. I made a mental note to add Canada Post to my stable of protected servers.

Finally I called up Kirin's file on my computer. /Burke<Enter> took me to the lines I wanted:

Edwards, Burke:

- photographer
(Edcon/ImagePlus Productions)
- former lover
- father of Carlin Neemes

I called Edcon/ImagePlus first, but Burke had left, so I tried his home. He answered on the second ring. The curtness of his greeting—*hello* compressed into a single syllable—made me wish I hadn't called. Some men try so hard to come across as masculine their every utterance suggests the world's an adversary.

I introduced myself and gave a neutral story about trying to reach Kirin. As I figured it, no way would Kirin go away with Carlin unless Burke were in the loop. She hadn't disagreed when I'd described him as a bastard who used Carlin to maintain a hold on her.

"You're a friend of Kirin's?"

What kind of friend?

I played dumb. "Yes, we're friends."

"Since when?"

"A while now."

"How come I haven't heard of you?"

Because you're so possessive she's afraid of how you'll feel about her having male friends? Friends of any kind?

"Do you know where I can reach her?" I asked.

He wasn't used to people stepping past a gauntlet he'd thrown down.

"She's away," he conceded after a long, combative silence.

"For the summer. Yes, I know. With Carlin. Did she leave an address?"

"What's it to you?"

I took a breath and counted to three.

"Mr. Edwards, Kirin's just a friend. We're not involved—not that that has anything to do with anything." *Satisfied?* "Now, do you know where I can reach her?"

“She’s gone camping. Left a mailbox address in some town called Caledonia.”

“On the Grand River. I know it. She mentioned she’d be down that way. Can you give it to me?”

A millisecond pause.

“She phoned me at the studio when she told me. I haven’t got it here.”

Now he was telling fibs, plain and simple.

“Are you saying you don’t know where to find your daughter and her mother?”

He took the bait.

“Hang on a second. She did send a postcard. Came on Friday.” I heard shuffling sounds. “Yeah, here it is. ‘Hi, Burke. Just to let you know we’re here. Arrived yesterday. We’re staying in a trailer—did I tell you that? Cramped, but Carlin loves it. Took her swimming in the river today. She says hi.’”

Why was he reading it? To reinforce his claim on Kirin and her daughter?

“Does the card say where it’s from?”

“Place called Brantwood Park. Yeah, that’s it. That’s where she said she’d be. Brantwood Park.”

As soon as he hung up, I sent an email to Josh Byron.



The bar was long and dim with a sour smell of decades’ worth of cigarettes that no No Smoking sign would never cure. Byron had responded curtly with a time and location. The address was on Yonge Street, near Front, tucked between a drugstore and a travel agency.

Byron had a booth already and was doing his chameleon act, the one he’d done so well at Gato Nero. With both hands wrapped around a glass of draught, he looked as if he hadn’t left the place since 1950.

I ordered from the bar and went to join him.

“David.” He raised his glass.

I lifted mine. “Josh.”

His eyes went to the clock above the bar.

“You’re punctual.”

“Two pm—*Star Trek* time.”

He frowned.

“I guess you never watched *Star Trek*. Captain Picard schedules everything for fourteen hundred hours.”

“Funny—I never picked you for a TV addict.”

“I’m not. I only watch what’s out on DVD.”

He nodded distractedly.

*Uneasy about something... more than Kirin's disappearance
... not sure what to say...*

“Did you drive or fly?” I asked, making conversation.

“Drove.”

Why lie in answer to a neutral question?

“No, you didn’t,” I said.

“I didn’t?”

“Ottawa to Toronto’s five and a half hours. You didn’t drive last night—,” his email had come in at one a.m., “—or you’d look fried. And there’d be road sign in your eyes if you’d driven down today.”

He shook his head. “You’re good. Ever thought of working in intelligence?”

“Certain agencies have tried to push me in that direction.”

“Those same agencies are very pissed at you right now.”

“The redoubtable Ms. MacKenzie?”

“Yeah. Subira.”

He drained his beer and signalled for another. He wore a short-sleeved dress shirt, minus tie. His biceps nearly split the sleeve. I’d forgotten how pumped up he was. And short. My mind’s eye had made him taller.

“She wasn’t very happy when you took your little trip without informing us.”

“I can’t say pleasing her was much of a priority.”

“As your report made clear.”

“I thought I’d toned it down.”

“Toned down? Intelligence is not the joke you seem to think it is. Did you ever stop to think we wouldn’t be the only ones who read it?”

“Did Ms. MacKenzie ever stop to think I don’t like being coerced?”

Byron looked away and took a breath.

“She expected some resistance on your part,” he said evenly.

“And she thought threats would help? Sorry if I don’t feel guilty for expressing my editorial position. What’s she got to be pissed about anyway? She got what she was after.”

Byron started toying with his glass.

“Yeah, well, that’s the problem. On the strength of your report, the powers that be instructed us to drop Cassandra Island. Now this—your friend, Kirin, disappearing. Subira has ambitions. You’re not making her look good. First, you take initiative you shouldn’t have, involving a civilian—”

“Didn’t stop you from calling on me.”

“—then send us catty journals telling us Cassandra Island’s clean. Subira eats crow, delivers your report and gets a reprimand for letting you go up there without training or support. Then your friend goes missing, *after* you’ve assured us Cassandra Island’s as harmless as a Disney Park. Furthermore, you choose to tell us in a properly detailed communication like the one you should have sent us in the first place.”

I waited a long beat. The issue here was Kirin, not the politics of CSIS.

He went back to playing with his beer, turning it in quarter circles.

“We’ve been instructed to hand the matter over to the appropriate agencies. The police, in other words. Our higher-ups don’t want to hear about Cassandra Island any more, which, thanks to you, is clear as far as they’re concerned. And since your friend isn’t a psychic—”

“Not professionally, no.”

He looked up sharply.

“I haven’t known her all that long,” I explained, “but I sense she’s special in some way.”

Byron went completely still. A vein beat at his temple.

“Why wasn’t that in your report?”

I thought it was implied? It didn’t seem important? Either might be true. But Byron hadn’t asked to get an answer.

Frustration... anger... not at me... directed elsewhere... a feeling of responsibility...

“You stood up for me,” I said. “You think your boss screwed up. She shouldn’t have used threats. You fought about it after my report came in. You made her see I’d done my bit, and convinced her she should trust my instincts. If I said Cassandra Island wasn’t fronting for a cult, then it wasn’t. Now Kirin’s disappeared, and you don’t know what to think or who to blame.”

Byron sat back, staring at the ceiling. The tendons of his neck stood out in sharp relief.

“How *could* you have been wrong,” he asked, his head descending slowly till his eyes met mine, “about Cassandra Island?”

“You had people there before.”

“They couldn’t read between the lines the way you do.”

“Is it possible the place is being used? Some other group’s behind these suicides and disappearances?”

He shook his head.

“You show up there with Kirin,” he said, ticking points off on his fingers. “Two days later, Roy appears, the same time he quits his job. He puts the moves on Kirin, who doesn’t stand a snowball’s chance in hell against his charms. A couple of weeks later they’ve *both* vanished, along with Kirin’s daughter. No, someone picked her out and told him she was there.”

“But that’s what I’m saying. It could have been one of the other guests.”

“You cleared them all.”

Irene... Margie... Don... Reggie... He was right; if there’d been more to any one of them than met the eye, I would have sensed

it.

“And what about the others?” he went on. “The six we showed you pictures of? Does this group we can’t track down keep people stationed there? Different scouts, all the time? We procured Cassandra Island’s records. No individual guest’s name coincides consistently with visits from the psychics who disappeared or drowned.”

Procured—obtained illegally?

“If the police look into this,” I asked him, “what happens?”

“Kirin and her daughter are a missing persons case. You or someone else will have to file the report. CSIS can’t. It’d look like we were asking the police to do our grunt work.

“When they get on it, which won’t happen fast—Kirin’s on vacation and people have been known to change their plans—Toronto and the OPP will synchronize their efforts. Provided they’re not currently at odds.

“They’ll check out leads. The obvious one is where Kirin’s mail is being forwarded to. And who knows? It might pan out. But Kirin wrote a postcard saying she’s somewhere that she isn’t. That smells like planning to me. Planning that wouldn’t overlook the possibility of her mailbox being watched.

“So unless something else turns up, Kirin and her daughter’s file stays open but they’re never found. Like the others.”

He took a sip of draught, grimaced, and shook salt into the glass.

“One more thing. Police involvement doesn’t get us any closer to the group responsible. Could, in fact, have the opposite result.”

“Assuming it exists.”

“It exists all right.”

“Tell me something, Josh. Does Subira know you’re here?”

“She’s in the loop, yes,” he answered warily.

“And you flew down at your own expense?”

“That’s right.”

“To tell me that you’re off Cassandra Island and involving the police is useless?”

A smile played around his lips.

“Pass me your cell,” I said.

He felt his pockets and produced a small Nokia, then watched as I thumbed 4-1-1 and Send.

“Paxton,” I replied to the recorded prompt. “Cassandra Island.”

His expression didn’t change while he listened to me book a reservation.

Chapter 20

LOVELY NIGHT FOR A BEATING

SOMETHING NASTY HAPPENED to Toronto.

Three years earlier I'd woken in an alley with a feeling for the city that was more than déjà-vu but less than memory. Woven into practicalities like streets and landmarks was Toronto's image of itself—its aspirations, expectations, etiquette. Even after real knowledge overwrote the almost-recollections, nothing contradicted what I'd sensed from the beginning.

Overnight, that changed.

The abruptness had to be deceptive. Perhaps I carried from that inexplicable first morning a tenacious but outmoded notion of Toronto's personality, and simply didn't register the transformations. When did a venerable dive for ageing queens become a fast food joint? What season was it when the city's favourite cinema mutated into boutiques for the rich? What fertilizer, dumped on little shops and businesses, germinated Second Cups and Starbucks in their place? Had teams of yuppie goblins worked by moonlight to erect the wall of condos sundering the city from its waterfront? What sorcery cloaked office towers during their construction so they magically appeared in all their glass and marble finery, glittering like greedy children's dreams?

The Toronto that I thought I knew was cold but never brittle, cheap but never mean. Suddenly, or so it seemed, the city lost its

soul. Sidewalks grew a film of grit they never had before. Bay Street turned a blind eye to the homeless at its feet. Parks I'd once felt safe in got unnecessary facelifts: bushes hacked to unconcealing regularity, paths filled in with Unilock, lights and more lights everywhere, turning the nocturnal commons into sterile no-man's lands.

The numbers of the privileged declined while the space they stole expanded. The have-nots, an embarrassment, got shunted into ever-shrinking cracks and margins.

And on the Grosvenor-Grenville block, a new spirit of self-interest began to take up residence.



Stretch had always been a problem.

Hustling's by nature solitary work. When customers are driving by you have to stand alone. It just makes sense; you're more accessible that way. But when traffic's slow you stroll around, make contact with the guys you know and size up those you don't. It's how you stay informed, protect yourself, establish new connections.

It's also just good manners.

Stretch didn't stroll. He hugged his well-lit turf as if the dimmer corridors of Grenville Street and Surrey Place held lurking bedroom monsters. If he saw you coming down the street, he scurried to the other side. If you surprised him coming round the corner, he tracked you with the cold gaze of a lizard.

His clothing never varied: acid-wash—both jeans and jacket—and a pair of oversized white Nikes. The look had made a fashion blip some time before then vanished into never-even-to-be-retro land. In combination with his weedy frame and pitted face, Stretch fit nowhere on the quirky, sometimes suspect gamut of what turns a gay man's crank. No one fathomed how he ever got picked up. Rumour was, as Cowboy'd said, he undercut.

Selling sex below the market value broke unspoken rules and hurt us all, but certain johns were better left undone, and *Stretch can have 'em* kept the rest of us from turning into bottom feeders.

Still, the undercutting niggled, and the new, uncaring spirit of Toronto had no sympathy for outcasts.



Someone started calling Brian, Neil, Shox and me The X-Men. *Hey, mutant, where's your buddies?* soon replaced the standard *How's it hanging?* if I happened to be solo. Had we been one less, no doubt we would have been the Three Musketeers. Fours are harder to find names for. The Fantastic Four? It sounded dorky. Besides, we were more like four and a half. Magic horned in sometimes, sniffing hard and dancing at the edges of the group.

We smoked a lot of dope, though I held off till I'd pulled at least a trick or two. Pot dried out my mouth—never good for business—and stole the focus that I needed to get into clients' heads. But the high was always welcome, forging warm connections to each other and the night. It let us be ourselves. Underneath his baby face, Brian was a mastermind, conceiving plans and setting them in motion. Neil displayed a gift for comic accents. Shox would take a toke or two and stand there slack-jawed like a satiated caveman. Our wired little pixie, Magic, hopped from foot to foot and jabbed the air, vanishing as often and as randomly as he appeared.

I smelled the pot a half a block away one slow October night as I was coming back from turning what was probably my only trick. Earlier the weather had been clear and cool, but somewhere around suppertime a warm front had blown in. Soft rain fell and fog descended, bringing on an early dusk. The glow of streetlamps charged the air with orange-coloured plasma.

The X-Men were across from Women's College Hospital. The tail end of a sentence floated up the street.

"... undercutting, man. I say we beat the shit out of him."

Neil spotted me and flashed a loopy smile. Putting Brian in between us when we bunked together hadn't quelled the crush he'd had on me for months.

"Hey, David. That was fast."

“Couldn’t wait to join you guys.”

“Ah, dat’s so sweet,” he mugged, imitating Tweety Bird. “How much did you make?”

“Thirty.”

More like fifty, but I didn’t want to say. Traffic had been spare the night before as well.

“Fuck,” Shox grouched, “how come you’re so lucky?”

“Because, dear boy,” Neil quipped, sounding like a ’30s film, “he puts out for his customers instead of scaring them. They come back that way, you see.”

Shox had to think it over.

Brian handed me the joint. I took two puffs and looked around for who was next. Shox put out a nailbitten mitt.

“We were just discussing Stretch,” Brian filled me in.

“Figures. I heard something about undercutting.”

“It’s not just him,” Neil put in. “It’s all the little kiddies selling now. They’ll do a guy for fifteen if that’s what he’ll pay.”

The changes in Toronto had brought more—and younger—hus-tlers to the block.

“Yeah,” said Shox, passing Neil the joint, “but he’s the one who started it. We shoulda taken care of him.”

Magic, who’d been bobbing up and down, hopped off the curb and started kicking at it. “Fucker’s always down there at the corner by himself. Never bothers to say hi. Looks scared if you go near him. I say we should get him.”

“Teach the boy a lesson?” Neil growled with boot-camp nasti-ness.

“Fuckin’ right.”

Neil offered him the joint. He refused it with a quick flick of his head. Brian’s turn was next.

He took his two puffs slowly.

“I think,” he mused, “we should at least go talk to him.”

“Make him an offer he can’t refuse?” Neil rasped.

“Huh?” said Shox. “What offer?”

Neil rolled his eyes.

The night wore on, the dope wore off. Three cars swished around the corner. None of them slowed down. Magic disappeared. Half an hour later he came back. His nose was running and he couldn't seem to keep his eyes on anything.

Brian turned reflective in a way he got sometimes when he was hatching plans.

"Know what, guys?" he said. "I say let's do it. Let's go talk to Stretch."



He and Neil took the lead. Shox and Magic followed. I pulled up the rear. All of us wore runners so our footfalls made no sound.

Stretch observed the phalanx coming down the sidewalk and crossed quickly to the other side.

"Make like you're going to Frans or something," Brian ordered quietly. "I'll split off and talk to him. Come back by way of Bay. Around the dealership. He won't see you coming."

He peeled off diagonally.

Shox and Magic stayed in front. Neil slowed and fell beside me.

"Lovely night for a beating," he fluted in a British accent.

"You think it'll go that far?"

He gestured at the two ahead.

"Elementary."

A streetcar clattered by. The passengers inside looked lost in misty autumn thoughts.

We passed in front of Frans and turned up Yonge.

"It's five against one," I said.

"Does zat trouble you?" Neil responded in mock German. "Ve all must do vot iss good for ze fazzerland." He giggled. "Or the hustlers' block."

We hung a left at Grosvenor, our circle now three-quarters done. Neil jammed his hands inside his pockets and began to whistle softly.

"You don't plan to get involved," I said.

“Honey—,” Deep South this time, “—ah assure you, ah don’ even know *how* to throw a punch. Ah’m here to lend mah moral support.”

He nudged me on the shoulder.

Shox and Magic slowed at Bay. We crossed together and walked four abreast to Grenville. I hoped things wouldn’t go too far, but neither did I want to see them stop. Shox’ and Magic’s pseudo-righteous anger was infectious. I felt the pull, the same as Neil. Inside my head it was as if the four of us were one.

A ruby neon sputtered in the Caddy showroom window. The heavy air outside appeared to throb in sync.

Stretch’s back was turned when we came around the corner.

“Fuck you, man,” we heard him say. “You don’t own this street.”

Brian answered calmly. “True. But we do all have to share it.”

He threw a glance past Stretch.

“Hey, Stretch,” Neil called. “You got a problem?”

Stretch wheeled. His face was mottled and the skin around his eyes was like a piece of hide drawn tight against his skull.

“What the fuck *is* this?” he drawled, aiming for pissed off, sounding scared instead.

A tingle brushed my groin. The *us* inside my head was growing, taking on a colour like vermilion. The showroom neon turned the air the same peculiar hue. The rainy street reflected it. My body drank it in. The tingle spread toward my abdomen.

Stretch stood rooted to the spot—in my mind, a smear of pale yellow on a field of orange-red. His eyes went left toward the street. Sensing what he planned to do, I made to warn the others. I wasn’t fast enough. Stretch spun and darted left. Magic was on him in a second. I saw a blur, and Stretch was face down on the pavement. The pale yellow flared and filled my inner vision.

Brian ordered Shox to pick him up. Shox rolled him over, grabbed him by the armpits and hefted him upright. His nose was at a funny angle, leaking blood.

“Don’t hurt me, man,” he mumbled. “Please, don’t hurt me

...”

“Why not?” Brian sneered. “You’re hurting us.”

Magic cocked a fist and planted it in Stretch’s stomach. The yellow flared again. Shox was holding on too tight for Stretch to double over. He started making retching sounds.

“Take him down the street,” directed Brian.

Shox marched him past the dealership. Brian stayed in front with Magic, edging backwards warily.

Stretch abruptly tried to wriggle free of Shox. Shox tripped and both of them went down. Shox let out a roar, and rising to his knees, laced his hands together in a massive fist and swung at Stretch’s head. Stretch’s whole frame shuddered with the blow.

The yellow turned the crimson of a setting sun. The street began to dim behind a haze of swirling reds. The tingling in my cock and belly deepened to a frank erotic charge.

Shox lumbered up. Towering over Stretch he started aiming runners at his ribs. Magic danced around and kicked with lightning feet. Neil stood by and watched. Brian wore a look of satisfaction.

The thrumming in my belly and the colours in my mind were like a thread connecting us. I needed to join in, though—to kick along with Shox and Magic—for the joining to be perfect. The moment my foot landed we’d erupt into completeness.

Blood rushed through my ears and I felt myself move forward.

Headlights swept around the corner. The bewitchment vanished. White light fixed the real scene: a gang of street kids kicking a defenceless victim.

Shox and Magic froze.

“Clear out!” Brian yelled and started running.

Shox and Magic tore off after him.

Neil grabbed my arm.

“Come on, David! We gotta get out of here!”

My legs had turned to jelly, but I shook him off and lurched into a headlong sprint. We hightailed it to Grosvenor and kept on going till we reached the safety of Queen’s Park.

Neil panted to a stop beside a drinking fountain.

“Well, now, that was fun,” he gasped. “Maybe next time we should hire him and rough him up in private. If he’s undercutting, how much can it cost?”

Chapter 21

WASTING TIME WITH BITS OF JADE

THERE WERE TWO ways to Cassandra Island: the 401 to Napanee then north on 41; or the Trans-Canada—supposedly a highway, but really little more than stitched-together country roads. I chose the scenic route. I wanted farms and villages and creeks with funny names, not eighteen-wheelers convoyed two abreast.

My game plan, dryly summarized by Byron, was to stay at the retreat and wait. For what we didn't know, and he wasn't taking risks.

“Take your laptop with you,” he instructed. “We'll stay in touch by email. Don't send anything directly. Log onto your computer in Toronto and email me from there. If anybody's monitoring network traffic all they'll see is you connecting to your own domain. Encrypt the data stream—log on with ssh—and use my public key for messages. Oh yeah, I'll need yours, too, for answering. Delete messages both ways when you're done.

“Something else. Get your hands on an old PCMCIA wireless card. If anything should happen and you're asked to cut contact with the outside world, hand your cell phone over—you have one, right? make sure it's obvious—but hang onto your laptop. Volunteer to wreck the onboard wireless if it comes to that. That's where the spare comes in. It should be easy to conceal if anyone goes through your things. They'll be looking for a dongle, not a card.”

I gave silent thanks to Linux and my geek-for-hire. What Byron wanted both made sense and wasn't difficult.

Not much else had been that simple. First, I'd had to deal with my clients. Doctors on sabbatical refer their patients elsewhere. What was I supposed to do? Send my clients off to Madame Selma over the Mac's Milk at Grace and College? Tell them to tune into Jena's *Psychic Nexus*?

Then there was Marion, *in absentia*. I'd agreed to keep an eye on her apartment. The only way to meet the obligation was to find somebody else. Raymond said he'd do it on condition that I let him fine tune things around my place—at my expense. Worse, he'd scouted Marion's with decorator-fever in his eyes.

And poked into her desk.

"Isn't this that place the minions of the government wanted you to spend your own dime checking out?" he asked, holding up a yellowing Cassandra Island flier.

I hadn't told him where I'd be while he was making fast and loose with my apartment.

Not so Ferko, who deserved to know. While the Jaguar skirted lakes and slowed for sleepy villages, I thought about the worried way he'd said goodbye.

"*You must not go seeking more distractions,*" he'd admonished at Kew Beach. "*That tactic now risks turning into crippling neurosis.*"

Yet here I was, going undercover—what else could I call it?—for Canadian Intelligence, tracking down a woman whom I'd scarcely known three months. Small wonder the concern on Ferko's face. In terms of finding *me*, what I was doing screamed avoidance. Intensified avoidance. Crippling neurosis.

The only city on my scenic route was Peterborough. I blasted round it on a nearly-empty bypass, then dropped back down to country speed. The little towns of Norwood, Havelock and Marmora slipped by, and sooner than expected I was turning left at Kaladar and heading north on 41.

Was Ferko right? Was this another tactic to distract me from

my missing years? Part of me said no. Kirin and her daughter had gone missing. The man they'd disappeared with had blown into Kirin's life while she was at Cassandra Island. Six other people—psychics, all—had either vanished after visiting the luxury retreat or drowned themselves. I could hardly be accused of making something out of nothing.

But part of me still wondered. Byron's cloak-and-daggering—encrypted email, dummy cellphones, secret WiFi cards—was right out of the movies. Just the sort of thing a person fleeing from himself would jump on. Why plumb hidden regions of the mind when you can play at being a spy? With the safety of a friend at stake, what better reason could there be to put off staring demons down?

The internal dialogue subsided when I turned at Cloyne. I'd grown tired of the self-analysis and needed to stay sharp for the next part of the drive.



It can't be *déjà-vu* when you relive a real experience, but *déjà-vu* is what it felt like when I reached the town of Paxton. It spoke to me more deeply than a few rounds at the Rainbow Grill accounted for, and further on, the cliffs with cedars clinging to their sides had something of the same *I-know-you* quality.

Cassandra Island's parking lot was fuller than before. Inside the lodge, Debbie at reception chatted me through sign-in, even asking ever-so-politely after Kirin.

"You made quite an impression last time," she said, handing me the sheet with this week's seminars and workshops. "Everyone was hoping you'd come back. Sadly, none of that group happens to be here right now."

I scanned the page.

"That's not quite true. I see Mr. Shen's still giving seminars."

"Oh, Mr. Shen's not a guest. He drives down to give his lectures. They're very popular. We pay him a small stipend."

"He lives around here?"

“He has a cottage up the lake. The only time he books a room is when he needs the library. Or when he doesn’t feel like cooking.”

“Yes, I recall your chef is very talented.”

“Shall I show you to your cabin, then?”

“Just tell me which it is.”

“Number three, on the left, nearest the lake. Do you need help with your stuff?”

“No, thanks. I’ll manage.”

“Enjoy your stay.”

I’d decided on an open-ended rental. Money talks, and with a mortgage-sized deposit, Cassandra Island had been happy to oblige.

The cabin had two bedrooms. I put my luggage in the one that had a window on the lake. The kitchenette was stocked with Lagostina pots and pans. The bathroom had plush towels folded on the sink. The living room contained a TV and a fireplace, in addition to a sofa, armchairs and a glass-topped coffee table.

I set my laptop on the table and verified Cassandra Island’s WiFi by connecting to my home machine. It worked as well as last time. My cellphone went beside it in a way that nobody could miss. The plug-in wireless card was hiding in a brushed-brass nameplate on the laptop’s carrying case. Finding a plaque maker willing and able to turn out the deception on short notice hadn’t been easy.

Back in the bedroom, I started sorting clothes. It was getting close to suppertime. Stuffing underwear and T-shirts in the dresser got me thinking about Axel. I’d have to see what he was up to after dinner.

A burst of rapping sounds came through the window. A woodpecker was dining at a maple tree. Beyond, the lake was doing picture postcard things. Guests had spread out towels on the dock. I supposed I’d have to meet them and go through the rigmarole again. David Ase, wonder psychic. If I were lucky, maybe they’d turn out to be as genial as Irene and her buddies.

Okay, I thought, still looking out the window. Here I am. What now?

—◆◆—

Axel didn't stay the night. The cabin's single beds were scarcely big enough to hold just him, let alone the two of us. His enthusiasm, though, ensured that when he left, I fell straight into bone-deep, dreamless sleep. My head had barely hit the pillow, so it seemed, when all at once the birds were chittering and cawing morning songs.

I pulled on sweatpants and a T-shirt, and braved the chilly dew barefoot across the lawn toward the lake. Another early riser was already on the dock. Silhouetted by the sun, the figure's stance seemed odd. I held my hand above my eyes and saw that he was standing on one leg. The other one was crooked against his thigh—a yoga posture called The Tree.

Mr. Shen remained immobile, watching me approach.

“David—I've been expecting you.”

Saying nothing more, he lowered the crooked leg and moved into the Namaste position—hands joined as if praying, elbows out. I copied him and wordlessly we went through twelve full cycles of the Sun Salute: Namaste, back arch, toe touch, Horse, Mountain, push-up, Cobra... Our bodies stayed in perfect synch; it would have looked like dance to an observer.

“You learned that well,” he complimented afterwards. “You had a good instructor. May I know his name?”

“To be honest, Mr. Shen, I don't remember.”

“Ah—perhaps you learned it from the Buddha, then?”

“Sorry, I'm not following you.”

“Come now. I'm sure you know the saying, ‘If you see Buddha on the road, kill him?’”

“Yes.”

“I'm suggesting that your teacher was so good he *was* his lessons, not the person teaching them.”

“For all I know, that might be it. By the way, how did you know I was here? Debbie told me you aren't actually a guest.”

“Word gets around. I'm glad you're back. I was terribly caught

up in work when you were here before. Our conversation was too brief. Do you canoe?"

The change of tack surprised me. "No."

"There's not much to it if you're sitting in the bow. Does crossing water frighten you?"

"Not at all. Why?"

"I was thinking today I might go over to the island. I'd be pleased to have you come along."

Mr. Shen was not a man to fear eye contact. His gaze stayed steady while he waited on my answer.

"The pleasure would be mine," I answered formally.

He touched my arm.

"You have lovely manners, David, but we won't have much to talk about if you treat me so respectfully. Even if you think of me as Mr. Shen, please call me John."

I nodded. "John."

"Will you be having breakfast in the lodge?"

"Yes."

"I've already eaten. Would you mind asking the cook to make us up a lunch? Sandwiches will do. Meet me here at nine-thirty. It's a good time to go out. The breeze keeps the mosquitoes down."

"Don't you have a lecture?"

"Not today."

Back at cabin number three, I donned some shorts and a polo shirt with a pocket in the front for my cellphone. Then I logged onto my computer in Toronto and arranged for it to call me later in the day.

I didn't skimp on breakfast—scrambled eggs and bacon, home fries with a lot of ketchup, a chunk of sirloin and a stack of toast.

Axel went overboard on lunch. In a cooler left outside my cabin door were egg and tuna sandwiches, cold chicken, pickled beets, raw vegetables and dip, apple pie, cheddar cheese, and a couple of bottles of water.

Mr. Shen was waiting on the dock. He arranged the cooler in the middle of a green canoe then handed me a pair of biking gloves.

“You might want these. Blisters are a problem when your hands aren’t used to managing a paddle.” He held his own out so that I could see the callouses. “And since you’ve never gone canoeing, may I give instruction?”

“Yes. Please do.”

“You’ll be in front. Your only task is locomotion. Kneel on the floor and use the seat to rest your bum. Dig deep with the paddle so the blade’s submerged with every stroke. When I tell you to change sides, first switch the order of your hands, then lever the paddle over the bow.”

“Seems clear enough.”

“We’ll go around the island counterclockwise. There’s a good spot on the other side for pulling up.”

It took only a few minutes to appreciate canoeing’s pull. The senses are at rest. The eyes are mesmerized by eddies from the bow. The ears are lulled by gently plashing paddles. The nose breathes in the soft green smell of open water, which you feel slipping underneath the membrane of the hull.

Cassandra Island, it turned out, was teardrop-shaped. As we circled round, a rocky spit came into view, tapering toward the farther shore. We paddled up the point, around, and down the other side. At a small cove nibbled in the base, Mr. Shen instructed me to get out first, then followed nimbly, hauling the canoe ashore.

“This used to be my island, did you know? At one point, my grandfather had holdings on the lake. He willed them to my father, who divided them among his children. There used to be a cottage but it burned some time ago. The foundations still remain.”

“I had no idea,”

“No? Tell me, David—are you one of those who receives impressions from a place?”

“No more than most people, I don’t think.”

“I was wondering if you picked up anything.”

“Sorry, that isn’t what I do.”

“Shall we take a walk, then? There’s no easy way around the island, but I’m sure you’ll like it. We’ll leave the cooler here and eat

when we return.”

I couldn't see a path, yet Mr. Shen, in front, made his way as if there were. His pace was quick, but not so quick there wasn't time to relish how the loam gave underfoot, or the smell of heat that rose off boulders rusty with dead lichen.

A quarter of the way around, Mr. Shen veered inland to a clearing where the cottage that he'd spoken of had stood. Crumbling masonry surrounded saplings and a mat of purple flowers. Cloudy beer bottles, a firepit and mouldering condoms told a timeless teenage story.

Mr. Shen stood in the middle—quietly, as if he wanted me to comment.

“Debbie at the lodge informs me you still have a place,” I said. “Further up the lake.”

He pointed north. “About there. You can see it from here in winter.”

“Nice location.”

“Indeed. Shall we carry on?”

The island's western face was steep. Several times he sent me on ahead to scale rocks and hoist him up. The teamwork made him beam instead of bringing on apologies. *How old was he?* Normally a person's age is easy to establish. Mr. Shen was over sixty, but by how many years or decades I really couldn't tell.

When we reached the southern shore, whatever breeze there'd been died down. The sun was nearly overhead. Few fish broke the water. Strands of gossamer winked through the pines. A crow cawed from the middle of the island.

We were sweating when we reached the spit again. Mr. Shen stripped to his briefs and waded in the water. The bottom dropped off sharply. He was treading water almost right away. He'd left his glasses on; the lenses flashed each time he faced the sun. I stripped and followed him, diving down to see how deep it really was.

Deep, as it turned out. When I surfaced he was on the shore in shorts again, wringing out his underwear. I stayed in a while longer, then got out and dressed while he inspected Axel's offerings.

“Mmm. Pickled beets. Axel knows I love them. You must have told him I’d be with you.”

“I did.”

“Do you mind if we eat here on the rocks? Fewer ants.”

“Good by me.”

We laid out lunch and sat cross-legged side by side. Mr. Shen unwrapped a sandwich, offering me half. He seemed disinclined to talk while we were eating. His only conversation had to do with food. *Another piece of chicken, David? I like the flavour olives give to eggs. May I finish off those beets?* I remembered from my first trip to Cassandra Island that he always dined apart.

The apple pie was every bit as good as Marion’s. It seemed a shame to wash it down with bottled water afterwards.

Mr. Shen lay back, propped up on his elbows.

“So, David—have you been wondering why I brought you here?”

“Presumably to get me by myself. To see how I react. There’s something here you want me to respond to.”

“Or maybe *not* respond to? What are you sensing from me now? Is that the word you use? Sensing?”

“I call it reading.”

“What are you reading, then?”

“Anticipation. Expectation. Curiosity.”

“These things are not invisible.”

“No. You’re right. Anyone could see them.”

“May I assume, then, you have trouble reading me? Specifics that you normally pick up won’t come?”

“Yes.”

“Why is that, do you think? Asian inscrutability?”

Precisely what I’d thought when we discussed the *I Ching* six weeks earlier.

“Don’t worry,” he laughed. “I’m not offended. The truth is, I’m as Canadian as you. My grandfather came over from Hunan while the railroad was being built. He stayed and did like many of his countrymen—quietly grew rich investing profits made from serving

food and doing laundry. His restaurant was where the Rainbow Grill now stands.”

“Which explains his holdings around Dawe’s Lake.”

“He had vision others lacked.”

Someone else had seized the day for boating. A red canoe slid round the north end of the island. Mr. Shen fell silent, watching.

“If you’d known,” he said at length, “I’d ask what you can read from me, would you have used your Internet Blue Book?”

“As perhaps you’ve done with me?” I answered, hiding my surprise. “I seem—how shall I put this?—not to be unknown to you.”

“I don’t do readings so I have no use for tricks. My interest is in Eastern divination. However, you are right. You are not unknown.”

“Are you psychic, then?”

“Are you?”

He asked so simply that I nearly answered no, but my cellphone beeped as I’d arranged, reminding me I wasn’t there to tell the truth.

“Yes,” I said, checking the display for show, “I am.”

“Why do you do it, then? Why cheat when you don’t have to?”

“Backup. The more I know about my clients, the easier it is to give them what they want.”

“You don’t trust your native talent?”

“I believe in preparation. I never know when someone I can’t read might come along.”

“Someone like me?” he teased. “Do you know why you cannot read me?”

“Because you’ve studied Eastern disciplines, I think. Most aim to bring the body and the mind in harmony. What tells me most about a person is the opposite. Disharmony. Say, for example, somebody who comes across as confident but bites their nails.”

“Interesting,” he said, his eyes twinkling. “Somebody who comes across as confident but isn’t. Like someone claiming they can ‘read’ but having recourse to deception.”

“More like how you didn’t answer when I asked if you were psychic.”

“*Touché.*”

His delight in our exchange was catching, even though it seemed to have been bought at my expense. *You are not unknown*, he'd said. The reverse, I realized, was true as well. No doubt Irene, the specialist in former lives, would have an explanation.

He stood and brushed his shorts off. I sensed him growing serious again. His humour didn't so much fade as sink back to the place where it had come from. He wandered over to the shore and squatted down.

"Psychism," he said, making circles in the water with his finger, "is the word some use for talents of the mind outside the ordinary. Abilities most people wish they had, but at best can only long for. The term, and others of its ilk—psionics, ESP—is imprecise. Like 'creativity', which covers many things, from baking bread to painting chapel ceilings. And as with creativity, many claiming it are wearing borrowed colours.

"And yet—," he turned, "—do you know Tennyson? The verse that starts: *"So runs my dream, but what am I?"*

"An infant crying in the night, an infant crying for the light, and with no language but a cry?"

"That's the one. Yearning as a statement of belief. You say you cannot read me, but I wonder—can you see where this is leading?"

"Shall I quote Tennyson again?"

He cocked his head and looked amused. "No, no need, I think."
There is more faith in honest doubt than half the creeds.

"You believe," I said, "that faith in psychism and trust in a benevolent divinity are similar. That it's not through blind acceptance we discern it in ourselves or discover its true nature. Rather, it's through questioning, through doubt that's real and honest—even by rejecting it—that we approach the truth. You suspect I question my abilities, perhaps reject them outright, but for you this is a sign they're really there. How'm I doing?"

Instead of answering, he started gathering the detritus from lunch.

"How long will you be staying at Cassandra Island?" he enquired.

He had to be aware my visit was indefinite. *Word gets around.*

“Till I find what I came looking for.”

“May I invite you, then, to spend a few days at my cottage? I would be honoured, and perhaps can help with what you seek.”

The gracious shift in language demanded something more than *Yeah, okay, sure.*

“It is I,” I replied formally, “who would be honoured.”



To: david@ase.ca

From: sleemans@pet.csis-scrs.gc.ca

Subject: Re: John Wu Shen

Do you know how many John Wu Shens there are?
Without the Cassandra Island sale we'd still be
trying to guess which one is yours.

John Wu Shen, born 1931. Family rich off rights
granted on mineral-bearing holdings in Northern
Ontario and Québec.

Educated in Montreal, Beijing, Heidleberg, Vienna
and New Delhi. Ph.D.'s in sinology and psychology.
Never joined the family business, which now
includes a small Hong Kong bank.

Appears to be a full-time academic, though he's
never held a university post. Contributor to the
The Gestalt Journal, *The American Journal of
Psychology* and *Cognitive Therapy and Research*.
Author of two books on *The Analects of Confucius*
and one on the fakir tradition in India.
Translations of several Chinese classics into both
English and modern Cantonese.

Associated with the Centre for Interdisciplinary
Studies in Alternative Psychotherapies (CISAP) out
of southwestern Ontario from 1964 to 1973. Major
focus now appears to be comparative translations of
the Chinese *Book of Changes*.

No police record. No troubles with Revenue Canada.
Not a member of any known professional association.

The deed to Cassandra Island was sold to a holding company in the early '90s. The sale included portions of the Dawe's Lake waterfront that now house the Cassandra Island Retreat.

The property was flipped twice before being bought up by the retreat. No evidence Shen maintains any financial or executive interest. The only connection we can find is that one of the owners of the numbered company with stock majority in the Cassandra Island operation provided funding for CISAP in the '60s and '70s. Said owner died in '96.

We'll dig deeper at this end. Continue cultivating Shen.

--

JB

I deleted Byron's message, logged off my computer in Toronto, and snapped the laptop shut. It wasn't coming with me. Something told me Mr. Shen was not set up for Internet. If I needed Byron I'd come back.

A Chinese saying has it: House guests are like fish; after three days they start to stink. Three of everything, including jeans, went in a suitcase that I took out to the car before informing Debbie of my plans.

"Oh, so that's where Mr. Shen will be," she said, making a note. "Too bad. I was going to ask if you wanted his spot at ten to do your workshop again. Now, should I get housekeeping to do your cabin while you're away?"

Where do psychics who aren't rich escape to?

Mr. Shen's directions were precise, but the going wasn't easy. The first part was straightforward—the north road round the lake until it turned to gravel. After that the complications started. *There's a little bridge across the ditch past the Road Ends sign...*

Many ruts, some corduroy, several forks and two plank bridges later I pulled up behind his cottage—cedar shingle, stained dark brown and trimmed in green, the same green as the outhouse. A hydro pole fed wires from a line that ended on the property.

I honked and got out. Sunlight on the forest floor released a smell that, bottled, could be sold as Attar of Contentment.

“David!” Mr. Shen came around the side. “Welcome to my slice of paradise. No trouble getting here, I hope?”

“For myself, no. I can’t speak for the undercarriage of the car.”

He approached and bent to have a look as if I’d meant it.

“Where should I park?” I asked.

He straightened up.

“Here is fine. My car’s around the other side. Bring your things inside. I’ll make some coffee.”

He showed me to a small room off the kitchen with a single bed, a dresser and a writing table. The bed—old-fashioned, with a metal frame—wore a tightly-snugged Hudson’s Bay blanket. A second one was folded at the foot. The room had a pleasant, musty smell like the inside of a canvas tent.

“You take your coffee strong with milk, is that correct?” Mr. Shen called out.

I laid my suitcase on the dresser and went to join him in the kitchen.

“You’re an observant man if you noticed how I like my coffee from your table in the lodge.”

“Like you, David,” he replied. “Like you. Go have a seat on the deck. I’ll be out in a minute.”

The front half of the cottage was a single room outfitted with a lacquered Chinese desk big enough to double as a banquet board. Like every other building on Dawe’s Lake, or so I’d started thinking, the floor, the ceiling and the walls were wood. Not that that much of the walls was visible behind the books—shelves and shelves of them, eight high from the floor. Even the mantelpiece was full. Two comfy-looking chairs without much leg room faced the picture window.

The porch door creaked, a homey sound that matched the Adirondack chairs outside, the dappled forest shade and the sharp-sweet smell of pine. Dawe’s Lake shimmered fifteen metres down a mossy slope. A staircase made of railroad ties dropped steeply to the

shore.

A hydro cable spool did service as a coffee table. On it were a teapot, a little china cup, and the seven pieces of a tangram set. The tiles were veined like jade, but of a green so rich it verged on emerald. Mr. Shen had placed them in the figure of a cat.



A tangram puzzle starts off as a square made out of triangles, a rhomboid, and a little inner square. It took a bit of thinking, but I had it rearranged when Mr. Shen came out.



“Ah, I see you found my secret vice. A wonderful pastime.” He handed me a thick white mug of coffee. “And yes, they’re jade. Cardboard would do just as well but I like the feel. A pleasure for the mind and a pleasure for the senses.”

He poured himself some tea then took the little square-shaped tile.

“What do you see?”

“A square of jade.”

He turned it forty-five degrees.

“And now?”

“A lozenge.”

He smiled.

I tried the coffee, which was perfect. He didn’t do the fussy thing of asking if I liked it. We sat for several minutes lost in hot caffeine reflection. A seaplane droned past overhead, its pontoons flashing through the trees.

“Did my invitation come as a surprise?” Mr. Shen asked, looking up.

“Did my accepting it?”

“No.” He chuckled. “Of course not. But tell me something, are you trying to read me now?”

“Why would I be?”

“To find out why an almost stranger would invite you to his home.”

“That’s pretty obvious. You like to teach and think you’ve found yourself a pupil.”

“That’s all?”

“You’re already sounding pedagogical.”

He chuckled again. “You’re right. I can’t seem to help it. So tell me, this gift of yours—may I call it that?—is it under your control?”

“It isn’t like a radio that’s permanently on, if that’s what you mean.”

“When do you use it, then?”

“Other than with clients? I can’t really say. Whenever I feel it will serve me, I suppose.”

He poured more tea and stared off at the lake.

“If I asked you to read me now—pre-supposing you didn’t find me difficult, as we discussed—would you be able tell me what I’m thinking?”

“That’s not how it works.”

“No?”

“I’m afraid not. At best I can extrapolate a person’s thoughts. I can’t say exactly what they’re thinking.”

“Yet it must seem to some as if you can.”

“I’ve gotten good at guessing.”

“Read me now.”

“What for? You already know I can’t.”

He turned his face toward me. There was nothing special in it but I got the feeling that I’d let him down somehow.

Whenever clients asked for on-the-spot, *tell-me-what-I’m-thinking* readings, I usually closed my eyes as part of the charade. With Mr. Shen I didn’t bother.

“You have something to show me,” I told him. “A point to

make, perhaps. You're delighted by the prospect but worried by its outcome. You've done this more than once, and know that you'll succeed. Still, you have concerns. You're afraid how I'll react. Some sort of urgency is driving you."

He nodded encouragingly.

"There's something else," I went on. "A fondness. Perhaps indulgence is a better word. Something you feel but can't acknowledge. Not now, at any rate. Not in words."

He sipped his tea. I hadn't made any startling *How did you do that?* revelations. In fact, all of it was guesswork.

After a few moments he set his cup down and slid the tangram pieces equidistant from each other.

"I'm going inside now, David," he announced, getting up. "I have work to do. Study this. I'm setting you a little task: to figure out what it reminds you of." He took his cup and teapot to the door. "We will not speak again until you have an answer."

The door snapped shut. I heard him in the kitchen rinsing up, then the sound of papers being straightened on his desk. The scrape of chair legs on the floor. Silence.

He hadn't made a figure of the tangram, merely pushed the tiles apart. What did they remind me of? The jade glowed softly on the spool's weathered wood. Green—my eyes? No, the colour of my eyes was clear, like light refracting through a mineral, not bouncing off it. Stuck on green, I thought of other things. Leaves? Grass? Yesterday's canoe? Nothing fit. The green reminded me of green, like gazing up at clouds and seeing only clouds.

I tried instead to focus on the table, not the tiles, hoping that the switch of fore- and background might reveal something. The Nuclear Hazard symbol flitted through my mind, the result of how the triangles were accidentally placed. Adding in the rhomboid made me think of Mitsubishi Motors. The company logo and the scary black-and-yellow trefoil were a lot alike. I hadn't noticed it before.

I free-associated long enough for Mr. Shen to silently refresh my coffee. Twice. My eyes began to group the tiles into partial figures.

The neck and two humps of a camel. The Pause/Play button on a stereo.

The sun rose high. The scent of pine grew heady. A chipmunk scampered on the deck, caught sight of me and fled.

By lunch—tomato soup and crackers brought out by Mr. Shen—the tangram still refused to speak.

What was I supposed to be reminded of?

I took a tile at random. The jade felt more like silk than, say, a piece of glass. I rubbed my fingers over it. No *Eureka!* moment.

I could sit and study it all day, but the tangram was a puzzle after all, a game. I might as well start playing. Staring at it bug-eyed wasn't coughing up results. From memory, I reproduced the sitting cat Mr. Shen had made, squinting so the lines between the tiles disappeared. Seen this way, the head appeared to be the small square tile with triangles for ears.



In fact, it was the rhomboid laid down vertically, with triangles placed back-to-back to form a mirror rhomboid of exactly the same size.



I spread the tiles apart and tried to make a standing cat. I'd only read about the tangram, never played with it. My standing cat looked like a Schnauzer with a tumour, not a tail. When I tried to fix the Schnauzer it became a sailboat with legs. Attempts to make the sailboat a galleon gave me something like Godzilla on his back.

The trick appeared to be not thinking of the tiles as discrete, polygons to be arranged until they fit some pre-conceived idea, but rather as a set of shapes with meaning that emerged depending on their context.

I started toying randomly. This triangle *beside* the square: a goose's head. The same triangle *above*: a child's foursquare outline

of a house. With the square rotated forty-five degrees: a face topped by a wide-brimmed hat.

A pastime, Mr. Shen had said. More like a time accelerator. Once I got the hang of it, making figures using all the tiles was easy. All my life I'd let the clues that people drop arrange themselves as maps inside my head. The tangram was a 2D version of exactly the same process, and I lost myself completely in the narcissism of it.

The freshness of the day matured. The light turned orange-gold. The pine scent softened. Mr. Shen came out and watched me for a while, then went inside and started making supper. The smell of beans and wieners drifted through the door.

I felt a little guilty. The pleasures of the tangram had distracted me. Mr. Shen had set a task but all I'd done was play. More sobering, I'd utterly forgotten I was there because of Kirin. Was there some charm over the place? Kirin had gone missing after hooking up with Roy Calhoun. Roy and Mr. Shen were friends; Roy had told me so himself. Yet here I was, a guest of Mr. Shen's, wasting time with little bits of jade. For all I knew he'd had a hand in Kirin's disappearance.

I ducked inside to see how far along the dinner preparations were, then climbed the railway sleepers to the shore. The sun had swung well west and hung in limbo between afternoon and evening. The sky was nearly colourless, the surface of the lake like liquid silver.

... or a mirror with no world to reflect... or the puzzle pieces in my head that told me who a person was... personal geometries whose meaning came from context...

No. That couldn't be what Mr. Shen was after. He couldn't see inside my mind. He wanted something else. Something I was missing.

I climbed back up the steps. Mr. Shen was on the deck. I shook my head. No answer yet. We'd be dining silently. I made to go inside.

"David, wait."

I turned around. Mr. Shen was tapping his left temple, grinning

impishly.

“What’s up here,” he said. “The tangram puzzle. That’s what it reminds you of. What you feel—what you read—from other people. How your brain interprets the impressions. Don’t look so surprised. I may not have the power to see what’s in your mind, but I know what’s in my own. Now, shall we go in?”

Chapter 22

BREATH PLAY

THE X-MEN DIDN'T make it through the winter.

Neil was the first to go, brought down by pneumonia. He looked pale one night, but when I asked he hugged himself and chattered he was fine. The next night he collapsed. Emergency at Women's College had him on an IV drip and oxygen in nothing flat.

Twelve hours later Brian, Shox and I went visiting. A trim man in a soft grey suit sat by his bed. We waited in the hallway till he left.

"My dad," Neil murmured from the sheets. "He wants me to come home."

"Where's that?" Brian asked.

"Ottawa. Rockcliffe Park."

"You gonna go?"

"Yeah." Neil coughed weakly. "He's a doctor, did I say?"

None of us felt comfortable. A nurse came in. We shuffled out with lame goodbyes.

"What the *fuck*?" Shox grouched. "You mean he's just some rich guy's brat?"

A few weeks later Brian wasn't out for three nights running. He showed up on the fourth in a down-filled winter coat and treated Shox and me to Fran's.

"I met this guy from Montreal," he bubbled, high on

something. “He’s crazy for me. Wants me to move in. Showed me pictures of his condo. Fucking awesome. And—you won’t believe this—he says it’s okay if I fool around.”

Brian had hooked up with that elusive hustlers’ dream, the smitten sugar daddy.

“Montreal?” Shox mumbled through his burger. “You speak French?”

Brian shrugged. “*Ban we*,” he said, or something like it.

I scarcely noticed Magic’s disappearance.

“Seen Magic recently?” Shox asked one snowy evening and I realized he hadn’t been around for weeks.

Shox himself got taken down in March. I came around the Grenville corner—Stretch’s former patch—and saw him up against a cruiser. No one had the scoop, so I checked the papers at the library. An item in the *Sun* said Shox MacLean had done some bad things in a town called Espanola. No quotes surrounded Shox. It must have been his real name.

Brian left the biggest hole. I didn’t have a place to crash. I’d kept in touch with Raymond, though, and asked about his basement rooms. He agreed to let me have them on condition I pay rent.

“You’re all grown up now. Free ride’s over.”

“Cowboy never paid,” I pointed out.

“Yes, but dear, he worked it off in other ways. And pretty as you are, we just don’t have the chemistry.”

It wasn’t all that much, but now I had to plan and budget, calculating tricks per week, subtracting what I owed. I wasn’t lacking customers, but with the X-Men gone the nights grew long. Obligation, not anticipation, carried me to Grosvenor-Grenville when the library went dim. The twilight of the block no longer called to me the way it had.

Hustling had become a way to pay the bills.



“Wanna make some money?”

Scott and Daryl had expanded into real business, setting up an agency, the kind that advertised with lots of triple-X's and *Discretion Guaranteed's*. The enterprise was going well. Both had lost their nerdy glasses and wore tailored leather coats. The Lincoln gleamed a little brighter, chamoised, I'd have bet, with rags made from discarded hoodies.

"What kind of scene?" I asked.

They had a stable culled from working boys who'd given up the street for bigger bucks and vetted clients. They'd wanted me but I'd refused, which didn't stop them asking me to freelance on occasion for their "specials"

"Heavy SM freak who's tired of balding leather queens."

"Looking for a top?"

"Mm-hm."

"How much?"

"Four hundred, straight to you."

Four hundred? That covered Raymond's rent, with some to spare, but no one paid that much.

"Which means he's paying twice that, total. What's the catch?"

"He's into breath play."

"With somebody he doesn't know?"

I'd learned a lot from specials, most of whom were happy to instruct me in the finer points of kink. Anything they hadn't taught me I'd picked up in books. Breath play meant asphyxiation by a partner to enhance erotic pleasure. Everything I'd read about it stressed the need for total trust.

Scott and Daryl shrugged in unison.

"Can you do it?" one or other of them asked.

I weighed the pros and cons: almost killing someone versus this month's rent.

"If it goes bad, you never heard of me, okay?"

"Sure. No problem."

The client's name was Eliot Pierce. He lived in Willowdale—nosebleed country if you lived downtown. He was going to pay my cab, and had passed along instructions. His back door would be

open. I'd find clothing just inside he wanted me to wear. Downstairs in his basement was a steel door. I was to open it. Pierce would be inside. Everything I'd need would be laid out.

It wasn't hard to guess what he was after: a heavy SM scene in which he didn't have to spell things out. A fantasy made real, in other words, like guys who hired "burglars" to break in and "overpower" them.

"What's his signal?"

Daryl looked at Scott. Or the other way around.

"None. That's what he said. No signal."

Specials always had a code that meant *Back off*. Always. It could be anything—a word, a gesture, sometimes just three blinks. No one went without, especially with a hired partner.

"I dunno," I said. "This guy sounds wacked."

"You got a rep, David. They say you get inside a client's head."

"Yeah—if I can see it. Some weirdo in a latex hood doesn't give me much to work with."

"We hear otherwise. But if you don't want to do it . . ."

They were right. I could do without a signal. I knew when limits had been reached. It's why they'd come to me.

"No, it's cool. I'll take it. How's he going to pay?"

"The money'll be out when you get there."

"When's he want me?"

"Tomorrow night. Any time after ten."



A storm brewed up next evening, detonating just before I hailed my cab. Lightning cracked. Thunder growled. Hard rain sizzled off the pavement all the way to Willowdale. Sheets of water curtained down the streets of Pierce's neighbourhood.

I paid the cab and dashed around the small suburban backsplit. The metal awning at the back door was a cataract. By the time I got inside my hair was soaked and puddles spread out at my feet. I shook my head and swiped the water from my face.

Pierce had laid out leather chaps, a leather vest and muddy motorcycle boots. Generic stuff. Whatever he was into, costumes weren't important. I peeled off my T-shirt, donned the vest, and sat down on the basement steps to try the boots. They weren't easy to get into but they fit. Afterwards, I zipped the chaps over my jeans.

The steps led to a rec room—Lay-Z-Boys, cheap broadloom, flat-screen TV, hockey posters on the walls. Mr. Normal. Lots of clients lived this way, getting off on getting fucked while wifey and the kids were with the relatives.

The steel door was bolted with a Yale lock. Bolted on the *outside*. The key to open it hung from a hook. If Pierce were on the inside—and I had no doubt he was—he had no way of getting out unless he had a spare.

I pocketed the key and turned the knob.

Hot moist smell of piss and mildew. Walls all brick and painted black. Concrete floor. A drain. Dim red lights in iron sconces. Chains from brackets mounted in the ceiling. A rope and pulley in between. Racks of toys—whips and paddles, cuffs and collars, gags and gas masks, lengths of rope and leather thongs. A dog cage in the corner.

A shelf above the dog cage had some smaller items: bamboo skewers, nipple clamps and poppers—butyl nitrate. A nearby shelf held dildos. A wad of bills was tucked between the smallest two.

Pierce was sitting on the floor against the wall, dressed in chaps, a pair of knee-high Docs, and nothing else. By the clear light from the rec-room he looked trim and fit. Curly, dark hair covered both his head and chest. Gold rings glittered at at his nipples. I went up and cupped his chin. Black eyes rose without surprise. The dilation came from more than just dim light. He'd taken drugs—E, or something like it.

I dropped his chin and looked around for other exits. None. He really was prepared to go the limit. I tried the lock. The key fit smoothly. Reassured, I left it in and pulled the steel door shut.

The ruby lightbulbs cast no shadows. Everything looked flat. Objects lost their mass. Distances became impossible to gauge. I

leaned against the door and let my eyes adjust. I could feel Pierce watching me but took my time. I had to know the contents of the room. Specials always told me what they wanted. Pierce's silence meant his kinks would have to be divined.

Nothing spoke to me except the obvious. I couldn't seem to focus properly. The red lights jammed the nexus between seeing and interpreting. Clues refused to gel the way they should.

I closed my eyes. A crimson after-image smeared behind my eyelids. The dungeon's stench turned rich and intimate. A dark, charged presence grew inside me, spreading out, exciting nerves that made my body sing.

Pierce.

"How long have you been in here, asshole?" I asked him, opening my eyes.

He didn't answer. I crossed the room and struck him with the backside of my hand. He shook his head. He'd scarcely felt the blow. I raised my other hand and struck again.

"How long?"

His head snapped sideways this time. He was smirking when he looked at me again. I sank my fingers in his hair and yanked.

"How long?"

The smirk remained. I stuck my nose up close to his.

"This is how you want to play it? Fine by me. I don't want to hear a sound from you. Not a fucking peep. You so much as breathe too loud you're going to hurt. *Turn around!*"

He kneeled with his face toward the wall. I grabbed his arm and twisted it behind his back. He gasped.

"I said, not a fucking peep! Do that again, I'll break your arm."

Seconds passed.

"Okay," he drawled, insolent and daring.

I wrenched his arm. A millimetre further, it would dislocate. I held it there until his shoulder was a blaze of pain then let him go. He slumped toward the wall.

"When I give an order," I said softly, "I expect you to obey. When I ask a question, I expect you to reply. You think I care how

long you've been in this stinking pit? I don't give a rat's ass. But I asked you something and you didn't answer. Now you're going to hurt. Hurt bad until you tell me. Is that clear?"

He raised his head and nodded. He had his signal now—anything to indicate a stretch of time.

"Turn around."

He pivoted on one foot.

"These your boots?"

He nodded again.

"And you gave them to me looking like this? They're fucking disgusting. Lick them clean. Wash them with your tongue until they're fucking spotless, you got that?"

He bent forward, glancing upward like a naughty puppy. I jammed a toe beneath his chin.

"Do it!"

His tongue poked out and touched the muddy leather. Daintily at first, then with gusto, he attacked the boots, reaming seams, exploring cracks, lapping at the uppers. His slurping filled the dungeon. I drew my foot away and planted it between his shoulder blades.

"No noise!"

I leaned forward on my heel until his chin was grinding on the floor. His breath came out in wheezing gasps. I held him there a minute then eased off. He lifted himself up and clasped the boot.

"Hands off!" I barked. "I'll tell you when to touch me."

He clasped his hands behind him and began to lick submissively. The slurping started again. I hooked him underneath the armpit and flipped him on his side toward the corner with the cage.

"That's how you want it, cocksucker? Test my limits? See how far I'll go? Bad mistake. I haven't even started. In the cage!"

Pierce crawled over on his hands and knees while I dragged the rattling pen from underneath the shelf of toys. The phials of poppers gave me an idea.

"Stop right there, fuckface!"

I unscrewed a little bottle. A smell like dirty socks and bleach

rose out. I crouched and held it to his nose.

“Take a hit,” I ordered.

His *Whatcha gonna do to make me?* smirk returned. I jammed the phial in a nostril.

“Do it, fucker!”

He inhaled long and noisily. Butyl nitrate gives an instantaneous but short-lived rush. Blood pounded in his ears. The space inside his skull blew up. The room went bright and echo-y. His head felt huge and hollow.

I waited for the rush to peak then cuffed his ear. The lighting in the dungeon flared. His vision filled with scarlet.

“Again!”

He snorted hard. I waited for the peak and struck his other ear. The lighting flared again.

I kept at it till he sank down on his elbows, practically insensate, then screwed the bottle shut and stood.

“In the cage, asshole. *Now!*”

He wriggled in.

I latched the door. “You know what’s coming next?”

He wagged his head.

I undid my fly. “You’re going to be my toilet.”

He moaned; this wasn’t punishment. I kicked the cage to silence him, then waited for my stream to build and loosed it on his back. He writhed beneath it, revelling.

“Turn your head.”

He did.

“Open your mouth.”

I pissed out what was left. The urine struck his cheek and dribbled in his mouth. He smacked his lips and swallowed.

“Piss-drinking little cocksucker. You like that? You like the taste of piss?”

I kicked the cage and zippered up.

The popper stink and ruby light were making me lightheaded. Everything seemed insubstantial. I watched my urine snake toward the drain. For a moment only it was real.

I unlatched the cage.

“Out!”

Pierce wriggled backwards.

“Sit!”

He sank down Japanese-style—legs folded, buttocks resting on his upturned feet. His cock was rising from the cut-out in his chaps. Mine was stirring in my jeans.

I squatted down.

“You liked that, eh?” I asked him nicely.

He licked his lips and nodded.

“Maybe just a bit too much?”

More steel in my voice this time. His head went up and down again.

I slapped him. “You’re a sick fuck, you know that? Lie down.”

He made to stretch out on his stomach.

“On your back!”

I found a length of rope and coiled it tight around his thighs. His scrotum mounded like a tumour in his crotch between them. I went over to the shelf of toys and got a bamboo skewer. The sharp end, when I fingered it, proved duller than it looked. It wouldn’t break the skin.

Leather thongs were hanging from a coat hook on the wall. I picked out one about a metre and a half in length and took it back. His erection hadn’t dwindled and mine had grown full-size. I freed it from my jeans, then, kneeling from behind with my legs astride his head, I set the skewer down, fed the thong through both his nipple rings and tied it in a granny knot.

Balancing on one arm I bent doggie-style over him. My cock loomed just above his mouth. I started pumping slowly. The primal urge for contact proved too strong. His lips fell open and his tongue slid out.

“Don’t touch!”

I picked the skewer off the floor and dragged it up his side. The sensation was like steel cutting flesh. He twitched convulsively.

I returned to playing with myself, teasing, lowering my cock so

close a quiver of his lips would brush the skin. Every time they did I used the skewer—on his belly, through his chest hair, up his sides. His breath grew ragged and his abdomen began to heave. The tang of sweat and urine formed a bond between us, one so intimate I wasn't sure where I left off and he began. Shocks ran through me every time I scraped.

The stirrings of ejaculation forced me to back off. I put the skewer down and grasped the leather thong. Looping it around my neck, I leaned over Pierce's genitals and exhaled on his cock. It slapped against my mouth. I sat up fast. The thong went taut. Pierce yelped.

"Don't touch means don't touch!" I growled. "Do that again, I'll rip your fucking nipples off."

I bent low again and blew a stream of a warm air on his shaft. He quivered with the effort at control. I blew again. My own cock danced but his stayed still. A bead of liquid pearled at its tip.

"Good," I drawled. "Let's see how you do with this."

I grabbed the skewer once again, exhaled, and drew it up his balls. He gasped in short, sharp, spastic breaths, each one a small explosion in my groin. His cock bobbed up against my face. I sat upright as before. His nipples tented. He hissed and clenched his fists.

I sank forward on my arms and let relief flood over him, then started with the skewer in a different way. Instead of playing rough, I tickled. I traced the sharp point through his pubes, up his shaft, through the crease between his scrotum and his thighs.

With a howl of frustration, he grabbed himself and started beating off.

"Silence!"

I sat up quicker than I meant to. I felt a second's burning, then the rings were out of Pierce's nipples and the thong was hanging loosely round my neck. The dungeon light flared scarlet. Pierce's chest heaved up and down. Blood began to pool on his ribs.

He didn't make a sound, but his cry beforehand couldn't go unpunished.

I stood and stuffed my cock back in my jeans. A ball gag hung beside the rack with hoods and gas-masks. I retrieved it and went back to Pierce, unbound his thighs and ordered him to sit.

His eyes were blacker than before. I grasped his jaw and forced it open with my thumb. The gag's hard ball was huge, but I got it past his teeth and cinched the strap behind his head. He couldn't speak the signal, but his level of endurance—he hadn't made a peep—made me think he didn't need it.

"Thought I was kidding, didn't you?" I whispered in his ear. "Guess you haven't learned. Get up."

He struggled to his feet, but his legs gave out from under him. I used a boot to prod him up. He tried again and crumpled.

"Weakling."

I dragged him by the shoulders to the middle of the room.

The chains depending from the ceiling ended in a pair of leather cuffs. I unhooked them, fastened them around his wrists, hoisted him two-thirds upright and re-attached the chains. When I was done, I kicked his legs from under him so that he hung suspended with his head inclined.

The ball gag bothered me. It made him look grotesque. I took a leather hood and zipped it on his head.

The dildos by the toy shelf were identical except for size—from human up to donkey. I picked one somewhere in between. It felt slippery but left no residue. Probably some high-tech silicone. The bottom didn't flare, the way most dildos do. Instead, it ended in a braided cord.

I crouched behind him, in between his legs, and pushed the dildo at his rectum. The tip slid in. I shoved a little harder, then started shallow fucking him. He arched his spine. I teased him for a while, then rammed the whole thing in. Pain detonated in his bowels and his head jerked back.

I got to my feet and walked around him. His hard-on was still there.

"You like that thing stuffed up your ass?"

His head, inside the hood, stayed motionless.

I took a paddle from the wall with canes and straps. All black, it looked as if it might have been a cricket bat. I slapped it on my chaps.

“You like that thing?” I asked again, positioning myself behind him.

Still no response.

I moved to one side, hefted up the paddle, and whacked his thighs above the knees.

“Do... you... like... it?”

I took the paddle in both hands and swung it at his buttocks. The crack of wood against bare skin brought water to my eyes. The room swam red.

I blinked and swung again.

“Answer me!”

He nodded weakly.

“Twisted little freak. You’re not supposed to *like* it.”

I started whacking randomly—thighs, back, ass—keeping at it till his never-quit erection flagged. The workout left me panting. I put the paddle back and leaned against the wall.

The rope that dangled from the pulley in between the chains had a carabiner on the end. The rope itself looped through an eye-hook in the ceiling to a large cleat on the wall. A studded leather collar hung beside the cleat.

I unwound the rope until the carabiner brushed the back of Pierce’s neck. He flinched but made no sound. I took the collar, noting it was lined with felt, and tightened it on Pierce’s neck. I stuck two fingers underneath to check for give, then snapped the carabiner through the collar’s ring.

Pierce’s penis stirred. I bent down and licked his neck. The softness of my tongue came unexpectedly. He jerked as if I’d slapped him.

I unhooked one of his wrists, went back to the cleat, unwound the cord remaining and handed it to Piece. He knew what to do, grasping hard and tugging at it so the collar lifted to his chin and blocked his breathing.

Breath play isn't about pain. Partial asphyxiation mixes deadly risk with dizzy pleasure. For Pierce to get his money's worth, I had to get the pleasure started. I knelt in front and took him in my mouth. An erotic charge coursed through him but he couldn't gasp or moan; the charge stayed locked inside, like current with no ground. Gooseflesh rippled on his skin. Both our cocks grew stiff.

I went at him gently, just enough to stimulate, not enough to get him off. I flicked my tongue around his cockhead, licked the slit, massaged his scrotum. Pierce tugged at the rope. The collar rose and snugged against his larynx, choking off his air. His brain reacted swiftly. Luminescent dizziness swirled in his head. His body sang with imminent unconsciousness. His grip relaxed; the collar settled down around his throat. Air hissed in his nostrils as his ribcage belled in and out. He tugged the rope again.

His cock was leaking pre-cum when we stopped. Mine was slippery inside my jeans. I pried the rope out of his hand, removed the hood and gag, and unbound his other wrist.

He sank down to the floor.

"On your knees."

He grasped a swinging chain and pulled himself upright. His eyes were glazed, his face ecstatic like the saints I'd seen in books of paintings.

I laid a finger on his lips to remind him that the silence rule still held. He tracked me with his eyes as I put the hood and gag back on their racks and lifted off a scary-looking gas-mask. The intake vent was sealed with a plastic disk that had been fitted with a fifteen centimetre rubber tube of drinking straw diameter.

The mask gave me some trouble once I got it over Pierce's head. I fiddled in the hard-to-focus-in red light, disguising inexperience with roughness as I figured out which clasps to slide, which straps to buckle. The mask grew hot inside. Pierce's face broke out in sweat. Blood roared in his ears. The dungeon through the thin glass of the eyeholes looked unreal and far away. I blocked the tube with my thumb and felt the pull of suction. Pierce could breathe, but whatever air was in the mask would give out fast.

I took my thumb away and placed his free hand on his cock. He started pumping slowly. Eyes on his, I stuck the tube end on his stomach. He struggled to inhale and stroked himself more rapidly. The room began to spin. His pupils clouded and his eyelids fluttered. The muscles in his abdomen gave way. Unerect, he might have pissed. Or shit, without the dildo.

I pulled the tube away. It whistled as he drew in air. A circular discolouration, black in the red light, had risen on his skin. I rubbed it with my thumb and checked his eyes, glittering behind the oval lenses. He wanted more.

His nipples had stopped bleeding so I placed the tube on one of them. He stiffened as his breath sucked in the wounded flesh. The dizziness came swiftly afterwards. The pain became a depth charge ready to explode. His hand beat faster on his cock.

I couldn't stand it anymore. I yanked my zipper down and started pumping just as fast. Our hands became a blur. The room began to swirl. Pierce's eyes crept backward in his head. Reeling darkness filled the room. He'd reached the point of no return. In seconds now, we'd blow.

I closed my eyes and headed for release.

Even with my eyes shut, I knew something had gone wrong. Inside my head a switch got thrown, cutting off the power. One moment, current crackled between Pierce and me. The next, it wasn't there. The urgency inside me died, snuffed out like a sizzling fuse.

Frustration flared, a flash of selfish anger. My eyes flew open. Pierce's hand was on his cock, but motionless and limp. His other hand no longer clutched the chain. He swayed and toppled forward. I tried to break his fall and tumbled backwards. The gas-mask landed on my stomach. No air whistled through the tube.

I scrambled up and fumbled with the mask. My fingers trembled in the aftermath of near ejaculation. I couldn't get the fucking straps undone. Why weren't they quick release? I glanced around for something sharp. Nothing. The dungeon was a fake—a playpen, not the real thing. There were no blades. I forced myself to work by

feel, pulling here, tugging there, until the gas mask played enough to rip it over Pierce's head.

I flipped him over. Wide eyes stared at nothing. No breath stirred his ribs. I touched his neck. No pulse. A sour smell came off him. Something dribbled from his mouth.

A fist of panic slammed me in the guts. I grabbed a chain and staggered up. The blood rushed from my head. Nausea swept over me. The dim red light and foul air just made it worse. I tottered to the door and turned the key.

The rec-room light exploded in my eyes. I made it to the stairs but tripped on my way up. The shock of falling killed the nausea but didn't slow me down. I stumbled to the kitchen and, not pausing for my shoes and T-shirt, launched myself outside.

Water sluiced off Pierce's metal awning. Rain battered me from every side, slashing at my chest, seeping down my jeans, raising stink off Pierce's leathers.

How did I get out of here? I hadn't paid attention in the cab. The cab... *Oh, God.* The driver could identify me. The icy fist of panic struck again. I lurched around the house and careened toward the street. The cab had pulled up left, so I knew which way to head. But where to after that? Pierce's suburb was a maze of courts and crescents.

A gust of wind attacked me from behind and pitched me forward. Recovering, I took a step. Then another. Then another. My legs picked up momentum. I broke into a trot. The heels of Pierce's boots sent shockwaves up my calves. I didn't care. I started running, sprinting left, splashing down the empty street, oblivious to everything except the need to flee.



The townhouse's three storeys were in darkness. It had to be near four a.m. The rain had given way to drizzle, dripping off the birch leaves overhead.

I'd made it out of Willowdale and found my way to Yonge.

Shirtless in a vest and chaps, a sodden lone pedestrian, I'd stuck to empty side streets for the long, wet trek downtown. I hadn't stopped to think if downtown was the place to be. My legs had carried me, one squelching footstep at a time.

Pierce had courted danger for erotic thrills. Perhaps he'd thought he'd never have to pay the piper, but he had, and I'd been it. I'd been the one to torture him. I'd been the one to kill him. I'd been the one who jerked off while he died.

And I'd been the one who'd left his fee behind.

Money on the dildo shelf of some guy's kinky playroom—it wouldn't take two seconds to connect the dots. How long would it be before the cops checked Pierce's calls and discovered one to Scott and Daryl's agency? They had too many irons in the bootleg fire not to trade my skin for theirs. Even if they didn't, the police would sweep the hustlers' block, searching for the green-eyed fare some cabbie had dropped off at Pierce's house. The driver might not give a good description, might not even contact the police. But Grosvenor-Grenville was the last place I could ever show my face again.

I had to hide, but where? I couldn't leave Toronto. The only cash I had was in my wallet, nowhere near enough to get away. I couldn't stay at Raymond's. The risk of being traced was far too great. How was I going to live? Hustling was out. And with no bank account, no school diploma, no ID, I couldn't even get a burger-flipping job.

I rang the bell. I should have called beforehand. The chimes might not be loud enough to reach the third-floor bedroom. I tried again and stepped back. A light came on. A curtain swayed.

Suddenly, I started shivering so violently I couldn't stand. I staggered to the door and dropped my head against the frame. A soft porch light winked on. I heard the thunk of deadbolts. The door cracked open, spilling out more light. I raised my head.

"David! What's the matter?"

The bathrobed figure looked and sounded wide awake.

"I... I need a place to stay. Please. I'm in trouble."

The door went wide.

“Of course, David. Come in, come in.”

With an ironic, courtly bow, Dr. Ferenc “Ferko” Anhalt ushered me into his home.

Chapter 23

IF IT LOOKS LIKE A DUCK

MR. SHEN HAD given me a task: to make the link between a Chinese puzzle and the way I saw things in my head. I'd spotted the connection then dismissed it as too personal. In the end he'd spelled it out and hinted that we shared some mental traits.

I may not have the power to see what's in your mind, but I know what's in my own.

What exactly did that mean? That what I saw in my mind's eye was somehow special? Or just the opposite? Every time I broached the subject over supper he found something else to talk about.

"Ketchup with your beans?"

"More bread?"

"Coffee on the deck?"

After dishes, he was full of questions. Where had I grown up? How had I acquired such a range of knowledge? Who were my favourite writers? When had I started working as a psychic counsellor? Did I have a special someone? How had I found my first stay at Cassandra Island?

I tried reading past his enquiries but nothing came. If the questions followed some agenda, it was one I couldn't see.

We chatted until midnight. It was only when I went to bed I realized he'd asked me almost nothing that I couldn't answer honestly. Subjects that required I prevaricate were dropped. His interest

never crossed the line from curiosity to prurience. Not even Ferko showed so much respect.

I slept well, waking in the morning from a dream: Kirin and her daughter, whom I hadn't met, running through a cornfield playing tag. The little girl looked nothing like her mother, all frizzy hair and dark brown eyes. Both were screaming gleefully. A schoolbell rang. They panted off toward it hand in hand, bursting from the field onto playground tarmac. The dream receded as they joined the lines of students filing in from recess.

Mr. Shen was up before me. I found him on the deck, standing in the Tree position facing east. He'd laid down yoga mats and beckoned me to join him. Just like two days earlier, we made a Sun Salute.

Years before I'd ceased to wonder where I learned the exercise. That morning, the question flickered through my mind again. So much I didn't know was locked inside my six years' missing memories. Why did I know the Sun Salute? Who had thought it crucial that I learn? Had I taught myself? Why was this the only yoga that I practised? Had it served a function in some larger scheme, forever lost?

I made French toast while Mr. Shen took care of frying bacon. We ate breakfast from our laps outside, mumbling pleasantries through fat and maple syrup. By the time we got to coffee—tea for Mr. Shen—the sun was splashing daubs of yellow on the cedar boards and chasing off the morning cool.

Mr. Shen cleared up. When he returned, he brought a deck of cards. Another game? The tangrams had been fascinating but I didn't relish yet another day of solitary play.

Mr. Shen refreshed his tea and stared off quietly. His upcurved lips gave him a look of deep contentment like a tabby basking in the sun.

"Will it come as a surprise," he asked me, many minutes later, "if I tell you I'm aware that you've been lying?"

Lying? *Oh, shit.*

"From you," I answered breezily, "it would surprise me only if I

hadn't been. Apparently, we both know what a lie looks like. Up here."

I tapped my temple.

"Indeed. We share some gifts in common. Like a feel for what a person's going to say next. In your case: 'But we all tell lies.'"

"I'd call that a feeling for clichés. The gambit's obvious. As obvious as what it introduces: In what way am I lying?"

"About who you are. What you are. You misrepresent yourself."

No anger... no feeling of betrayal... no hint of menace... In my head, Mr. Shen remained, as always, placid like the surface of Dawe's Lake, fifteen metres down and skinned with silver.

"Last time I checked," I said, "I was David Ase, obscenely lucky millionaire and full-time psychic counsellor."

"And so you are. Lucky, that is. And a millionaire. And a counsellor."

"So the lie's in being psychic?"

"Not precisely. It's in feeling that you aren't while claiming that you are, like you did your first time at the Island. And then again, two days ago. I asked if you were psychic. You answered yes. But in your heart you don't believe it, do you?"

I saw no point protesting. He'd already shown his skill at reading me. I only hoped he hadn't spotted how relieved I was the lie he was referring to had no connection with Canadian Intelligence.

"What I believe's not really that important, is it?" I replied. "I'm sure you know the saying: 'If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it's probably a duck?'"

I'd been aiming for a chuckle but he wasn't laughing.

"That's sophistry, David, designed to cloak the fact appearances do *not* reveal the essence of a thing. Nor its intent. It's lazy and dishonest."

The criticism stung. I wanted Mr. Shen to like me—and not just because I needed him to trust me should he hold the key to Kirin's disappearance.

He took the deck of cards and started shuffling idly.

"Have you never wondered how it is you do the things you do?"

he asked. “How you know so much about a person whom you’ve barely met? How you gauge their motivations, grasp their secrets, know their lies, absorb their feelings—all as if you really could see in their heads?”

“You presume to know a lot about the workings of my mind.”

“Am I wrong?”

“No, but it’s a little disconcerting.”

“No doubt. Like glimpsing your reflection when you least expect it. But tell me—have you ever wondered?”

I shrugged. “Does a hockey player wonder why he’s good at getting goals? In his head, he simply is, and works at getting better. I have a gift for observation and I’ve practised it, that’s all.”

“With such a skill you could have been a writer. Or a spy. Or a doctor or a priest. Why a psychic? What made you want to use your gift the way you do?”

“A friend of mine suggested it. A psychiatrist.”

Mr. Shen stopped shuffling—clearly not the answer he expected.

“He was fascinated by the way I sized up strangers,” I went on. “We talked about it often. His conclusion, and mine, was always that I’m fast at spotting tells and good at making sense of them. Nothing more.”

“So anyone could do the things you do?”

“If they set their mind to it.”

“The same way anyone could pen a Shakespeare play or write a Wagner opera if they set their mind to it?” he teased.

“Apples and oranges.” I replied.

“Is it? Consider this. Everybody has intelligence and creativity. They’re part of being human. But can a smart, creative person—even one who’s very smart and very gifted—develop the intellectual or artistic capacity of an Einstein or a Michelangelo just by working at it?”

“On the surface genius, like psychism, looks like an extension of capacities we all possess. It appears to be a simple quantitative increase. But it differs qualitatively as well. That’s why genius so often doesn’t recognize itself. Psychism, either. Those who have it

view themselves as normal. They can't grasp why others have such trouble seeing things the way they do. A case of familiarity breeding an understandable lack of appreciation."

He sat forward.

"I'd like to show you something, David. This may not be the strongest way to make my point, but divination and prediction are my specialty. Humour me." He put the cards back on the table. "It's an ordinary deck. I sound like a magician, don't I? No matter. What I mean is, it has all the usual cards except two that I've removed. Which two is unimportant. It's so that there are only fifty cards. The math is easier that way.

"I'm going to take the top card off the pile. Just before I do, try to tell me what it is."

He held his hand above the deck. I said the first thing that popped into my head.

"Eight of diamonds."

Mr. Shen picked up the card.

"Eight of diamonds."

He showed it to me, slipped it in the deck, reshuffled, and held his hand above the cards again.

"Ten of spades."

He checked the card and showed it to me.

"Another hit."

More shuffling.

"Jack of spades."

"That's a miss. Ace of spades."

He flipped it so that I could see.

"Five of hearts."

"Miss."

"Two of diamonds."

"Miss."

"Four of hearts."

"Miss."

"King of clubs."

"Hit."

We kept at it till I lost all sense of time. The morning's sounds—the quarrelling of squirrels, the twittering of chickadees, the whine of someone's far-off chainsaw—formed a background to the drone of Mr. Shen replying “hit” or “miss” each time I made a call.

Finally he squared the deck and sank back in his chair.

“Two hundred guesses. That should do. Are you feeling tired?”

“A little fried, yeah.”

“Fatigue can be a problem with this sort of test. Still, your ratio of hits to misses didn't change by very much.”

“You were keeping score?”

“A trick I know. Useful in my field of study. Now, do you know what I mean when I refer to the law of large numbers?”

“I've read about it somewhere. The more times you test a known statistical probability, the more closely the cumulative result reflects the probability.”

“Your reading's served you well. Now, two hundred guesses hardly counts as a large number but it's adequate. Tell me—with fifty cards, what were your chances of your calling the top card correctly after each shuffle?”

“One in fifty. A two percent chance.”

“What does that work out to over two hundred guesses?”

“A probability of getting four correct.”

“I trust you noticed you got rather more than four correct?” he asked with some amusement.

I nodded.

“Would you care to guess how many?”

“Fifty?”

“No, David. The number is much closer to eighty. Seventy-six, to be precise. Thirty-eight percent correct.”

“I won the largest jackpot in Canadian history. Don't you believe in luck?”

“At a variance of thirty-six percent above the odds?”

I couldn't answer that, not even flippantly.

Mr. Shen got to his feet.

“We've been sitting quite a while. Would you like to stretch your

legs?”

Without waiting for an answer he started down the steps toward the lake.

A deer path hugged the granite shore. Well-worn tracks branched off toward the water. Dark, wet hoofprints stained the pinkish rocks. Mr. Shen went on ahead, pointing out a spray of scarlet mushrooms, a geode crusted with blue quartz, a patch of tiny flowers that smelled like apple blossoms.

I stopped beside a sap-encrusted pine root snaking horizontally above the ground. Mr. Shen kept on, then registered I wasn't following and turned around.

“Yes?” His eyebrows queried me above his glasses.

“John,” I said, “that test just now—you're not implying that I won the lottery by looking in the future?”

“Did you?”

“The ticket was a Quick Pick. I didn't choose the numbers.”

“But you chose the time and place to purchase it.”

“And you believe somehow I knew? Trust me, I didn't have a clue.”

He came back toward me.

“Are you familiar with the word, *prevoyance*, David?”

He pronounced it *pray-VOY-ense*.

“It used to be a French cycling team, didn't it?”

“Really? I didn't know. I'll have to take your word for it. But I meant it in another sense.”

“I'm not familiar with it, then. Related to clairvoyance?”

He crouched down by the root and picked up a twig.

“*Prevoyance*,” he said, poking through the pine needles and loam, “is the term we use for being able to predict things. It's from the French for foresight. It's the weakest of the psychic gifts, and the most elusive. The least understood as well.” He smiled. “One could say it's the least predictable.”

“All true psychics have it in some measure. In prediction tests they always score above the norm, with hit rates in a range from twenty up to forty-five percent. In any individual psychic, the score

will fluctuate depending on what's being tested. For example, some are good at seeing the near future. Others have a flair for long-range prophecies.

"No one can foretell the outcome of a physical event—say, a throw of dice—until it's set in motion. Even had you tried, you could not have known the numbers of your lottery before the draw. During it, perhaps, once the numbers started spinning in their bins, but not the whole string days before."

He fell silent for a moment. A beetle he'd unearthed scrambled round in frantic circles then burrowed back into the forest floor.

"What makes prevoyance so intriguing is that all real psychics have the gift but none possess it by itself. It's always linked to something else—a skill that forms the true heart of a psychic's talent."

"May I ask you something, John?"

"Please."

"Was that the point of guessing cards? A litmus test to see if I have other skills?"

"Not 'skills', David. Skill. Just one. Now, may I ask you something in return?"

"We're getting very Chip 'n Dale here," I said, "but go ahead. Ask away."

"Have you ever had foreknowledge of the future? Answer honestly," he added gently. "I know you don't believe such things are possible."

I made dissenting noises but he waved them off.

"Please—I'd like to know."

A punk named Michael Nemecek, a.k.a Bandanna—murdered, as I'd seen... Cowboy driving off to face the music for his vigilante justice...

"I may have," I confessed. "But one time I was stoned, and other I was sicker than a dog."

"And you discount the incidents because of that?"

"I've never really known quite what to make of them."

He nodded.

"Psychotropic agents can enhance prevoyance. As can certain

illnesses. And trauma, though in real psychics the talent is innate.”

Illness? Trauma? Like something that would lead to waking in an alley with a six-year memory gap?

“Pre-supposing,” I replied, wondering for a second if he’d touched the nerve on purpose, “you believe in such abilities. And since you’ve made it clear you know I don’t, I might as well go on and say that in one case it was probably wishful thinking, and in the other, well, it wasn’t as if the clues weren’t there.”

A dark sedan... two large men in front... Cowboy in the back seat, staring straight ahead...

Mr. Shen found that amusing. His face split in a broad, good-natured smile.

“Ah, yes. The rational explanation. You must be very good at it by now. Lots of practice. One might even say a reflex. No matter what extraordinary things you do, they always have an explanation.”

“You make it sound as if there’s virtue in credulity.”

As fast as it had come the humour vanished from his face.

“No, David. There isn’t. None at all.”

He tossed his twig away and stood, the smoothness of it testifying to his yoga and whatever other disciplines he’d mastered.

“Come. You’re getting hungry. After lunch we’ll do another test. A shorter one, to demonstrate the points I’ve made.”



The temperature had risen steeply so we ate inside at Mr. Shen’s enormous desk. Afterwards, while I cleared up, he went outside and came back with his cards.

“Just so there’s no doubt,” he said, “check the cards and verify the deck—I’m doing the magician thing again, aren’t I?—then shuffle them. Oh, hang on,” he reached inside the desk, “here’s the two I pulled this morning.”

While I checked and shuffled, he slid a pad and pen across the desk. I handed back the deck and watched him cut.

He picked the top card off the pile. "Which card is this?"

I wanted very much to say I didn't have a clue, and hadn't we already done this, but his unperturbed grey image in my head—the total concord between what was on the inside and the out—had grown a rippling centre like a stone dropped in a pool. However much this looked like what we'd done that morning, Mr. Shen cared more about the outcome this time around.

And, truth was, I knew which card he held. Had it been any other he would not have looked the way he did. No one looks at playing cards without subconsciously assessing them. A bridge player sees a jack and counts it as the lowest face; a euchre player sees a jack and counts it as a bower.

Mr. Shen played euchre.

"Jack of spades," I said, an image of the card quite clearly in my mind.

"Write it down," he said, nodding at the pad.

I wrote J-S while Mr. Shen put down the card and took the next one from the deck.

"This one?"

"Queen of clubs."

He nodded at the pad again. I jotted down Q-C.

"And this?"

"The queen of diamonds."

Q-D.

"Seven of hearts."

7-H.

Fifty-two cards later, Mr. Shen pushed his chair back from the desk.

"Because I want to demonstrate a point," he said, "I'm going to ask the obvious. What was different about the way we did things this time?"

"You went through the whole deck instead of shuffling each time. And instead of asking what the cards were just before you picked them up, you asked me afterwards."

"Plus," he added, "you kept score yourself. Do you know

why?”

I shrugged. “Presumably so I wouldn’t think you’d lied or cheated.”

He pushed the cards across the desk. “How do you think you did?”

“Based on what you said about prevoyance, not as well. I wasn’t, in the strictest sense, predicting. More like trying to figure out. But my score will be above the norm. I was reading you, or trying to. I gather you like games with variable high cards?”

He chuckled. “I do. Context, as we discussed a month or so ago. So—ready to check your score?” He flipped the deck; the top card was the jack of spades. “And while you’re at it, would you like a beer?”

“Sounds good.”

I’d gotten halfway down when Mr. Shen returned and set an Export at my elbow. He stood behind with his. I could sense him looking out the window. I could also sense the ripple in his calm demeanour growing. The reason wasn’t hard to guess. He’d pulled a fast one.

“John,” I said, laying down my pen, “it appears I’m not the only one not telling the whole truth. Apparently you do know sleight-of-hand. I’m intrigued. How did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Switch the cards. Arrange them in this order.”

“Believe me, David, I didn’t do a thing.”

“You had to have. This isn’t possible.”

“No?”

He touched my shoulder. I twisted round to look. His eyes were grave—graver than I’d seen them yet and filled with something like enormous sympathy.

“Do you recall,” he asked, “I said prevoyance is inevitably linked to something else?”

The meaning took a moment to sink in. His sombre look, the different way we’d done things—he had indeed slipped something past me. But not the way I’d thought.

“You weren’t testing my prevoiant skills,” I said. “Not this time. Not at all. What are you playing at?”

“Playing?” He shook his head. “I don’t think so. Would you like to do it one more time? Set controls yourself? Assure yourself that prestidigitation doesn’t enter into it?”

“I think perhaps we should, don’t you?”

“As you wish.”

He sat down. I kept the cards on my side of the desk this time, lifting each so he could see the faces while I only saw the backs. I marked my guesses as before and verified them afterwards.

The score of hits, impossibly, remained the same.

A hush that I could almost touch fell on the cottage. Up above, a squirrel dashed across the roof. From the kitchen came the hum of the refrigerator. A tingle started in my gut, growing into something nasty like the buzz of electricity. The room turned oddly bright. Auras flickered at the edges of my vision.

“How do you suppose you did it, David?” Mr. Shen asked quietly. His voice was soft and anodyne. The harbingers of agony dissolved like nighttime terrors chased off by a bedside lamp. “If all you have’s a gift for observation, how do you account for calling all the cards correctly? Fifty-two of them? Not once, but twice?”



How did I do it?

No, I thought crossly, *how did you?*

Mr. Shen wore glasses. Had he fixed things so I’d see the cards in the reflection? Had he lied? Was it, after all, a simple magic trick? He’d already shown that he was good at reading me. Perhaps he knew what hints to plant in my subconscious. And hadn’t he and Irene gabbed about the finer points of hypnotism? Could he have used the dry monotony of naming cards to put me in a trance?

I kept my scepticism quiet. If he wanted me to think I had a gift, I’d play along. It wasn’t all that difficult. Who doesn’t want to hear they’re like an undiscovered genius or blessed with supernatural

abilities? Mr. Shen was playing to my vanity. The reason wasn't hard to guess. He was trying to reel me in. "*Prevoyance is the term we use,*" he'd said. *We.* Byron and MacKenzie's cult was looking more and more like a reality, making Kirin's disappearance every bit as ominous as they, and I, suspected.

So why was time with Mr. Shen as easy as an afternoon with Marion?

We moved back outside. I sank down in the Adirondack chair as if I'd sat there all my life. The surrounding forest presence was as sweet as anything I'd known.

Mr. Shen had brought the cards.

"This isn't very scientific," he apologized. "We should be using Zener cards."

"The ones with squares and circles and wavy lines?"

"Did your psychiatrist friend ever use them?"

"No. He wasn't into parapsychology, just fascinated by the way my brain made sense of what it got by ordinary means."

"Really?" He tapped the deck. "Then I wonder what he'd make of this. The same test as before. Flip the cards, show them to me, write down what you think they are. And David—" he paused to wipe his glasses, "—don't be surprised by the results."

"I think I'm past that now."

He raised his eyebrows in a look that said we'd far from plumbed astonishment.

Fifty-two cards later I knew why.

Not one single call I'd made was right.



"Is there some point to this?" I asked. Mr. Shen had gone inside to take a leak a little too conveniently, leaving me to think things over. The strategy was starting to wear thin. "You're good—don't think I'm not impressed—but why the parlour tricks?"

So much for playing along.

"There are no tricks," he answered.

“Come on, John. You always know how things will go before we start. Pardon me for thinking that entails deception.”

“You’re right. It does. But not the way you think.”

“And what way would that be?”

“Hmm—,” he screwed a finger in his chin, “—let’s see. You’ve thought about my glasses, considered sleight-of-hand, wondered if I’m dropping hints, and contemplated hypnotism.”

Pretty good, but no better than I could do.

“In short, every explanation but the one that fits—you can see what’s in my mind.”

“Not that well, apparently.”

I gestured at the pad with its perfect score of misses.

“My point exactly,” he replied. “What makes you think I didn’t lie? Here, give me a sheet of paper.”

I ripped one off. He jotted on it quickly, hiding what he wrote.

“This time,” he said, folding it in quarters, “you’ll only get a few cards wrong. I’ve written down which ones by their position in the deck. There’ll be exactly four. Unless, of course, you miscall by design.” He pressed the paper in my hand. “Assurance that no tampering has taken place.”

As predicted, I got four cards wrong: the fifth, the ninth, the twelfth and the thirty-second.

“Have look at what I wrote. And please don’t say, ‘It’s got to be a trick.’”

5-9-12-32.

I looked up. “I wasn’t going to.”

His brows knit dubiously.

“Okay, okay, I was,” I conceded.

“That’s better. Good thing you didn’t count the cards.”

“Why is that?”

“You’d have noticed that the deck was off. I had to choose cards at random for your ‘wrong’ calls, which meant that when the real cards showed up. . . . Ah, but I see—you *were* counting cards.” He wagged his finger. “Naughty.”

“Only at first. When I hit the queen of diamonds twice, then the

five of spades, there didn't seem much point. What do you mean, 'chose cards for my wrong calls'?"

"I'm never sure quite what the right expression is. Fed you false information? It's like a lie, but the better term is misdirection."

"Misdirection? Concerning what?"

"Concerning—me." He raised his palms in the universal gesture of frustration and apology. "I'm sorry. I know that doesn't help. I wish I could explain."

My tolerance for mystery was fraying.

"Is that an 'I can't explain' or an 'I won't explain'?" I asked crankily.

He made a rueful face. "Both, for now."

"And how long will 'for now' go on?"

"Until I'm sure."

"Sure of what?" My voice went up a notch. "That I meet all your criteria? That you can trust me with whatever your agenda is?"

"Agenda?"

"Oh, come on, John. Aren't we playing at the Magus and his pupil? Doesn't that involve the wise old master finally revealing why his every utterance is shrouded in enigma?"

He held the look I gave him without flinching.

"Believe me, David—there's nothing wise about this master. What we're doing is both dangerous and *terra incognita*."

"Dangerous to whom?"

"To you. I saw your look inside, when you started to feel ill."

"So what?"

"I know where it leads."

"Somehow, John, I doubt that," I shot back, sounding like a scornful adolescent.

A long-beaked bird that had been circling above the lake plummeted and rose off with a fish. The water arcing off its catch sparkled like a slip of diamonds. Mr. Shen seemed not to notice.

"I'm sorry, John," I said. "You touched a nerve."

He made a flicking motion with one hand, brushing the apology away. I stood wordlessly and went inside.

It was cooler in the cottage. I washed and dried the lunch dishes then lay down on my bed, tracing circles on the scratchy blanket with my finger.

I thought I'd known what Mr. Shen was doing. The picnic on Cassandra Island. The invitation to his cottage. The demonstration of his psychic prowess. The tests to make me feel that I was special, too. All headed for a delicately-worded, "There's some people you should meet, a group of others, just like you." All I had to do was play a part, appear to go along. How hard could that be for a former male whore?

But something else was happening. Instead of playing along, I was putting up a fight and spurning every bit of psychic bait he offered. It didn't matter that he knew I didn't buy the *oo-ab* Jena stuff; all I had to do was make it seem he'd won me over.

Somehow, though, he'd gotten underneath my act, the role I needed to pull off for Kirin's sake. I felt cornered by his tests. Something in them frightened me, like memories that, when I tried to call them up, exploded into searing pain. It made no sense.

I heard a creak. A moment later, Mr. Shen tapped on the bedroom doorframe.

"David?" he queried diffidently. "I was afraid I'd find you leaving."

I sat up.

"No, no. Look, I'm sorry. It's just that what you've been showing me, it's all a bit much. I shouldn't have sounded so—"

"—testy? It's all right. The fault was mine. Your reaction wasn't unexpected. I shouldn't have presumed. Accept my apologies. Can I convince you to come outside and join me again?"

I studied him a good long time, looking for the chink, the crack, the little piece that didn't fit. Nothing came.

"Give me a minute," I said.

"Would you like another beer? Something else, perhaps?"

"No, thanks."

After he left, I got off the bed and smoothed the blanket. I'd left my suitcase open on the dresser. I folded up some dirty socks and

tucked them in. The pillow needed fluffing. I gave it a good pounding. The throw rug by the bed was rucked. I straightened it. A dessicated moth lay in the window frame. I transferred it to the garbage pail.

Finally I went outside.

Mr. Shen was in his chair, fingers steepled, deep in thinking mode. The cards were gone. I sat down in the other chair. The sun had swung around, slanting at an angle that put half his face in shadow.

“Images,” he said, not looking up, “images and memories, emotions and volition. Pre-cognitive volition, to be accurate—the urge that forms a thought and leads to action. These are what you read from people’s minds. We call it empathy—a term made trivial by TV shows but still the one we use. Empaths can read something else as well: the wholeness of a person. We’ve tried to quantify exactly what that means without success. It appears to be a knowing that can never be reduced to smaller parts.

“I had hoped to demonstrate, by steps, that you have the gift of empathy. That you sense these things, not by ordinary means, but with your mind. That you aren’t, as you believe, just someone who is good at observation. My agenda, as you called it, was to highlight the absurdity of your position. To bring it to the fore so you would see it cannot stand up under scrutiny.

“I had doubts I would succeed, doubts the pain you started to experience confirms. As did your reaction when I mentioned it. What I hoped to show you, and the manner of my doing it, conflicts with a conditioning that bars you from the truth. Your thoughts cannot go certain places.”

“The wall of pain,” I said.

He looked up, but not at me. “Is that what you call it? I was wondering.”

“What do you know about it?”

“I know that because of it, you’ve had to make up who you are. Invent yourself.” He turned. “The invention isn’t real, David. You’re someone other than you think.”

Someone other than you think... the dream of everyone... a general truth... fortune-teller's honey...

"What else do you know?" I asked him cautiously.

"I know the way things look inside your head. I know the terms you use. Puzzle-pieces, mental maps, sculptures. I know about the grey that isn't grey, how it shapes itself in ways you can't describe because it has no analog in vision. I know about the core of you you sometimes cast into the future. I know that face-to-face, your image of a person's clear, but in a group the clarity diminishes. Conversely you are nearly helpless to resist a strong group feeling. You suffer déjà-vu. You have a fear of being discovered, which makes you nervous around agencies that gather and keep records. And you have a hole, a part of you that's missing, surrounded by a wall of pain."

"Are you reading this from me?"

"No, David. You're nearly as opaque to me as I to you—the misdirection that I spoke of. The difference is, I can reveal myself or any part of me at any time to you or any other empath. You cannot. Not because you lack the skill but because you don't know how."

Don't know how... don't know how... don't know how...

Something happened on the deck. It was as if a cloud had veiled the sun while the world itself had brightened.

Mr. Shen, I realized, had lied. And more—he wanted me to know.

"You don't mean, 'don't know,'" I said. "You mean, 'don't remember?'"

He didn't answer. Neither did he look away. Time hung suspended. The lambent vision faded. Mr. Shen got up and wandered to the railing.

"Your friend is safe," he said, speaking to trees. "And yes, there are some people that I'd like you to meet."

Chapter 24

FIELDS OF EMERALD SOD

To: sleemans@pet.csis-scrs.gc.ca
From: david@ase.ca
Subject: Request for instructions

Josh --

You and Ms. MacKenzie appear to have been right about Cassandra Island.

John Wu Shen knows where Kirin and her daughter are. Safe, he assures me. No further information offered. Shen reveals what he wants when he wants. Probing's useless.

I'm back at the retreat but not for long. Shen's taking me to meet "some people". We're leaving today. He didn't say where, but we're going in my car--at his suggestion. I gather we'll be gone a while. He recommended I clear off my schedule.

Since my last communication, he's been putting me through tests. The goal appears to be determining the nature and extent of my "abilities". Apparently he's satisfied by the results. Enough at least to trust me with the information about Kirin.

I think we can assume the people I'm to meet have been using the retreat the way we talked about, viz planting spotters. The criteria for whom they choose to contact isn't clear. Presumably it's

more than psychic gifts, since Cassandra Island's guests all claim to have them.

I can't help wondering that Roy Calhoun was Kirin's perfect somatype and Shen's a person I was certain to warm up to. It's as if the two were chosen just for us. We may have been investigated. Certainly, Shen knows more about me than can explained any other way.

I'm no expert in these matters but I think the group that you and Ms. MacKenzie have been looking for is closer to a secret order than a cult. The distinction may not be important, but it's worth remembering that Shen is highly-educated, very smart and, as you indicated, rich. If his people are the same, it's possible they have connections--"in high places"--and your attempts to investigate Cassandra Island failed because of that.

How should I proceed? Our means of communication has already proven unreliable. I've taken the precautions you suggested but they're meaningless if wherever Shen is taking me is WiFi-less.

Please get back to me right away. I'm returning to Shen's cottage in a few hours.

--

DA

I sent the email but stayed logged on to ase.ca. I had no idea how Byron would react. Would he read between the lines? Sniff out my ambivalence?

When Mr. Shen had said *Your friend is safe*, I'd instantly and utterly believed him. No one, not even someone claiming he could camouflage the truth from real psychics, could have lied with such sincerity. It was as if he'd let me glimpse the truth, as moments earlier he'd let me see his lie.

The tests he'd had me do—he couldn't have been faking the results. There's only so much misdirection anyone can do. It's one thing to convince a mark that you can read his mind; it's something else to make him think he's reading yours.

No amount of research could have possibly unearthed what Mr. Shen appeared to know. He may have fudged up to a certain point, the kind of verbal trickery that Marion, and sometimes I, resorted to: making generalities specific and the common sound unique. But only Ferko and his colleague, Dr. Behr, knew about the pain around my missing years.

As for the other details—what I saw inside my head, the weakness in resisting group emotions, my paranoia about agencies, the *déjà-vu*—any one of them could, by itself, form part of anyone's experience, but taken all together fit me far too well to be dismissed.

And no matter how I tried, I couldn't reconcile bloated drowning victims like the ones in Ms. MacKenzie's photos with the enigmatic man who whipped up food I loved and wouldn't let me do the dishes afterwards alone. Someone may have pushed three psychics into suicide, someone may have snatched three others, but the self-effacing scholar I'd spent two days with could simply not have been involved.

I had no such feelings about Roy Calhoun. Both men were impossible to read, or, to use Mr. Shen's expression, knew how to camouflage themselves. I only had his word that such a thing was possible. But if it were, what lurked behind Roy's arrogantly masculine facade? I'd sensed a need to dominate that couldn't be ignored.

I hoped Byron wouldn't notice my equivocation. If he did, he'd probably demand I haul my ass back to Toronto lest I ruin what for him, and for his boss, was shaping up to be a coup, the kind careers are made of.

While I waited to see what he'd have to say, I packed my things and took them to the Jag, then paid a visit to reception.

"No problem," Debbie smiled. "Everyone's allowed to change their mind. We'll have to keep your deposit, though."

"I must be starting to look like one of those flighty millionaires they love so much in TV shows."

"I'm afraid Don Metairie has already beaten you to that title. You remember Don? The oil diviner?"

"The lech?"

“That’s the one.” She put a legal form on the counter facing me. “We need your signature to sign off on the deposit. At the bottom here, and here.”

She busied herself at her computer while I signed.

“Mr. Sheffield will be sorry that he didn’t get to see you,” she said, scooping up the form. “But you will be back, won’t you? And wherever you’re going with Mr. Shen, don’t keep him too long.”

“I’ll do my best. Say hi to Tom for me.”

Byron’s reply was waiting when I went back to the cabin to collect my laptop.

To: david@ase.ca
From: sleemans@csis-scrs.gc.ca
Subject: Re: Request for instructions

David --

> You and Ms. MacKenzie appear to have been right
> about Cassandra Island.

Good work.

> John Wu Shen knows where Kirin and her daughter
> are. Safe, he assures me. No further information
> offered. Shen reveals what he wants when he wants.

Or may not know, or isn’t telling the truth.
Consider K at risk until you have confirmation
otherwise.

> I’m back at the retreat but not for long. Shen’s
> taking me to meet “some people”. We’re leaving
> today. He didn’t say where, but we’re going in my
> car

Can you stall? Long enough to have your car
outfitted with a beacon? I could be at or near the
Island by this afternoon.

> Since my last communication, he’s been putting me
> through tests. The goal appears to be determining

> the nature and extent of my "abilities."

See comments further down.

Re: Calhoun and Shen

> We may have been investigated. Certainly, Shen
> knows more about me than can be explained any other
> way.

Disturbing. Your cover may be fooling no one.

> I'm no expert in these matters but I think the
> group that you and Ms. MacKenzie have been looking
> for is closer to a secret order than a cult. The
> distinction may not be important.

From the point of view of national security, no, the distinction isn't important. Both pose similar threats. However tests like you say Shen performed are often used to screen postulants for secret orders.

> How should I proceed? Our means of communication
> has already proven unreliable. I've taken the
> precautions you suggested but they're meaningless
> if wherever Shen is taking me is WiFi-less.

What you're doing remains unofficial. Subira put in a request to re-open the Cassandra Island file but was refused. Her stock's still down after the last reports you sent. If you continue, you're entirely on your own unless you find a way to stay in contact via computer.

Subira's angling for you to go along with Shen. Any intelligence you gathered would be invaluable. But since we know nothing about Shen's group, you'd be entering a potentially dangerous situation with virtually no support.

If it weren't for Kirin, personally I'd advise getting the hell out of there. You've done your part, providing us a lead that, with a bit more time, has to convince our superiors to re-activate Cassandra Island. However, as I said, there is

your friend.

It's your call. From our meetings, you strike me as a man more prone to gestures than good sense. But remember--if you go with Shen and are unable to maintain contact, you'll be up the creek without a paddle.

--

JB

Apparently I wasn't the only one with ambivalent feelings. I composed a brief reply—*Leaving from Shen's cottage. No way to contact him from C-I. Stalling not possible*—and logged off.

My open-ended stay at Cassandra Island hadn't lasted very long.



Mr. Shen had packed lightly, just an overnight case and a satchel of books. He spotted my laptop while I was helping him load them in the car.

"Would you mind bringing that inside?" he asked.

"Sure," I said. "What for?"

I guess he didn't hear me.

"Just set it on the desk," he directed in the kitchen, rooting through a drawer.

"Should I boot up?"

"No need."

He stood up with a multidriver and apology writ large upon his face.

"I'm afraid I'll have to do a little surgery or ask you not to bring the laptop. The people we'll be meeting need to keep their whereabouts unknown. You'll understand once we arrive."

"The same way Kirin 'understood'?"

His expression sombered.

"Your friend is there by choice, David. Don't for a moment imagine otherwise. Besides," a sly smile replaced the serious look,

“she isn’t working for Canadian Intelligence.”

The ghost of a wink crinkled one eye. He watched me hunt around for words.

“How long have you known?”

“Since your first visit.”

“How?”

He wagged a finger.

“That would be telling. Let’s just say we’re aware of CSIS’ interest in the Island and the reasons for it. It doesn’t trouble us. However where we’re going is a different matter. I’m sorry for the mystery. Really I am. I don’t like to be so unforthcoming.”

“Not so’s I’d noticed. What’s to stop me from disclosing the location when I leave this place you’re taking me?”

“You won’t.”

“Won’t say where I was? Or won’t be leaving?”

His reply was long in coming.

“Certainly the first,” he answered cautiously. “Quite possibly the second. In either case the decision will be yours. You’re in no danger. On the contrary, we’re the ones at risk.”

I waited for an explanation. None came.

“If I walk out right now, what happens?”

“Nothing.”

“Even if I brief CSIS on everything you’ve told me?”

“I imagine you already have.”

“That doesn’t bother you?”

“It’s a price we have to pay.”

It’s your call. First Byron, now Mr. Shen. Both giving me the option to back out. Both sure I wouldn’t.

“Go ahead,” I said, “butcher away. I’d like to keep the laptop with me.”

I quashed the urge to make up reasons why. With Mr. Shen, simple statements seemed the safer way to go.

He sat down, removed the laptop’s keyboard and made scratching motions on the inside with his screwdriver. *Backups*, my geek-for-hire whispered in my head, *you can never have enough.*

“You’ll have to take this to the shop to get the wireless repaired. Meantime, no other damage done.”

“You know your way around computers?”

“Let’s hope so.” He deftly reassembled it. “Now, your cellphone. If you don’t mind I need it, too.”

I pulled it from my belt, where I’d clipped it to be visible. He flipped it over, popped the battery and slid it in his pocket.

“Well, then, that’s that. Give me a minute to lock up then we’ll be off.”

Right—let’s take a little Sunday jaunt into the perilous unknown, shall we?

Outside I offered him the keys. He waved them off.

“That’s all right. You can drive.”

Why get paranoid about a laptop and a cellphone then sit back and give directions? Shouldn’t I be blindfolded? Drugged? Something so I wouldn’t know where we were going?

We bumped and scraped through trees until we hit the road that hugged Dawe’s Lake. Mr. Shen instructed me to make my way to Paxton, then over to the highway down to Kaladar. Afterwards he settled in his seat and watched the countryside roll by. His only further comments were to compliment the Jaguar’s quiet ride and fine suspension.

At Kaladar, we hung a right, mirroring the route I’d followed coming up.

“At 37,” he instructed, “take a left. It’s the shortest way to 401. Plus we’ll pass through Tweed. There’s a restaurant that does terrific liver if you want to stop. Lots of bacon, tons of onions.”

“How come you know my tastes in food? I thought you said I was—what was the word you used?—opaque.”

“You are.” He waited half a beat. “Almost.”

“Don’t you ever tire of being cryptic?”

“It’s a strain.”

“But there are Very Good Reasons.”

“Indeed. You.”

“Should I feel honoured?”

“In your place, I think irritated might be more appropriate.”

“To be honest I think I’m suffering what Ferko calls a flattening of affect. Not feeling much of anything.”

“Ferko?”

“The psychiatrist I mentioned.”

“Ah.”

His mind was elsewhere. He turned toward the window. There wasn’t much to look at, only rock-strewn hills and birch-and-cedar forest.

“I should be scared shitless,” I essayed a kilometre later.

“Flattening of affect is common among empaths. Without it you’d be terrified of letting go.”

“Letting go of what?”

“Of you. Your ego boundaries. When you read another person, it’s not at all objective. Part of you becomes that other person. The problem is, the ego’s like a jealous watchdog. It sets up quite a racket when it senses an invasion. The only way to silence it is not to care. To lose yourself.”

“Sounds like a one-way ticket to psychopathy.”

“Genius looks like madness, too.”

“You like the genius analogy. You used it yesterday, down by the lake.”

“The similarities are hard to miss. To start with, psychism’s extremely rare. One in many million, at a guess. Statistics are a little hard to gather.”

He went back to staring out the window. We glided up behind a tractor-trailer loaded down with timber. Inching left, I saw the road was clear and pushed the pedal to the floor. Responsive but not vulgar, the Jag slipped into overdrive and ferried us around.

The display of British engineering savvy animated Mr. Shen. He shifted in his seat and, for the first time since we’d left, seemed fully there.

“We have a ways to go,” he said, “which doesn’t mean we have to spend the hours in silence. There are things it cannot hurt for you to know, even if for now you don’t believe them. May I talk a

while?”

“Feel free.”

He made himself more comfortable, sinking deep into the Jaguar’s padded leather.

“True psychism,” he began, “is an innate condition. You’re either born with it or not. It manifests in just four ways: empathy, imprinting, prevoynance and telepathy. Those other so-called gifts—channelling, remote viewing, telekinesis, what have you—can charitably be summed up as wishful thinking.

“Of the four, empathy and imprinting are the most significant, the yin and yang of psychism. The two are mutually exclusive. No psychic ever has both gifts.

“Empathy, as I explained yesterday, means that you can read emotions, mental images and pre-cognitive volition, as well as seeing what we call the wholeness of a person, up to and including memories.”

“Reading minds, in other words,” I interrupted, trying not to show the trouble I was having buying it. Getting into people’s heads—admittedly something I was good at—was a turn of phrase, not a literal statement.

“Not precisely,” Mr. Shen replied. “Empaths cannot know another person’s thoughts, only sense the mental fields that give rise to them. In *The Hollow Men*, T.S. Eliot wrote: ‘Between the desire and the spasm falls the Shadow.’ In the same way, there’s a gulf between conditions pointing to a thought, and the actual thinking of it. That’s what empaths read—the gulf, the Shadow.

“Imprinting is the opposite of empathy. Those who have the skill are called transmitters. They imprint—transmit—from their own minds the same things that an empath reads—emotions, images, the wholeness of themselves. They cannot imprint thought *per se*, nor bend a person to their will, though it sounds as if they could. They’re more like artists—painters, for example, whose canvasses communicate their thought—except transmitters have no need of oil and brushes.”

“Empaths and transmitters experience cognitive, conceptual,

affective and memory functions in a manner largely foreign to the non-psychic mind. They ‘map’ these functions onto mental models, which they then perceive like sculptures visible from all sides simultaneously. Empaths map the things they read from other people’s minds; transmitters map their own minds and imprint selected content.

“The map, or model, can be played with, granting empaths the ability to show a false, or partial, image of themselves to other empaths. For transmitters, it means they can imprint, say, feelings that they aren’t in fact experiencing.”

“In other words,” I interrupted, “empaths can lie to other empaths and transmitters can fake their feelings. Pardon me for saying that hardly sounds earth-shattering enough to warrant muzzling my laptop.”

He carried on unperturbed.

“Do you recall I said psychism *looks* like an extension of faculties everyone possesses, but that it’s more? Here’s an example. It’s one thing to tell lies effectively. It’s quite another to fool a human polygraph. Equally, it’s one thing to manipulate a person’s feelings with a word or gesture; quite another to arouse emotions without any stimulus at all.”

“I can see where that might come in handy. Like getting the cops to wave you past R.I.D.E. checks on New Year’s Eve.”

He laughed. “Your quips are quite a treat, even if they’re prompted by anxiety. Oh, here—your turn is coming up.”

The landscape changed on Hwy. 37 with surprising speed from wilderness to undulating fields and generous old homesteads. Road signs pointed toward little towns with odd, mineral-sounding names like Sulphide and Actinolite.

“You mentioned telepathy,” I said when we grew tired of bucolia. “That sounds a hell of a lot more significant than this empathy-imprinting thing.”

“It does, doesn’t it? The stuff of psychic thrillers. The problem, though, if I may call it such, is that telepathy’s unlike the other forms of psychism. To begin with, it’s unique to twins. Even then,

it's extremely rare. Statistics show that twins account for point-zero-four percent of the world's population. Telepathy between them shows up at an even lower rate, somewhere around one in several tens of thousand sets.

"Furthermore telepathy appears to be restricted to monozygotic—identical—twins. With a single known exception, biovulars, or dizygotics—what most people call fraternal—never develop the ability.

"Primary psychism—empathy and imprinting—demands that subjects be nearby. Not so telepathy, which operates without regard to distance. Up close, telepathic twins communicate with great precision. As distances increase, their telepathy is more like what an empath reads, but the non-proximate psychism still remains anomalous.

"Even more peculiar, telepathic identical twins are never empathic, transmissive or prevoyant, which suggests telepathy is unrelated to psychism in its other forms. It's a puzzle, one we're not likely to solve any time soon."

"We? That would be the people we're going to meet?"

"Primarily. There are others. The Boundary Institute in California, the Engineering Anomalies Research lab at Princeton. And, of course, the granddaddy of them all, the Society for Psychical Research in London. Plus some organizations rather more interested in application than research."

Mr. Shen was back to being slippery. He lapsed into reflective silence. I got the feeling something that he'd said made him uneasy. His description of "true" psychism didn't correspond with anything I'd read, yet he'd spoken as if quoting from a textbook—in itself, not that unusual. By his own admission he enjoyed the act of teaching. But it had me wondering again about the people he was taking me to see. As I'd hinted to Josh Byron, clearly they weren't lacking brains.

The town of Tweed was very much like Paxton: not big enough to sprawl, not small enough to wither. The wide main street housed video stores, Tim Hortons, and the usual fast food franchises.

Nestled in between were shops proclaiming they'd been around since horse and buggy days.

The restaurant that Mr. Shen had spoken of was done in varnished pine with tables big enough for family lunches Sundays after church. Weathered men in baseball caps swilled coffee while the hefty boys across from them dug into plates of fries. It was as if we'd stumbled on a father-son convention.

We ate beside the lettered plate-glass window giving onto main street. Bracketed by Rams and Silverados, the Jaguar, parked out front, looked small and low and out of place.

"A fine car," Mr. Shen observed, polishing off liver every bit as good as what he'd promised. "Lovely ride."

"Do you want to try it out?"

"You must be psychic," he replied, deadpan.

"Very funny. You've been angling for it since we started."

"Am I so transparent?"

"Again, very funny. But since you do know where we're going ..."

"You're sure you don't mind?"

I dug in my pocket and handed him the keys.

He left with take-out coffees while I paid the bill. When I joined him he was in the driver's seat self-consciously adjusting mirrors. Leaving Tweed, he held the wheel like a driving student, but past town on the highway he relaxed and drove one-handed, sipping what turned out to be a weak but bitter brew. Evidently tastes in Java around Tweed were left over from the days of horse and buggy, too.

Despite the caffeine hit, the heavy lunch had made me drowsy. The sun had scooted west and was pooling on my legs. I could feel the engine purring through the floor. Road sound hummed a bourdon in my ears. Mr. Shen, taken with the Jaguar's handling, wasn't saying much. I felt my head sink forward.

"John," I said, jerking upright, "these empaths and transmitters—which are you?"

"I thought that would be obvious. I'm like you."

“So you’re not somehow making me feel—,” I sought for words, couldn’t find them, “—somehow making me *not* feel. . . .”

“No one’s both transmissive and empathic, David.”

“Then how. . . ?”

I lost the thread of what I meant to say. There seemed to be a disconnect between my brain and tongue. I shook my head and I tried again.

“How can I. . . how can I be doing this?”

Mr. Shen glanced over. “Doing what?”

“Driving. With you. As if nothing’s going on. I should be feeling something. . . different. I mean, I *am* feeling something different. I know it. I have to be. It’s just that. . . .”

I couldn’t get it out. My mouth felt funny—slack, like it wasn’t quite connected to my face.

“Stimulus, response,” Mr. Shen said.

“Response?” I echoed.

“To what you read from me. In turn, based on—tailored to—what I know from you.”

“But you can’t read me. Or almost can’t. Or something. Didn’t you say. . . .”

I couldn’t find the energy to finish. Something was seriously wrong. My eyes would not stay open. My arms were leaden on the armrests.

“How are you feeling, David?”

His voice came from a distance. A thrill of fear pinged in my stomach, rose, spread and died as if it didn’t matter. My head fell back. My mouth dropped open. I didn’t have the strength to close it.

“Wha’—?” I managed to get out.

“. . . *sedative, David. . . understand. . . tomorrow. . .*”

Nothing.



I woke up on my back. Sheets were tickling my chin. I could have

pulled them down but my arm was too damn comfy where it was. I stretched instead, a long, deep, shuddering stretch as satisfying as a two-hour massage.

My foot struck something solid. That was odd—my bed didn't have a footboard.

Hold on—I wasn't in my bed. I was at Mr. Shen's cottage.

No, I'd gone back to the retreat.

In the past I'd woken lots of times not knowing where I was. The confusion always went away after a few seconds.

I pushed against the footboard.

No bed I'd slept in recently had had a footboard.

Right—I'd been driving with Mr. Shen...

My eyes flew open.

It was daytime though the light inside the room was dim. To my left, flowered drapes glowed orange at the edges like a hand over a flashlight. Above me in a circle of worked plaster was a chandelier with five bronze arms and frosted tulip shades. The walls were sagey green and wainscotted in white. The door was white as well and fitted with a tarnished knob and fingerplate. Beside it was a dresser with a mirror in a swivel frame, a pitcher and a washbasin. A rocking chair and reading lamp were tucked into one corner. My laptop lay beside them. In the corner parallel, a pine armoire.

I turned my head. The pillow, obviously feather, molded to my face. I stared at the armoire until the pine knots went all blurry.

The air smelled baked and dusty with a strangely pleasant undertone of cow manure. I wondered what would happen if I tried to stand. The lead weight in my limbs felt like the aftermath of sleep, not the side-effect of something likely to cause dizziness. I nearly closed my eyes and dozed again.

Finally I pushed the bedsheet down and swung my legs over the edge. My bare feet landed on a braided rug. Someone had removed my shoes and socks but that was all. My suitcase, open by the dresser, had been emptied.

I tilted my head back and lowered it slowly. Things didn't start to spin so I stood and padded to the door. The knob turned but it

wouldn't open. I pulled a little harder. It didn't budge. It crossed my mind to bang and shout. Neither made it into action. Whatever Mr. Shen had slipped me was still dampening the panic reflex.

I went over to the window and pulled back the flowered drapes. Daylight flooded in and struck the dresser mirror. I glanced away to let my eyes adjust, then squinted out.

Dew was glinting on the lawn outside. Grass still rimed with silver formed a circle in the shade beneath a weeping willow. Through the trailing branches I could see a narrow road. Purple teasels spiked above the pampas grass and cattails in the ditch. Post and wire fences marked off fields of emerald sod. The cloudless sky was pale, as if filtered through a haze of motes kicked up by farmers' ploughs.

I knew this countryside. I knew it from my dreams. I knew it from my memories. I knew it from my journeys to a church across the highway from an empty, weed-choked lot.

Footsteps reached me from the hall outside. Someone fumbled at the door. Any less enchanted I'd have turned to face my keeper. Instead I kept on staring. The fumbling continued, followed by the crack of wood detaching from a swollen frame.

"Ah, so you *are* up," said a voice behind me. "They thought you would be. Lovely morning, isn't it? Did you try the door? Damn thing always sticks this time of year."

I turned around.

"*Marion?*"

My next door neighbour, drinking pal and sparring partner for the past two years was standing in the threshold with a breakfast tray.

"David—welcome home."

PART
TWO

Chapter 25

SINS OF OMISSION

AN IRON GATE slammed shut inside me. A very cold iron gate.

“Where am I?”

“On a farm near Binbrook.”

*Binbrook... south of Mt. Hope... east of Highway 6... east
... the compass point where memories turned into dross...*

“Am I a prisoner?”

“No.” Marion set her tray on the dresser and fished in her skirt.

“Here. Your keys. John nearly took off without giving them back.”

She dangled them in front of me.

“John. Mr. Shen?”

“That’s right.”

“Whom you know?”

She nodded.

“And told I was working for Canadian Intelligence.”

“Not directly, no.”

“But you told someone.”

“Whom you’ll be meeting soon enough.”

I snatched the keys.

“I doubt it.”

She watched me ransack through the dresser for my clothes.

“Your friend, Kirin, is here.”

I started pitching jeans and T-shirts into my suitcase. “And?”

“You should talk to her.”

“What for?”

“So you can see that she’s all right.”

“Is she?”

“Yes.”

“Then we don’t need to talk.”

I jammed in socks and underwear, slammed the lid and pointed at my laptop on the floor.

“You’re in my way.”

She moved over to the bed.

“I’m sorry, David. If there’d been any—”

“Sorry?” I shouldered the laptop. “Don’t you mean inordinately pleased? I’m not an easy man to hoodwink. You’ve been at it how long now?”

She sighed and sat down wearily. “Since you moved next door.”

“Well, then, there you have it. Congratulations. You must be feeling very proud of yourself.”

I hoisted up my suitcase and stormed out.

“Aren’t you interested to find out why?” she called after me.

“In another lifetime.”

The room opened on a hallway with a service staircase at the far end and a formal landing in the middle. I made for the fancy balustrades and started down.

Marion’s footsteps sounded quickly overhead.

“David, please. Wait. Listen to me.”

I carried on.

So did she.

“Your mother’s name was Margaret. She tried to kill herself, and you, by jumping from the Skyway Bridge in Hamilton when you were three. She thought you were a demon—you, and your imaginary friend.”

I froze.

“She got committed and you were shipped out to a foster home. You grew up there until a fire razed the place—a fire you had a hand in. The man who worked this farm was in the township VFD. He

spotted you, your . . . talents, and arranged to have you placed here.

“Those six years you can’t remember? The ones you never mention? This is where you spent them. This is what you can’t recall.”

The blood drained from my head. I couldn’t find the strength to look behind.

“Who *are* you?” I asked dully.

“Not are, David. Were. You created problems around other kids. You couldn’t go to school. I was hired to be your teacher.”

The staircase broadened to a living-room jam-packed with antique furniture. *Just like my stage-set parlour in Toronto.* Through sheers gone ivory with age, I could see the willow tree out front, moveless in the morning light. No sounds intruded on the quiet of the house. Smells of breakfast filled the air, too rich for just one diner. Not long before, a gang had scarfed down porridge, pancakes, bacon, eggs.

My right foot dropped a stair. The left one followed. Then again. And again. I reached the bottom. My suitcase weighed a ton. I set it down and turned around. Marion was frozen like a player in a game of statues.

Farm raised . . . a teacher before fortune-telling . . . takes the room she’s had forever when she goes home in August and the corn is coming on . . .

She looked like Marion Harper.

She sounded like Marion Harper.

I didn’t know who Marion Harper was.

“Don’t leave, David, please. There’s so much to explain.” She started down the stairs. “John told me you’d be hungry when you woke. *Are you hungry?*”

She asked as if I had Down’s Syndrome, and I sensed her wondering if she should take my arm or whether reassuring contact was some sort of breach of etiquette.

“This way,” she said, making for a pair of sliding doors. “Cook knows you’re here. She’s as excited as all get out. Don’t be surprised if she breaks down and cries.”

The doors were glazed with bevelled panes and opened on a

dining room. Marion skirted round the table and crossed a narrow hallway to a kitchen lined with whitewashed shelves of pickles and preserves.

A Garland stove held pride of place against one wall. A tiny woman with her back to us was taking muffins from the ovens to an oval table large enough for twelve. Her hair was pulled back in a frizzy, silver knot.

“Cook,” Marion announced brightly, “look who’s up.”

The wizened figure spun, stood still a moment, then rushed over, tearing off her oven mitts.

“Oh, my Lord—David, it *is* you. I can’t believe it. Welcome back, welcome back.” She stopped a foot below my nose. “You haven’t changed a bit. No, no, that isn’t true at all. You’re more dashing than before. But still dressing like a fifties tough. I’ll bet you’re back in fashion now, the way these things go. Here, let me look at you.”

She reached up and touched my face. Her eyes were brimming. Suddenly her arms were round my waist.

“Oh, David, it’s so good to have you back.”

I stood there woodenly.

“Forgive me,” she sniffed, dabbing her eyes with her apron. “I know you haven’t got a clue who I am, but you were always, *always* my favourite. Do you still eat like you used to? I’ve kept everything from breakfast. Except the eggs. I’ll fix some if you like. I’ve got the last of last year’s quince honey for your pancakes. You used to love it. Eat it right out of the jar, you would, thinking I wouldn’t notice. Come, sit.”

She dragged me to the table and starting bustling, laying out a feast that did indeed seem made to order.

And I *was* hungry. Ravenous. The only sense that didn’t feel numb was taste. I dug in with the focus of a family dog for whom the world disappears when his nose is in the bowl. Marion sat opposite. Cook hovered, refreshing food, clearing dishes, pouring coffee from a percolator.

“Cook,” said Marion when the only thing in front of me was

half a slice of toast, “could you give us a few minutes? If you don’t have something on the go, that is.”

“Of course. I’ll go pick vegetables for lunch and do some weeding.”

She gave me a final look then took a sunhat and a plastic grocery bag from beside the door and went outside. Through the screen I watched her make her way across the driveway.

“This place,” I said to Marion, waving my hand around, “it isn’t yours, is it?”

She shook her head.

“But I see only you and . . . Cook.”

“There are others,” she said. “Around.”

“Avoiding me.”

“Not precisely, but yes, everyone’s been cleared out.”

“Why?”

“To give you time. You saw Cook’s reaction. Look—shall we dispense with the ‘I know this must be quite a shock’ thing? My job is to babysit, pique your interest so you won’t bolt, show you around—not, I should add, in the hope of epiphanic recollections—and provide unsatisfactory responses to questions you’re not ready to have answered.”

That sounded like the Marion I knew.

“I know it doesn’t mean a thing,” she went on, “but I’ve hated lying to you since you moved next door. I’ll skip the justification that you haven’t exactly been forthcoming with me either. And I won’t ask you to start trusting me now. That’ll come or it won’t. Right now you have no reason to.”

“There are understatements, and there are understatements.”

She absorbed the comment with more difficulty than she let on. “It needed to be said.”

“Does—did—Mr. Shen know me, too, then?”

She shot me a withering look. “What do *you* think? I’m sorry—that wasn’t called for. This won’t be easy, forgetting we have two years of badinage behind us. Yes, John knew you. He was your—,” she sought the word, “—other teacher.”

“Not of algebra and English Lit.”

“No,” she allowed herself a little smile, “not of algebra and English Lit. Look, you’ll be meeting other people who know you from before. It’s going to be tough. You won’t know them from Adam. I can’t even begin to imagine how disconcerting that will be. Especially since your natural tendency will be to try to remember, which you can’t. Not without . . . consequences.”

“You know about that, too.”

“Yes.”

“What else do you know?”

“I know that right now, in your place, finding out what you’re finding out, I’d be feeling like a drunk with the mother of all black-outs.”

Lace had been hung halfway up the kitchen windows. Hummingbirds outside were spearing feeders filled with ruby nectar. Across the lane, Cook bent over rows of greens, her dress hiked well above her skinny knees.

“Were they all as fond of me as her?” I asked.

“You were special.”

“She said I was her favourite. Favourite what?”

“That was just Cook talking.”

No, it wasn’t.

“Is that your first ‘unsatisfactory response?’”

“Bear with me, David.”

“Give me one fucking reason why I should.”

“We know who you are.”

“And that’s supposed to make me playdough in your hands? Two years ago, maybe. You know, something like, ‘Oh, my God, David—is it really you?’ Now? It’s bogus and stinks of machination.”

“It isn’t bogus. We do know who you are.”

“I notice you’re not answering the machination part.”

“Because it’s true. Has been, in fact, since first you told me that that fire plug of a CSIS agent asked you to investigate Cassandra Island.”

“With good reason, it turns out.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“No? Let’s see. Psychics have been vanishing and dying. CSIS thinks Cassandra Island is involved. I go up there and get drugged and kidnapped. Am I missing something?”

“We weren’t concerned the first time you went up. We merely use Cassandra Island. We don’t own it. The administration hasn’t got a clue. We felt safe, even knowing who you were.

“What we didn’t know was that the friend you showed up with would prove to be an empath. Or that her empathy would give us information we’ve been seeking for a long time now. Or that what we’d learn from her would mean we had to bring you back.”

“Back where? Charles Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters?”

“The Binbrook Caucus. Formerly of the Society for Psychological Research, in England. We’re not the X-Men, David. The man who owns this place is Dr. Robert Colton and he doesn’t look anything like Patrick Stewart in the movies.”

The X-Men... Brian, Neil, Shox... no, it had to be coincidence...

“Mr. Shen kept saying ‘we’. Like he was trying to let me know about this... Binbrook Caucus.”

“He hoped that curiosity would make you more amenable.”

“Amenable to what?”

“Don’t be thick. To coming here of course.”

“Who needs curiosity when you’ve got roofies or whatever up your sleeve?”

“Yes, I suppose from your perspective it must seem that way. And John’s pill does explain why you’re not the sharpest knife in the drawer this morning.”

I stared at her, this woman that I used to know, this person called Marion Harper.

“Fuck you.”

She held my gaze then quietly got up and poured herself some coffee.

“Will you stay?” she asked, her back to me.

“What happens if I don’t?”

“That’s up to you. We’ve played our hand. We don’t intend to hold you. The car keys in your pocket should be proof of that. If you wish, you can expose us to your CSIS friend. Truth is it won’t make that much difference. We’re at risk from quarters other than Canadian Intelligence.”

Something in her voice caught my attention.

“Other than, or in addition to?”

She came back to the table.

“Both. The purpose of the Caucus is protection, primarily through secrecy. As things stand now we’re in danger of exposure anyway. It won’t make a hill of beans who breaks our cover. But you should know, you’re in jeopardy yourself unless you understand the reasons why we brought you here.”

“If I stay, will I start speaking in riddles, too?”

“There’s no help for it. Not at this stage. We don’t want to keep things from you, but we’ve agreed that for the time being, it’s best to—how shall I say?—funnel what you learn. Until you’re up to speed.”

“Up to speed on what?”

“Who you really are. Who *we* are.”

“If this is your idea of a choice, it sucks.”

“It’s the way things are.”

“I don’t get it. You say I’m free to leave, and I agreed to come here willingly. Or, at least, come *somewhere* with Mr. Shen. Why the Mickey Finn?”

Marion sat back.

“I was wondering when you’d get to that. I know this isn’t the time or place for levity—you’ve made that abundantly clear, thank you very much—but I can’t resist. Fasten your seatbelt, David. You’re about to get an inkling of how deep my sin of omission runs.

“I assume your sporadic Sunday jaunts are to Mt. Hope. You retain your memories of childhood up until the barn fire so it’s natural you’d go there looking for yourself. But when you leave your car you feel ill. More than ill—as if you’re going to die. Equally, you’ll

have noticed certain places seem to be off-limits. I don't know how you process that, but simply put, you have no urge to travel east of Highway 6. Toward this farm, in other words.

"There's a reason for that, which, provided you don't scarper, you'll be given. For now, in answer to your question, you were drugged because we didn't know how you'd react as you got closer to the farm. Your resistance might have triggered the response I understand you call 'the wall of pain.' We thought it best to have you sleep throughout the trip and wake up with a *fait accompli*."

"You've known all along," I said, my voice a disbelieving whisper. "About my memory. About the wall of pain. About the trips to Mt. Hope."

"And about your psychism."

"How have you been doing it?"

"Doing what?"

"Lying. Hiding things. Are you one of Mr. Shen's psychics?"

"Not 'Mr. Shen's psychics', David. Psychism is real, regardless of opinions spouted when we've chewed the matter over. Very real. And right now, people who possess it are in danger. It's why you're here. You're safer than you would be in Toronto."

"Are you one of Mr. Shen's psychics?" I repeated.

Marion looked down. "No."

The answer cost her and she wasn't hiding it.

"But you wish you were."

She raised her eyes and gave a long, assessing stare.

"One thing the Caucus asks is that, while you're here, you don't read other members."

"Who's reading? From the day you introduced yourself, I knew some part of you was discontented. As if life had cheated you. I thought it was advancing years."

"Yet you've let me go on and on . . ."

She stopped, realizing what she was saying.

Outside, Cook was coming back, listing with the weight of fresh-picked vegetables.

Marion took her mug over to the sink. "Cook's going to need

the kitchen soon. Would you like to take a walk? You were out for nearly eighteen hours. You must be feeling stiff.”

“Whatever. You’re calling the shots.”

She dried her hands on a checkered towel.

“I’ll take that as a yes. But before we go, would you mind doing something with your suitcase? You left it at the bottom of the stairs.”

Smooth. Rather than asking if I’d stay, she was forcing a commitment: return the suitcase to your room or take it to your car and leave.

I carted it upstairs.

The shock of finding out that Marion knew things about my past was wearing off. What she’d told me wasn’t all that recondite. My birthplace, my mother’s name, the foster home—all were no doubt in public records someplace, even if the private eye I’d hired once to find them hadn’t. Other kids who’d grown up in the home could be tracked down. And both Ferko and his colleague, Dr. Behr, knew about the fire, my imaginary friend, the wall of pain. Two days earlier, I’d been ready to believe they hadn’t been sought out. Not anymore. That Marion had some facts to hand didn’t make her story true. That’s the way a psychic’s clients think. I wasn’t going to fall into that kind of *post hoc* fallacy.

Still, she’d known about my strange unwillingness to travel east of Highway 6. A small thing to be sure, but not one easily dismissed.

She wasn’t in the kitchen when I came back down.

“Out front,” Cook told me. “You might as well go out this door.” She spent a moment staring. “It really is good to have you back. I never approved, you know.”

“Approved of what?”

“I wish I could say, dear. I just wanted you to know.”

Out front was a veranda wrapping round two sides of an enormous old brick farmhouse. Wooden columns tapered to an overhang. Stumpy banisters held up a solid railing. A settee and some wicker chairs invited contemplation of the field across the road.

Nasturtiums spilled from hanging pots.

“So,” Marion asked, coming down to meet me on the lawn, “would you like to see the place?”

“Don’t make like I’m a guest.”

“I’m only trying to be civil.”

“Why bother? You’ve got me by the balls.”

She shook her head dispiritedly.

“I don’t know why I hoped you wouldn’t be so fractious.”

“Sorry if I’m ruining your fun.”

She started for the lane. I stayed put.

“Well, are you coming or not?” she called out.

What choice did I have?

A row of oaks and maples formed a windbreak to the driveway’s left. A little past Cook’s garden, two board-and-batten cabins sported fresh blue trim and window boxes filled with pansies.

“This used to be a commune in the sixties,” Marion informed me, sounding like a tour guide. “Commune slash retreat slash place-of-study for people working in the counselling professions. It had—has—quite the library, plus a couple of consulting rooms in the extension at the back. Visitors could stay as long as they liked provided they pitched in with the chores. It was before my time, but I believe they grew produce for the Hamilton farmers’ market. The official name was the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Alternative Psychotherapies. Very sixties. I’m told locals called it The Funny Farm.”

Byron had mentioned CISAP in his run-down on Mr. Shen.

The driveway widened to an oval patch of hardpack. Marion stopped. The Jag was parked against a long addition, faced in brick to match the house. Beyond, the broad doors of a red barn yawed. A rutted track beside the barn led to a cabin larger than the other two and fronted by a covered porch.

“The farm comprises three fields,” Marion said. These two—,” she swept her arm to indicate the field behind the barn and another to the left, “—and the acreage across the road. That one’s rented out to a potato grower. These other two are corn and soya, alfalfa

in the off years.”

I held my hand above my eyes. Behind the barn, maturing corn, gilded by the morning sun, glittered with remaining dew. A tractor in the distance kicked up dust. Marion had said I shouldn't hope for recollections. None came. Why should they?

“That used to be your room,” she said, pointing to a corner window right above the kitchen. “Next to the back stairs. You were always first up in the morning, getting in Cook's way.”

She stood a moment, then turned around and walked us to the road.

“Nebo Road,” she told me, heading right. “It ends about a mile back at Chippewa. If we keep going this way, we'll hit Whitechurch, which takes you into Binbrook.”

A breeze played through the lush growth in the ditch where the teasel heads were at their lilac-banded peak.

“These don't grow much in Toronto,” I said. “The only place I've seen them is High Park. They used to make me feel sad. I never understood. When they're not flowering they just look weird, as if they're from another planet.”

Further down the road, a small black car approached. Kirin honked and waved as she drove by.

“She really does want to talk to you,” Marion said. “She feels terrible about her part in this.”

“No doubt.”

Several hundred meters on, she slowed and halted. Turning to the sun, she raised her chin and closed her eyes.

“You never answered my question,” I said.

“Which one was that?” she asked.

“How you managed to lie to me.”

She lowered her face. “Simple. I just didn't say anything. The same way anybody would.”

“But Mr. Shen implied that only psychics—”

She cut me off. “You can't have it both ways, David, citing John but not believing him.”

“It isn't him I'm having trouble with.”

“But the Caucus—you, me, the Farm—it’s all connected.”

“I’m either for you or against you, is that it? All or nothing?”

“Please, David—we’re not a bunch of Christofascists like those thugs who used to rule the States.”

“No? Seems to me they wouldn’t balk at drugged abduction any more than you.”

“I told you why that was.”

“And of course I bought it. Totally. A friend turns out to be a plant and tells me I was kidnapped for my own protection. What could be more natural than trusting her?”

“You were ready to trust John.”

“I was keeping up my cover, pointless as that proved.”

“John thinks otherwise.”

“I guess you’re not the only one who’s good at faking friendship.”

Her face turned hard.

“I wasn’t faking anything, goddamn you. And don’t you *fuck-ing* raise your eyebrows like you don’t believe me.”

She wheeled and stalked off. In any other circumstances I’d have rushed to smooth things over. I didn’t doubt her outburst, but why should I feel sympathy? If everything she said was true, she had a lot of catching up to do before our pain was equal.

I waited till she vanished up the drive, then followed her.



“David!”

Kirin waved brightly from the doorway of the cabin adjacent to Cook’s garden. She’d parked across the way, beside the Jag.

“It worked,” she said as I came up. “You’re here.”

“Seems so.”

“Are you angry?”

“I’m not sure if that’s the word for it, but even if it is, it doesn’t do my feelings justice.”

She made a sour face.

“That pissed, eh? Want to come inside? Have some coffee?”

“Anything stronger?”

“Coronas.”

“That’ll do.”

Her cabin faced north-south and didn’t get much light. She fetched and cracked two beers while my eyes adjusted. The place was clean and comfortably filled with cast-offs from the seventies. I sat down in a rough twill chair that matched a houndstooth daybed. Kirin handed me a beer and put her own down on a coffee table—kidney-shaped with canted legs.

“No limes,” she apologized, settling on the daybed with her legs drawn up. “Unless you want to run across the way and see if Cook has some.”

“I’ll pass. Are you alone?”

“Roy’s out with Carlin. They’ve gone to see the warplanes at the airport.”

She raised her beer. I returned the *not-quite-sure-if-we’re-still-friends* half toast.

“I’m really sorry, you know, David.”

“I’ve just been with Marion. She was sorry, too. If your apology covers anything like hers, you’re going to have to spell out what you’re sorry for.”

“I’m not part of what you can’t remember, if that’s what you mean. I mean, I am now, but if you’re asking if I knew you before we met . . . God, this is complicated.” She smacked her forehead with the heel of her hand. “What am I saying? This must be *terrible* for you.”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“You *are* angry.”

“No, numb. If I were angry, I’d be out of here.”

“You’re going to stay?”

“More like I won’t be leaving.”

“I get that, totally. In your place, I’d be freaking. I mean, finding out you grew up here, not remembering, discovering your next-door neighbour knew about it all along. She’s great, by the way. I

wish I'd met her sooner."

"You left out 'finding out about this Caucus thing'. Being told that I was raised inside a secret order. One so clandestine I have no recollection of it."

"Secret order? Yeah, well, I guess it is. Sort of. It doesn't feel like it, though. They've been so helpful. I get it now. Why I'm so sensitive to other people's feelings. Why I get these flashes. Why I cave in so easily, always doing what other people want."

Surely not because your mother's mother was a drunk, I thought, but bit my tongue.

"It's why I came to you in the first place. Something weird was going on. I *knew* it. You couldn't help—I understand that now—but, if I hadn't come..."

"... I'd be at home right now, padding barefoot round my place, a mug of coffee glued to one hand, looking forward to a day like any other."

"That doesn't matter now."

"Maybe not to you."

"Oh, God—you're right. I'm sorry. It's just that this is so awesome for me. I had no idea."

"What did they tell you?"

"That I'm psychic. An empath."

"Well, well. Imagine that."

"You don't believe it."

"The term belongs in science fiction. It isn't even a real word."

"You're wrong, David. Empathy is real. That's what's so weird. I kept getting the feeling you knew what was going on but wouldn't tell me. Like you had the answers and were testing me or something. But you didn't know, did you? You still don't. Something happened. Your memories... they sort of explained. I'm not sure I understood."

"What did they say?"

"Something about walling off your memories. Burying them or hiding them. Something like that. They say you *agreed*."

"And did they tell you why I'd go along with amputating six

years, just like that?”

“Is that how much is gone? Jesus. I had no idea.”

“I take it that’s a no?”

She was having trouble with the six-year span.

“I thought it was just, you know, specific things. Like the Caucasus. Or being psychic. Shit—how can anyone ‘forget’ a thing like that?”

“Easy if it isn’t true.”

“You really don’t believe it.”

“It’s a lot to swallow.”

“For someone who knew everything about me when we met?”

“I cheat, Kirin,” I said, not very patiently. “I dig up dirt on all my clients before they cross my threshold. Plus I’ve been around. I’m good at wild stabs. I’ve told you that before.”

“You mean you’ve never felt . . . ?” She tossed her head, rejecting the idea. “No. You have. I know you have.”

“Not much I can say in the face of so much certainty.”

She flushed. “You *are* mad at me.”

“No. Someone’s been feeding you a line. Which one did they use? Lives are at stake? It’s for his own protection? For ours?”

From her face, all three. It didn’t take an empath to see that.

“Why don’t you just tell me everything?” I suggested. “I suspect that’s what they want you to do anyway. It’s a little too convenient, you being the first person I meet up with. After my trusted next-door neighbour, that is.”

She unfolded herself from the daybed and hunted round for cigarettes, not as if she were buying time, more as if she felt relieved. Returning, she stretched her model’s legs across the coffee table. The Kirin I’d first met would have been mortified.

“Roy’s friends,” I said to get her started, “the ones you mentioned on the phone. Let me guess—members of this Caucus thing?”

She exhaled a stream of smoke.

“He introduced me to them right away. Mr. Shen spotted me while you and I were at Cassandra Island and called in Roy to do

exactly what he did: get me away from you. The Caucus didn't want you knowing anything about them. They figured if you thought I'd just gone gaga for another jerk you wouldn't be suspicious. Mr. Shen's an empath—but you know that now—so he was pretty sure that Roy would turn my crank. Did I mention Roy's psychic, too? I guess you figured that out. Except he's the other kind. A transmitter.”

“So Mr. Shen had you seduced by a man with nearly god-like powers of persuasion. He could have been a troll and gotten in your pants. Don't you feel a little used?”

“It's not like that,” she answered icily.

“No? How is it, then?”

“He's not a troll.”

The deadpan caught me unawares. There was something almost Marion-esque about it.

“Roy and I are still together,” she said, enjoying my reaction, “and he's crazy about Carlin. He isn't what you think. That was an act. A good one, too. He had you fooled.”

“The seducer got seduced and now it's happily ever after, is that it?”

“He loves me, David,” she said, all humour gone. “I know.”

“Because you're psychic?”

“Because he's good to me and Carlin.”

I drained my beer and waved away the offer of another.

“Assuming that I buy this empath-transmitter shit,” I said, “what's stopping Roy from entering your mind and making you feel things you don't? You've been set up once and used to get to me. Do you imagine it stops there?”

She shook her head. “One of the first things that they taught me was to recognize an imprint.”

“They—this Caucus thing?”

“Stop calling them ‘this Caucus’ and ‘this group’. You've made your point. I know you're sceptical.” *Definitely Marion-esque*. “An imprint's not some kind of mind control. It feels like those ideas you get sometimes. You know, crazy thoughts you don't know where

they come from. You don't have to act on them."

"Very reassuring," I murmured.

"Would you *stop*? This is important. The Caucus has been helping me. It's what they do: help people with their gift. Do you know what my problem was?"

An alcoholic grandmother and a taste for macho men? I'd have found it easier to kill the snide remarks if she'd stop handing me the openings.

"Even without training, empaths are supposed to have the power to shut down. Stop getting vibes, reading people, whatever. The shutting down's supposed to be reflexive. You go crazy otherwise. But I was like a TV with a wonky switch—sometimes on, sometimes off. It was never under my control.

"Roy showed me how to turn it off. Just by thinking it. Imprinting me. I—," she made a helpless gesture with her hands, "—*saw*. Not what was in his head, but how it was arranged. How the bits and pieces fit together. How they moved. It all made sense. I understood. I only had to—"

She made the gesture with her hands again, trying to find words for concepts beyond speech.

"Try me," she said, giving up.

"What?"

"Try reading me. See what you get."

No matter how I tried to cool her psychic ardour, she remained impervious. I heaved a mental sigh and made a show of visibly relaxing, putting on a middle-distance stare.

No sizzling snowy image...no trace of me...utterly self-assured...no grey fuzziness of doubt...the inside and the outside matched...

"See?" she said.

The only thing I'd "seen" was that her mental map resembled Roy's and Mr. Shen's. She'd learned the trick of buffing the rough edges off revealing conflicts. Learned, or had drilled into her.

"Quite a difference," I said noncommittally. "What happens if you switch the TV on?"

“You mean read you while you’re reading me? Not a good idea. There’s this kind of feedback loop that happens when two empaths read each other. It’s nasty, like a blast of static in your brain. It’s happened between you and me.” Pre-Caucus Kirin made a brief appearance. “You do know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

I nodded. No point in lying. Her description sounded like the one I’d given Ferko.

“Empaths are supposed to shy away from it by instinct. It’s kind of like a mental cringe, but with the problem I was having... well, you get the picture.

“Roy’s friends—Mr. Shen and two others; they’re here, you’ll get to meet them—asked to read me once they knew I wouldn’t fry their brains. They said they needed to, as part of what the Caucus does. Mr. Shen called it a background check. Kinda made me laugh, except I get the reason for it now.

“That’s when things got weird. All of a sudden they had to get you back. They knew about the CSIS thing—you weren’t pulling my leg, were you?—and figured you’d go back to Cassandra Island if I up and disappeared. They pulled Roy from his job and got us all to move here, then had me give you Roy’s address so you’d find the trailer empty if you ever came to visit. They were pretty sure you would. The card to Burke was my idea. To keep him off my back *and* make you suspicious. You did track him down, didn’t you?”

I nodded.

She looked pleased. “I thought you would. Look—I know this is going to sound strange, but thanks. I don’t know anybody else who would have done the gung-ho thing for me like you. Marion’s lucky to have you for a friend.”

“Luck that’s running out.”

“Because she never told you about this?” She used her chin to indicate the farm outside.

“That and other things.”

“Cook said Marion was your teacher. I can’t believe she didn’t at least *want* to tell you.”

“But she didn’t, did she? And not to put too fine a point on it,

why should I believe her now? I have a six-year hole where my memories ought to be. She could say I was the king of Spain and how would I know differently?”

“Did you ever talk about your missing years?”

“It’s not the kind of thing I trot out over drinks.”

“Right,” Kirin drawled. *If you never broached the subject how on earth was she supposed to?*

I heard the crunch of tires in the drive. Kirin shot a glance outside.

“It’s not a lie, David. I know what I’ve experienced with Roy and with the others. This farm is real. The Caucus is real. The people in it all have gifts. Everyone is special. You more than most, I guess. Don’t turn you back on Marion just yet.”

Chapter 26

A MIRROR SLIGHTLY WARPED

To: sleemans@pet.csis-scrs.gc.ca
From: david@ase.ca
Subject: Shen's people

Josh --

I've been taken to a farm.

Shen let me drive partway--south and west from Paxton--then slipped something in my coffee. I was out for eighteen hours. He knows about my working for Canadian Intelligence and killed my laptop's wireless. I'm connecting with the card you had me bring. There's a router somewhere on the premises.

His "people" call themselves The Caucus. From what little I've been told, it sounds as if they formed back in the sixties. The farm used to be a commune. With cabins and an added dorm, I'd say it once held twenty-five to thirty. Now it seems to be some sort of chapter house. No whiff of hippiedom remains.

Kirin's here--voluntarily, she says. She says her daughter's here as well, and Roy Calhoun, though I've seen neither of them yet.

I've encountered seven people total. Four arrived by king-cab yesterday, two with luggage. The truck's the only vehicle around here other than my car and Kirin's.

Shen has gone away, but I'm told he'll be returning. He's not the leader of this "Caucus". I'm to meet the man who is today.

Kirin has admitted that her disappearance was contrived. The object was to get me back to the retreat so Shen could reel me in. I've no idea why. And now I'm here, apparently I'm free to leave. No sooner did I wake from being drugged than my car keys were returned.

It's early morning now. Still dark. I'm sending this before the house is up lest someone check the LAN and notice there's an extra node.

What now?

--

DA

I logged off ase.ca and powered down the laptop. Even early in the morning, piggybacking on the farmhouse LAN was risky. Routers can be set to maintain logs. I had a small utility called wif-sniffer that took care of sussing out a router's key but not of cracking the administrative password.

A solitary bird was peeping, harbingering dawn. I went over to the window and looked out.

What's to stop me from disclosing the location when I leave?
I'd asked Mr. Shen.

You won't.

Won't say where I was? Or won't be leaving?

Certainly the first. Quite possibly the second.

Riddles wrapped in mysteries inside enigmas. What had Mr. Shen been trying to tell me? Was the second of his statements meant to be a warning? Or was it, like the first, prolepsis to be borne out by my actions? Because I hadn't told Josh Byron where I was. I hadn't given names. In fact, I'd told him nothing. All I'd done was keep a channel of communication open. Did that mean I'd end up staying here as well? I observed I wasn't going anywhere. There seemed to be no *where* to go.

There seemed to be no *here* here, either. A glass wall had

sprung up between the world and my senses. I saw and heard all right, but in a daze. What would Ferko have say about it? I'd have given anything to hear his voice just then.

Yesterday, while I was still with Kirin, Cook had rung the bell to signal lunch. We'd walked over to the kitchen, joining Marion plus two men and two women who'd arrived by king-cab. I got introduced—re-introduced—to one, and was presented to the others.

I shook hands, accepted hugs and ate Cook's lunch aware all eyes were on me like lion in the zoo at feeding time. Conversation of no import swirled around the table. I wanted to ask questions, but froze before I could. I wasn't sure which would be worse: spotting lies that said this was a monstrous set-up, or sensing truths that meant my lunch companions held the answer to my missing years.

Over coffee Marion held out an olive branch by offering to show me round the house. We started at the back—the long addition—which held sleeping quarters and two "quiet rooms". Marion repeated that they'd once been used for therapeutic counselling.

In the cellar of the house itself, shelving crammed with banker's boxes lined the walls.

"The Caucus archives," Marion informed me. "We call it Chancery. And if that's not bad enough," she waved her hand toward a tall white metal cupboard with red crosses on the doors, "that there's the Apothecary. Chancery, Apothecary—sounds like the chorus of a patter song."

On the second floor, she pointed out the bathroom and a closed door near the formal staircase.

"Dr. Colton's study. These days he doesn't like to be disturbed. He knows you're here, of course. He'll be seeing you tomorrow. If you haven't flown the coop, that is."

A flick of eyes, both query and admonishment.

The library took up the ground floor's southern half, its collection an expanded version of Cassandra Island's. At a guess, with floor-to-ceiling shelves, five thousand books in all. On a bottom shelf, bracketed by volumes on psychology, philosophy, arcana and the vatic arts, were paperbacks by Heinlein, Bradbury, Zelazny,

Asimov and Zenna Henderson.

“This used to be your home inside a home,” Marion informed me in the voice reserved for libraries and churches.

So what? She knew I liked to read. But the way she said now it held a trace of expectation. *Not in the hope of epiphanic recollections* . . . Yet there she was, anticipating one.

I made a show of reading spines then tugged a brick by H. Blavatsky from the shelves. Co-founder of theosophy, Blavatsky wrote in prose that brought enlightenment through narcolepsy.

“I’m tired, Marion,” I said abruptly. “I’m going back upstairs.”

I’d slept the afternoon away, woken by a knock at six. The doorframe cracked like gunshot when I yanked it open. Cook was in the hallway with a steaming supper tray.

“I saw your face at lunch,” she said. “Poor dear. I’m guessing that you’d rather dine alone.”

She set the tray down on the dresser, gave my arm a squeeze and left without another word. Country ham steaks, mashed potatoes, peas and carrots, rhubarb pie . . .

Afterwards I’d started in on *Isis Unveiled*. Predictably, Blavatsky’s prose weighed heavy on my eyes. I’d slipped between the sheets and dozed off once again.

The lonely pre-dawn cheep outside was swelling to a chirping, cawing ruckus. Rags of mist across the road were changing into cloth-of-gold as, in the east behind the house, the sun began to rise.

Could this really have been home?

I donned a clean white T-shirt, scrubbed my scalp until it tingled, pulled the door I’d left unsnugged and went down to the kitchen.

The smell of bacon greeted me. Cook was at her Garland wielding tongs like a conductor.

“David! I was sure you’d be up early. How are you feeling? Did you get a good night’s sleep?”

“If length’s the measure of how good it was, then yes.”

“I’m so glad. This must all be overwhelming. Sit, sit. Do you still like porridge in the morning?”

"I do, but most days I'm too lazy to make anything but toast."

She *tsk*-ed.

"Breakfast is still the most important meal of the day. Though I have to say you don't look underfed." She spooned a gob of oatmeal into a cereal bowl. "Not a bit. You've filled out very nicely. And haven't grown a paunch. I'm surprised, given how you used to eat."

She put the bowl in front of me and fetched a creamer.

"When's breakfast normally?" I asked.

"Half an hour from now. Luke's usually the first to straggle in."

"Luke?"

Neither of the men I'd met were Lukes.

Cook scurried to the stove. "You'll be meeting him," she said, her back to me. "He's our farmhand now."

Now? "What was he before?"

She started flipping bacon like her life depended on it.

"I sense you weren't supposed to mention him," I said.

The porridge pot received a mighty stir. Something in the oven needed tending. The bacon got more twiddling.

"We have a rule, David. You're not supposed to use your gift without permission."

"I know. Marion told me. I'm not reading you." At least, I didn't think I was. "Can I ask you something? Are you psychic, like the others?"

"No. Neither is Marion. We're the only ones who aren't."

"So I could read you if I wanted to? You wouldn't know?"

"You could try but it won't work. You used to, you know, all the time, but you never did discover where I hid the brownies. It feels odd, me being the one to tell you this, but non-psychics can be taught to hide specific things from empaths. I'm getting old but I haven't lost the skill. My mouth is what betrays me now. I'm such a chatterer these days."

Getting old? She looked like eighty was a distant memory.

She turned from the stove. "You won't tell Dr. Colton, will you?"

"That you mentioned someone I don't know called Luke? I can

manage that. If you promise to bake brownies for me sometime.”

Her face melted.

“Thank you, David. There’s so much you have to know, but Dr. C insists you have to get it slowly. Speaking of whom, he wants to see you after breakfast. His, that is, not yours. He takes it in his study. Will you be going back upstairs after you’re done here? I can call you when I get his tray.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do. Most likely take a walk. How’s about you tell your Dr. C that I’ll be free at ten?”

She gave me a funny look.

“You really have grown up. It’s going to take some getting used to. Now—more oatmeal? Or would you like an egg?”



I raised my hand.

It’s just a door.

It’s just a room.

It’s probably all bullshit.

I knocked.

“Come in.”

Muted by the door, the voice was whispery like fall leaves stirring in a breeze. I turned the knob and entered.

The room was long and dim. Velvet swags freed from their tiebacks pooled on the floor behind an L-shaped desk. A banker’s lamp shed quiet incandescence on a blue expanse of blotter. A monitor and keyboard occupied the short leg of the L. Phosphor from the angled screen reflected off the high back of a studded oxblood chair, which had been turned to face the curtains. The seat on this side of the desk looked puny by comparison.

Where was Dr. Colton?

I shut the door and looked around. An entertainment centre filled the far end of the room. Two chintz armchairs faced a big TV—an older model with a massive CRT. The green shade of the banker’s lamp glowed distant in the curving glass. Wooden filing

cabinets lined the other walls. Hardback volumes sat on top, held in place by bookends. An heirloom clock stood sentry in one corner resonantly marking time. The air was rich with lemon oil and beeswax.

“David. Have a seat.”

The same dry voice, emanating from the high-backed chair. I went over to the desk and took a seat.

A minute passed ticked off in weighty seconds. The studded oxblood quivered. I heard a sound that might have been a sigh.

“When you were seventeen, you woke up in an alley unable to remember how you got there. It was early June—the third, to be precise. It had rained the night before. You were in a doorway, sheltered from the elements.

“Dressed as you are now you found your wallet in your jeans. It was filled with hundred dollar bills but no ID. You knew your name, though, and your age. Most likely, to this day, you’re unaware it was your birthday.

“It can’t have taken long to figure out what city you were in. But while you knew the streets and landmarks, nothing felt familiar. You had no recollection of a life lived there, just an inner map to help you find your way.

“I won’t conjecture how you spent that day. All I can be certain of is that you realized at some point your amnesia wasn’t total. Images from childhood surfaced, likely within hours, and you pieced together that your memory gap spanned nearly six years total.

“You spent the days and weeks that followed roaming round Toronto, hoping to encounter something—anything—to tie you to the city. You found nothing. It occurred to you that agencies existed that might help, yet you shied away from them. Your memories of childhood continued to return, but only to a certain point. Debilitating pain set in whenever you went past it. Images of fire figured at such times.

“An element of what you could recall was an imaginary friend who led your games and was your partner in delinquency. You wondered if your ‘friend’ was the result of guilt displacement and

contemplated trauma as the cause of your amnesia.

“Over time you realized you had a gift. You could see into the minds of others. Sense their wholeness, so to speak—who they were, what they were, how they saw themselves. You could even make predictions, though that skill was fleeting and erratic. Against all logic you denied your gift, maintaining it came from careful observation and a flair for putting two and two together. Even now you hold to that position.

“Miss Harper tells me you’re protective of your past. You never talk about the years before you won your jackpot. We knew of that, of course; it was in the news. Your name came as a shock, but not the fact of winning. Most of us are lucky around money, though seldom so dramatically.

“I have no way of knowing how you used your gift at first. I hope some day you’ll tell me. Know, though, that your current title, ‘counsellor’, is common among people with your talent. The Caucus coalesced around a nucleus of therapists.

“Your moving in beside Miss Harper took us by surprise—proof of the old saw about the best-laid plans. Since your first day in Toronto, stringent measures had been taken *not* to know your whereabouts or doings, to forestall all contact between you and Caucus members.”

The disembodied speech came to a caesura. The interval was preparation, not a pause requiring confirmation or acknowledgment.

“There is no easy way to say this,” it went on. “You killed a man. This farm was once your home. We brought you here, provided schooling, helped you with your gift. Then at age sixteen you wantonly misused that gift, resulting in a member’s death.

“You didn’t mean to kill him but events before his death as we uncovered them revealed you had abilities we didn’t know about, ones you’d hidden from us and that posed a threat as long as you stayed here.”

A slow intake of breath—patient, almost fatalistic.

“The overriding mandate of the Caucus is protection, protection

bought with secrecy. You knew that once. You understood. As you will again. My aim is not to keep things from you.

“You can’t, however, learn too much too fast. For now what I can tell you—the ending of one story and the prologue to another—is that your memory loss was self-inflicted. You gave yourself amnesia. No trauma was involved. You voluntarily walled off six years, and, with our help, ensured that what you’d done could never be repeated.”

The polish-scented air was growing stifling. The heirloom clock ticked louder than before. The oxblood chair rocked slightly spilling glitter from the studs upon the desk.

“Your memories can be recovered—reassembled—but the process will take time. The conflict between what you can’t recall and the Self you’ve built up in its absence could result in catastrophic ego fragmentation.

“Meanwhile, you can *hear* about your missing years, which may distress you but will not provoke the pain you fear. That response is triggered by your memories as memories. Once you know the story and your psyche is prepared, you’ll be ready to reintegrate them as experienced reality.

“For that to happen, though, our major obstacle is trust. What can you believe? There’s a folder on my desk beneath the blotter. Please have a look.”

Age had darkened the manila. The spine was pleated; it had once held far more documents. On top, a birth certificate: *St. Joseph’s ... Hamilton... Ase, David...3rd of June...* Underneath on ruled paper, writing that resembled mine but far too neat, the schoolroom not yet whittled off the conscientious strokes.

PSYCHISM:

Components, Features, and Restrictions

1. What constitutes a psychic...

“You’re looking at a project written for Miss Harper. It’s a detailed summary of psychism’s chief attributes. Impressive for a boy of sixteen years. You had more gifts than empathy.”

I couldn't take my eyes off the familiar handwriting.

2. *Limitations on psychism*
3. *Demographics*
4. *How psychism works...*

Dr. Colton rose.

"It's my habit to go walking at this time of day. For my health. I'd like you to come with me. If you would, please wait downstairs. I'll join you shortly."



I needed air. I needed light. I needed ground beneath my feet.

Dr. Colton found me in the lane behind the house, scuffing up the hardpack with my toe.

"I go this way," he said, pointing with a cane toward the north end of the barn.

He wore an old man's business suit, somewhere between brown and grey, the jacket open with no tie. As with Mr. Shen I couldn't fix his age. He still had all his hair, silver white and very fine, the scalp beneath it pink with sun. The years had etched a roadmap on his face although the flesh was taut, like lizard skin. His light brown eyes were ringed with blueish-grey, but bright. A good ten centimetres under my one-eighty, he stooped but walked as if his cane were more for show than use.

The barn's wide doors were open. I heard the clink of tools inside and caught a flash of movement.

Tractor ruts cut round the field behind. Dr. Colton picked his way toward the fence that marked the southern boundary. He swept his cane from right to left, encompassing the field and a woodlot at the back.

"We'll go all around," he said. "That should give us time."

"For what?"

"To begin recounting," he said, glancing at the barn. "To recount beginnings."

We set off slowly, sticking to the ruts between the cornfield and the post-and-wire fence.

“Almost everything I tell you,” he began, “you already know. It’s buried with your memories. Everything you learned about us here, everything pertaining to the facts about your gift, is still inside you.”

A breeze blew up, fluttering the waxy leaves of corn. They rustled dryly, like the sound of Dr. Colton’s voice with no inflection.

“In nineteen thirty-nine when war broke out, I was in my second year pre-med at Queen’s. My intention was to go into psychiatry. I dropped my studies, joined the air force, learned radar mechanics, and went overseas in nineteen forty, stationed at Baginton near the cathedral town of Coventry.

“In the fall of that same year, Hitler ordered the attack on Coventry that brought the verb, to coventrate, into the English language. It means ‘to devastate by aerial bombing’.

“The blitz came on the fourteenth of November. It’s widely held that Churchill knew about it in advance, but sacrificed the city to safeguard the secret that the British had already cracked the German military code—the Enigma ciphers. That belief is wrong. Churchill knew of an attack, but not the time or place. Others did, however. They knew because I told them.

“The previous September, recovering from leave—in other words, on my knees glued to the john—I had a premonition of the bombing, a vision so detailed I reported it. Our wing’s group captain listened with a partial ear—I’d been barred from poker after cleaning out the whole wing three nights running—filed a report, and made a mess hall story of the corporal whose vomit told the future.

“The story didn’t seem so funny after the attack. I was relieved of duties and subjected to interrogation at the hands of MI5. Their methods were... aggressive. Pain, like illness, is a trigger for long-range prevoyance, and I had a second premonition of *another* raid on Coventry. In my vision it was early spring; the leaves were only just beginning on the trees. I relayed the details to my questioners, even though I might be tried and shot if what I said came true.”

The deep-throated chugging of a tractor started in the barn, followed by protesting gears and noisy clattering. Dr. Colton cocked an ear and waited for the sounds to coalesce and fade.

“That raid took place on April eighth, nineteen forty-one. By then, MI5 was satisfied I was no spy, so instead of being executed, I was squired down to Cambridge and ‘lent’ to SIS—MI6 as it had been renamed, Britain’s Secret Service. My branch’s mandate, in conjunction with the Society for Psychical Research—their archives were conveniently nearby—was to turn the Nazis’ trust in things occult to Britain’s favour and to gather what intelligence we could by psychic means.

“Nothing much came out of that initiative but rumours that still circulate today. Mostly all we did was sit around and wait for psychic flashes, or study the ephemeris for what the Third Reich’s augurers were likely telling Hitler. I held long conversations with our SPR associates and whiled away the hours in their archives.”

The whine of a cicada rose up from the trees ahead. The woodlot was in shadow, backlit by a sun that seemed to sink as we approached.

“In nineteen forty-three a soldier from Wisconsin was assigned to work with us. We were told he could read minds and had had flashes of foreknowledge. What about, we weren’t allowed to ask. As so often with Americans, the pooling of intelligence went one direction only. The soldier’s name was Private Finnestad.

“We gravitated to each others’ company, two hard-R’d North Americans awash in public school accents. He was a farmboy: twenty-two, introspective—shy, almost—rarely speaking unless spoken to. Still, he was the one who broached the subject of our talents first.

“We shared a common gift, one experienced more often in our knowledge about people than in glimpses of the future. Neither of us understood. We knew no others like us. The SPR was focused on the supernatural. What went on inside our heads bore no relation to their poltergeists and ectoplasm. Their archives didn’t help much, either.

“Garrett’s parents were religionists. Speaking of his gift was never easy. He’d been beaten for it as a child. I admired his courage every time he opened up.”

The air grew cooler as we neared the woodlot. The fence came to an end outside the trees. Dr. Colton stopped beside the final post—recently replaced, its yellow wood still oozing sap—and gestured with his cane.

“You used to play in here. Any time we couldn’t find you, this is where you’d be.”

“Did that happen often?”

“Nearly every day.”

The sun no longer in my eyes, I could make out maples, alders, oaks and ash. A clump of willows formed a silver island in the mass of darker greens. Dr. Colton bent a little to relieve his back, then straightened up and carried on. The forest, to our right, exhaled the smell of raspberries and underbrush.

“After the war, I finished my degree at Queens, enrolled in medicine at U of T, did a psychiatric residency, and headed for New York to study at the newly-founded Institute for Gestalt Therapy under Fritz and Laura Perls.

“Gestalt was radical in its time. It claimed a patient’s real experience—his or her perceptions in the here and now—was vastly more important than a therapist’s analysis. It borrowed from Gestalt psychology, which looks at how we organize perception. Both psychology and therapy break with convention. They emphasize totalities rather than component parts—what’s called a ‘field approach’.

“Normal scientific method speculates, observes and classifies. It breaks things down in order to make sense of them. A field approach is just the opposite. It considers things in their entirety. It doesn’t try to understand a puzzle from its pieces. It seeks to understand the pieces from the puzzle. It is less concerned with constituting parts than how they interact. Its main thrust is discovery—description, not analysis; revelation, not hypothesis.”

The flow of words fell off. Insect humming filled my ears. Dr.

Colton's story felt too ordered for an old-man's reminiscence; he was lost in something else. I tried to see it in my head but nothing came. Just grey, undifferentiated calm—like Roy, like Mr. Shen, like Kirin.

After fifty or so metres he resumed.

“In nineteen fifty-three I communicated with the SPR for help in setting up a chapter here in Canada. I wanted to research the gift that Garrett and I shared. Affiliation with them seemed a good idea. I hoped their contacts might direct me toward others who were like us.

“In that regard, it was the counselling community that proved most useful. When the SPR officially acknowledged us in fifty-four, our group consisted of myself, three other therapists—all empaths as we later came to understand—and two noteworthy clients. One was like the rest of us, though deeply anxious, much like Kirin Neemes. The other was convinced her states of mind were being broadcast so that people did her will against their own, crippling her with guilt and damning her to isolation. Both had had significant prevoyant episodes.

“The approach of our Canadian Chapter, influenced by Gestalt, differed from the SPR's. Instead of seeking proof of our experience—to us it was a given—we concentrated on describing it, phenomenologically, without recourse to analysis. In a sense we were returning to a scientific method pioneered by Goethe, one that emphasized an intimate, first-hand encounter between object and observer in an effort to discern how what was being studied would describe itself had it the power to speak.

“That intimate approach to research led us to uncover what we termed primary psychism: empathy and imprinting. It allowed us to explore them thoroughly, both inwardly, alone, and in contact with each other. Our delicate empiricism, to use a phrase of Goethe's, also helped us see the link between primary psychism and prevoyance. Furthermore, it indicated that telepathy—a subject much investigated by the SPR—was not the same as psychism, but rather, a phenomenon apart. Psychics, as we came to use the term, were

never telepathic.”

A crow cawed overhead. Swallows burst up from the middle of the field, peppering the sky with tiny arrowheads. Dr. Colton watched them wheel and fly off.

“I lost touch with Garrett after forty-five. He left the army and went back to work the family farm. His involvement with the psychic branch of SIS was still on record, though, and in fifty-three, the CIA, newly risen from the ashes of the wartime Office of Strategic Services, requested his participation in their MKULTRA project.

“MKULTRA’s shameful purpose, as I’m sure you know, was to research mind control through experiments involving radiation, paralytics, psychotropics, induced comas, electroshock and sensory deprivation. The majority of subjects were unwilling, culled from mental institutions, penitentiaries and people living on the street. There were, however, volunteers. Perversely, they got singled out for even more extreme experiments.

“MKULTRA’s mandate didn’t stop at brainwashing and high-tech torture. A sub-project, designated F-RK, sought ways of using psychics for intelligence and covert operations. In the era of the Red Scare, nothing was considered too farfetched.

“For three years Garrett patriotically took part in scientific horrors aimed at finding and enhancing psychic skill. Driven to a breakdown by prolonged amphetamine-barbiturate rotation, he ran off in fifty-six with a suitcase full of purloined documents and film. Cadging rides through Minnesota into Canada, he ended up in Winnipeg and spent the next year homeless in a haze of booze and goof-balls.

“He tracked me down in fifty-seven, calling from a pay phone—drunk, alone and scared. I took the train to Winnipeg, dried him out and brought him here. Part for therapy and partly since the property was idle—I’m a doctor, not a homesteader—I gave him sanctuary managing the farm.”

The woodlot ended at the fence that ran between the corn and soya fields. The soya field was narrower but twice as long. The tractor we’d heard earlier sat quiet in the farthest corner, crimson on the

mat of dark green crops.

Dr. Colton rested on his cane.

“At first I credited his stories about torture tests performed on psychics to amphetamine psychosis. But in his suitcase, when he trusted me enough to open it, were very real documents and footage. Any madness that there was was in the horrors that they chronicled.”

With more stiffness than before, he started on the last leg of our circuit.

“It was evident that F-RK was shooting in the dark: telekinesis, astral projection, remote sensing, map dowsing. The project hoped to augment psychic skills—difficult to do since the skills it sought were lifted from the pages of *Amazing Stories*. However, subject Finnestad and at least two others displayed abilities susceptible to spiking in the course of certain trials. Rather than researching those abilities—trying to grasp their essence—F-RK went for results, intensifying trial conditions, hoping to prolong or boost the spike.

“Speaking for our chapter, I wrote the SPR warning them that psychics—whether genuine or not—were at risk from Cold War agencies. I urged them to take measures. Their response, British to the core, evinced distaste for what they styled political engagement. ‘In times of war we do our duty. In times of peace we are but humble scientists.’

“Psychic testing on the scale implied by F-RK was something new. How long till they lost their taste for science fiction and began exploring real human attributes—our capacity to empathize, our ability to influence, our power to anticipate? Psychism is a transmutation, not a faculty apart. We saw in it the seeds of practical compassion. Would they see weaponry instead? To what lengths would they go to hunt down and deploy it? We already had an inkling.”

The tractor in the neighbouring field coughed into life. I looked around. A cloud of dust was heading down the fence.

“I flew to London several times, hoping to persuade the SPR to change its stance. They wanted to hear nothing of the CIA or MKULTRA F-RK. Our chapter’s paranoid agenda, they informed

me, was disruptive. I persisted, earning us the soubriquet, the Canuck Caucus. I wondered then and cannot help but wonder now: What prompted their hands-off response? Canuck is not a British word. It's favoured by Americans.

"In sixty-two, we came to a decision and advised the SPR our chapter was dissolving, citing rifts within the group itself. We wanted them, or anyone who asked, to think we had disbanded. For added measure, members changed their names—myself included; I was born Sebastian Carver. In short, we chose to make ourselves invisible, believing secrecy to be our best defence against the CIA or any other agency involved in clandestine research.

"The SPR knew nothing of this farm. All our correspondence had been through a numbered box. We felt safe continuing to use it. And on account of its location—plus, I confess, to thumb our noses at the SPR—we re-baptized ourselves the Binbrook Caucus."

He measured out the sentence like an actor finishing a scene. His timing was impeccable. The tractor would have drowned him out. I felt it getting closer like a pressure on my back.

"Here endeth the lesson for today?" I said.

He gave a little smile. "You don't go to church."

"I know the phrase from movies."

And from books. And from TV shows, like Chris Carter's moody exploration of late-nineties' zeitgeist in the *X-Files* and *Millennium*, where shadowy cabals, MKULTRA and the CIA were tropes for angst and paranoia—dreamscape bogey-men, not flesh-and-blood reality.

We reached a stretch of scrubby grass that formed a lawn of sorts around the cabin with the porch. A barbeque of blackened bricks, a milkcrate-plywood workbench and a covered cord of firewood gave the place a lived-in look the others didn't have. Dr. Colton climbed the steps and sat down in a bucket seat—one of two, a refuse pail between them—and beckoned me to do the same.

The sun had reached full noon. Beyond the porch, everything looked faded. Whatever breeze there'd been had died. The only sound came from the tractor.

Down at Nebo Road, the king-cab truck turned in the lane. Dr. Colton took a handkerchief and touched it to his forehead.

“That’ll be John,” he said, more to himself than me.

The truck backed up and parked beside the Jag. Mr. Shen, the driver and another passenger emerged.

“Am I allowed to speak?” I asked.

He made an upward, open-handed gesture.

“Did you ever think of being a writer?”

“You believe it’s fiction,” he said, unperturbed.

“There are similarities to books I’ve read.”

He seemed amused. “You’re being very careful with your words.”

“I don’t know whom I might be pissing off,” I said, “nor the repercussions.”

He pursed his lips. “Wise, under the circumstances.”

The tractor’s chugging dwindled as it passed behind the cabin, then returned as it came into view and headed for the barn. Dr. Colton waited till it disappeared inside.

“You’re having trouble accepting all this,” he said. “I understand.”

“No, Dr. Colton, I don’t think so. As far as I can tell, you’ve contrived to make it difficult. I don’t think you understand one bit.”

“Fair enough. Birth certificates and handwriting can be forged. History can be invented. A man who doesn’t know who he is can easily be fooled.”

A figure strolled around the barn. Dr. Colton used his cane to push up from the bucket seat.

“Stay here a minute would you, David? I want to introduce you.”

He met the farmhand halfway down the track between the cabin and the barn. I couldn’t make him out—just a billed cap, work shirt, jeans and Kodiaks. The way he walked was disconcertingly familiar. For a second, impossibly, I thought of Cowboy.

As they got closer, snippets of their conversation reached me.

“...run-off. The ground’s too soft. We can’t just brace again.

The end posts have to go in concrete.”

“Poured?”

“Won’t take that much.”

I stood as they came up the steps. The farmhand wore his shirt tucked in, the sleeves rolled to his biceps. His arms were tanned and covered with a coppery-gold down. He smelled of work—perspiration, grass, raw wood. His head was lowered so I couldn’t see his face, but he had my height, my weight and almost certainly my age.

He pulled his cap off by the bill. The hair beneath was blond and damp. He swiped his forehead on a section of rolled sleeve and raised his head.

I was staring in a mirror slightly warped. He had my forehead, only higher. His cheeks were mine, but fuller. His nose tipped up a little; otherwise, it was the same. Our mouths were shaped identically though his was more compact.

But his eyes, no difference there: a clear, chrome green as startling as teardrops from an emerald. Sidelit by the noon-bright sun, the pupils drank the colour in and vanished.

“David,” I heard Dr. Colton raspy murmur, “say hello to Luke—your imaginary friend.”

Chapter 27

NINETEEN MINUTES APART

KIRIN TOOK ONE look at my face.

“Jesus, David—what’s up?”

“I need to talk.”

She glanced over her shoulder. Behind her in the cabin I could hear the *bloop! blap!* of a video game.

“Roy’s here with Carlin. You want to go somewhere? There’s a bar in Mt. Hope.”

Right. I wasn’t captive. I could leave any time I wanted.

“Not Mt. Hope.”

“Binbrook, then? Roy took us to a diner out on Highway 56. It’s licensed. You need a drink, I’m guessing?”

“Yeah. You’d better drive.”



The grey zone. The dead zone. Whitechurch Road, east of Highway 6, toward a village called Binbrook. A trajectory I’d been conditioned—persuaded? brainwashed?—to avoid.

Kirin’s Honda was a stationary bubble, the scenery outside a looping film projected on the windows. Fields upon fields upon fields. As we got near Binbrook, the houses started scooting closer to the road and to each other. Few of them were new, but few were

old like Colton's. Most were fifties brick, solid and four-square. Some had front-yard signs for studio-boutiques—scented candles and ceramics—and basement hair salons.

A fairgrounds with a baseball diamond was the only indication we'd arrived at Binbrook. Otherwise, where Whitechurch Road met 56 was just a knot of rural businesses, all prosperous. None had Mt. Hope's worn-down, fixed-in-amber patina.

Lady Jo's, the diner, was a clapboard rectangle with sod farms all around. Wooden shutters held in place with one-by-two's angled over dusty window screens. It looked like the kind of eatery that opens up May twenty-fourth and battens down on Labour Day.

The booths along the windows were red leatherette, the tables chipped Formica. Refrigerated shelves held cakes and pies and little coupes of Jello and rice pudding. A narrow hutch displayed the basic bar-brand liquors. A solitary farmer nursed a coffee at the counter. High up on a corner shelf a radio played tinny country music. Behind the cash, James Dean pouted from a faded poster framed in Christmas lights.

A waitress in a polyester apron took our order—a Blue Lite for Kirin and a double rye for me. The waitress' hair was steel grey and marshaled into ringlets like the curls on a Roman bust. She set the drinks on placemats advertising local businesses in faded lime-green ink.

"Are you going to say anything?" Kirin asked halfway through her beer. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"In a way, I have."

"Dr. Colton?"

"No, not him. Somebody he introduced me to."

"Someone in the Caucus? I thought you had no memories of the Farm."

"I don't. It's someone from before. A long time before. The beginning, you might say."

"You're talking double-Dutch."

"What do you expect? That's all I've been hearing for the past couple of days."

"You're pissed."

"Fucking right."

She sipped her beer and made a face. Not her regular Corona.

"Look, David, if all you want is company, just tell me. I hate quizzing people when they get all surly."

"Surly? Is that what you call this? I've been trying to find a name for it."



His mouth twists in a slow, lopsided smile.

"David."

The syllables sound rusty, as if he hasn't spoken them in so long he's not sure he's got them right.

Blood speaks to blood.

"Brothers?" *I whisper.*

He nods. The smile's still there. If it vanishes the scene will go away. The porch, the cabin, the field beyond...

Dr. Colton, an inconsequential phantom, says We'll talk again and quits the porch.

"Twins?"

I reach out with my mind, but there's only calm, unruffled grey, like Lake Ontario before the sun comes up on still November days.

"Nineteen minutes apart."

His voice sounds far away.

"You're real," *I stammer.*

He steps closer, lifts his hand, lays it on my shoulder.

"As it gets."

His grip's as reassuring as a promise.

"I thought..."

"... you made me up? That I was just pretend?"

"More than that. So much more. Every memory I have of growing up, you're there. Nearby, like a dream you know you had but can't recall."

He takes his hand away. The echo of it lingers on my shoulder.

“At least they left you that.”

“Your memories—are they... intact?”

He gazes off, as distant suddenly as he is near.

“Let’s just say they found some other things to break.”



“A brother? *Fuck.*” Kirin breathed the expletive. “That’s heavy.”

“They didn’t introduce you?”

“They said he was the farmhand. Keeps to himself.”

“You didn’t see his eyes?”

“Don’t you think I’d have said something about it?”

“I don’t know. Would you?”

“We’d better get this straight. Any lies I’m guilty of start and end with saying I was someplace that I wasn’t. Period.”

I drained my drink and held my glass up for another. The waitress shuffled over to the bare-bones bar.

“Sorry, Kirin. I had to ask.”

“It’s okay. In your place I would, too.”

“I thought he was a figment of my imagination.”

“So what you’re saying is you knew about him but you thought he wasn’t real? How the fuck does that work?”

“I remember growing up till age eleven. He’s in those memories. Every single one of them. He talks to me, gives me ideas, listens. Only I can’t see him. I was a foster kid. I had no friends. I thought he was, I don’t know, a symptom or something.”

“But how can someone disappear from memory like that? I don’t get it.”

“Neither do I, Kirin. Neither do I.”

“It really was like seeing a ghost.”

“The opposite.”



The noonday sun is fierce. Everything beyond the porch is bleached and insubstantial. He alone is solid, like a spectre in reverse.



“It was as if we’d met before, without ‘as if’. I kept thinking: ‘You’re my other half. The rest of me. The key.’ That someone everyone is looking for and no one ever finds.”

“And he’s in *every* memory you have?” Kirin’s eyes were wide. “Shit—how close was that?”



He wants to hug me, wrap me in a tight embrace and say my name a thousand times. The impulse quivers in the air between us.

He steps back.

“I fixed up beans. You want some lunch?”

“Food’s the last thing on my mind. I can’t eat right now.”

He tries to hide his disappointment.

“You used to never stop.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“You don’t anymore?”

“No, I still dig in.”

Approval spreads across his face.

“I’ve got beers,” he tries.

“Sounds good.”

“Coming up.”

I haven’t budged when he comes back with quarts of Coors. We crack the tops in unison and land the caps together in the pail between the bucket seats.



“You drank beer all afternoon?”

Her eyes went to my second double rye.

“Not the whole afternoon. He had chores to do.”

“You meet a brother you didn’t know you had and all of a sudden he has to go and milk the cows?”

“Mend a fence. It’s not a dairy farm. And yes, it felt contrived. I sensed Dr. Colton’s hand. He wanted us to meet, that’s all. For now, anyway.”

“But surely Luke—”

“—didn’t have to go along?” I shook my head. “No, Kirin. I think he did.”



The sun’s a little further to the right. A patch of light has crept up on the porch. We’re seated, legs stretched out. Luke’s undone the buttons of his shirt.

“We have to take this carefully,” he says, “Go slow because of what they did.”

“Dr. Colton said I did it to myself.”

He’s looking straight ahead. A muscle twitches in his jaw.

“You don’t think it’s true,” I say.

He turns.

“We have to get to know each other in the here-and-now.” Here-and-now’s a phrase that Dr. Colton used. “I can only tell you things, not let you read them from me.”

“What’ll happen if I do?”

“I might lose you for a second time.” He goes back to staring off. “We only get this chance.”



“I’m the carrot, Kirin. *We’re* the carrot. The *us* of us. It’s obvious the Caucus wants us back together. It wouldn’t have been all that difficult to keep me in the dark about a brother that I didn’t know I had, right? I have no idea what they’re after, but whatever they’re

expecting—from me, from him, from us—they're holding out the promise of my memories. The real ones, the ones we genuinely share, not grafts made up of bits and pieces other people tell me. Everything that made us us—unbroken in a line from birth.”



“Do you remember about Mom?” he asks.

An overcoat drawn tight against the cold... hair whipping in the wind... a high bridge over inky water...

“She was going to kill herself,” I say. “And me.”

“And us.”

He tips his beer, takes a swig, wipes foam off with his knuckle.

“She woke us up. Helped us into snowsuits, wrapped us up in scarves. Said she had to go somewhere, we had to come along. She dragged us to the Skyway Bridge and walked across. There were hardly any cars. The wind was freezing. You lost your scarf and started crying so I gave you mine.

“She stopped halfway and said the breeze was dangerous. She wrapped her own scarf around her waist and tied it to our wrists. Then she hopped up on the railing. You sensed what she was going to do and pushed me down. Pinned me to the sidewalk—like that was going to save us.”

It’s so close to what I think I know. So very close.

“I just remember Mom. Realizing what she’s doing, throwing myself down. Some guy squealing to a stop. Her yelling as he yanked her off the railing. I never understood. I scared her somehow.”

“What’s to understand? She was off her rocker.”

“Is she still alive?”

He tilts his beer again.

“Who knows?”



The waitress ambled over and took Kirin's empty.

"Another, dear?"

"Coffee. I'm driving."

She watched the waitress rinse out dregs and start a fresh batch brewing.

"He was that cavalier about your mother?"

"She was crazy. Committed the same night. We were only three. She tried to kill us. Not much *not* to feel cavalier about."

"Did you ever see her afterwards?"

"We were shipped off to a foster home."

"What about your father?"

"We must have had one but we never knew."

"That first time I came to see you? In your apartment? I had a sense you were an orphan. Cut off, without roots. Totally alone. Remember?"

"Not so alone after all, as it turns out."

"Guess not, eh?"

The waitress hurried up the coffee, pouring from a half-full pot. She brought it over with a little pack of cellophane-wrapped cookies.

"You're from around here, aren't you?" she asked me, extracting creamers from her apron. "Long time ago?"

What could I say but yes? *That's what they tell me* would have sounded strange.

"I thought so. You used to come here with your granddad. You and your brother. It's the eyes. Hard to forget."

Granddad? Dr. Colton?

"My niece who used to work here had a crush on you. Can't say I blamed her. Strapping boys, both of you. What's your name?"

"David. David Ase."

"Funny, don't recall it. Can I get you anything else?"

"This is fine, thanks."

Kirin studied me, head tilted, as the waitress walked away.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm wondering how that felt. I mean, if you had any doubts—"

“—I didn’t need to hear about my ‘granddad’. Look over there, behind the cash. Remind you of anyone?”



He slaps at a mosquito on his arm, then licks his thumb and wipes the blood away. He hasn’t spoken for a while, but every gesture is a word, every movement like the easy conversation between people who complete each other’s thoughts.

He slides down in his seat so that his head is on the back and looks over at me sideways.

“Hey, there, Jimmy-Dean.”

He means the way I dress, the clothes that feel like me.

“There was this poster in a restaurant,” he says. “First time you saw it, it was love. You started watching Rebel every time it played. Drove everybody crazy. You didn’t care about the story, just the jeans with cuffs and crew-neck Ts. Ultimate cool for you.”

There’s a softness in his voice, like sympathy that makes you realize how long you’ve been without.

“When I came to,” I say, “after . . .”

After what? Is there a name for what was done to me? He understands and makes a lazy rolling gesture with his hand.

“ . . . I saw how I was dressed. James Dean came to mind. I had a feeling I’d been ribbed about it.”

“Doesn’t look as if it bugged you much. You used to slick your hair back, too. And wear your jacket collars up.”

“Cook said something about looking like a fifties thug.”

“She was always putty in your hands. Thought it was adorable.”

He slides down even further in his seat and pulls his cap down like he’s taking a siesta. He’s already said he has to work on Colton’s fence and shucked off the suggestion I could help. I’m a city boy.

“You used to call me that,” I say. “Jimmy-Dean. It was your name for me.”

*He smiles broadly, like I've figured out a secret.
"Little Jimmy-Dean. I popped out first."*



Kirin chose a different route to drive us back, one that crossed the Welland River. A conservation area spread out along the banks. From the way she turned to look, I could tell she'd picnicked there with Carlin.

"He's psychic, right?" she asked. "Your brother?"

"He didn't say."

"Didn't say? What the hell did you guys talk about?"

"There wasn't that much talk."

"*Jesus Christ,*" she exploded. "You sound like love-struck teenagers, not brothers re-united after fifteen years." She stared ahead. "Sorry. Had to say that. It's just too weird. Weren't you dying to know everything?"

"Guys aren't as curious as women. Frustrating, I know. But think about it—we could hardly sit there reminiscing, could we? *Hey, bro, remember when...?* Because I *don't* remember. He has to tell me everything."

She tried again a minute or so later.

"He must have wondered about you."

"I'm sure he did."

"But you didn't talk about you, either."

"No."

We made two turns, one at Haldibrook and one at Tyneside Road. Tyneside took us back across the Welland. Boys in rubber boots with T-shirts to their knees were fishing off the bridge. Further up, a rowboat sliced the crinkled-foil water.

I'd been slammed too hard, too fast, with too much new. The buzz of double ryes was feeling like sobriety compared to where I'd been. Kirin wasn't wrong to find it weird. Punch drunk with answers, questions had escaped me.

A windmill missing several vanes was spinning in a field ahead,

flashing spastic semaphore.

“Why now?”

Kirin glanced over with a puzzled look. I hadn’t meant to voice the thought.

“Why rob me of memories for fifteen years then choose to give them back? Why have me think my brother is a foster-kid’s imaginary friend then introduce him in the flesh? Why the turnaround? What’s different now?”

“CSIS?”

“Not according to Marion and Mr. Shen.”

“What brought them to you in the first place, anyway?”

“Three people with connection to Cassandra Island died. Suicides apparently, all within a week. Later, three others disappeared. Caucus members, I’d guess. CSIS suspected a cult. They hoped somebody with the right credentials would draw it out.”

Kirin fumbled on the dashboard for a cigarette. They—whoever had initiated her, had won her trust in something called the Binbrook Caucus—hadn’t mentioned suicides or disappearances.

“I have a favour to ask, Kirin. I’m trusting you’re not happy telling lies. And that the Caucus won’t require it again. That is, unless you have a side I don’t know anything about—like you’re one of them.”

“One of *them*? Do you know how paranoid that sounds?”

“Maybe that’s exactly what they want. Me to get all paranoid and turn to you so anything I say goes up the pipe to Dr. Colton.”

She lit her cigarette and cracked the window.

“I see,” I said. “You are reporting to him.”

“I don’t know. Maybe. He asked about you yesterday. Had we talked? How did you seem? That sort of thing.”

“Checking up on me.”

“Oh, come on, David. We’d just been talking for an hour. Who else would he ask? You make it sound so ominous. He was concerned is all.”

“Yeah, but about what?”

“You *are* paranoid.”

“Wouldn’t you be?”

She slowed to make a right-hand turn, then shortly up the road, a left. Home, such as it was for now, was getting near.

“If I asked you to be careful when you talk with Dr. Colton, not to say too much about our private conversations, would you be okay with that?”

“I dunno, David. I’m not good at telling lies. You said so yourself.”

“I read you yesterday and got a big, blank nothing.”

“I’m mean ordinary lies. Fibs.”

“That isn’t what I’m asking.”

She sucked hard on her cigarette. “You went to bat for me. I owe you one.”

“And if I asked to be kept posted about anything you hear?”

“Yeah. Sure.” Another long pull at the cigarette. “I can do that.”

The farm hove in view, looking like a photo on a rural business calendar: big brick house, gleaming white veranda, red and orange nasturtiums trailing out of hanging pots.

“I’ve got no reason not to trust the Caucus, David. Not after how they’ve helped me. But you? Your story’s way past weird. It doesn’t even sound like the same people. I hate taking sides, but if I have to I’m on yours.”

Even if the cost is losing Roy?

I left the doubt unvoiced.



He pulls his cap off, rubs his face, hooks the cap back on.

“Got a fence to mend,” he says, standing easily, buttoning his shirt.

He takes the empty beers inside and walks me to the barn. Outside the gaping doors he stops. Sunlight off the hardpack strikes his eyes—eyes like what the woman on the bridge had seen, day in, day out, times two.

“Colton doesn’t want us spending too much time together. Not at first. You’ll see. He’ll find ways to keep you occupied. If you ask him he’ll admit it. Clear, upfront. That’s his way.”

He steps in closer, throws his arms around me. Work-smell fills my nose.

“Play along,” he whispers, “little Jimmy-Dean.”

Chapter 28

GRINNING MASTER PO

KIRIN BEGGED OFF supper in the kitchen on the grounds she'd promised Carlin pizza earlier.

"Besides," she added, "you still have issues with Roy. I'm pretty sure you don't want to have to deal with that right now."

Too bad. I could have used her company; Luke wasn't present, nor was Dr. Colton, nor was Mr. Shen.

"Dr. C normally takes meals in his study," Cook informed me when I asked about the absences, "so you wouldn't see him anyway. But tonight it just so happens all three of them are off on farm business. They won't be back till late."

Supper was like lunch the day before. Conversation swung from Blue Jays baseball to provincial politics. Good with names—perfect, in fact—I had to memorize this group. Franklin. Jay. Tasha. Dom. Jameela.

Dom—short for Dominique, a Québécoise in her late fifties—became the second person I got introduced to with the words, *You won't remember, but...* She sat at the far end of the table.

Afterwards I lugged Blavatsky to the library and picked out something zippier—*Stranger In a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein—from the shelf of science fiction paperbacks. My name was neatly pencilled on the inside cover. The escapades of Valentine Michael Smith, human raised by Martians, kept me occupied until I

fell asleep near ten.

Early to bed, early to rise...

Byron had replied when I checked my email in the morning.

To: david@ase.ca
From: sleemans@pet.csis-scrs.gc.ca
Subject: Re: Shen's people

David --

The Cassandra Island file has been re-activated. Subira's in good odour with our higher ups. Trust me--that's the way you want it. Don't piss her off again.

I've gone over what you sent and don't like the way it's adding up. Re-ordering a bit:

> He [Shen] knows about my working for Canadian
 > Intelligence...
 > Kirin has admitted her disappearance was
 > contrived...
 > I've been taken to a farm...
 > Shen let me drive partway <snip> then slipped
 > something in my coffee...
 > I was out for eighteen hours...
 > Now I'm here, I'm free to leave.

Don't believe it for a second. They haven't engineered this just so you can walk away. Three members of this "Caucus" drowned, remember? Three others disappeared. They know you're working for us. They know you've passed us names: Shen and Roy Calhoun. Their nonchalance suggests they have the means to vanish, covering their tracks, as suddenly as they've appeared. No need to spell out what that means for you and Kirin.

> His "people" call themselves The Caucus. From what
 > little I've been told, it sounds as if they formed
 > back in the sixties.

And haven't hit our radar? That implies connections and resources CSIS needs to know about.

Hell--a weekly social club for psychics would have crossed our desks by now.

I'm uneasy with this situation. I doubt you're physically in danger. Too much went into grabbing you. But we came to you for help in luring someone from this group out of the woodwork and now you've gone from bait to plant--a role that properly requires an officer with training.

> The farm used to be a commune. With cabins and an added dorm, I'd say it once held twenty-five to thirty.

The Caucus's Achilles' heel appears to be the farm, hence both the effort to prevent communication with the outside world and the knockout drug Shen gave you. Do everything you can to find out where you are. And send as many details as you can about the farm itself.

> Four arrived by king-cab yesterday

Licence plate?

> There's a router somewhere on the premises.

Get the IP address. Finding you may be as simple as demanding records from an ISP. We'll need the time of day you get it, too, in case the address is dynamically assigned.

> What now?

Stay put. Play along.

--
JB

I deleted Byron's message and logged out. It read like something from another universe. The Caucus wasn't trying to hide their whereabouts—I was.

From my laptop's browser, I checked Google's IP lookup widget for the router's address and the geographical location of the ISP assigning it. Los Angeles it turned out, which meant the farm was

using an anonymizer service. That, in turn, meant I could send the information without telling CSIS anything. As for the truck, I'd have to get the plate and do a lookup on the owner. On the Internet, anyone can be a spy.

The bathroom was adjacent to my room, with the formal landing separating it from Dr. Colton's study. I showered quietly, then crept downstairs and used the front door to go out.

The air was chilly in a way that feels more, not less, like summer. Across the road the mist was gold chiffon, just like the day before.

"David. I thought you might be up."

I'd been looking right, toward the drive, and hadn't noticed Mr. Shen. He was leaning on the railing in a pair of white pyjamas. Straightening, he gestured me to follow him around the L of the veranda.

So much for deking round the house to get the licence plate.

He'd laid out two mats facing east. Wordlessly he peeled off his pyjama top and prepared to make a Sun Salute. It was like the dock at Cassandra Island all over again only this time we performed the movements double-time. Mr. Shen's skin glowed like burnished teak when we were done.

He bunched up the pyjama shirt and mopped his brow.

"Will you be joining me for breakfast?" he enquired. "Cook's fixing sausages and I feel I have apologies to make."

"Nice to know somebody feels that way."

Cook rushed over from the stove to hug me but recoiled when my stomach growled.

"Has Luke been in?" I asked.

I'd been aiming for offhand, but like a drunk who sticks too closely to the speed limit, I did too well and gave myself away.

Cook's face melted.

"No, dear. He goes through phases. He's getting his own breakfast these days."

These days? As in, since I arrived?

"I'm so pleased Dr. Colton let you meet," she chattered on while

Mr. Shen and I sat down. "I hoped he'd do it quickly. It's been fifteen years and not a day goes by I haven't felt he's half not here. Good or bad, some things should stay together."

She shot a glance at Mr. Shen, studiously pouring apple juice, then set about with spatula and tongs and ferried platters to the table.

"I confess to feeling some relief as well," said Mr. Shen, lifting pancakes from a stack and spearing sausages. "So much will be easier now you're reconnected."

"So much what?"

"Teaching, I suppose. It's hard to know the right word. I'd say re-education, but that sounds so Communist. I'm not sure the English language has ever faced a situation quite like yours. What would be the word for 're-acquiring for the first time knowledge you already have'?"

He doused his plate with maple syrup.

"Satori?" I suggested.

"Perhaps. Except there'll be no moment of enlightenment. And satori isn't something you get back. Once found, it's never lost. Nothing I'll be telling you will add to who you are or what you have become. At best I'll be supplying words to help you understand. Zen in reverse, if you want to look at it that way."

He paused, tickled by the paradox, then dug into his breakfast.

"You're to be my guru."

"Adviser," he corrected through a mouthful of pancake.

"So Dr. Colton lectures me on history and you're in charge of practice, is that it?"

"You're quick this morning."

"I hope that doesn't mean you think the choreography is subtle."

"Not at all."

"And where does Luke fit in?"

He stopped mid-bite.

"Why, he's your brother." *Why would you ask?*

"Is guru—adviser, whatever—what you were to us before? Like

Marion was our tutor?”

“She had you afternoons. I got you in the morning.”

“Which explains the Sun Salute.”

“Getting fractious boys to pay attention is more work than you imagine. *Pranayama*—breathing—and the *asanas* of yoga helped. Believe me, it was more for me than you.”

“Are psychism and yoga linked somehow?”

He shook his head.

“Psychism’s innate. No amount of discipline can bring it forth when it’s not there.”

“And if it is?”

“Grass grows wild in the field, little Grasshopper. It’s the plough that makes it wheat.”

A grinning Master Po went back to links and flapjacks. I tackled my own plate—slicing sausages, inserting little rounds of meat between the layers of pancakes. A Niagara of syrup overtop. Cook looked on approvingly.

“You said you had apologies to make?”

Mr. Shen sat back and touched a napkin to his lips.

“Indeed. Slipping drugs into your coffee. Quazepam, in case you’re interested—used to treat insomnia. You now know why I did, but wrong is wrong. I hope you can forgive me.”

“A small sin, all things considered.”

“And I’m sorry for misleading you. Pretending that I didn’t know exactly who you were. Luring you with partial truths.”

I waved my fork around the kitchen. “You tried to to tell me about all this. In the library at Cassandra Island. Remember? We talked about a hexagram.”

“*Hsao Kuo*. I recall.”

“You were trying to tell me who I was. To let me know you knew.”

“I couldn’t let the opportunity slip by. Not after fifteen years.”

“Why not?”

He gazed up at the ceiling.

“Who knows? The imp in me? The challenge of it?” He looked

down again. "No. That's not it. The truth is, I proved not as strong as Marion, who held her tongue when you became her neighbour. Mind you, she knew she had the luxury of time to get to know you."

"You were warning me as well."

"I was."

"Not to go poking into things I shouldn't. To accept things as they are."

"As they *were*."

"Yet here I am. What changed?"

"There is a judgment in the *I Ching*, David. 'At the first oracle I inform him. If he asks two or three times, it is importunity. If he importunes, I give him no information.'"

"In other words, you're not going to tell me."

"On the contrary. We have this and other mornings."

"Mornings like before? When this was home?"

He rose.

"Finish up your breakfast, then come out front and join me. Like we used to." He patted my shoulder. "Before."



Cook gave me two Thermoses to take to the veranda, one for me with coffee, one for Mr. Shen with tea.

The sun was casting morning shadows on a lawn as green as newly misted produce at an upscale grocery store. The only summer I remembered so determinedly perfect was my first year in Toronto. Every moment then of every day had been imagination's version of the way things ought to be. Pathetic fallacy's supposed to be a literary gimmick, but here the weather was again, mirroring the new with all of optimism's trappings.

Mr. Shen was in a wicker chair, flipping through a slender document.

"Dr. Colton showed you the original of this," he said, closing the black covers. "It's the outline for an essay on psychism you did

years ago for Marion. With emendations, it's required reading for new Caucus members.

A label on the front identified it as *The Psychic Rules*.

"The title is a misnomer. They're observations more than rules. The Caucus's vocabulary developed out of usage, not precision. Take 'empaths' and 'transmitters'. Empath was a simple choice, but no one liked imprinter as its complement. We took to saying transmitter and it stuck. Same thing for *The Rules*. Between now and when we meet again, I want you to go over them."

I took a seat and handed Mr. Shen his tea.

"You seem to like an outdoor classroom," I observed. "First your cottage deck, now this."

"Actually, David, the preference is yours. At least, it was. Yours and Luke's. Winter or summer, you hated being cooped up." He unscrewed his Thermos, poured steaming liquid in the lid and blew on it. "Lessons go much better when you listen to a pupil's needs."

"So what's the lesson plan today?"

"You're sounding awfully chipper for a man whose world's gone topsy turvy."

"And you're sounding more and more like Marion."

He blew on his tea again. "She does have quite the arsenal of obsolete locutions, doesn't she?" He took a sip. "Today's a day for questions. Questions with straight answers. Some things will have to wait of course, but I'll answer what I can without equivocation. I ask only that you not enquire about your separation from your brother."

"The right hand giveth and the left hand taketh away, is that it? You answer every question but the one that matters? Is the price of psychic empathy an absence of compassion?"

Behind the wire spectacles, his black eyes softened.

"I said 'about your separation', not 'about your brother.'"

Was the sympathy an act? If only I could read beyond the maddeningly smooth grey surface of his mind. What really lurked there? A kindly mentor whom I used to love? A Svengali? Something worse?

Play along...

Okay, then—twenty questions.

“Is Luke the same as me?”

“If you mean psychic, yes.”

“Which kind is he? An empath or transmitter?”

“A transmitter.”

“So we’re opposites.”

“Psychically speaking.”

“Driving here, I’m sure I heard you say that twins are never empaths or transmitters. Or was that the Quazepam?”

“No, you heard me right. However, I was speaking of identicals. You two are fraternal.”

“Can he imprint me?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Luke’s abilities have been... disabled.”

“Disabled?”

He’d made the hesitation obvious; he wanted me to ask.

“We discovered years ago that antipsychotic tranquilizers—specifically, the so-called typical neuroleptics developed in the fifties—render psychism inactive.”

Anti-psychotics? Our mother had been committed. I felt the blood drain from my face.

“You’re not saying—”

“—that Luke is like your mother? No. The drug he’s on, Chlorpromazine, serves only as a tool to still his gifts.”

“But why?”

His gaze, directed at the willow in the middle of the lawn, was seeing something other than the screen of sun-bright leaves.

“The answer to that question will emerge. For now, I imagine what you’re wondering is: could you get your memories back by having Luke imprint them?”

“Could I?”

“Trying will set off your wall of pain. Working through it could prove fatal. The tripwire—another word we simply took to using—

has to be disabled first.”

“Fatal? As in ‘kill me?’”

“That’s the generally accepted meaning of the word.”

“Let me guess—I can’t read his memories either?”

“I’m afraid not. For the same reason.”

“When will this tripwire be removed?”

“When Dr. Colton says.”

Not “*when Dr. Colton deems you’re ready*” or “*when Dr. Colton feels it’s safe*.” Just, “*When Dr. Colton says*.”

“If my memories came back right now, how would that affect your plans?”

“Plans?”

“Oh, come on, John. You brought me here for something. After fifteen years it isn’t just to make amends.”

“Some of us have always had misgivings.”

“Like Cook?”

“Like Cook.”

“Dr. Colton said I did it to myself.”

“In the strictest sense, you did. We merely helped.”

“We?”

“Myself, Dr. Colton, and one other. A member who’s passed on.”

One of the suicides?

“Were you involved?”

He nodded.

“How involved?”

“I said I had apologies to make,” he answered, more as if he feared how I’d react than honestly remorseful, like a kid who knows that what he’s done is wrong but can’t help wistfully remembering his misdemeanour’s cleverness.

He poured more tea and settled back.

“We call it ‘psychic surgery’—another term we’ve sanctified through usage. Outside the Caucus it means something else: performing medical procedures *with*, not *on*, the psyche.”

“Medical procedure’s a bit generic for wholesale amputation,

don't you think?"

"But David, nothing's been removed."

"Could have fooled me."

"Then we succeeded. You're by far the most receptive empath that we know about. Combined with your intelligence, you seem to have a mind that has no friction points. Everything is oiled and moves smoothly. What others have to struggle at for you is water off a duck's back."

"You're telling me my memory gap results from being good at something that, if I were any less adept, would have left me whole and happy?"

"In a nutshell, yes."

A car door slammed behind the house. The king-cab rolled in view and made a right. I couldn't see the driver but I got the plate at last.

"Memory's a funny word," said Mr. Shen, watching as it dwindled down the road. "We say it in the singular but there are different kinds. It's a bit like love. The ancient Greeks had four words for it; we, in English, have but one.

"Consider, for example, our memory for experience and facts. Psychologists call it declarative memory because we can discuss it—relate it, as it were, the way you've heard about yourself these past few days. Episodic memory—the recollection of events bound up with time and place—and semantic memory, which is knowledge about facts that don't rely on time and place, are both declarative. Both kinds are consolidated in the hippocampi of the temporal lobes.

"Affective memory, on the other hand—recalling an emotion—and general autobiographical memories, like what it feels like to have someone scratch your back, use a different section of the brain, the amygdalae.

"Two separate processes occurring in disjunct regions of the brain, and yet we call the whole thing memory.

"Ironically," he continued, "advances made in understanding memory come mostly from the study of its absence, namely

amnesia.

“Broadly speaking, amnesia comes in two flavours: retrograde and anteretrograde. Retrograde prevents the recollection of events that took place prior to the onset of amnesia—forgetting one’s past, or parts thereof. Sometimes even who one is. *Ante*-retrograde is not so much forgetting—losing—as the failure to retain new data and experience.

“Did you ever see a movie called *Memento*? The main character can’t remember anything that happens to him longer than a few hours. That’s anteretrograde amnesia—obviously quite a different kettle of fish from losing whole portions of one’s past.”

What I remembered of the film was that, impossibly, it told its story in reverse, starting at the end and working backwards to the opening, all the while building up an atmosphere of nail-biting tension.

“The psychic mind has the ability to ‘see,’ and thus manipulate, its memories. Not just the details of a recollection, but the whole of memory itself. All of us perceive it differently. Most of us describe it using paradigms of sight, even though the percepts have no shape, *per se*, or colour.”

Maps and sculptures... mirror-grey...

“I see colour sometimes, too,” I interjected. “Not all the time, not with everyone, just... sometimes.”

He nodded to himself.

“Synaesthesia. A few of us, Dr. Colton being one, encounter it when reading strong emotions, particularly the collective feelings of a group. It’s unique to empaths. I always wondered if you had it. It hadn’t shown up while you lived here. Or perhaps you opted not to mention it.”

I heard a barb in the last sentence, as if keeping things from Mr. Shen, or maybe Dr. Colton, had been a regular occurrence.

“At any rate, colour synaesthesia doesn’t give an edge to those who have it. It’s like icing on the cake. There are, however, some—again, Dr. Colton’s one—who feel a psychic’s ‘maps’ are nothing more than special instances of synaesthesia. If you’re interested, the

library has monographs, though none address the psychic issue. Third shelf, north wall, if I recall.

“But getting back to memory, your psychic surgery induced two forms of retrograde amnesia, lacunar and source. Lacunar is the inability to call to mind specific epochs of your past. Source means that you can’t remember where or when or how you garnered data, or the knowledge to perform a task. Like the Sun Salute. You must have wondered how you knew it.”

He fell silent for a while, drained his tea, and stood.

“So much talk. I’m getting thirsty. I need something more. Cook usually has lemonade. Can I get you some?”

I held my Thermos up. “This is fine.”

While he went inside I took my coffee to the railing. Cook’s brew was every bit as good as what I got from Gato Nero.

Gato Nero... Little Italy... Toronto... It seemed a million miles away. How was Ferko doing? What was Raymond up to?

Not just a million miles—a century as well.

The dew had burned completely off the lawn but the floor of the veranda, still in shade, was damp and cool. I stuck my big toe in a gap between two planks. It felt familiar, somehow. Comforting. I looked down to see if anything was visible between the boards. Only black showed through.

Mr. Shen returned to find me staring off. He joined me at the railing, holding up his lemonade and studying the light refracting through it.

“I’m not unfamiliar with advances in the field of memory,” I told him.

“Of course not. A man in your position wouldn’t be. Or was that a nice way of saying I’m being pedantic?”

“A tad.”

“Better safe than sorry. Do you want to move down on the lawn? It’s a shame to waste the morning in the shade.”

I manhandled two chairs down the steps and placed them underneath the willow tree toward the sun. The branches made a gauzy curtain, softening the light.

“Consider everything I’ve talked about,” Mr. Shen began, once he’d gotten settled, “as groundwork for what otherwise might sound impossible or contradictory.

“When you undertook the process I’ve called psychic surgery, you buried—re-mapped, actually—all episodic and semantic memory of this farm. Everyone you met, every experience, the location of the Farm itself, the Caucus. At the same time, we showed you how to keep the skills you’d learned.

“Skills I learned from you on days like this?”

“Not just you. Luke, too.” He smiled; the memory was a happy one. “The result was you retained your training without knowing where it came from. You needed it, reflexively, to guard yourself.”

From what? Whom?

The answer to that question will emerge...

“The most sophisticated part of what you did,” Mr. Shen went on—quickly so I wouldn’t ask, or so it seemed, “was the remapping of your memories of Luke. Full retrograde amnesia would have robbed you of your soul, leaving you with nothing to hold on to while you dealt with the confusion of your waking in Toronto. We couldn’t have you seeking help to find out who you were.

“The problem was, there was no way to keep your memories of growing up without your brother being in them. The two of you did everything together. Your attachment formed a huge part of the young men you’d become. We couldn’t have you totally forgetting.”

He paused to polish off his lemonade.

“The genius of psychism is in its skill at isolating mental constructs, mapping them to new locations, switching fore- and background, altering their context. Empaths and transmitters both possess the gift. The major difference between them’s really only in the action of their psychism relative to others.

“With our help, you re-mapped all the *physical* components of your memories of Luke, while retaining both the episodic and affective recollections. We weren’t sure how your mind would process the anomaly—memories of kinship without someone to attach them to. It might have shown up as a dream persona. It might have made

you to feel as if you had a ‘familiar’. Or—and this was my and Dr. Colton’s guess—as an imaginary friend.”

Billed cap... work shirt... field-stained Kodiaks... An image of the brother that I hadn’t known I had superposed itself upon the teasing-urging-daring presence *there* and *not-there* in my memory. What had he looked like back when we were kids? What had he sounded like when real words were coming from his mouth?

I must have zoned out for a second. “... psychic mind ‘sees’ mental space,” Mr. Shen was saying, “differently from how the eyes see real space.

“Imagine for a moment that you’re looking at a ball suspended in the air. The ball grows smaller while you watch. There could be several explanations for the shrinkage. It could be losing mass. It could be imploding. Or it could be travelling away from you.

“Now imagine you can see the ball from every side at once. You know it isn’t losing mass. You know it’s not imploding. Thus it must be travelling away from you. But how, if from every angle it grows uniformly smaller?

“That’s an easy one,” I answered. “It’s travelling through some dimension outside length-breadth-height.”

“Excellent.” He beamed. “Your love of science fiction served a purpose after all.

“The point is, even though the situation I’ve described could never be perceived by ordinary senses, in the psychic mind it *is* perceptible, and subject to manipulation.

“Therefore if instead of ‘ball’ I say ‘the mental artefact of Luke-as-person’, perhaps you’ll grasp how what you did was possible. You re-mapped all your memories of Luke. Buried them inside the inside of the inside, if you follow me. Places always distant—equidistant—from wherever you approached them.”

In reverse he was describing what my mind’s eye saw whenever I assembled someone’s image in my head. Could I really take the bits and pieces of myself, as me, and *dis*-assemble them the way he was suggesting?

A flash of windshield down the road drew near: the king-cab

with a complement of passengers it hadn't had before.

"Summing up," said Mr. Shen as it pulled in, "when the process of the surgery was over—you can well imagine that it wasn't just a one-shot deal—you could no longer access memories of Luke or of the Farm, nor where you learned the skills acquired while you were here.

"To complement the burying, elements got added to your personality. The way you feel about authorities and agencies. Your adamant refusal to acknowledge anything unusual about your gift. Your reluctance to drive east of Highway 6."

"And I did all this myself? *To myself? By myself?*"

"Not entirely. Some hypnosis and imprinting were involved. Your knowledge of Toronto, for example. A man who lived there all his life imprinted you with that.

"The most significant addition, the one most problematic now, was the psychological injunction that prevents you from the voluntary or unconscious reassembling of your memories. The debilitating pain that leads to loss of consciousness."

"And you want me to believe I went along with that? Just agreed without a peep?"

Suddenly, I couldn't help myself. Rule of the Farm or not—and why should I be bound by it?—I tried to read him. Surely if his story were a lie...

Nothing. Nothing at all.

Chapter 29

THE RULES

PSYCHISM An Overview

1. CLASSIFICATIONS

Psychism manifests itself demonstrably and reliably only in:

- empathy } primary
- imprinting } primary
- prevoyance } adjunct
- telepathy } anomalous

2. TERMS

<u>Primary</u>	<u>Adjunct</u>	<u>Anomalous</u>
• empathy	• prevoyance	• telepathy
<u>empath</u> (n.)	<u>foretell/foresee/</u>	<u>telepath</u> (n.)
<u>read</u> (vb.)	<u>predict</u> (vbs.)	<u>send/receive</u> (vbs.)
<u>empathic</u> (adj.)	<u>prevoyant</u> (adj.)	<u>telepathic</u> (adj.)
• imprinting		
<u>transmitter</u> (n.)		
<u>imprint</u> (vb.)		
<u>transmissive</u> (adj.)		

3. INCIDENCE

The incidence of psychism is extremely rare—in the case of anomalous telepathy, possibly as low as 4×10^{-6} percent of the total population. Accurate statistics are impossible due to insufficient sampling.

Incidences of primary psychism are majoritatively empathic.

4. MUTUAL EXCLUSIONS

All primary psychics have some gift of prevoyance, however

- no psychic is both empathic and transmissive
- no psychic is exclusively prevoyant

Typically, anomalous telepathy and primary psychism are mutually exclusive.

5. CHARACTERISTICS OF PRIMARY AND ADJUNCT PSYCHISM

The cognitive, conceptual and memory functions of the psychic mind have the capacity to operate in a manner alien to non-psychics. Primary psychics have the ability to map the aforementioned functions onto a multi-dimensional mental model, which can be manipulated.

Specifically, both empaths and transmitters can, at will, access quasi-objective perceptions of those regions of the mind associated with

- pre-cognitive volition (“urges”)
- emotions
- mental imaging
- memory (medium- and long-term)
- conscience
 - the portion of the ego that experiences détente or conflict with the superego (truth/lies)

Primary psychism consists of specialized receptive (empathy) or communicative (imprinting) faculties that allow the reading or imprinting of such perceptions.

5.1 Empathy

Empaths can read

- emotional states
- conscience
- medium- and long-term memories
- mental images
- precognitive volition
- the “wholeness” of a person (a synergistic amalgam of the above, approx. synonymous with “image of the Self”)

Empaths can also register whether a person possesses primary psychic ability (the psychic footprint, qv).

Empaths cannot read a person’s immediate thoughts (mind reading). Gifted empaths, however, can register with a high degree of precision, giving the impression of reading a person’s mind.

Some empaths perceive emotional states synaesthetically.

5.2 Imprinting

Transmitters cannot imprint precise thought, nor control others in a directed manner. However, imprints can be used to manipulate a subject behaviourally by provoking a response based on imprinted stimulus (positive/negative reinforcement).

Transmitters can imprint

- emotional states
- images (and, by extension, pseudo-memories)
- memories/wholeness
- mental “fields” (a matrix of the above)
- pre-cognitive volition

Imprints can be real (e.g. memories) or fictive (e.g. images).

5.2.1. Imprinting and psychopathy

Psychopathy and imprinting appear to be related. Psychopaths are manipulators, with a remarkable talent for making people feel and believe things they wouldn't otherwise feel or believe.

It has been theorized that psychopaths may be proto-transmitters. However, psychopaths

- do not exhibit a psychic footprint (qv) discernible by empaths
- tend to influence only the already susceptible

It is more likely that their effect on people is a result of highly developed skills in conventional persuasion. Lacking conscience, they are, over time, able to practise and refine their skills since they are typically unconcerned with the consequences of such practise on others.

Nevertheless, it has been observed that transmitters exhibit some or all of the following symptoms associated with psychopathy (from the PCL-R):

- grandiose sense of self worth
- shallow affect
- parasitic lifestyle
- impulsivity and irresponsibility
- lack of realistic long-term goals

5.3 Prevoyance

Adjunct prevoyance is the most elusive of the psychic abilities. In tests, even those most gifted with prevoyance rarely score hits more than forty percent of the time. The expected range for prevoyant accuracy in primary psychics is 20-45 percent.

Experiments indicate that primary psychics exhibit a marked, innate affinity for discrete categories of prediction. Some foresee only the near future. Others have a gift for visionary, long range predictions.

No primary psychic can foretell the outcome of purely mechanistic, chance events (e.g. a throw of dice) unless and until the event is set in motion.

The relationship between primary psychism and adjunct precognition is not understood. However, because precognition never exists alone, it has been suggested that empaths have the ability to read and map more than just the human mind. Their predictions may be macro empathy with universal currents, energies and trends. Conversely, transmitters may create the futures they predict.

The hypothesis remains unproven.

6. LIMITING FACTORS

6.1 Aggregation

Empathy and imprinting normally attenuate in inverse proportion to the number of people being read or imprinted.

Empaths are no more skilled at reading groups (i.e. gauging their moods), and only slightly better at reading individual subjects in a group, than non-psychics.

Empaths are, however

- hyper-sensitive to strong group feelings
- able to read a subject in a group if
 - the subject is sufficiently proximate (see "Proximity")
 - the subject is already known to the empath
 - the empath focuses exclusively on the subject

Transmitters cannot imprint effectively on groups, nor on individual subjects in a group, unless the subject and the transmitter are physically proximate and in direct contact, either visual, auditory or tactile.

Typically, but not exclusively, imprinting requires reciprocal contact between the subject and the transmitter.

A halo effect has been observed when a transmitter succeeds in imprinting a subject in a group. The strength of the effect and its range is transmitter-dependent.

6.2 Proximity

The effective range of primary psychicism is limited, and typically requires visual, auditory or tactile contact (reciprocal in the case of imprinting).

Exceptionally, imprinting on primary psychics can occur without respect to aggregation, contact or proximity. This has given rise to the hypothesis that primary psychics routinely integrate conventional perception and observation with their psychic abilities, but that such integration is not actually required for psychic functioning.

Anomalous telepathy appears to have no spatial limitation when what is sent or received falls under the category of emotions and/or mental images. Precise thought can be sent and received, but only in close proximity. Otherwise, anomalous telepathy is more general, closer to primary psychism; telepaths can send and receive “looks like”, “feels like”, or “sounds like”, but cannot read or imprint “the real thing”.

7. ETIOLOGY

The origins of primary psychism remain a mystery. While clearly innate, insufficient data exists to determine whether genetic factors play a role. To date, no contributing environmental or psychological factors have been isolated.

The medium permitting psychic communication, both object to subject (empathy) and subject to object (imprinting) has not been identified. Some paranormal researchers have posited that Schrödinger’s psi-wave function could, theoretically, act as a “psychic carrier”, but the limitation of proximity on primary psychism discredits this, since a key feature of the psi-wave function is that it does not exhibit a reduction in strength as amplitude decreases.

8. INVOKING

Primary psychics can invoke or shut down their abilities at will. The ability to do so is normally innate and intuitive, and appears to be linked to self-preservation and reciprocal altruism. A perpetually-reading empath would become a moral vegetable. A perpetually-imprinting transmitter would become a monster.

Additionally, the empathic mind normally withdraws by instinct when it encounters active empathy in another.

9. COLLIGATION

Conjoining primary psychics of similar type (empath+empath, transmitter+transmitter) produces no discernible enhancement in empathic receptivity or transmissive strength.

However, pairing empaths with transmitters demonstrably improves imprinting. An empath’s insights into a subject, communicated verbally to a transmitter, permit a transmitter to tailor and refine some aspects of an imprint’s content, thus potentially improving the effectiveness of behavioural manipulation (see above, “CHARACTERISTICS, Imprinting”).

In the absence of an empath’s capacity to “know” a subject fully, though, a transmitter’s ability to imprint specific behavioural stimuli remains limited.

10. IMPROVING/AUGMENTING

Primary psychic ability can be improved with training, but only to the limits of the psychic’s innate potential.

Sensory deprivation inducing an altered state of consciousness increases native psychic ability. The effect is discernible only after the period of sensory deprivation, and diminishes rapidly.

Red light in the range of ~ 625-650 nanometers, like sensory deprivation, also increases native psychic ability. A combination of the two is synergistic, indicating that it is the electromagnetic radiation itself that is responsible, not the perception of it, since during sensory deprivation, vision is blocked.

Brain damage (e.g. from strokes, tumours or trauma) exceptionally confers limited primary and adjunct psychism, as do illnesses producing delirium.

Psychotropic agents can enhance but not confer prevoynance, notably THC (canniboids), psilocybin (Psilocybe mushrooms) and mescaline (3,4,5-trimethoxyphenethylamine).

11. MISDIRECTING (empathy)

With training, primary psychics of both types can successfully misdirect an empath concerning

- emotional states
- conscience
- memories
- precognitive volition
- psychic ability
(see "CAMOUFLAGING, The psychic footprint")

utilising the cognitive and conceptual functions unique to the psychic mind (see above, "CHARACTERISTICS").

Such misdirections can be made reflexive.

Non-psychics can be taught techniques for limited but effective misdirection of an empath. The techniques require full engagement of the conscious mind.

12. RESISTING (imprinting)

Both transmitters and empaths can identify an imprint. Both have the same capacity to perceive their own cognitive, conceptual and memory functions in a quasi-objective manner, allowing them to identify mental fields (notions, images, emotions, etc) that "don't belong".

Non-psychics cannot identify imprinting as such. However, an ethically-responsive personality can resist an imprint in the same way it resists or ignores any self-originating mental field.

13. DISABLING

Neuroleptic dopamine-2 receptor blockades (major tranquilizers) cripple primary, adjunct and anomalous psychic ability.

14. CAMOUFLAGING

Empaths can detect the presence of primary psychic ability from:

1. the activity of psychism itself
2. the memories/wholeness of a person
3. an independent, perceptible constant (the psychic footprint, qv)

Therefore, in addition to avoiding psychic activity (1), successful camouflage of psychism entails:

- dissimulating memories/wholeness (2)
- screening conscience (hiding lies)
- hiding the psychic footprint (3)

14.1 Dissimulating memories/wholeness

Primary psychics can hide (dissimulate) specific memories. Memories are not discrete, but rather indexed amalgams. Memory dissimulation is the process of distilling out significant components and selectively re-mapping them, so the components referenced by the index vanish into an undifferentiated whole. Wholeness (“image of the Self”) can similarly be selectively dissimulated (e.g., knowledge of oneself as empath or transmitter).

Hypnosis and imprinting can be used to teach non-psychics memory dissimulation, with limited but effective results.

14.2 Masking conscience (hiding lies)

Primary psychics can mask ego/superego conflicts, thus permitting lies that don’t alert an empath.

Such masking has the drawback that typically no ego is ever free of moral and/or ethical collisions, except in cases of delusion, indoctrination (religious, military, etc.) or psychopathy. As a result, an empath encountering such masking may suspect—though cannot ascertain—that psychism is responsible.

Masking engenders a dissociative state; the psychic witnesses ego/superego conflicts and the consequent affective states as if they’re happening to someone else. Over time, this can have deleterious effects, notably a generalized flattening of affect.

As with memory dissimulation, non-psychics can be taught to mask untruths selectively.

14.3 The psychic footprint

The psychic footprint is difficult to describe: a mental artefact, perceptible by empaths, falling somewhere between visual imagery and pure geometric abstraction. It can be likened to an object that is both key and keyhole. An empath detects it in a psychic’s mind (whether empath or transmitter) as “key and keyhole joining”, which object/event is felt,

rather than seen, as completion, perfect concordance, perfect harmony.

The footprint is mappable, therefore susceptible to manipulation and displacement within the psychic mind, allowing it to be camouflaged or hidden.

15. INTERACTIONS

Normally, the empathic mind, encountering empathic activity in another, recoils. Otherwise, the mind “overloads” with feedback.

If an empath doesn't recoil from active empathy, what it reads is garbled and incomplete, as if two nearly identical waveforms were imperfectly cancelling each other out. The experience can lead to nausea and fainting.

A similar effect does not occur when an empath reads an actively imprinting transmitter. An empath can read when a transmitter is imprinting, and choose whether or not to incorporate (give in to) the substance of the imprint (see “RESISTING”).

Chapter 30

AN OUTCOME, NOT A CAUSE

I LAID *The Rules* on the dresser and went over to the window, where I'd drawn the drapes against the sun, and peered out through the crack.

"...with emendations," Mr. Shen had said. Meaning what, exactly? How much of the document was mine? The language seemed too polished for a sixteen-year-old boy—assuming that my "project for Miss Harper" dated from the year I'd made myself forget the Farm, the Caucus, Luke. The information read like Coles Notes for a subject I'd already mastered, thanks to Mr. Shen.

When's the test? I asked the brilliant afternoon outside. *Is it for marks?*

My answer was a gentle knock.

"David? Are you decent?"

Marion. I hadn't seen her for two days except at mealtimes, when we hadn't said much more than *Pass the butter, please*. I stood aside and let her in. She made a beeline for the rocking chair, leaving me the bed.

I sat and waited. Damned if I was going to start this conversation.

"You're still miffed," she said at last.

"I can't imagine where you got that idea from."

"Don't," she snapped. "I'm not in the mood for sarcasm."

“Gee, isn’t that too bad?”

She looked as if I’d slapped her. “I was hoping we could talk.”

“A chat. How nice. What shall we talk about? This run of lovely weather? The price of tea in China?”

“I was thinking something closer to home.”

“Silly me. Of course. Let’s talk about deceit.”

“I’m not here to make excuses, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I wish you would. Then I could tell you to fuck off.”

She went still. “You’re that angry?”

“You lied to me. For over two years.”

“I kept things from you, yes.”

“Splitting that particular hair is unworthy, even of you.”

“I’m not splitting hairs. Misrepresentation of the truth is a lie however it’s done. I just want us to be very clear what kind of lies I’ve told.”

“Passive lies? Lies of omission? Lies of imposture? There—all cleared up. I feel so much better. All is forgiven.”

“Would you *stop*? Get out of your own head for a minute.”

“How about you try getting *into* it? Right—I forgot. You can’t.”

“Is that meant to be a killing blow because you’re psychic and I’m not?”

“Killing blow? That was just a practice shot.”

We locked eyes.

“I had no idea you could be so nasty,” she said.

“Something you must have missed. You knew everything else about me.”

“Not everything. I didn’t know the adult-you would have an endless store of brandy.”

“If that’s a reference to your dropping over to keep tabs on me, sorry if it isn’t tugging at the heartstrings.”

“I wasn’t keeping tabs.”

“No? What the hell do you call Cassandra Island? The Caucus knew I’d be showing up there almost before I did.”

“That was different.”

“Different from what?”

“Cassandra Island was exceptional. The Caucus had to be forewarned.”

“Are you telling me you waited till then to inform them David Ase, brother of Luke, robbed of his memories, out of sight and out of mind for a decade and a half, had become your next door neighbour?”

“Of course not. I told them the moment you showed up.”

“And their response was, ‘Isn’t that a kicker?’ and that’s all?”

“Don’t play thick. Of course they wanted to know more.”

“And afterwards? No further interest? I’m assuming your August visits ‘home’ were here, not to the family farm?”

“That’s correct.”

“And the subject of me never came up?”

She sighed. “Where are you going with this?”

“Sounds like keeping tabs to me.”

“No, David, it wasn’t. Do you honestly think I was chumming up to spy on you?”

“How the fuck would I know?” I stood and grabbed *The Rules* off the dresser. “As with memory dissimulation,” I read, “‘non-psychics can be taught to mask untruths selectively.’ How am I supposed to interpret that? Sounds like you can lie on just about every level imaginable. I don’t even know who you are anymore.”

“I’m Marion Harper, vituperative prognosticator and supercilious trasher of all things lazy, mediocre and banal.”

I tossed *The Rules* on the dresser.

“Nice try. I used to know someone like that. Any other last ditch appeals? Because I’d rather be alone right now.”

“I’m not leaving till we get this thing hashed out.”

“Fine, then. Stay.”

I threw myself on the bed and turned to face the window. A breeze blew through the curtains, bringing in the dusty smell of sun-baked fields.

Marion cleared her throat.

“I won’t insult you by saying I’m sorry, David. I was bound by a commitment to the Caucus, and I stand by that commitment. Even

if you don't have the whole story, it should be obvious by now that something extraordinary happened fifteen years ago. There could be no further contact between you and Caucus members afterwards. Ever. In the event that our existence became known, we needed to be certain you, especially, couldn't be tracked down.

"When you moved next door—when I saw you for the first time and knew that it was you—I asked Dr. Colton what to do. He said, quite simply: 'Nothing.' He wanted very much to know what sort of person you'd become but never asked me to report on you.

"I tell myself I had the choice to totally ignore you. To play the city neighbour. But did I really? For one thing, there's that damn door between our apartments. Hard to ignore, even if we seldom use it. More than that, it can't have escaped your attention I lead a solitary life. For the most part people bore me. They rarely have anything intelligent to say and when they do they seldom take the time to say it well. Could I really have resisted seeking out your company, even if you weren't my former pupil?"

She stopped. The curtains shuffled in the breeze again, admitting light that crossed the floor and split the room in two.

Play along.

I wanted to believe her, like the victim of a huckster who refuses to acknowledge that the swindler's lies were nothing but a con. But Marion was a pro. A fortune-teller. One who'd learned to fool even a human polygraph.

Play along, little Jimmy-Dean.

I rolled over. Marion was ramrod straight. Her hands were clasped together in her lap. *Worry... chagrin... sadness... resolve ...* And something else: a field, coloured warm, enveloping the rest. *Tenderness.* A soft spot, verging on maternal—at least, maternal as I fancied it to be. I'd encountered it before, but never so predominant, so undisguised.

Play along.

Genuine or not, it's what she wanted me to see.

"I feel so betrayed," I said.

She settled back, relieved by the admission.

“How could you not?”

“More than that, humiliated.”

“Rather like the emperor in his new clothes, I imagine.”

“Exactly. You let me go on and on—about the way I work, my feelings about psychism, a past I wrap in dark ellipses to obscure the fact it makes no sense at all—all the while knowing it was bullshit. And even if I tell myself there had to be a reason, I still feel like a fool.”

“A pissed-off fool.”

“Something like that.”

The laconicism came out sounding churlish.

“Would it help to know I feel every bit as bad as you?” Marion asked.

“I guess that’s what happens when you let obedience trump friendship.”

“I suppose it is.”

“You could have told me, you know. Whatever happened happened long ago. I was seventeen. I’m over thirty now. An adult. One you could have trusted. You could have found a way to tell me.”

“But would you have believed me? Think, David. With no memory of this place, how could you possibly have known if what I said were true? Would you have understood the Caucus’ need for secrecy? More to the point, would you have taken it on faith you had a brother? A twin? If you’d read that in a book it would have had your eyeballs rolling in their sockets.”

“They’re not rolling now.”

“That’s because you’ve met him.”

“Yeah. Once.”

Marion got up. I wondered if she planned to sit beside me, but she skirted round the bed. I heard the curtains rustle; she was peering out, as I had done.

“Why doesn’t Dr. Colton want me spending too much time with him?” I asked.

“Who told you that?”

“Luke.”

“John and Dr. Colton both know what they’re doing.”

“That’s not an answer, Marion.”

“No,” she sighed, “it’s not.”

The floorboards creaked. I felt the mattress sink.

“David,” she said tentatively, “I’m frightened what you’ll say, but I’m going to ask anyway. I want us to stay friends. I don’t want you vanishing again. I don’t want you hating me. I’ve no right, but is there any way . . . ?”

Marion had been my tutor. How much of me had come from her? We conversed so easily, used the same elliptic syntax, spoke the same allusive language. How often had we finished sentences the other had begun, or twisted them for laughs? Was it possible that that had been her doing? Her impact on a mind at an impressionable age? If so her influence had gone beyond the purely pedagogic. I had to have imbibed her lessons, not just merely learned them.

I was an invention built around a six year vacuum. What sort of person had I been? Dr. Colton knew, as did Mr. Shen and Luke. But none of them had chosen to become my friend, to share the things they could despite the things they couldn’t. Subtract humiliation and betrayal, and Marion, at this stage in my life, knew me better than I knew myself. Literally.

“This sucks,” I said.

I felt her turn, and swivelled round to face her.

“Is there a chance,” I asked, “that this place also has an endless store of brandy?”

“And rye,” she answered briskly. “Sideboard in the parlour. Shall I get Cook to fetch us ice?”



Sharing drinks with Marion, my feet up on an ottoman that Raymond could have chosen, it was easy to imagine that no time at all had passed since she’d announced her plan to head home early for the summer. The difference then had been I didn’t know her lines came from a script. Now I did, but though the script was

censored—I could almost see the Magic Marker blotting out key passages—I trusted what she said was true.

She'd been hired by Dr. Colton shortly after he became the legal guardian of two boys implicated in their foster father's death.

"God knows what strings the Caucus pulled," she told me, "but somehow it was legal, or at the very least, attracted no attention. I've been given to understand that all official record of your origins have been expunged. Felony and psychism apparently need not be strangers to each other."

She knew nothing of the Caucus when she started at the Farm, only that her job was tutoring two boys, described as very special, at a salary "that put questions out of the question." Months passed before she found out that her friend, the therapist who'd asked her if she'd like the job, was more than simply good at getting into people's heads. In that time, the Caucus had assessed her to determine her response, not only to the fact of its existence but to finding out that psychism was real.

"I had an aunt who claimed to have the Sight," she reminisced. "Of course she didn't, but as a child I played with her Tarot and traced the Zodiac on onion skin to colour with my Crayons. Some day I was going to be a Seer."

She welcomed finding out that prevoyance was real, though she herself would never have the gift. It was Mr. Shen, responsible for teaching her the discipline of misdirecting empaths, who had swayed her into fortune-telling.

"It was John who showed me synchronicity and random patterns, like dealing out Tarot or the accident of when and where a child is born, could indeed be read for intimations of the future. That suited me just fine, Seer that I hoped to be but hard-nosed pragmatist that I'd become. I suppose I could have gone back to the classroom after working with you two, but..."

You two. Luke and I. Inseparable brothers.

We hadn't really been inseparable. Luke was quite content to leave me in the library while he explored the barn or scoured the property for treasure: flint arrowheads, nests of garter snakes,

hollow trees that could be used as natural redoubts by two boys playing soldiers.

“Yin and yang,” Marion recalled. “You the thinker, Luke the doer. By thirteen he could already disassemble the equipment in the barn and mostly put it back together. You were good at lessons, both of you, but while for him they were the price of living here, you would take the time to read up further.”

We’d been good-looking even then. “Devilishly handsome,” so said Marion, but Luke, with his blond hair, stood out. A charmer, nearly irresistible, “where you were sweet, he was just plain smooth.”

When not engaged in study we had free run of the property. Boys will be boys, and trouble sometimes followed.

“From the start, discipline presented problems. Luke protected you as fiercely as a mother bear. He took the blame for everything, even when responsibility fell squarely on your shoulders. No one could chastise you, not even Dr. Colton. If anyone tried, Luke’s rages were implacable. Scary, really. One got the feeling only you existed in his world.”

For my part, I’d follow him in anything. Not an angel—not by a long shot—I was, in Marion’s words, “not a troublemaker but more than capable of getting into trouble.”

The picture that emerged as Marion downed two, then three, then four drinks was of two boys hidden from the world but given liberty to roam in paradise. All that was required of them was learning—curriculum from Marion, psychic skills from Mr. Shen. If A.S. Neill had met Ray Bradbury—*Summerhill* meets *Dandelion Wine*—between them they could not have made a place more perfect for two brothers tumbling into teenhood.

And I voluntarily excised all memory of it?

Like Mr. Shen, Marion never got to that.



We were eleven for supper. Three new faces—Greg, Mehtar, Lise—

with two from last night missing: Dom and Franklin.

Marion sat next to me, weaving slightly. Mr. Shen had staked out Father's place, with Cook in Mother's at the far end of the table. Across from me were Kirin, Roy and Carlin. Kirin glowed as if she'd gotten laid. Carlin chattered happily about her day to Roy, who did the bug-eyed thing and groaned at her invented jokes. Perhaps I had misjudged him. Or perhaps he really had succeeded in misleading me. I had trouble fitting someone so attentive to an eight-year-old together with the finger-crushing bozo of Cassandra Island.

Conversation, as at other meals, floated around neutral topics as if everyone were talking about everything but what they really wanted to. Halfway through I asked of no one in particular if Luke was going to join us. In the silence following, Mr. Shen offered vaguely that he was off with Dom and Franklin and wouldn't be back till later.

A small group went upstairs for coffee with the doctor after supper. Not one of them enquired if I'd like to tag along. Marion made noises about catching up on god-knows-what. Roy, with Kirin watching, invited me for beers. I declined with an apologetic *Next time*, aimed at Kirin.

I meant to spend the evening reading in my room, but dozed off in the rocking chair. The deep, rich smell of chocolate woke me up.

"I could have come and knocked," Cook told me when my legs had carried me on auto-pilot down the service stairs, "but I decided to make the mountain come to Mohammad for a change." She whipped a towel off a cooling rack of brownies. "Luke just got back. I thought you'd like to know. He's over at his cabin now."

I grabbed her face and kissed her on the cheek, this tiny woman whom, it seemed, I used to love as much as I did now.

"Cook," I said, "you shouldn't have."

"Just completing my side of our bargain. You didn't tell Dr. C about my little slip. Not that it matters now. You and Luke have met."

She cut and transferred brownies to a floral plate.

"I know he hasn't been—," she cast about words, "—around

much since. That's why I wanted you to know he's back."

I took a brownie and bit into soft, moist sin. Words failed me, so I stuffed the whole thing in my mouth. Cook beamed, then set the plate down on the table. I quickly grabbed another.

She batted at my hand.

"Don't be greedy. You're not the only person here. There's a little girl across the way who'll want some, too."

I scarfed another while she hunted up some plastic wrap and stretched it overtop.

"Go," she said, the task complete. "I know Luke's all you're thinking of."



Night. Luke's porch. The southern sky infested with a billion stars. A nail paring of moon. Crickets creaking like a thousand unoiled hinges. The lamp post near the barn attracting moths. A humid, evening smell like pineapples and honey.

"Bedstraw," Luke says. "That's what smells so sweet."

"Never heard of it."

"City boy."

"Did I used to know?"

"A thing like that, you'd probably remember."

He's lit a citronella pail. The three wicks flicker, wafting hot-wax scent. Dr. Colton's window is a pale-yellow cutout. Cook's a shadow flitting in the kitchen. Three rooms in the dorm-extension have their lights on—night owls inside, like us.

"Almost everybody's here," Luke says.

"How many are they?"

"Fourteen, with the new girl. That's leaving out Miss Harper and Cook. The other two arrive tomorrow."

"Do they gather like this often?"

"Once a year. Normally a quorum. This year everyone's been called."

"Why?"

"Things have changed."

"Because of me?"

"Something Colton needs approval for. You're an outcome, not a cause."

"Something?"

"He'll tell you when he's ready."

"But you know."

"I do."

"To do with me?"

"With us."

He stands and makes to go inside.

"Another beer?"

"Sure."

He comes back with a frosty can and hands it to me from behind.

"Jimmy-Dean," he says and scrubs my head.

I don't know this man but he's my partner in a childhood from which he's been erased. I feel his affection flowing from the tingling in my scalp. He's on my side, even if constraints prevent him telling me what's going on.

"I spoke to Marion today," I say when he sits down.

"Miss Harper?"

"Marion to me. My next door neighbour."

He pops his beer. "How did that happen anyway?"

"Coincidence. Didn't they tell you?"

"Only after they recruited the new girl."

"Kirin. She's a friend of mine."

"And Roy Calhoun's new squeeze."

"How well do you know Roy?"

"He's been with the Caucus eleven years. Tight with Colton and a couple of others. Can't say I really know him. Haven't made the effort. Seems full of himself."

"I thought so, too, but I was watching him at supper. He dotes on Kirin's little girl."

He shrugs. "Like I said, I hardly know the guy."

“What about the other Caucus members?”

“I know their names but other than the ones who were around before, I don’t have much to do with them. Or them with me.

What did Miss Harper have to say?”

“Sounds funny to hear you call her that.”

“Habit.”

He takes a swig of beer.

“I asked her about us. What we were like. What it was like, us being here.”

“Did she mention how much fun we had?”

He flashes me a wolfish grin.

“She made it sound like heaven.”

“Yeah, when they weren’t trying to teach us stuff.”

“That’s more or less what she said, too.”

He hears something in my voice.

“You don’t believe her?”

“No, it’s not that. She said that discipline presented challenges. You wouldn’t let anyone come near me.”

A throaty chuckle. “We watched out for each other.”

“You a little more?”

“You could say.”

I twist my beer and watch the light that catches on the can. The citronella flames are dancing little jigs.

“I have memories of the foster home,” I say.

He tips his beer again.

“It was brutal.” The careless nonchalance of someone hiding scars. “The other kids wouldn’t have anything to do with us. They couldn’t hide from you and I was always fucking with their heads.” He pauses, savouring. “Then there was that fat slob, Bennett, drinking up the social service money. Hannah never had enough to make us decent meals.”

“I didn’t know he’d died. I only just found out.”

“How far do your memories go?”

“To the fire in the barn. I see Tom running in to save his truck. After that... not a blank, more like a road I can’t go down.”

He nods. *"The tripwire."*

"That's what I'm told they call it. Dr. Colton and Mr. Shen."

"How bad is it?"

"Bad. Like exploding on the inside while I'm clamped into a vice. There's no escape. It doesn't stop till I black out."

I get around to opening my beer and lick the foam that spreads around the rim.

"Bennett blew up with his truck," Luke says. "The house caught fire in the explosion. No one else got hurt."

"Who really set that fire?"

He takes an empty can and crushes it one-handed.

"We did."

"On purpose?"

His silence chides me for a question that I shouldn't have to ask.

"Jimmy-Dean," he says again and rubs my arm.

The beer is passing through me.

"Straight through, at the back," he tells me.

The layout of his cabin's simple. Living room in front, bedroom on the right, kitchen on the left, bathroom in the rear. Coming back I peek inside the bedroom. There isn't much to see. A futon raised on two-by-fours. Stacks of paperbacks. Ansel Adams posters on the walls. A bureau with a photograph on top of two boys grinning at the camera. One is blond, the other dark. Their eyes are startling green.

I trace the unfledged faces through the scratched acrylic, wondering if this is us age eight or twelve. It's hard to judge. Sunlight coruscates off water in the background. The pond behind the foster home? I try imagining what came before. Luke and I, not as we are now but with these features of our younger selves. Laughing, shouting, diving deep...

The pain slams hard, a tidal wave of agony. I stumble, drop the picture, hear a cry. Luke's bedroom starts to spin. The wave becomes an ever-dimming maelstrom. I feel myself begin to fall.

Darkness overtakes before I reach the floor.



A sound. My name. The pain is gone.

My head is cradled in a lap that smells of sweat and summer fields. Strong hands smooth my hair and stroke my forehead.

“Soon,” I hear, or something like it. “Soon.”

Chapter 31

THE SILENCE, NOT THE IMAGES

LUKE HELD ME, murmuring till I could stand, then helped me to the futon and fetched washcloths for my forehead. My body was an aching hollow reamed by pain, and sleep came soon enough.

When I awoke, he'd crawled in bed beside me and was lying on his back. His shirt was off and he had one leg crooked so that his jeans were rucked around the crotch. A woody mound at the zipper. He'd left a small light on, and his ribcage glowed with nighttime sweat. I held my palm above it and felt rising heat.

He'd put my sneakers by the door. I took them to the porch and laced up on the steps. The soles squeaked as I walked toward the house, the sound as intimate and anechoic as a whisper.

The stars had vanished while I slept. Misty drizzle made a saffron aureole around the lamppost by the barn. Desultory birds called forth a dawn that wouldn't see the sun.

Cook's domain looked cavernous without the dynamo who gave it life. The kitchen clock said five-to-five. Time enough to get on the computer. I slipped my sneakers off and crept upstairs, past Dr. Colton's study, to my room. The door, though tight, no longer woke the dead.

First thing after booting up, I checked the king-cab's plates. The truck belonged to Mr. Shen. No help there for someone trying to find me. I disconnected briefly from the router, contemplated what

to say—how *much* to say—then settled down to business.

I provided Byron with the router's unrevealing IP address and the equally unhelpful license plate, mentioning the truck was still the only vehicle I'd seen except for Kirin's car and mine. I hypothesized the obvious—it was being used to ferry people from a nearby terminal or station. I avoided saying airport.

Some sort of gathering was taking place, I said, which seemed to coincide with my arrival; I had not, as yet, heard anything about its purpose. As for the Caucus, no agenda had emerged although I'd been informed repeatedly its mandate was protection of its members. Which members I then listed, minus Marion and Cook.

"First names only seems to be the rule," I wrote, "except for Dr. Colton. No one you suspect of having been abducted has appeared.

"Shen's no longer putting me through tests. Instead he's lecturing about my 'gift'. So far I've only had to listen. I have no idea where the talks are headed."

I made general comments about Dr. Colton—his advancing years, that everyone deferred to him, his predilection to stay cloistered in his rooms—but omitted everything he'd told me two days earlier.

Finally, I gave a full description of the Farm: the house, the barn, the cabins, the fields of corn and soy. Detailed, useless information.

Still online, I googled "Dr. Colton". There were lots to go around. I fired off the email, hosed all traces of it and went back downstairs.

Cook was once again in full possession of her kingdom. Coffee burred, big pots steamed, bacon sputtered on the grill.

Luke was at the table eating grapefruit. He raised his spoon in greeting.

"Sleep well?"

Nothing in his voice suggested that the bed I'd slept in had been his. Cook turned from rinsing dishes in the sink.

"Oh, good morning, David. I didn't hear you come in."

She looked from me to Luke and back again, seeing something she approved of. Approved of thoroughly, since she stood there

long, eyes crinkled happily.

She roused herself. "Grapefruit, David?"

"Mmm."

"Broiled, or as is?"

"Broiled. Brown sugar overtop?"

She clucked. "Now how else would I do it?"

I sat across from Luke while she began preparing it.

"Looks like it's going to be a wet one today," he commented. "I'll be working in the barn. Know anything about tractors? The differential lock is sticking. I could use the help."

"I can lend a back but not much more."

"Oh, I'm sorry, David," Cook piped up, her back to us, "that'll have to wait. Dr. C expects you in his study after breakfast."

She placed the grapefruit on a broiling rack and slid it in the oven. Luke looked up and held my eyes a moment.

What did I tell you?



The swags on Dr. Colton's windows were tied back, admitting grey-day light. The man himself was at his desk, hands folded patiently.

"David—please, have a seat."

He motioned to the armchairs pointed at the big-screen television set.

"You'll recall," he said as I sat down, "I mentioned Garrett Finnestad decamped from F-RK with footage of their work. Unpleasant though it is, you need to see at least a part of what he stole."

From the corner of my eye I saw him swivel, then heard tapping from his keyboard. The TV hummed and crackled and a Windows-style browser filled the screen. The cursor skittered, double-clicked and navigated to a folder filled with movie icons. Dr. Colton clicked on one and launched a player. *MKULTRA F-RK, Madison Facility* in fuzzy letters filled the frame. The cursor touched the Full Screen button, doubling the letters' size. They faded to a room inside a

fifties-style hospital with lots of chunky porcelain and big ceramic tiles.

“Nice setup,” I commented, nodding at the CRT invisibly connected to his desk. My office in Toronto had spaghetti everywhere.

A toolbar popped up at the bottom of the screen. The cursor hovered over Pause.

“Franklin’s work. You’ve met him. Tall? Grey hair? Brushcut? Our computer expert. ‘Guru,’ he insists.”

A chuckle like the rustling of paper.

I’d dined with them, I knew their names, I’d listened to their views on sports and politics. Yet I knew nothing about any of the Caucus members. The Farm’s no-reading rule required me to ask if I had any interest.

Dr. Colton closed the swags behind his desk, clicked on Play and let the footage roll.

The images were grainy—digitized from black-and-white—but slickly edited. Clinical vignettes crossfaded seamlessly with panoramic shots of rooms and close-ups of equipment.

A woman strapped down on a gurney with a baton in her mouth and two electrodes on her forehead. Her left leg was in plaster from her heel to her hip. A dial was turned; a switch got thrown. Her back leapt off the table in a writhing arch. A full five seconds passed before a labcoat killed the current.

Dr. Colton narrated.

“For electroshock, at voltages of seventy to one-fifty, the normal pulse length should be less than half a second. Here they use a lower voltage but a longer pulse. The idea was to re-align magnetic fields in the brain, hoping to confer psychokinesis. Muscular contractions broke the woman’s leg a session earlier.”

A bald man in a dentist’s chair with lesions on his face and a gnarled growth beside one ear. A black box mounted on a boom trawled back and forth above his head. The nuclear trefoil was clearly visible.

“What you’re seeing here is murder, plain and simple: irradiation of the brain to stimulate the growth of temporal lobe tumours,

thought to be responsible for ESP?”

Orderlies straightjacketing a military type who ripped an IV from his arm, leapt from his bed, and started strangling a doctor with his stethoscope. The IV line connected to an apparatus with a row of toggle switches. Looping from the back were tubes attached to phials.

“The device you see permits the rapid alternation or combining of amphetamines, barbiturates and psychotropics in the subject’s IV catheter.”

“Is that your friend?” I asked. “Garrett Finnestad?”

No answer.

A room with trapdoors in the floor, their dimensions about equal to a coffin.

“Sensory deprivation modules. Completely sound and light-proof. No room to move. Subjects stayed inside for up to seven days. Intravenous feeding, elimination through a catheter.”

Shots of trapdoors being opened, subjects being lifted out. All were swathed in padding, wearing gloves. None could stand up by themselves. Some trembled uncontrollably. Others let their limbs be posed like catatonic zombies. Still others curled foetally and seemed to weep...



In the end it was the silence, not the images, that got to me, like *The Scream* by Edvard Munch.

“You can see now what we feared,” concluded Dr. Colton as the screen went black. “What we petitioned London with, and when that failed, why we took the steps we did. These days we keep the footage safe in Chancery—”

“Your archives in the basement?” I asked, turning round.

“—and show candidates this video instead.”

“Candidates?”

“Empaths or transmitters who have come to our attention. Once we deem them trustworthy, the video is used to introduce them to

the Caucus' genesis and *raison d'être*. If they're sympathetic, there follows a novitiate—a period of training much like you and Luke received with John. At the end, the candidate is deemed a full-fledged member. An initiate, if you will."

"A Knight of the Hermetic Order of The Caucus, something like that?"

He smiled painfully.

"Nothing so arcane. Someone with the right to have a say in our decisions."

He blipped the TV off and pulled the curtains back. The colours in his study, sober though they were, looked vivid after all the black and white.

"I'm going to have to chew your ear off as I did the other day. Bear with me. It's the fastest way to bring you up to speed. Should I have Cook bring something?"

"Up to speed on what?"

"Coffee? Lemonade? Iced tea?"

"Just answers, thanks. Straight up, with equivocation on the side."

He settled in the chair beside me, crossed his legs and plucked his trouser crease.

"Miss Harper said you'd grown into a wit."

And not the right kind, either. *Wit*, the way he said it, had a *t* in front.

"Our decision to go underground in sixty-two was, perhaps, precipitous. Garrett notwithstanding, F-RK had yet to stumble onto genuine psychism. Nor were they likely to. It took sensitivity and insight for the picture to emerge. Our own grasp in those days, still in its infancy, had come to us one small piece at a time. Their shotgun sadism suggests that even with a glimpse, they were unlikely to have recognized the very thing they sought. Nor to have the mindset to pursue it. Real psychism was not as sexy as the comic book variety—at least to Cold War scientists.

"We were, however, caught up in the spirit of the times. Rumours about CIA abductions were becoming common coin, and

with the narcissism of the paranoid, we feared the Caucus would be targeted.

“In truth, by sixty-four, the CIA had pulled the plug on F-RK, a fact we didn’t learn until a decade later. Ironically, not knowing worked to our advantage, granting ten years’ practice dodging nothing more substantial than our fears.

“That same year—sixty-four—we opened up the Farm as a commune and retreat, which we called the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Alternative Psychotherapies. CISAP, for short.”

“Yes, Marion told me. Some sort of shrinks’ kibbutz.”

The corners of his mouth drew tight. He either found the term distasteful or didn’t care for interruptions.

“CISAP was pure sixties: experimental, optimistic, painfully sincere. We offered therapists outside the mainstream—Gestalt, transactional analysis, bioenergetics—a haven to exchange ideas, write, and even practise their vocation in a rural setting.

“Behind the scenes, of course, our purpose was to unearth psychics and recruit them to the Caucus. As I pointed out the other day, we tend toward careers in counselling.

“As a front, the Centre was a victim of its own success. At any time it might be housing twenty or more visitors, most of whom knew nothing of the Caucus. To deal with this we set up protocols resembling a secret order, whence the terminology you mocked. The paradigm both shrouded our existence and provided structure for the vetting of potential members.

“We gathered often and debated long. Anomalous telepathy, a thorny issue, occupied us till we finally concluded that it was, indeed, anomalous. John amassed statistics on prevoyance, correlating them against a staggering variety of factors. We discovered the disabling effect of neuroleptics. On a gentler scale than F-RK, we investigated ways to augment psychic gifts. And so on. The picture that emerged was not much different from *The Rules*.”

“Rules you say came from a sixteen-year-old’s pen.”

His eyebrows rose.

“And why not? Do you doubt you had the competence?”

He took my silence for a no.

“Have you read through them?”

“Mr. Shen gave me a copy.”

“Good. That spares me some explaining.

“A feature of psychism we uncovered was that empaths could detect psychic ability—the psychic ‘footprint’ mentioned in *The Rules*. We still had much to learn about dissimulating mental fields, and the fact that empaths could detect it worried us. What if, we reasoned, F-RK, whom we still feared, were to change their methods and approach psychism properly? In time they’d happen on the footprint, providing them a way to track down psychics and co-opt them for their purposes. CISAP, with its fluid population, was an open invitation to discovery.

“We dissolved the Centre early in the seventies, though the Farm remained our place of gathering. By then we numbered seventeen, scattered across Canada, with members in the States as well.

“Our timing was fortuitous. Russian psychotronic research had led American defence agencies to see a growing East-West ‘psi-gap’, which they sought to close by funding psychic research out of Stanford University, and at Fort Meade in Maryland.”

“The Star Gate projects,” I cut in. “Grill Flame, Sun Streak, Center Lane.”

“You’ve heard of them?”

“Like anyone who’s ever typed ‘conspiracy’ in Google.”

“So you know what they were after?”

“Psychic spies. Eyes-in-the-sky who never left their armchairs.”

“A colourful turn of phrase, but in essence, yes.

“Controlled remote viewing, as they chose to call it, was their major thrust, but no chimera got neglected in their hunt for psychic tools to turn against the Soviets. The Department of Defence—specifically, the Army Intelligence and Security Command, INSCOM—was particularly eager, spurred by INSCOM’s head from eighty-one to eighty-four, one Major General Albert Stubblebine.

“You mean that army nut who used to host spoon-bending

parties? He's legendary on the Web."

A tight-lipped, millisecond smile.

"The same. Star Gate reached its apogee under his sponsorship, and while most of its initiatives were harmless—at worst guilty of poor science—one of them continued in a line from F-RK, using human guinea pigs to test sadistic 'what-if' propositions. The project didn't have a name, just a number, 2561-G. Outside of those involved no one knew of its existence.

"Except you, the Caucus."

"A member in the States knew Stubblebine through contacts on the paranormal circuit. She got herself a job compiling data at Fort Meade. In effect, a mole."

"Got herself a job? Just like that? At a secret military lab?"

The smile this time was fractionally longer.

"The woman was a transmitter."

Right.

"It was from her we learned in the mid-eighties that 2561-G had narrowed their investigations down to two phenomena, which they called temporal displacement sensitivity and partial proximate telepathy."

"Prevoyance and empathy-imprinting."

"Precisely. 2561-G had turned up three primary psychics—from our intelligence, two empaths and a transmitter. 'From our intelligence' because the subjects were sequestered. We extrapolated their abilities from data our insider was responsible for processing.

"Similar to F-RK, 2561-G was focused on enhancing psychic power. Genuine psychism in and of itself was insufficient for the purposes imagined. Its effective range was limited. Empaths couldn't read a person's thoughts in real time. Imprinting didn't guarantee control over their actions. And prevoynance wasn't accurate enough to give an edge. Consequently, those responsible for 2561-G devoted all their efforts to improving what they didn't understand by any means.

"The approach was flawed on nearly every level, with the result we kept the upper hand in *understanding* psychism—cold comfort

when, in eighty-eight, two more subjects were sequestered at Fort Meade.

“To everyone’s surprise, the Berlin Wall came down in eighty-nine. Suddenly, US agencies conducting Cold War psychic research had to justify their spending. An independent cost-results analysis of nearly forty years of psi-investigation had shown their paranormal dabbling for what it mostly was—a twenty million dollar waste.

“Scrambling for funds, 2561-G grasped at straws and finally unearthed one: Garrett Finnestad. Data culled from former F-RK research suggested that his talents had been genuine. From his disappearance back in fifty-six, coupled with the trouble finding others like him since, they posited to Congress the existence of an underground of psychics working to prevent them furthering their work.

“American credulity is hardly news, nor is paranoia in the US government—although ironically, in this case, the story they cooked up was true. At any rate, funds were allocated to a project based on 2561-G and codenamed BRAZIER.

“Centred at Fort Meade again, it had a threefold mandate: to hunt for ‘partial telepaths’, investigate their usefulness in covert operations, and track down the elusive underground.

“Using more sophisticated protocols than those of 2561-G, BRAZIER finally succeeded in developing a picture of psychism very close to ours, including that ‘receiving telepaths’—empaths—could detect the psychic footprint, which they referred to as the ‘psi-constant’.

“We had, by then, worked out techniques to camouflage it. But we weren’t the only ones at risk. Empaths and transmitters not yet in the Caucus, those we didn’t know about, needed to be warned and taught the skill.

“The problem was, we had to find them.”

“Hence Cassandra Island. A summer camp for psychics. Come and play, and while you’re at it join our secret order.”

Another chilly twitching of the lips.

“What better place to hide than in the open? No one at the Island knows its real purpose, which, to borrow from your book of

clever phrases, is to sift among the flakes for gold.

“A single Caucus empath, in rotation—John, of course, is one—is always at the Island. Should a guest prove genuinely psychic, we begin the process of inducting them. In the years Cassandra Island’s been in operation we’ve uncovered six. All have readily aligned themselves with us.”

“With just one member on the grounds, Cassandra Island’s secret remains safe. BRAZIER hasn’t worked out yet that psychism can be disguised. Even if they send an empath to investigate, we always know. And they do send people. Regularly. Not just BRAZIER, but the CIA, CSIS, and others. So far the strategy has worked. The Island even turns a profit.”

From downstairs came the muffled clanging of Cook’s dinner bell. Dr. Colton checked the clock. Like last time, when he’d strolled me round the cornfield, my impression was he’d timed his final sentence to the second.

He stood, a little stiffly.

“No doubt you’re hungry. We aren’t, however, finished, and I have commitments for the next few days. Would you be good enough to come back after lunch? Say in two hours? We’ll continue then.”



Two more members had arrived, the last: Trinity and Eric. The kitchen could no longer hold the numbers. Lunch was served across the hall. The doors between the dining room and parlour had been closed. Little of the day, still overcast, crept through the single window. A chandelier—bronze, with tulip shades, cousin of the fixture in my room—provided warmth instead.

Luke came in from working in the barn. His fingernails were rimmed with grease, even though his hands were pink from scrubbing. He took the chair beside me, brushing me as he sat down. Silence didn’t fall—these people were too good for that—but glances flickered our direction. Luke ignored them, joining in the table

conversation smoothly. His easy fitting in reminded me of Byron.

After lunch the diners drifted off, some toward the kitchen, others to their quarters. I went with the kitchen group. Luke cut his head toward the door, inviting me to join him in the barn.

“Can’t,” I said. “Dr. Colton isn’t finished with me yet.”

“That so, huh?”

His face showed no expression.

Upstairs in my room, I dozed off and got woken by a knock a half an hour later.

“Dr. Colton’s ready for you now,” Mr. Shen called through the door.

I got up and let him in.

“He’ll have to wait a minute,” I said, stripping off my T-shirt. “I need to freshen up.”

He watched me rustle through the dresser.

“That’s quite the tale Dr. Colton’s spinning,” I commented.

“And that’s a telling choice of words. What, you don’t believe him?”

“Let’s just say the jury’s out.”

“It’s all true, you know.”

“But that’s just it. How *would* I know?”

I found a T-shirt that still had a bleachy smell. My clothes supply was getting low. I’d have to ask Cook what to do about my laundry.

“What do your instincts say?”

“My instincts aren’t allowed to function here.”

“No, only your empathy. You still have ordinary intuition.”

“Which tells me that his story won’t be getting optioned any time soon, not even for an LBC.”

“I’m sorry—LBC?”

“Low Budget Canadian. Knock-off sci-fi thrillers shot around Vancouver.”

“That’s good,” he chortled. “I’ll have to remember it. But I understand your feelings. Bad enough not knowing whether anything you’re told is true, but being asked to buy a story so

fantastical—”

“No,” I cut him off. “Fantastical describes my life since seventeen. Clichéd’s the word I’d use for Dr. Colton’s narrative.”

“Clichés aren’t inauthentic to begin with. They only get that way through repetition.”

“Lazy repetition,” I corrected, flattening my hair, “usually by people who underestimate their audience.”

“Does Dr. Colton strike you as the type to underestimate anyone? Come. We shouldn’t keep him waiting.”

He went out in the hall.

“You’re joining us?”

He nodded. “Robert’s asked me to sit in.”



“On some level,” Dr. Colton started, speaking from across his desk, “you must be finding this preposterous.”

Mr. Shen allowed himself a smile.

“Not just preposterous,” he carried on, “but taxing. The quantity of information we’ve been giving you—,” a nod at Mr. Shen, “—must seem like Jello concentrate without the water. We do apologize. You’ll have time to process things after we’re done this afternoon. John?”

Mr. Shen was in an armchair we’d dragged over to the desk. He adjusted his position to encompass me and Dr. Colton both.

“You may have noticed, David,” he said comfortably, “we haven’t spoken much about telepathy. Perhaps you’ve wondered why?”

I shrugged.

“No?” He looked surprised.

“Oh, come on, John. The two of you are masters at the slippery answer, and your ping-pong lectures are co-ordinated to the n th degree. You tell me only what you want, and only when you want to. Wondering’s a waste of time.”

The two of them exchanged a look. *The subject’s growing testy.*

“We understand,” said Dr. Colton. “Please—bear with us. You’ll soon have all the facts.”

“Yes, but why the scripted rigmarole? Seems to me you’d save a lot of time, and help your credibility, by doing what you have to do to restore my memories. ‘Re-assemble’ them, according to what Mr. Shen here says. Or is it possible there’s something you don’t want me to remember?”

“Of course not, David.” He sat forward in perfect imitation of the sympathetic shrink. “As I’ve explained, we must go carefully. You need to be prepared, and that’s exactly what we’re doing.”

The honey of appeasement was spread thinly on impatience. I contemplated pushing him but he would never crack. And, despite what I’d just said, I wanted all the information he and Mr. Shen could give.

“Okay,” I sighed. “Telepathy. Tell me what you think I ought to know.”

The two did more eye-talking, then Dr. Colton gestured with his hand to Mr. Shen, palm up. My former mentor took his cue.

“Of the extraordinary gifts with which the mind can be endowed, the rarest is telepathy. We dignify it with the word, anomalous, but the common term is twin-telepathy.

“You’ve heard of it. Everyone has. Its status in the popular imagination verges on the mythic. Anecdotes abound, though most don’t indicate the presence of telepathy but rather similar perceptions and the heightened intuition of two people with the same genetic makeup.

“That said, valid scientific studies, conducted independently in Russia, Scotland and Australia have demonstrated, unequivocally, that mind-to-mind communication does exist between a tiny fraction of identical twin sets. Only five such sets have been identified in sixty years of research.”

He paused and looked at Dr. Colton with a tiny nod. Apparently, they planned to sing duet, like Byron and MacKenzie when they’d tag-teamed on their story about dead and missing psychics. In my head, I killed the visuals and settled back to listen.

Dr. Colton:

“Telepathy’s infrequency has kept us from exploring it ourselves. What we know, or think we know, derives from other people’s research. We’re still uncertain how, or even whether, it’s related to primary psychism. All the data points toward it being something different, a phenomenon apart.”

Mr. Shen:

“Telepaths exhibit no empathic or transmissive skills except in interoperation with each other. In addition, proto-speech forms part of their communication, permitting the exchange of complex ideation—a feature missing from primary psychism. Furthermore telepaths evince no special tendency toward prevoyance.

“Lastly, telepathy appears to function irrespective of proximity, though proto-speech attenuates with distance. The only real overlap with empathy-imprinting is the crippling effect of neuroleptics.”

Dr. Colton:

“Regardless, if we take telepathy and psychism as aspects of the same phenomenon, we discern the following conundrum. Telepathy is self-contained—solipsistic, one might even say. Two minds know each other, with a shared epistemology going right back to the womb. *Cogito ergo es; cogitas ergo sum*. I think, therefore you are; you think, therefore I am.

“Primary psychism is just the opposite. It gives or takes *outside* itself—inclusively, embracingly. Its focus is the Other. Yet some perverse ontology dictates that it remain disjunct, like two halves of a tantalizing, disconnected whole. John, if you don’t mind—*The Rules*, item nine?”

Mr. Shen:

“Pairing empaths with transmitters demonstrably improves imprinting. An empath’s insights into a subject, communicated verbally to a transmitter, permit a transmitter to tailor and refine some aspects of an imprint’s content, thus potentially improving the effectiveness of behavioural manipulation. In the absence of an empath’s capacity to know a subject fully, though, a transmitter’s ability to imprint specific behavioural stimuli remains limited.”

Dr. Colton:

“In other words, the full potential of psychism can’t be realized unless an empath and transmitter merge, like telepathic monozygotes...”

Dr. Colton... Mr. Shen... Dr. Colton... Mr. Shen—one voice dry as wind-blown sand, the other warm, mellifluous. The back-and-forthing was hypnotic, the words themselves selected more for rhythm than for sense.

My mind begin to disengage. I went to interject, “*Catch-22*,” but as when Mr. Shen had dosed my coffee driving out of Tweed, I couldn’t seem to find the strength.

Sunlight pooling on my legs... road sound humming in my ears... Mr. Shen instructing in his calm, unhurried way... far too much to grasp at once... information planted for the harvest... “With a single known exception, biovulars, or dizygotics—what most people call fraternal twins—never develop the ability...”

The trance broke like a pane of clouded glass.

“Luke,” I said, startling myself. “You’re telling me that Luke and I are telepaths.”

The heirloom clock ticked fifteen hour-long seconds.

Dr. Colton rose. “Thank you, John. I’ll take things from here.”

Chapter 32

NOBODY WAVED GOODBYE

THE OVERCAST BEYOND the study window grew another layer of cloud. The room began to dim like houselights going down. Dr. Colton sat and pulled the brass chain of his banker's lamp. The green glow lit his face from underneath. He contemplated me a while, reaching a decision—or mulling over one already made.

A point of no return had come.



“You and Luke had barely turned eleven when you set the fire that razed your home and killed your foster father.

“At the time, Garrett Finnestad was active in the Glanbrook Township Fire Department. It was he, investigating afterwards, who spotted you and Luke and brought us news. The Caucus set to work to have me named your legal guardian, and with your placement here, we took you out of hell and gave you paradise.

“Nostalgia is an old man's trap, one that I've avoided and am no more likely to fall into now than shuffleboard. Still, when you were at the Farm, the place was different somehow. Brighter. Summers seemed to go on for forever, with winter just a blink between the long, hot months that saw the sun set late.

“The excitement that surrounded your arrival was like

Christmas Day. Psychism doesn't run in families. You were the first, the only, siblings ever known to share it. What's more, you were a mirror set—empath and transmitter—and twins, though not identical. Possibilities for solving riddles opened up before us. We felt like evolutionary scientists who'd stumbled on the missing link.

"Your gifts were strong in each of you, stronger than we'd ever seen. Luke could, for example, imprint even when a subject couldn't see or hear him. Up till then we'd always thought that contact—auditory, visual or tactile—was required for imprinting. As for you, whenever you read subjects, it was eerie. You *became* them, so much your mannerisms and expressions changed.

"Your prodigiousness, in combination with your otherworldly appearance—your eyes, of course—had everyone beguiled. Everyone, that is, but Garrett. Where the rest of us were given to indulgence, he remained inflexible and stern. Chores *would* be done and people treated with respect or there'd be hell to pay.

"You yourself got on with him. Perhaps it was your empathy. Garrett had been scarred by F-RK. More, I think, than people realized. He'd been a dedicated patriot. MKULTRA had destroyed his trust in flag and country. He felt utterly betrayed. You would have sensed that even through the camouflage we use to guard our privacy.

"Luke, on the other hand, distrusted him, openly defying Garrett every chance he got. For one so young he could be frighteningly obdurate, even facing someone twice his size with military training. Garrett, for his part, spoke in dark allusions any time Luke's name came up.

"From the start, the two of you were secretive—normal for two brothers ostracized the way you'd been. But around your third year here, you started to grow taciturn as well, exchanging looks instead of speaking in the company of others. We attributed the change to teenage sullenness and let it pass.

"Then the mishaps started. Little things: keys misplaced and found in odd locations, reading glasses sat on, coffee spilled down shirt fronts, stairs missed going up. It was as if a wave of clumsiness

had struck the Farm.

“Garrett was convinced Luke was responsible. Most of us dismissed the accusation. Imprints always touch the conscious mind. One becomes aware that something is intruding. Non-psychics usually feel them as unbidden thoughts, unmotivated urges, unexpected insights. A psychic’s grasp of his or her own mental map, however, sets them in relief. The foreign influence is easy to distinguish. Only a transmitter with an empath’s sensitivity could imprint a Caucus member so adeptly that the imprint wasn’t noticed.

“That, or a transmitter who could read an empath’s mind.

“Given the improbability of brothers—fraternal twins at that—having mirror psychic gifts, I was not prepared to rule out the latter. I spoke with John. For several months we kept an eye on you, becoming more and more convinced that you were hiding something, something so miraculous your hoarding it seemed pure ingratitude.

“I wanted to confront you, however John advised against it. ‘Teens need their secrets, for a time at least,’ he said, ‘and lose respect for anyone who forces them to lie.’”

“Would it have mattered if I hadn’t heeded his advice? Most likely not. Secrecy itself was not the issue. Rather it was who you were, *what* you were. Both of you—you, and most particularly, Luke.

“For many years, season permitting, Garrett had the habit of sitting by himself on the veranda as the sun went down. No one bothered him. The time was sacred. He’d been free of drugs and alcohol for decades. Still, not a day went by without its struggles.

“One evening in the summer of your sixteenth year, the Farm was empty but for you and Luke and Garrett. Cook was on vacation and a member visiting had tickets to a country show—George Strait at the Coliseum. The Farm brought out the cowboy in our mostly urban members.

“Earlier that day, Luke and Garrett had had words, but things had settled by the time we left for Hamilton. Garrett saw to it your chores were done then took his chair on the veranda.

“Luke has never said if what came next was planned or whether opportunity set things in motion. He wouldn’t let me read him afterwards so what I know comes straight from you. Telepathy with him left traces in your mind, however not enough to ascertain pre-meditation.

“This much is certain, though. For Luke it was a game, like the minor mishaps, only this time getting back at Garrett was the prize. Anticipation of it lit a fire in you. In play, the candle to your moth was always Luke’s excitement.

“At his suggestion, you crawled under the veranda at the south side of the house and crept around. He, meanwhile, went up to Garrett, saying they should clear the air. Disarmed and thinking you were elsewhere, Garrett felt no need to camouflage his mind. While Luke kept him distracted, you watched and read him through the floorboards.

“After twenty minutes, Luke told Garrett he was going to the library. Instead he snuck around the house and joined you under the veranda.

“I don’t know how it’s done—no one does but you and Luke—but there the two of you linked telepathically and Garrett-in-your-mind became a part of Luke. The game began.

“Garrett had been dry for decades but the call to lose himself in alcohol had never gone away. Combating it required a superego stronger than the craving at all times. His strictness with the two of you reflected that—a halo of the discipline he practised on himself.

“Party to your empathy and all its insights, Luke imprinted Garrett, not with the urge to drink, as he might have done without your help, but with permission to relax his discipline.

“The subtlety and skill involved were staggering, far beyond what Luke could manage on his own. Garrett, a founding member of the Caucus, never even registered the imprint. He went indoors and came back with a tumbler and a fifth of rye. In short order, he was hammered.

“Luke toyed with him at first, getting him to scratch his head, pick his nose, swat at non-existent bugs. Emboldened, he went

further. Could he get Garrett to jump up and down and shout obscenities? To laugh hysterically? To piss himself?

“The light was dying and your hiding place was getting cramped. Not yet ready to give up, Luke imprinted Garrett with an urge to joyride on the Farm’s old Massey-Ferguson. Keeping a safe distance, you followed as he stumbled to the barn and fired up the tractor.

“Responding to Luke’s stimuli, Garrett drove it down to Nebo Road, where, weaving back and forth across the centre line, he headed toward Whitechurch. After narrowly avoiding him, a neighbour two farms down alerted the police.

“At this point Luke grew tired of the game, and imprinted Garrett with a yearning for his chair again. In no condition to perform the simplest of manoeuvres, Garrett botched his turn and flipped the tractor in the ditch. The OPP, already on their way, showed up minutes later. The two of you, in hiding, watched as an emergency response team pulled him out from underneath.

“Flashed cars were waiting when we got back from the concert. You and Luke, innocent as lambs and properly distressed, were sitting in the kitchen with the officers. In their opinion Garrett wouldn’t last the night. They offered to escort me to St. Joseph’s, where I sat with him until the end.

“Sat, and read his garbled memories. The picture that emerged was chilling. We’d always known Luke harboured psychopathic tendencies, but had assumed, from your successful integration at the Farm, that your empathy—and the compassion that goes with it—tempered them, held them in check. But when you merged, conscience and compassion disappeared. Luke’s propensities held sway. You followed where he led. Together you were utterly remorseless.

“It was still some time till sunrise when I got back to the Farm. Everyone was sleeping, but the shock of what had happened lingered in the air like silence following a thunderclap. I couldn’t bear the quiet. John was at his cottage on Cassandra Island. I called despite the hour.

“Detachment is John’s greatest gift. Even roused from sleep, he

grasped what needed to be done. You and Luke could not remain together. Whatever hopes we'd had for you would have to be abandoned. You were too much of a danger.

"John advised a separation that was swift, complete and permanent. One of you would have to leave the Farm for good. The other would stay here, his psychic gifts disabled. We had no doubt who that would be. Luke's powers of mental suasion were too great to let him loose upon the world. As for you, John was, I think, already formulating how to seal the split. He offered to drive down and take you to his cottage right away.

"Securing your agreement would be crucial. 'Words will not suffice,' John warned. 'We're asking for a sacrifice that comes with no reward. David has to *know*. Let him read you, Robert. Let him see himself and Luke through others' eyes.'

"Luke would have to be sedated till you left. John suggested ketamine, an anaesthetic with dissociative properties we'd studied in conjunction with prevoynance. You may have heard of it. I understand it's known as Special K. We still had phials locked in the Apothecary.

"The room you shared with Luke is opposite this study. You always rose ahead of him. I waited till you went downstairs then slipped across the hall.

"You'd left the door ajar and I noticed that Luke's bed was empty. Peering round, I saw him tangled in your sheets, sound asleep and curled toward the wall.

"Even intramuscularly, ketamine acts quickly. I injected him, and Luke roused only long enough to rub his thigh and mutter.

"You knew you were in trouble when I found you in the kitchen. Seeing what was in my face, you paled and followed me upstairs. Seated as we are right now, I confronted you with Garrett's death and what I'd gleaned before he died. John's advice was sound, but I wanted—needed—you to hear out loud what suffering you'd caused.

"I then demanded that you read me, opening myself as I had never done before. The horror on your face as you began to grasp the thoughtlessness—the viciousness—of what you'd done convinced

me you were truly seeing free of Luke.

“Frightened in a way I hope you never are again, you offered no resistance when I, in turn, read you, confirming that you understood why brothers Luke and David Ase could be no more.

“John arrived at noon. By then the members staying here, and those we’d reached by telephone, had learned of the events surrounding Garrett’s death. ‘Draconian’ was used but no one balked at what we planned. We gave you time with Luke, still heavily sedated, then packed your things and took them to John’s car.

“The lane was empty as the two of you drove off. Nobody waved goodbye.”



Silence *can* be deafening.

Dr. Colton came around the desk. His mouth was moving, but I wasn’t hearing him. He touched me on the shoulder.

“... everything, for now. The Caucus will be meeting for the next two days. Spend the time with Luke. What happened happened long ago. Both of you have changed.”

He squeezed my shoulder.

“We’ll talk again.”

Chapter 33

SIT TIBI TERRA LEVIS

SPEND THE TIME *with Luke.*

As if it were that easy. Tell me Luke's a psychopath, then send us off to play. Tell me I'm one half of something aberrant, then stick us both together—after telling me a tale that begged a thousand questions. Was Luke supposed to answer them? Luke, whom Garrett hadn't trusted? Luke, too dangerous to be let loose upon the world? Luke, the candle to my moth?

I'd gone back to my room instead and stretched out on the bed. The pretty sage-and-white décor, homey when the sun streamed in, felt drab and claustrophobic. The ceiling fixture's tulip shades looked cloudy more than frosted. The bronze arms needed polishing.

The morning I arrived, the view outside my window had been green and gold and glittering with dew. It was less as if I'd woken in a dream than that a dream had woken round me. For a second, just before the knock that turned out to be Marion, the mystery of me since seventeen had broken free as magic. But Dr. Colton's dry summation of the six years I'd spent here had stolen every dram of wonder. Jello concentrate without the water? More like marvel rendered into dust.

Dr. Colton wanted me informed, not *au courant*. Along with Mr. Shen, he'd been drawing charcoal outlines, just enough for me

to know about—not understand—his reasons for reversing a decision made in fear and never meant to be undone. That the Caucus needed me and Luke together as we used to be was obvious. But trying to figure out what for was pointless. Dr. Colton would dole out whatever else I needed when he thought I needed it.

The problem was, his idea of need and mine were manifestly different. Hearing about memories I ought to have was miles from reliving them. You've changed, he said. But how? What sort of person had I been? Would I recognize myself? Would I even *like* myself? Or would I find the me I'd built with half the pieces missing couldn't stand my former self at all? As Dr. Colton told it, I'd been weak, a follower. What did that say about me now?

I tried to muster anger—at Dr. Colton's wilfully unsatisfying brevity, at Marion for keeping secrets, at myself for things I'd only heard I'd done. I couldn't. Crammed with information, all I felt was empty.



I went downstairs an hour before supper to tell Cook I'd be eating in my room. She was at the table with a colander, shelling peas and humming to herself.

"Not feeling sociable?" she enquired sympathetically.

"Not tonight."

"Is everything all right? You look a little pale."

"Must be the weather. Grey's not my colour."

She stopped what she was doing.

"Dr. C told you, didn't he? About the accident."

"Is that the word you use? He made it sound like murder."

She *tsk*-ed, then shelled the last few peas.

"He told me you weren't here," I said.

"I wasn't. I got back to find you gone, and Luke. . ."

She stood up with the colander and took it to the sink.

"Luke?" I prompted when she'd rinsed the peas and tipped them in a waiting pot.

“What else could they do?” she said, towelling her hands. “They didn’t really have a choice. He’d have run away. The two of you had never been apart. He raged for weeks. They had to keep him drugged. Poor thing, locked up in his room like that.”

“Locked up?” Dr. Colton’s résumé hadn’t gone that far.

“They couldn’t very well just go to the police, now could they? Or call up Child Services. It took some time to figure out a workable arrangement. In the end, they joined some rooms in the extension at the back so he’d have proper quarters. They’re Mr. Shen’s now when he’s visiting.”

“*Locked quarters?*” I repeated.

“Well, yes,” she said uncomfortably. “He was under supervision.”

“For how long?”

“Until he understood. Afterwards they set it up so he could move about as freely as he wanted. Didn’t Dr. Colton say?”

“No. I get the feeling he wants Luke to flesh things out. His story ended with me riding off into the sunset in a blaze of shame.”

She sat down next to me and took my hand.

“That’s very brave of you, making light of something so distressing. In your place I’d be worried sick that every question’s answer would be more disturbing than the one before. Dr. Colton said that when he got you to this point, we weren’t to hold things back. Just the same, it probably is best if you get Luke’s side of things from Luke.” She gave my hand a squeeze. “Now, if you don’t want company, you better scoot upstairs. I’ve co-opted Dom to help me peel potatoes. She’ll be here any minute.”

Halfway up I heard her at the bottom the steps. I turned around to see her foreshortened to the size of Mrs. Peppercot.

“Don’t get me wrong, David. I’m a sentimental, not a fool. I adored you both, but what you did, what you might have done—well, let’s say I shared the Caucus’s concerns. But I put the blame on them as much as you. Letting you run around like little princes, training you in gifts they hardly understood themselves, never bothering to teach you about consequences. And them, a bunch of

shrinks.”

Colour rose into her cheeks.

“Thanks, Cook.”

The kitchen door-spring screeched.

“Skedaddle,” she said. “I’ll bring your supper around seven.”



I spent the evening torn. Not actively, as in a tug-o-war, more like contemplating slips of paper torn from the same sheet and thumb-tacked to the corkboard of my brain.

This one up top? Get the fuck away from here.

That one? Unload on Kirin.

Over here? Beard Dr. Colton, cause a scene, demand a better truth, if truth it was, than carefully-constructed digests.

Down there, niggling at my conscience? Email Byron and come clean.

And that one in the centre, larger than the rest? Luke—the holder of my past, murmurer of comfort, delinquent puppet-master.

A storm blew up around eleven, starting with a lightning crack so close my arm hairs prickled. The window fulminated like a dance-floor strobe and thunder peeled in waves. Even through the mattress I could feel the bedframe shake.

In time the thunder dwindled to low rumours and the pelting rain abated to a soft drip from the eaves. I fell asleep with moonlight breaking on the coverlet.



To: david@ase.ca

From: sleemans@pet.csis-scrs.gc.ca

Subject: Not enough

David --

The IP address and the plate were useless. So was your Rockwellian description of the farm.

> anywhere in rural Canada except the Rockies or the
> prairies

You've got your car. Supposedly you're free to leave. Subira wonders why you don't just drive around.

Myself, I'm still suspicious. I wouldn't recommend it. Not yet anyway.

A house that size with all those people--someone's got to pay the bills. Check garbage pails for envelopes. Have a look around the barn. You never know what you might find.

I'm guessing there's no rural address signpost by the road, but keep your eyes peeled for a string of digits written near a telephone. 911 is linked to rural addressing.

> First names only seems to be the rule

The list you sent sounds cosmopolitan. Anything to that? Are any of these people foreign nationals? If so we need to know, and fast. Other agencies may have to be informed.

Find out everything you can about this Dr. Colton. You've talked to him. Did he say anything--anything at all--to help establish his identity? You're good at clues. He can't be totally opaque to someone in your line of work. A physical description might be useful.

Push buttons if you can. Ask about the drowned and missing psychics (profiles attached). These people know about your working for us. They won't wonder where you got the names.

> gathering is taking place, which seems to coincide
> with my arrival.

The group is called the Caucus. A gathering is taking place. Conclusion: they're debating something. What?

The name is troubling. A caucus is a group within

a polity whose goal is putting forth its own agenda. What are they a caucus of? Are we dealing with a faction? What's larger group's agenda? The questions aren't rhetorical.

Your past, to put it mildly, is hazy. Subira fields the theory that you have some former tie--possibly without your knowing. That's too *Manchurian Candidate* for my taste, but there has to be some reason for their interest in you. Do everything you can to find out what. Use those skills you pointedly displayed when we first met.

--

JB

To: sleemans@pet.csis-scrs.gc.ca

From: david@ase.ca

Subject: Re: Not enough

Josh --

> Subira fields the theory that you have some former
> tie

She may be right.

At one point in my life (late teens), I suffered a significant memory loss. I haven't mentioned it till now because it didn't seem germane. My "hazy past" was none of your concern.

I tell you now because this Dr. Colton claims to know me, as do several others. They maintain this farm--*which I do not recognize*--is where I spent a portion of the years I can't remember. More importantly, they claim they have the power to restore my memories.

I have reason to believe they may be telling me the truth about my having lived here. As for getting back my memories, I've learned the Caucus formed around a nucleus of paranormally-obsessed psychiatrists. No guarantees, but if they can in fact uncover what I lost, the information could prove gold.

Consequently I'm unwilling to do anything that might arouse suspicion--snooping, pushing buttons, driving around, whatever. The Caucus will be meeting for the next two days. I'm being passed off to a farmhand, who's supposed to keep me company. Afterwards, Dr. Colton says he "wants to talk".

The man himself's Caucasian, in his nineties, 170 centimetres, slender, white hair, hazel eyes, no distinguishing features.

As for foreign nationals, none that I'm aware of.

--

DA

I read over what I'd written.

Then again.

And one more time, in case.

Was every sentence factual, no matter how misleading? Insurance for the lawyers, Ferko would have called it. Required to defend myself, I didn't want to have to say I'd lied. But after Dr. Colton's grainy video, I didn't want Intelligence—Canadian, American, or Patagonian—to have the means to track the Caucus either.

Not yet, anyway.

My eyes began to blur. Was Luke up yet? Would he make breakfast for himself or wander over to the house?

The Caucus will be meeting for the next two days. Two unbroken days with Luke. Why was I dithering?

I shook my head and sent the message off.

—◆—

The horizon is a strip of orange shading up to greenish-yellow, powder blue, and closer to the zenith, indigo. The air is sweet with odours loosened by the rain. The bottoms of my jeans are soaking by the time I mount Luke's porch and knock.

"Hey, there, Jimmy-Dean."

A loopy smile spreads across his face. He's dressed in jeans and

nothing else. His hair is flattened on the left side, tousled on the right. He opens up and stands aside. A rich aroma hits me.

"Scrambled eggs with pork and beans, toast and wild grape jelly. The jelly's courtesy of Cook. I pick the grapes."

He lets me in and sits me down and feeds me till I'm stuffed. Afterwards he sends me to the porch with coffee. I close my eyes and let the sun's warmth penetrate my face.

The door snaps open. Luke comes up and stands beside me.

"Still do the Sun Salute?" he asks.

"I always wondered how I knew it."

"Part of John's routine."

"Yeah. I know. He told me."

"Bit late for it now." He pats his belly, covered by a workshirt. Moisture films the patched grey bucket seats. He wipes them with his forearm and sits down in what is obviously his.

"Jimmy-Dean," he says again, holding up his mug.

We clink. Coffee sloshes on the porch. He rubs it with his toe.

"Did you ever think . . . ?" he starts, then stops himself.

"That we'd be sitting here like this? How could I?"

"Guess not, eh?"

He sips his coffee, blows on it, and sips some more. It's not as good as what I drink at home, nor as good as Cook's. But here, with Luke, it tastes just fine.

"Colton tell you everything?" he asks.

"I'd hardly call it everything, but yeah."

"He said he would. Before the Caucus started meeting."

"That how you knew I'd come a-knocking?"

"Yepper."

He's sure of everything to do with me, like Dr. Colton. But where Dr. Colton lords it, Luke sits on it quietly.

"How does he do that, anyway?" I ask.

"How does who do what?"

"Dr. Colton. Everything he says comes out so perfectly. The way he talks, it's like he's reading from a book."

"Cold," Luke says. "No feelings."

"You think?"

"You don't?"

"Just a sense I get."

"From reading him?"

"No, not that. I couldn't, anyway. He's hidden—'camouflaged', whatever—like everybody else. I still don't get quite how that works."

"You're doing it yourself twenty-four/seven."

"That's what Mr. Shen said. Some sort of reflex."

"In your case, more like auto-pilot. They took away the over-ride. Normally you should be able to control it. Let your guard down, put it up."

"You're hidden, too."

He nods.

"Can you control it?"

"Mm-hm."

"Dr. Colton told me you're on drugs that cripple your abilities."

"Anyone can learn to misdirect an empath. Like Marion or Cook. It isn't easy but it doesn't take a psychic."

The porch is half in sunlight now. The air is close. It's going to be a scorcher.

"How do they make you take them, anyway? The drugs, I mean."

"Injections once a month. Depot dosaging, same as what they do with schizophrenics who forget their meds."

"And you just go along?"

"At least I've always known what choices I don't have. And I've got a little secret." He leans across the gap between our seats and whispers in my ear. "Colton skipped my dose this month."

His breath sends gooseflesh down my spine.

"He did?" My voice is hoarse.

Luke sits back. "They want us as we were."

I clear my throat. "I figured. Why?"

"To deal with a problem."

“Kirin told me they uncovered something in her mind. Does it have to do with her?”

“Nope.”

“What, then?”

He drains his mug and stands. “Refill?”

Just like Dr. Colton.

“Why won’t you tell me, Luke?”

He pulls the screen door open. “Doctor’s orders.”

I swivel round.

“Do you always do what Dr. Colton says?”

His face grows still, his eyes as hard as north Atlantic ice. He schools himself, relaxes.

“For this—,” the two of us together on his porch, “—anything he asks.”

He goes inside and comes back empty-handed. It’s too hot now for coffee. He stands as I did, taking in the sun.

“How long till the drugs wear off?”

“Could be anytime.”

“How will you know?”

“I’ll try imprinting Cook to make her dance buck naked.”

“No, seriously.”

He kneels in front of me, inclines his head and pulls me forward so our foreheads butt.

“Telepathy?” I stutter.

“Ooo-aaah,” he intones, then grins and lets me go.

He moves over to his seat, strips off his shirt and lays it on the back. His torso’s lean, the musculature clear. A thin scar mars the tawny skin beneath his collarbone. Blond hairs dust the cleft between his pectorals.

“What was it like?” I ask. “Telepathy?”

“Badass fucking awesome,” he replies, no hesitation.

“Something Dr. Colton said confuses me. The way he tells it, our telepathy developed after we came here. But in the memories I have, the ones where you’re invisible, I hear you speak. Like whispers. Thoughts.”

“That’s because of how they made you reconfigure things inside your head. Colton told you right—the telepathy came later. You could say we grew into it.”

“I can’t imagine.”

“You won’t have to, soon.”

Anticipation of it makes him squirm. He’s like a little kid.

“Dr. Colton says we tried to hide it.”

He hears the question in my voice. “What kind of picture did he paint of life back then?”

“He made it sound like paradise. Marion did, too.”

“More like Eden with no privacy. He wanted to know everything about us, everything we did. Like God. We had to let him read us any time he asked. He told us it was for his research.”

“You think there was more?”

“He would have checked the bedsheets if he could. Probably did.”

“Did we have other secrets?”

He daydreams for a moment. The corners of his mouth go up. His eyes go far away.

“What?”

He reaches over lazily and rubs my arm. It’s all the answer that I’m going to get.

For now.



He doesn’t ask me about me. He doesn’t wonder if I’ve changed. He doesn’t question if I want to be with him. For Luke, our fifteen years apart, now over, never were.

Time expands, contracts.

He tells me about Mr. Shen—our training sessions, how he made us work, how light his hand at discipline. The sun stands still, beating at an angle on the porch.

“John knows only one morality,” Luke tells me. “He’s inquisitive. Curious as hell. Wouldn’t hurt a fly, but if you pulled the

wings off one he'd be the first to stick them on a slide."

Then he reminisces—actively, for me—about the Farm, the fields, the places where we played. Suddenly it's noon, the porch in shade, the sun above the overhang. The view across the cornfield is so bright we have to squint.

"Day like this, we should be in the woods," Luke says.

He gets two beers, hops off the porch and gestures me to follow.

We cross his patch of lawn and head toward the woodlot. The dirt track by the fence is dry. The beers are gone before we get halfway.

Luke sets the empties up on posts, walks ten meters, grabs a clod of earth and chucks it. One can topples over. I find a rock and aim. Can two disappears.

"Get 'em later," Luke says, brushing off his hands.

The corn looks taller than it did when Dr. Colton talked me round the field. Luke lifts his arm and trails it across the tassels.

When we reach the woods the scent of brush and raspberries is like a solid wall.

"Careful," he instructs, angling through thorny canes. "We had a dry June last year so I didn't cut them back."

Inside, the odours change to earth, damp bark and moss. The green shade lifts the noon heat off my shoulders. Everything's bright shadow till my eyes adjust.

Luke leans back against a trunk.

"We used to come in here to get away," he says.

"I know."

He looks surprised.

"Dr. Colton mentioned it."

Surprise gives way to disappointment. I'm not somehow remembering, and Dr. Colton's telling me has sullied a fine memory.

He stoops to pick a flower—tiny, pink, with leaves like curled parsley. He crushes it and sniffs.

"Herb Robert," he says idly; then, pointing: "Celandine—," like

skulking buttercups, “—and over there, twinflowers. Up close they smell like Cook’s perfume, the one she always wore when she got dolled up in her pearls.”

I’ve been listening for something—anything—to indicate unhappiness, resentment, discontent. So far, I haven’t heard it.

“How do they keep you here?”

He rubs the scar beneath his collarbone.

“An implant. A high-tech deadman’s switch. As long as there’s a signal from the home base nothing happens. If the signal weakens past a certain point, the implant sends a beacon and I get pumped with sedatives. Knocks me out in nothing flat. Colton keeps the home base under lock and key.”

“What’s the signal’s range?”

“Enough to let me move around the Farm.”

“The other day, Cook said you’d gone somewhere. Off on farm business.”

“Oh, I can travel just so long as there’s a minder and a chaperon along. The minder keeps the home base—it’s compact—and stays some ways away. The chaperon sticks to me. If I approach the minder minus chaperon, the minder throws the switch.”

“Have you ever tried?”

His mouth twists crookedly.

“Woke up with a pounding head and puked my guts for hours.”

He pushes off the trunk and dusts the loose bark from his back.

“You’ve been captive here for fifteen years?”

A squirrel natters overhead. Luke looks up with eyes as emerald as the backlit leaves.

“Does this look like a jail to you?”



There’s no path that I can see but Luke has said Come on, I wanna show you something and set off.

The woodlot’s different from the forest at Dawe’s Lake. The

canopy admits less light. The floor is littered with decaying leaves instead of sere, brown needles. The silence there was loud with open spaces. Here it's muffled, private.

We're not penetrating deep, rather sticking to the northern edge. Luke makes his way with purpose, pointing out a rotting tree fort, bug-infested hollow logs, blasted stumps with shelves of orange fungus.

The trees begin to thin. Through the trunks I see another cornfield and a slip of the horizon. We're near the eastern border. Waxy plants with frothy blooms roll out a mat of foam. A limestone tablet rises in the middle.

Luke comes to a halt and waits till I catch up.

"Garrett Finnestad."

He nods toward the headstone. The carving's uneroded: name and date in chiselled caps, epitaph beneath.

A HAND THAT CAN BE CLASPED NO MORE

SIT TIBI TERRA LEVIS

"Tennyson," Luke says. "The first line, anyway."

"From In Memoriam, A.H."

"Marion made us read it."

"Guess I read it all again."

"You would."

"How was I supposed to know?"

"The Latin says: 'Light lie the earth upon you.'"

"I know. The inscription found on Roman graves."

"You did keep up your reading."

Enough to realize the hand that could be clasped no more was male and that Roman culture owed a lot to ancient Greece.

"Dr. Colton didn't mention he and Garrett had been more than friends."

"I'm not surprised."

"He wanted you to show me."

"That'd be my guess."

I step up to the marker. "We killed Dr. Colton's lover?"

"A tractor killed him. It was an accident."

"Like Tom Bennett in the fire?"

A muscle twitches in his jaw. "Does it bother you he died?"

"He was a bastard. I remember that."

I crouch and trace the letters with my fingertips.

"What was your problem with him, anyway?"

"Finnestad? He didn't like us spending so much time together.

Claimed we were too close. It wasn't natural."

"Dr. Colton says you didn't trust him."

"The guy was always trying to get you by yourself."

"Dr. Colton said we got along."

"You were a chameleon."

"I didn't trust him either?"

"A blind man could have seen you made him itchy."

"Did Dr. Colton know?"

"I don't think he wanted to. You used to say he had the hots for you himself."

"Sounds like teenage swaggering."

"Nah, you read it from the horse's mouth."

"How, if he was hidden?"

"He didn't realise how good you were."

"Something else we kept from him? Like our telepathy?"

Luke grins.

I stand and shake a kink out of my leg. "Was it only me that Garrett had an interest in?"

"You were everybody's darling. Finnestad included."

He starts chuckling.

"What?"

"I just realized. Some things never change. You always called him Garrett. I always called him Finnestad. To his face, of course, it was always 'Sir'."

"Was there some sort of rivalry between us? 'Everybody's darling.' That's pretty strong."

"Rivalry? Nah. Not unless you mean like this."

He hooks his foot behind my legs and shoves me hard. I try to

keep my balance but surprise is on his side. He presses his advantage, dropping as I fall and pinning me. I grab his hands to keep them from my shoulders, but he leans with all his weight. I raise a leg and jam a sneaker in his ribs. He tumbles and we start to roll. I try to get on top, but overshoot and wind up eating dirt.

He scrambles up and straddles me.

“Uncle?” he demands.

“Never.”

He drops down on my back and stretches out on top of me.

“Sure?”

There’s no wriggling away. He’s won.

“Next time, Luke.”

“As if.” He struggles up and offers me a hand. “That’s what you always used to say.”

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."

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.

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 patriotic. “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.”

Chapter 37

THE NECTAR OF FAMILIARITY

THE HOUSE ACROSS from St. Paul's Anglican had sprouted a For Sale sign. The tattered net was gone, its poles consigned to discards in the drive—stereo equipment, broken chairs, a headboard minus frame. The grasses of the bottomland had been mowed down. The unshorn creek banks raised a sort of Mohawk through the stubble. Nothing moved except the cars on Hwy. 6. Through the scruffy pines surrounding the abandoned property, chicory and Queen Anne's lace stood utterly becalmed.

Bombshell dropped, Dr. Colton had wrapped up summarily. Normally, he stayed behind his desk when we were done. This time he'd decided to escort me to the door, allowing him to slip in chatily that Luke had gone to Hamilton with Mr. Shen. Ferrying a member to the VIA station.

Pieces being moved around the board again.

Out loud, I'd wondered who'd gone with them. Luke's mobility depended on a two-man escort.

Marion.

Which left Cook or Kirin to unload on—not the deepest in his counsels.

The kitchen had been empty when I'd gone to look for Cook, though something rich and garlicky was roasting in the oven. I'd gone out on the stoop to check for Kirin's Honda, but it wasn't

there. I'd spotted Cook, however, at the far end of her garden hacking at a stalk of Brussels sprouts. Watching her, I'd idly started worrying my keys. I'd utterly forgotten that I'd jammed them in my pocket after Marion had told me I was free to leave.

It was almost disappointing when the Jaguar purred to life. How much simpler if it hadn't, if all I'd heard was chugging or the stomach-sinking silence of ignitions wires cut. I'd have had the righteous fuel then to storm inside, burst in on Dr. Colton, level accusations

...

...and what? Stomp off in a huff? Thumb a ride north to Toronto? Make myself forget the Farm, the Caucus, Luke? Hell, I'd done it once before. How hard could it be?

But the engine had rolled over. No one had been lying. I could have left the first day if I'd wanted to.

The western sun was pouring through the windshield. In contravention of good eco-sense I turned the motor on and let the AC run. Across the road, the front door opened and a stick-thin woman in a tank-top dragged a faded plastic Santa down the stoop. She stopped to catch her breath and didn't seem to notice me—the gleaming silver Jaguar in a rural church's parking lot. Perhaps she'd gotten used to it.

I sank down in the seat and closed my eyes.

Of course the promise to restore my memories came at a price. Too much had gone into taking them away for the undoing to be otherwise. But killing? For a group complicit in the dropping of me, homeless, in Toronto fifteen years ago? A confrerie about to disband anyway? People I felt absolutely no commitment to?

Not true. There's one.

The rush of earlier, beside the pond with Luke, swept over me. If not for that, I'd be inclined to write off Dr. Colton as a nut. Psychics at Fort Meade? MKULTRA? 2561-G? BRAZIER? Grist for Hollywood, chocolate for the paranoid. But Luke—the very fact of him, his memory of years I hadn't lost, the stirrings of telepathy between us—washed away the scepticism.

Brothers.

Twins.

Extraordinary twins.

Empath and transmitter.

Telepaths.

Dr. Colton's fears about us had been anything but baseless. Where I'd gone with Luke was like a meltdown in a nuclear reactor. Left unchecked, the scalding *just because we can* of our telepathy would vaporise the moral shells containing it. Yet here he was, tickling the tail of the dragon, hoping that it wouldn't turn and grill him to a cinder.

He clearly knew the beast. "I can't help but notice, David," he'd opined instead of laying out precisely what he meant by *point the gun*, "you're more intrigued by 'how' than troubled by the notion."

Accusation? Or nasty little dig? Whichever, he'd declined to tell me more.

"We'll meet again," he'd finished up. "You, me, John and Luke. You can give us your decision then."

Yeah, right. Decisions mean you have a choice.

Say I went back home—slipped the car in gear and headed north toward Toronto. All other things aside, I'd have to contact Byron and MacKenzie. They weren't about to drop Cassandra Island and the Caucus just because I'd ceased communication. *Oops, sorry, false alarm* wasn't going to wash. Partial truths weren't going to cut it either.

Since arriving at the Farm, I'd been puzzled by the cavalier reaction to my sending CSIS info from Cassandra Island. I'd been thinking maybe it was bluster, and that Dr. Colton cared a whole lot more than he was letting on. It wasn't that. He'd merely played the CSIS angle perfectly. By letting me provide them with enough to pique their interest, he'd ensured that now, no matter what, I'd have to tell them everything or shun them like the plague. And not just now. Forever. In short, he'd cleverly contrived things so I'd have to throw my lot in with the Caucus, since exposing them put me at risk from BRAZIER, too. As he'd pointed out, it wouldn't take too long for CSIS' interest in a bunch of psychics to go down the

pipeline to the States.

Across the way, the skinny woman was unhooking blinds and curtains. The rooms behind the windows had a pre-abandoned look, with boxes stacked against the walls like monuments to transience.

I'd started over once before with just a couple thousand bucks. How hard could it be with millions? For sure, Byron and MacKenzie would devote themselves to finding me. But for how long? I wasn't some rogue agent with state secrets up for grabs. Their bean counters would never allocate more funds than I could match; I'd always have the monetary upper hand. And what really waited for me in Toronto? A clever, over-decorated flat in Little Italy? A regulated life distracting me from mysteries now solved? I'd touched magic at the Farm. There'd be no going back.

I could get a new identity. Move somewhere else in Canada. Change countries altogether. Acquire a South Seas Island if I wanted. Surely vanishing without a trace was nowhere near as tough as fiction made it out to be. I didn't have a clue how it was done, but I could always pay someone who did. Too bad the accidental killing of their customer had forced me to break ties with Scott and Daryl years ago. They'd have been the ones to know a guy who had a friend who knew somebody...

Scott and Daryl... the X-Men... Cowboy... Raymond... Ironic to be sitting here and thinking of Toronto. The nectar of familiarity had lost its sweet—the sloping lawn, the missing house, the pond I couldn't see whose outlet carved a channel to the creek. Every memory that mattered had included an imaginary friend. Joy of place had never really been a part of it, that sense of *I own this* that gilds nostalgia when revisiting the sites of childhood. I'd come for Luke, always Luke—the hollow I'd been trying to fill and never quite succeeded.

The air conditioning was getting cold. I straightened up and turned it off. Across the way, a muddy pickup slowed and parked beside the lane. A burly teen descended and attacked the junkpile, stomping Santa, smashing chairs and chucking everything in back.

Unlike the woman in the house, he stopped and stared. A lot.
I spun the wheels for him turning south on Hwy. 6.



It was close to dinnertime when I got back. Luke had come and gone again—more Caucus members leaving. I'd scarcely been aware of them except at meals yet I could feel their dwindling numbers like a slow leak in a tire.

Supper was moussaka. Cook's face crumpled when I told her I was going to pass.

"If you want to be alone, I can bring it to your room," she offered.

I pecked her on the cheek.

"Thanks, but no. I need a change of scenery."

I drove to Lady Jo's and gorged myself on diner food with all the sides. Not quite Cook's moussaka but exactly what I needed. A journey of a thousand miles may start with the first step, but comfort food provides the wherewithal to take it. I finished off with cherry pie and two scoops of the best ice cream I'd ever tasted.

"From Hewitt's, down in Hagersville," the waitress told me.

A visit to the hair salon had tightened up her cap of steel-grey curls. I wondered if she'd worn her hair that way when Luke and I came here with Dr. Colton. She'd assumed he was our granddad. Because he looked the part, or based on how we interacted? If the latter, what had she observed? Spare the rod and spoil the child discipline? Affectionate, hair-tousling indulgence?

Who—*what?*—had Dr. Colton been to me and Luke back then?

The man himself out on the veranda when I turned off Nebo Road. Legs crossed in a wicker chair, he looked smaller—frailer—than he did behind his desk. Surprised, I parked behind the house and walked around. He greeted me politely and invited me to sit. I apologized and said I had some business to attend to. He nodded, showing no surprise.

Then, without my asking, he offered me his phone upstairs, "...

since there are no others in the house.”

One step ahead, as always.



It's nice to know that if you pay your broker well enough, you can call him any time and have your holdings liquidated, all of them, and moved offshore. Just like in the movies.

And it's reassuring to discover that for double his commission, he'll arrange to get your money and convey it to you later—even if the means aren't strictly licit.

But what's really comforting is finding out that if you triple the amount of the already doubled figure, and delicately hint you're in the market for a new identity, he'll concede—no promises—perhaps he does know someone with a friend who knows a guy...

Who needs the Scotts and Daryls of this world when all you have to do is call your broker?

I located Dr. Colton afterwards and thanked him ever-so-politely for the phone. There was still no sign of Luke and Marion and Mr. Shen. With nothing else to do, I gravitated to the library. Books and me and homelessness appeared to be ingrained.

By the standards of my former Yonge Street haven, this one wouldn't cut it as a reading room. But something about shelves of books that go up to the ceiling fools the eye. The pregnant weight of hidden words makes everything look lofty, particularly when you sit cross-legged on the floor and scan the bottom rows.

It seemed odd the Caucus hadn't chucked my stash of science-fiction. The desquamating spines looked out of place. But someone had decided they should stay. The someone who had left my taste for fantasy intact? It couldn't be coincidence I'd re-read nearly all of them: Zelazny, *Eye of Cat*; Henderson, *The People*; Asimov, *Foundation*; Vinge, *Psion/Catspaw*. I wondered how my younger self had felt about the heroes, psychic loners trying to adapt or angrily rejecting their humanity. The telepath. The empath. The transmitter, like the Mule in Asimov's *Foundation*.

To which, had I been reading Le Carré back then, I could have added now the sleeper, the defector.

Or the guy who just stopped emailing.

It was tempting to send Byron one last missive:

“The group you seek presents no threat to national security. It is they who are at risk, from military and intelligence communities both south and, in all likelihood, north of the 49th. If you want to find the psychics who went missing, try your brethren in the States, c/o BRAZIER, Fort Meade, Maryland. As for the suicides, no one ordered anyone to drown themselves. There is no cult, no Jim Jones avatar. And Subira’s guess was right: I am a member of the Caucus. As such, I can no longer in good conscience send intelligence.”

Too bad I couldn’t do it. It was tantamount to painting AWOL! on my forehead.

I pulled John Wyndham from the shelves—*The Chrysalids*—but by page five I hadn’t registered a single word. My thoughts were still on Byron. In a quirky kind of way, it felt wrong to leave him hanging. He was a decent sort of guy. He might even understand my backing out. His boss, though—she’d never let a rung in her ambition’s ladder slip away so easily. Better to say nothing and just monitor my inbox. One of them was bound to get in touch.

Satisfied, I took another stab at Wyndham.

Jimmy-Dean.

I looked up. There was no one in the room.

Luke?

Not so much his name as the idea of his name.

Hey, there, buddy.

Not so much a greeting as the feel of a greeting.

What’s up?/Where are you?

No sending or receiving. Just thoughts, like prayers with someone answering.

Whitechurch, coming up to Nebo. Be home soon.

Night-road, headlights, fields speeding by. An overlay of distance, time, direction. No words, and yet remarkably precise.

Want me to come over to the cabin?

Kinda tired.

Gritty eyes, things glazing over.

Yeah, me too.

Colton wants to see us in the morning.

Two lines at right angles, a dry-as-dust hypotenuse.

Oh?

You'll need to be awake for that.

Tomorrow, then/Sleep well/Sweet dreams/G'night.

A mutual receding, sinking down, becoming still.

My geek-for-hire once waxed eloquent about what she called “daemons” on my Linux server—little programs lurking round in memory, sleeping till some higher process quickens them. Invoked, they do whatever magic they were conjured for, then sink back to the netherworld and wait again.

A beam of light swept round the room and tires scrunched outside.

Telepathy with Luke. My daemon process.

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."

Chapter 39

DREAMS OF FLYING

I FORGOT TO pull the curtains when I went to bed, and woke up to a velvet sky just starting to go navy. I used to see that colour, sometimes, waking up on parkland grass my first year in Toronto. Listening to bird calls and the swell of distant traffic, I'd forget my situation and just *know*. Know that there were twenties in my wallet. Know that no essentials needed stealing. Know my stomach would be filled three times that day. It wasn't that the questions of survival had been answered, or the mystery resolved. Rather it was knowing, for a while, that I could rest.

Sometime in the night, or perhaps the day before, a page had turned. The Caucus had dispersed. The Farm was back to normal: Dr. Colton, Mr. Shen and Cook. A few visitors—Marion, and Kirin's little household.

Luke, whom I'd left nodding off by firelight, had mentioned something about Hamilton that afternoon, but planned to spend the morning working on the truck.

Cook was up and at it when I got down to the kitchen. Her porridge pot was smaller but her energy the same. I gave her a big hug and let her feed me like a king. I wondered why Luke seldom took advantage of her breakfasts. Maybe the attention got to be too much.

My broker was to keep me posted on his progress via email at a

throwaway account. I checked it after breakfast, figuring if Dr. Colton was prepared to let me use the phone I didn't have to fret so much about the router. There were no messages, other than that tired plea from a Nigerian official wanting access to my bank account to hide his fortune from the despot who'd already killed his family.

I checked my server in Toronto, too, to see if Byron had sent anything.

He hadn't.

Luke was up. I heard the truck turn over and the tires as he moved it to the barn. Content with just a trace of where he was—of *that* he was—I stretched out on the bed and finished off *The Chrysalids*, then showered and shaved and went outside to join him.



Mr. Shen came out while Luke was underneath the truck. It had taken less than thirty seconds to establish I knew nothing about disks or shoes or callipers, which left me fetching tools while he did something to the brakes.

"Boys," said Mr. Shen by way of greeting, "how's work progressing?"

Luke drew the dolly forward with his heels. His face was smudged, his T-shirt flecked with rust.

"Pretty good. After this, it's change the oil and we're done."

"Excellent. Ready for this afternoon, then?"

"No problem."

"In which case, may I steal your helper for a minute?"

"Sure, if he'll find me an extension for the socket wrench. Blue toolbox, top tray."

I pawed through greasy tools. "Long or short?"

He craned his neck under the chassis. "Better make it both."

"I don't know if Luke told you," Mr. Shen began outside, squinting in the brilliant sun, "we're going into town this afternoon."

"We' as in . . . ?"

“Luke and Roy and I. For a medical appointment.” He smiled good-naturedly. “Luke needs his tune-ups, too.”

“Must be interesting, explaining to his doctor what the implant in his shoulder’s for.”

“No need. She put it there.”

“A Caucus member?”

“Let’s just say, a friend.”

“Like Marion?”

“Not exactly. She spent some time here when the Farm was home to CISAP. But that isn’t what I want to talk to you about. When we get home, you and I are going on little trip. Not far. Just down to Port Dover. You might want to pack some things. We’ll be spending a few days.”

“Doing what?”

“Helping you to be all you can be,” he said with heavy boot-camp irony.

“You mean starting to re-learn things? Like Dr. Colton said? How did he put it—reawaken what I used to know about my gift?”

“More like teaching you to shake old habits.”

“Still with the riddles, eh?”

“It’s been said there’s no such thing as magic, just technology we don’t yet understand. Riddles are like that, except it’s logic, not technology, escaping us. At any rate, Robert and I feel you should be off the Farm for this.”

“Away from Luke.”

“Away from all distraction. And Luke, whatever else, has farm work to attend to. What I’m thinking is, when we return from Hamilton, you and I can drive to Caledonia, eat footlongs by the river, then head down to Port Dover. I’ve booked us rooms at a hotel. Roy will join us in the morning.”

“Roy? I was under the impression he was going to be the guinea pig for me *and* Luke.”

“And so he will, but his involvement starts with you alone.”

“Doing what, exactly?”

He gave my arm a pat.

“You’ll see.”



Footlongs by the Grand with Mr. Shen was like a trip down memory lane, even with my slice of personal nostalgia removed.

We got them from a stand called the Oasis on the south side of the river. The structure has eight sides, approximately one for every decade it’s been open. It was built to feed the workers raising Caledonia’s nine-span concrete bridge and hasn’t missed a summer’s operation since.

With soda-fountain Coke and French’s mustard happily cohabiting my tastebuds, I took Mr. Shen’s advice and turned off Hwy. 6 for a detour through tobacco country. Sweeping roads and sandy shoulders shimmered in a setting sun that washed the elephant-eared crops with brass.

We rejoined the highway near Port Dover, slowing to a crawl and stopping for the lift bridge while a sailboat glided through on water stained the colour of the sunset. The pier beyond, in silhouette, seethed with evening strollers. The lighthouse at the end, a squat square pyramid, wavered like a heat mirage.

Past the bridge, Main Street was a free-for-all of jaywalkers and families with strollers.

“You call this away from all distractions?”

Mr. Shen shrugged.

“I like to be near water. The Farm is peaceful but I feel landlocked if I stay too long. Perhaps tomorrow things won’t look so crowded.”

I wasn’t optimistic when I saw *No Vacancies* in stuttering green neon on the sign outside the ’50s-style beach hotel where Mr. Shen had rented rooms. In addition to prevoyance, though, he must have had some special kind of weather sense. Next morning when I peered outside through blinds stained beige with decades’ worth of guilt-free cigarettes, the sky had turned soft grey, the colour of the fog that clings to snowbanks in the spring. The surface of the lake,

undulating slowly, had the matted sheen of brushed aluminum. The crestless swells that reached the shore slid round the legs of sandpipers who looked more lost than hungry. Not a day for sunbathing, or even eating French fries from the Arbor—kin to the Oasis—on the pier.

Mr. Shen had slipped a note under my door:

*Lazybones. Gone out for a walk. Meet me
after breakfast on the pier. JWS.*

Breakfast was buffet, in a dining room that needed sun to make the oilskin tablecloths and knotty pine look cottage-y. The walls were lined with photographs that told the story of the art itself from sepia through tinted black-and-white to saturated Ektachrome.

I checked the beach for Mr. Shen, then set off for the pier. The morning air was damp, but neither warm nor cold. I stopped to run my fingers through the sand. It, too, felt oddly neutral.

The pier was empty but for one bench near the lighthouse. As I approached, I saw it wasn't Mr. Shen, but Roy Calhoun. He looked vulnerable all by himself, not the macho prick who'd nearly crushed my fingers when I met him at Cassandra Island.

He watched me coming up. I had the feeling he was missing Kirin, even though the Farm was less than one hour's drive away. It struck me as unfair, the role he'd had to play to make her falling-for-the-wrong-guy sham believable.

"David."

The greeting came out sheepishly, as if his thoughts were running in the same direction and he wanted to apologize.

"Hey, Roy. Where's Mr. Shen?"

"Not here yet."

"He said to meet him after breakfast."

"Yours or his?"

"Mine, I guess."

He slid over to make room.

At a loss for words, both of us pretended interest in a motor

boat a hundred metres out. It took forever for the wake to slap half-heartedly around the pylons. A gull lit on the railing, cocked a greedy eye and flew off in a snit.

I couldn't get my mind off Kirin. Finally I asked how it was going with the two of them.

"Good. I really like her little girl."

"I've noticed."

His smile was almost bashful. I really had misjudged him.

We went back to scanning the horizon. Scanning *for* it. The distant, faint-grey smudge could easily have been a strip of cloud, and nowhere near where sky and water met.

I could feel Roy losing patience. He drew out a pack of Camels.

"You smoke?" he asked, nipping at the cellophane to open it.

I shook my head.

He flipped a matchbook open with his thumb and struck the light one-handed.

"Good thing Kirin does. You know how hard it is to find a squeeze these days who lets you light up afterwards?"

Instantly, Cassandra Island Roy was back, the one who'd summed up Kirin by her hair and tits. He checked his watch and frowned.

"What the fuck is taking John so long?"

He got off the bench and started pacing.

Alpha arrogance... envaginates the world... considers it an insult when the universe refuses to put out for him...

Roy-the-jerk in full ascendance. What was it with this guy?

Mr. Shen appeared a short time later, ambling toward us in a pair of cargo shorts and Birkenstocks. Roy parked his ass against the railing, crossed his arms and tapped his foot.

"So, Roy," Mr. Shen enquired as he came up, "which one is it? Lovesick fool or chauvinistic throwback?"

Roy twisted round and flicked his cigarette away.

"Asshole."

The epithet left Mr. Shen untroubled.

"And the other?"

“Tried it first. Started getting worried David here was going to hug me.”

He winked. Not at Mr. Shen—at me.

“Would either of you care to tell me what the fuck is going on?”

They exchanged a look. Mr. Shen was better at inscrutable. Roy lost it first. The macho posture melted.

“Shit, David, if you could see your face right now. This—,”
..lonely pier... thoughts of Kirin... missing her, “—was me imprinting. So was this.”

... self-importance... patience dwindling... world contracting to a phallic-driven centre...

Both felt utterly authentic, like before, but this time with a speculative edge—ways Roy *could* be seen, not ways he was.

Mr. Shen allowed himself a smile.

“Fascinating, isn’t it? Once you know an imprint is an imprint, it feels a little different. More like an idea than an intuition. Come—,” he touched Roy on the arm and beckoned me, “—we’ve made it this far up the pier. Shall we go all the way?”

We strolled around the lighthouse three abreast. The sky looked whiter here, the lake more argent, as if lights beneath the surface were reflecting off the clouds.

Mr. Shen stood quietly, flanked by Roy and me. When at length he spoke, he sounded like a man entranced.

“We have much to do, and not much time to do it in. For many years now, David, your empathy has been reflexive. When you read someone, it’s passive. The puzzle pieces fall in place. A mental map begins to form. Intuition and experience interpret what you see.

“What you made yourself forget is that the mental map can be manipulated. Elements can be re-ordered, moved about, uncovering connections that reveal the hows and whys of who a person is, not just the what. Luke requires this fluency from you in order to perform his part in Jena’s killing. Roy and I are charged with re-instilling it.”

A gull screeched overhead, perhaps the same one who’d been hoping for a scrap from Roy and me. I glanced up, remembering

another soft, grey morning where the rains had come and gone while I was sleeping and a wailing gull had offered hope of showing me what city I was in.

The bird rose high and vanished in the whiteness of the sky. Staring up began to make me dizzy. I dropped my gaze. As I did, an afterimage—milky, luminescent—seemed to form above the lake. For a brief, disorienting moment, the world turned achromatic: the canescent not-quite-colour of a mirror having nothing to reflect.

No—the *concept* of a mirror having nothing to reflect, like imagining imagining the inside of a silver ball.

More like an idea than an intuition.

I looked at Roy, standing on the other side of Mr. Shen.

“You?”

He nodded.

“Someone has to draw the maps for where John’s taking you. We got started on the wrong foot, you and me. You’ll see. Underneath the hood, we’re not so different.”



Everyone has dreams of flying. Ferko once confessed his patients spoke of them more often than they did about their nightmares.

Typically, the dreamer is engaged in an activity that momentarily puts him aloft—jumping puddles, skipping down the street—when, as if it’s normal, he prolongs the instant just before he lands. It isn’t difficult. All he has to do is hold his feet above the ground. There’s nothing strange about it. In dreamspace, anyone could do it. No special skills or muscles are required.

The dreamer lands and jumps again. This time he hovers longer—maybe with his knees bent so his feet don’t touch the earth. Suddenly it dawns on him: *Hey—if I stay this way long enough, it’s tantamount to flying. Cool! How come I never noticed?*

Thus flight in dreams originates, not with rising up, but an epiphany—a whole new way of using the familiar.

For ten oneiric lakeside days, Roy touched my mind and showed

me I could fly. Psychic artefacts and mental maps, my own and other people's, didn't have to fall immutably in place. By an act of will, like saying to myself *Don't let your feet make contact with the ground*, I could hold them in suspension, shuffle them around and re-arrange them into new, revealing shapes.

It seemed so obvious, so simple, when I had Roy's imprints guiding me—overlays, seen and yet not-seen, like the grid of Golden Rectangles that govern the proportions of the Parthenon. But when the imprints faded, I had trouble practising what seconds earlier had made such perfect sense.

"Have you ever read a book called *Flatland*?" Mr. Shen asked early on. It might have been a morning. Or an afternoon. Or an evening. The silver weather, holding fast, had stopped time in a bubble made of lake and pearly sky.

Flatland. Nineteenth-century. A novella chronicling the exploits of a humble Square living in a universe of only two dimensions. Square's ordered life amongst exceedingly well-mannered Polygons is shattered by a visit from a Sphere, who transports him from his flat existence into three dimensions: Spaceland.

"Do you remember how the Square describes his shift to Spaceland?" Mr. Shen enquired.

In *Flatland*, *up* is always north. Back in two-dimensions, Square, trying to recall how Sphere effected his translation, keeps repeating: *upward, but not northward; upward, but not northward*.

"Consider psychic space as being like Spaceland to the Square. When Roy imprints, you occupy the next dimension up. Not because he's showing you, but because you can—on your own, without his help. That ability defines the essence of psychism. For now, your mind is following reflexively. With repetition, that will change. You'll catch on. Or should I say, catch on again?"

Which didn't stop me chanting to myself at night: *outward, but not upward; outward, but not upward*. Nor waking in the morning with an almost-understanding, and the memory of Mr. Shen's hypnotic promptings: "*Notice how the ligature that binds a recollection to its affect-field unravels when you juxtapose a different trigger*

from the ambiance array... ”

The timeless silver days wore on and Mr. Shen proved right. Of my own accord, I found that I could summon up the colourless geometry of inner space and move inside it at the same time as I mentally stepped back and watched its axes become fluid: left-and-right transforming into up-and-down and up-and-down, in turn, to in-and-out.

So obvious.

So simple.

Such a relief.

After fifteen years of holding back, my mind, at last, was breathing free.



The strange, calm weather broke the evening I was leaving. I was carrying my suitcase to the car when a ribbon of cyan at the horizon widened till the setting sun protruded like a tumour from beneath the silver clouds. Lurid pink rushed in to fill the vacuum left by ten days' grey. The air itself appeared to be on fire for a while.

Coincidental with the gaudy light, an SUV pulled in the parking lot and honked. A moment later, Kirin Neemes stepped out—a newly minted Kirin Neemes I almost didn't recognize. She'd cut her hair, and dyed the short bob gleaming black. Bright-red lipstick and a pair of Capri pants announced a serious commitment to reviving sixties' Monte Carlo.

“You like?” she asked, spinning around.

“I think the operative word is *Gulp!*”

“Too much, you think?”

“That's a question better left for Roy.” I nodded at the SUV. “Whose wheels?”

“Mine. Or rather, Karen Naylor's. Here, have a look.”

She dug into a chartreuse vinyl handbag and produced a matching wallet. Flipping through, she flashed a photo ID, health insurance card and driver's licence. The former Kirin Neemes, now

identified as Karen Naylor, looked a bit like Audrey Hepburn.

“New car, new identity,” I said. “Deep pockets, good connections. They’re moving fast.”

“And a new house, too. Already.”

“Oh, yeah? Where?”

“BC. We’re driving out. Carlin and I. Roy’s going to join us after you get finished whatever it is you and Luke are doing with him.”

“Won’t your family worry?”

She snapped the wallet shut.

“What family? Mom and Dad were in a pile-up two years after Carlin. My only relative’s my grandmother, who’s in a home and thinks that Diefenbaker’s still prime minister. I thought you knew. Feel like a walk?”

“Mr. Shen’s expecting me to drive him back.”

“He’s gone already. Roy gave him the truck.”

“Where’s Roy?”

“With Carlin getting ice cream cones.”

“Do I sense your coming here is—how shall I say—arranged?”

“Kinda. We need to talk.”

“Okay. Just let me finish checking out.”

For a woman with a need to talk, Kirin didn’t say much when we started down the beach. Instead, she took my arm and shot me funny glances.

“What?” I asked.

“You’re different, somehow. Easier to be around.”

“Perhaps it’s you who’s changed.”

“No. I mean yes,” she amended quickly, “of course I’ve changed. But so have you. I feel like I can trust you now. Shit. That came out wrong. It’s just that, remember how I used to wonder all the time if there was something you weren’t telling me? Like you were pulling my leg or something? I don’t get that now.”

She gave my arm a squeeze.

Further down the beach, I asked what she’d been up to in my absence.

“Oh, this and that. Trying to keep Carlin occupied. I’d never

have believed it, but Roy's actually better at it than me. We've been doing what there is to do in Hamilton—the Botanical Gardens, Dundurn Castle, that sort of thing. Marion and I had to run Luke into town a couple of times, what with Roy and Mr. Shen down here with you.”

“Which of you got to hold the switch?”

“Marion. It felt weird, knowing she could knock him out at any time. And weirder that it didn't bother him.”

“He's had a while to get used to it.”

“I guess.”

A little further on, she dropped my arm and knelt to pluck a triangle of frosted glass out of the sand, the green kind Sunday beachcombers are always on the lookout for. She held it to the setting sun, then dropped it in her purse.

“We should be getting back. Roy and Carlin won't be all that long.”

Arm in arm again, we set off down the beach. Our shadows stretched ahead of us like Giacometti sculptures.

“Do you remember, David, just after you met Luke, you sort of asked me to choose sides? Like, if there was anything I learned I thought you ought to know, you wanted me to tell you?”

“I remember. Feels like ages ago.”

“This is probably the last chance we'll ever get to talk. The SUV is packed. Carlin and I are spending tomorrow here with Roy and then we're taking off. We'll drop Roy at the Farm, but we won't be staying long.

“I've given this a lot of thought. Like it or not, I'm part of something now.”

“You mean the Caucus?”

“Yes. And don't get me wrong, it's mostly 'like'.”

“Even when you have to change your name and start all over?”

“It won't be so bad. The Caucus has arranged things so I never have to worry about money. And knowing what I am now, it's like being a brand new person anyway.”

“I smell a *but* . . . ”

“Well, that’s the thing. I’ve had to ask myself, which is more important: doing what the Caucus wants because I’m part of it—and grateful—or acting like a friend. We *are* friends, aren’t we?”

“That’s how I plan on thinking of it.”

The clearing sky had raised a breeze that ruffled up the lake and made a spray of copper pennies of the sunset trail. Kirin stopped to light a cigarette and stayed in place, admiring.

“I wish this weren’t how you’ll remember me,” she said, her eyes far off. “The bearer of bad tidings. But I’d rather that than have you think I lied. There’s something no one’s telling you. Something Dr. Colton asked us not to talk about.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

She turned to face me.

“It’s Luke, David. He’s dying.”

Chapter 40

NOT EXACTLY ANGELS

LUKE'S CABIN WAS in darkness, as I'd known it would be long before I reached the Farm.

Driving north on Hwy. 6, I'd sought him out and found him, as for ten days I'd been finding him, a reassuring presence like a night-light in the hallways of my mind. But he was sleeping—napping, maybe?—and I didn't want to rouse him. I wasn't even sure I could. Up close, telepathy allowed us to converse; further out, perceptions-thoughts-intentions found a language of their own. Beyond that, it became noesis—a joining that entailed nothing but itself. Luke *was*, and I perceived perceiving him.

The lights were on in Dr. Colton's study when I parked behind the house. The kitchen, too, but I couldn't deal with Cook. One look and she'd know something was amiss. I walked around instead and entered from the front.

Dr. Colton must have heard me on the stairs. He raised his eyes with only mild curiosity when I burst in.

“Yes?”

The single word was colourless, a question asked by sandpaper. He'd donned a terry bathrobe and his hair was damp, marshaled into furrows with a comb. The smell of Yardley's soap hung in the air.

I marched over to his desk. “Why didn't you tell me Luke was

dying?”

He'd been writing in a journal—quarto-sized and bound in kid—in script so dense it looked like solid blue. He screwed his gold pen shut and laid it on the page.

“Apparently because there was no need. Who told you? Luke?”

“How could he? I've been gone the past ten days.”

“Please,” he said dismissively, “don't be insulting. There's your telepathy.”

“It doesn't work like that.”

“No? Well, perhaps some day you'll tell me how it does.” He closed his book with studied care. “From your friend, Miss Neemes, then?”

“Who gives a flying fuck how I found out? What matters is you never told me.”

“Like you never told us you were still in touch with CSIS?”

The room expanded and contracted. I could almost hear the blood drain from my face.

“The router, David,” he pressed on. “Did you think we wouldn't notice? I had Franklin checking logs from the moment you arrived. More from curiosity, I have to say, than lack of trust. You told them nothing of importance.”

“You can't possibly know that. Everything I sent them was encrypted.”

“Perhaps. But you are not. At most, you sent them factual but useless information. Am I wrong?”

“Why bother asking? You seem to think you know me better than I know myself.”

“But David,” he replied, his voice like cinders in the wind, “in some ways, I do.”

I'd never felt the urge to smack someone so strongly. I balled my fists and stepped toward the desk. He didn't flinch; my rage was futile and he knew it. The terry bathrobe, plush and white against the deep red chair, made the man inside seem smaller but his presence more commanding. He snugged the collar while he watched me flex my fingers as I fought down the reaction he'd so skilfully

provoked.

“Luke has a progressively enlarging tumour in his brain. It showed up first in MRI scans after his attack of NMS. The tumour is itself benign. However, it impinges on the ring of arteries that feed the brain. The location militates against excision.”

“How long does he have?”

“At the present rate of growth, he’ll be fully symptomatic in about three months.”

“*Three months?*”

Three months ago, I didn’t even know I had a brother. Now, that same span hence, it might as well have been as if I never had.

Three months.

Ninety days.

Ninety days to fill with fifteen years.

And to accomplish what the Caucus wanted. The light began to dawn.

“This rush to take out Jena—it’s not about her schedule. It’s Luke. You’re afraid he’ll die before we get the chance.”

For the first time ever, Dr. Colton looked as if his hand had been played out.

“Am I wrong?” I mimicked in the silence.

“No,” he sighed, “you’re not.”

“What the hell were you hoping to gain by keeping this from me?”

“Focus, David. Knowing Luke was dying might have pre-disposed you to—,” he frowned, “—inappropriate emotional priorities. We hoped to minimize distractions from the task at hand. What was—what *is*—important is developing your psychic bond with Luke, not grieving for a situation that won’t change.”

“Do you get off on being callous?”

“Callous?” He looked genuinely puzzled. “No. Introducing you to Luke and telling you he only had a short time left, then asking you to set aside the shock of finding out you had a brother *and* that he was dying while you helped us with our problem—*that* would have been callous. There was a time you weren’t so high and mighty.

You would have seen past the expedience.”

“Seen past, or overlooked? If that’s what I was like, I’m glad for every second I spent ignorant of you, the Caucus, and this farm.”

“And Luke?” He held up a placating hand. “We hoped to spare your feelings, David. Or rather, to defer the grief occasioned by his illness to a time more apt for dealing with it.”

“*Jesus Christ!*” I shouted. “You’re a shrink, or used to be. Since when has sparing people’s feelings ever been good therapy? And just so’s I can get this straight, you were going to what?—sic Luke and me on Jena, bring us back here afterwards, take me out one day and say, *Oh, by the way, Luke’s dying?* Then nurse me through a Kübler-Ross while helping me recover everything I’m going to lose again?”

“Or was the memory retrieval to be put off? ‘To a time more apt for dealing with it?’ And maybe then again, with even feebler excuses?”

Dr. Colton pushed away from his desk and stood. Not abruptly—more like he was saying my hour was up.

“Minus all the paranoia, David, and your crack about how cavalierly we were going to break the news, then yes, in essence, that’s how we foresaw it.

“But you’re missing something. Perhaps the shock of finding out is still too raw. You seem to feel that I—or rather, or we, the Caucus—are the ones who chose to keep you in the dark.

“May I suggest you take the matter up with Luke?”



The sun’s directly overhead. Beneath the trees around the shore, the surface of the pond is black, even though it’s blinding in the middle. Minnows nibble insects floating on the surface. The tiny ripples dissipate before they reach the shore.

“What were you waiting for?”

Luke had been there in my mind next morning, telling me to meet him at the pond. He’d risen early. So had Dr. Colton.

"Till after we'd had all the fun we could," he says.

I'd arrived ahead of him and sat down on the stonecrop with my arms around my knees.

"So it really was you didn't want me knowing?"

"Like I told you—Colton doesn't lie."

I'd sensed him walking to the woodlot, entering the shade and pushing through the ferns. By the time he'd reached the pond, his simple wish to keep our time together free of sorrow was forgiven.

"I should have seen it, Luke."

"Prevoyance isn't perfect. Even John screws up sometimes."

He's settled close behind me now, scissoring his legs so I can nestle in the V.

"Not like that. I mean the obvious. They couldn't let us stay together afterwards. They'd be too scared. What did I think was going to happen? Dr. Colton would extract that thing there in your shoulder with a 'Guess what boys, you're free to go'? Or they'd keep you here forever, and I'd just go along with it?"

"It's hard to see what you don't want to, Jimmy-Dean."

His hands are on my shoulders, loosening the muscles. The callouses are catching in my T-shirt.

"I have a hard enough time seeing things I want to."

His fingers make a detour through my hair. "Because of what's up here? The tripwire?"

"Yeah."

He traces patterns on my back then puts his arms around my chest.

"You know, Luke, I don't buy it anymore."

"What?"

"This 'damage to my psyche' crap. My real memories can't be any more traumatic than the bullshit I've been hearing."

"You think Colton's stalling?"

"I've spent ten days being taught stuff I already know, or would, if I remembered. Wouldn't helping me—I still don't know the word . . . retrieve? restore? repair?—my memories have been a whole lot easier? Why the rigmarole, unless there's something Dr. Colton

doesn't want me knowing? Something about you, or me, or us? Let's face it—if my recollections of the foster home aren't totally fucked up, we weren't exactly angels."

I feel him start to chuckle through my spine. "You remember that old witch? The one whose kitchen we destroyed? All those jars of pickles?"

"Mrs. Chenoweth."

"Hey—you're the one who's s'pposed to have a memory problem."

I swivel round and cuff him. "When half your memory's gone, you work hard at keeping what you've got."

He rubs his ear, gets up, and saunters to the bank.

"We did some bad shit, Jimmy-Dean, there and here, but nothing Colton doesn't want you knowing."

A cloud of midges floats toward the middle of the pond. It hovers like the shadow of a shadow. Luke picks up a stone skips it through.

"If not us, then maybe something about him? He says the morning after what we did to Garrett, he made me read him. Fully, so I'd feel the pain we'd caused."

"That was thoughtful."

"If he had secrets, I'd have seen them then."

He fires off another stone. "You're the empath, Jimmy-Dean."

"And those months with Mr. Shen at Dawe's Lake afterwards? Was there more to it than learning how to fuck my own mind over?"

"You could always check in Chancery."

"They kept records?"

"It's not exactly privileged information around here. And John and Colton are obsessed with keeping notes."

He finds another stone, inspects it, drops it in the water.

"Did you ever take a look?" I ask him.

"Kinda lost my taste for anything to do with Caucus shit."

There's more, but he's not saying. I feel his resistance, though I can't say whether it's telepathy, or empathy, or intuition. He comes

back and stretches out, his face toward the sun. His eyelids are half-closed. The irises beneath them are the pale, fluorescent green of anti-freeze.

“Imprint me, Luke.”

“With what?”

“I dunno. A memory. Something from Mt. Hope. Something where I think you’re my imaginary friend.”

“You know what’ll happen.”

“Roy’s been in my mind all week. I know what imprints feel like. They’re not like reading or telepathy. They don’t become a part of me unless I let them.”

“Colton says—”

“I know what Dr. Colton says.”

There’s algae drying on the shore, giving off a rotting odour that brings Mrs. Chenoweth to mind again—her kitchen with its sour smell and all those shelves of pickles. But the recollection’s slightly off. Angles and perspectives aren’t as I remember them. The camera of memory has moved a foot or two. The windowpane is smashed before I break it. Shards of glass crunch underfoot before I step on them.

Luke’s imprint’s not like Roy’s. His were mind and concept; Luke’s is sense and feeling. If there are colours past what eyes can see, sounds beyond what ears can hear, if a feather’s touch can feel like a lead weight and a cannonball a snowflake, I have only to embrace Luke’s memory to know.

I pull it close and feel a surge of recognition, sharp and sweet, stopping breath and making me go hard.

The pain starts dully, like a throbbing toe, then blossoms in a heartbeat into waves of agony encroaching on the beach of consciousness. I want to let Luke go, but it’s too late. The process has begun and I can’t stop it anymore than I could stop myself from cumming.

The world explodes and darkness crashes in.



*Somehow I'm still sitting, shivering. Luke is on his knees, his hand
behind my head. I feel him ease me back.*

He lays down with his leg across my thighs.

The woodlot makes its forest sounds.

The pond exhales its odours.

He slides his hand beneath my shirt and gently rubs my chest.

Chapter 41

BREAKING THE VESSEL

I CREPT DOWNSTAIRS on stocking feet. The moon was bright and carving shadows on the kitchen walls. I tiptoed to the cellar door and turned the knob. A floorboard creaked. My heart leapt to my throat. I waited till the pounding in my chest had stopped and rolled my inner eye. Why was I acting like a sneak? Forbidden rooms are locked. Chancery was open. Marion had shown me round my first day at the Farm.

I palmed the wall inside the door for switches. Finding none, I set a cautious foot one dark step lower. Right away the lights came on—fluorescent tubes, stuttering and buzzing till the gas inside them settled. I stayed in place until the cellar was completely lit, then carried on.

When Marion had brought me down, all I'd registered was steel shelving filled with rugged banker's boxes—nothing to suggest it as a place for answers. If instead there'd been tall folios in flaking calf-skin, piled helter-skelter and exuding old-book smell, I might have come here sooner. But until Luke mentioned it, I hadn't given Chancery a second thought.

I had trouble shaking off the feeling I was skulking. Even after several minutes' poking round, I still expected someone to call sharply from the kitchen *Who's down there? What are you doing?*

Little strips of Dymo tape identified the contents of the shelves:

Property, Accounts, CISAP, SPR, Cassandra Island, Projects, Members. The lower shelves were given over to *The Bad Guys*—metal trunks in flaking army green with MKULTRA F-RK, 2561-G and BRAZIER blazoned on the sides.

Property went back to 1921, when the farm was sold at auction to one Wallace Carver. Its boxes held surveyors' maps, building permits, property appraisals, tax assessments, and an archivist's wet-dream of documents pertaining to the purchase of the woodlot, squabbles with the township over lot lines, bickering with neighbours over fences, and compensation paid out for some troublesomely errant goats.

Accounts revealed a pack-rat's horde of annotated household spending, farm equipment rentals, service contracts, long-expired warranties and bills of every kind including coal deliveries.

SPR was mostly correspondence. *CISAP* held a lot of painful promo copy out of 1960s journals welcoming practitioners of "humanistic Therapies" to "Dialogue and Share" in an environment where they'd be "close to Mother Earth" and could "Partake of bringing Forth the Bounty of the Soil."

Cassandra Island's records were identified by gold stars on the lids. Almost everything inside was photocopied: blueprints, zoning applications, financial statements, stock analyses, AGM minutes, shareholders letters, quarterly reports. Only the brochures and annual reports were the originals. A quick glance through confirmed that Dr. Colton hadn't lied; the place was in the black.

Projects had been grouped according to adhesive DayGlo dots, and labelled with a hyphenated number done in Letraset. Lists of letter-digit combinations had been jotted underneath.

Members boxes occupied the most amount of space. Several had been stamped DECEASED. Four had question marks in red. All were stencilled with a letter-digit combination like the jotted lists in *Projects*. DayGlo dots were lined up underneath. Below each dot were hyphenated numbers, terminating with an -R or -S, written out by hand

Beside the stencilled letter-digit strings were three thick lines,

stacked vertically. Mostly, all three lines were broken by a small gap in the middle—the trigram, *K'un*, from the *I Ching*. Where they weren't, all three lines were solid: the trigram, *Ch'ien*. *K'un* and *Ch'ien* are like the *Book of Changes*' yin and yang. *K'un* is passive and receptive. *Ch'ien* is active and creative. Empaths and transmitters? It made sense.

Tucked beneath the trigrams were two numbers, left and right. The left hand one comprised two digits, while the right hand one was always 1 or 2.

At first blush, all the *Members* boxes looked about the same. There were, however, differences. KN1533RC had a gold star but no coloured dots. Others had the dots without the stars. Some had both. A symbol like a pair of boldface letter I's appeared on two—Gemini, the Twins. Unsurprisingly, their stencilled strings began with DA and LA.

If the starting letters were initials, probably the terminating letters were as well. Assuming KN1533RC—gold-starred like *Cassandra Island*'s lids—represented Kirin Neemes, RC at the end most likely stood for Roy Calhoun, the member who'd inducted her from the retreat. That fit with GF at the end of Luke's and my identifiers: Garrett Finnestad.

Kirin was the newest member and her box was free of DayGlo dots, suggesting that the colours represented *Projects* categories longer-standing members had been part of. A quick check either side of KN1533RC confirmed it. The hyphenated numbers written underneath cross-referenced the Letraset on similarly colour-coded *Projects*. Elegant. Chancery was its own index.

DA0318GF was on a middle shelf. The sturdy cardboard box was double-length, divided by a pasteboard insert. The front half held official papers: birth certificate, medical and early school records, documents pertaining to my status as an orphan. All were photocopies. Any place my name would have appeared had been blacked out.

In addition to the records was a stack of Duotangs. The ruled sheets inside were filled with penmanship identical to that of the

original of what was now *The Rules*. I flipped through them with the same dumb fascination that had held Narcissus captive to his own reflection. Book reports, history papers, English essays, science projects, math exams... More than once, I whistled through my teeth—less at what I'd written than at Marion's unflinching setting of the edu-bar to max. Compare and contrast Eliot and Browning? Heady stuff.

The back half of the box was filled with notebooks: inexpensive Hilroys, and six more costly Moleskines. The Moleskines sat on top, each one labelled with a year in gold. *Diaries*? It couldn't be. A record of my missing years set down in my own hand? I slipped the soft elastic off the first one with the feeling in my stomach that a roller coaster gives as it goes rattling toward the starting peak.

Anticipation's little train cars didn't barrel down the other side—they reached a puzzling plateau. Instead of words in my own hand belying or confirming Dr. Colton's tales, not only were the pages crammed with someone else's writing, it wasn't words at all. The notebook's contents looked like formulae for changing lead to gold, or the musings of a physicist turned loosed on the ephemeris. Page after page of hieroglyphics, festooned with tiny numbers, the script so dense in places it was almost solid blue. Only dates were recognizable—disturbing, since the quantity of entries, often several times per day, made me feel as if I'd stumbled on a stalker's journal written out in code.

The Hilroys were as mystifying. The covers all had coloured dots and hyphenated numbers from the *Projects* boxes. The entries were like those inside the Moleskines—dates and times with lines of gibberish—but here, the handwriting was mine. I recognized the carefully barred 7s, and the slashes through the zeros. Log books of some kind? I took a couple over to the *Projects* section, verifying DA0318GF was written on the boxes where the numbers and the colours matched.

I slipped the lid off a magenta-dotted box, #049-126. The contents weren't as organized as DA0318GF, just binders, steno pads and scrawled-on legal tablets. A folder had been tucked along one

side. Inside it was a molecule diagram, all hexagons and letters, and a formula like H_2O but vastly more complex.

I tried the box beside it. The same, except the molecule was different. Magenta projects—drugs? Not where I was going to find what I'd come looking for.

Puce came next. As with the magenta boxes, every one had folders with descriptive sheets:

Perceptual restriction (visual) . . .
 Perceptual restriction (mixed mode) —
 tactile-auditory . . .
 Perceptual restriction (comprehensive) —
 fall-off (emp./p.v.) . . .

That didn't seem right, either.

Lime-green had do with sleep, judging from the frequency of words like *hypnopompic*, *REM* and *hypnagogia*. Deprivation/interruption seemed to be a common theme.

Ochre was the opposite of puce—increased stimulation of the senses, linked with meditation.

Meditation/sonics (330-660Hz), stage five,
 visionary p.v . . .
 Meditation/EM spectrum ($\pm 560m\mu$), stage two,
 empathic sensitivity . . .

I knew before I opened it the box in mauve contained what I was after. The only member ID on the front was mine. I'd have spotted it right off if I'd stayed focused on the outsides of the boxes only.

The interior held less than all the others, just a dozen or so supple leather quartos like the journal Dr. Colton had been writing in. But it wasn't his cribbed script inside. The hand was flowing, almost calligraphic.

Ref: #817-221
Category: mauve
Type: applied

Phase: gamma (radical)

Subject: DA0318GF

Lead: JWS2251

Subject is an adolescent male empath (PV type-2, index 78); one male sibling (dizygotic), also primary (trans., PV type-1, index 84). Anomalous telepathy confirmed.

Accelerated gamma of #817 series (memory dereferencing/reallocation) warranted by circumstances.

Ratified (plenary). Disclosure and subject-compliance requirements met.

*Cassandra Island
Paxton*

The exigencies imposed on us by L&D at last provide an opportunity to implement our work on...

“David? Is that you?”

Mr. Shen’s voice from the kitchen made me start. I closed the quarto quickly and returned it to the box.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Luke said you might be down there.”

“Isn’t he in bed? It’s one-thirty in the morning.”

“He told me earlier. And only if I couldn’t find you elsewhere. I tried your room a minute ago.”

I replaced the lid on #817-221 and took it to the bottom of the steps. Better brazening it out than acting like a thief.

“Was there something in particular you wanted?” I called up.

“Just to let you know that Kirin will be dropping Roy off later than expected. Sometime early afternoon. You can sleep in if you want to.”

“Thanks.”

He watched me cart the box upstairs.

“Found what you were after?”

“I wouldn’t know. You tell me.”

“Robert rather hoped you wouldn’t come across my notes till later.”

“Then perhaps he should have put them somewhere else.”

“That’s not his way.”

“So Luke keeps telling me.”

Some awkward seconds passed. My arms were getting tired. I set the box down on the kitchen table.

“What’s in here Dr. Colton doesn’t want me knowing?”

“Not ‘knowing’, David. Misinterpreting.”

“Like what?”

“If I told you, would you read the contents anyway?”

“Of course.”

“Then there wouldn’t be much point.”

“What are all the funny symbols?”

“Ah—the psychics’ code. Ancient Chinese secret.” In the darkness, I could only hear his little smile.

“Please, John, no more riddles.”

“As you wish. They’re an evolving language for describing what a psychic grasps in his or her own mind, as well as in the minds of others. Not ‘what someone’s thinking’, more like ‘how they’re thinking it’. Parsing thoughts without respect to meaning. Mentation, as it were, devoid of content.

“And now, I’m off to bed. As you’ve pointed out, enigmatic gets to be a strain.” He tapped the box. “Don’t stay up too late.”



I spread the quartos in a semi-circle on the floor. The lamp behind the rocking chair reflected off the satiny black covers. There were ten in all, with thirty or so daily entries each—approximately one per month between the summer of my sundering from Luke and the birthday gift of finding out that six years of my life were gone.

“*Your loss was self-inflicted,*” Dr. Colton said. “*You voluntarily*

walled off six years, and, with our help, ensured that what you'd done could never be repeated."

He made it sound so simple, so straightforward. Who knew? Perhaps it was. But the pages I'd already scanned were thick with Mr. Shen's "emerging language", the Rosetta Stone for which lay buried with my other memories.

Not all the pages, though.

*Cassandra Island
Paxton*

The exigencies imposed on us by L&D at last provide an opportunity to implement our work on memory dereferencing. Sadly, it is bought at the expense of laying down our hopes for #412 – again. Perhaps it's for the best. Concerns were being raised about a "psychic weapon" back when #412 was active. Empathy-enhanced imprinting through telepathy would have made a tool too easily misused, as L&D have shown – a plough too ready to be forged into a sword.

I have other regrets. I'm very fond of D, even though I can't agree with R that L is the sole architect of their delinquencies. D's been a joy to know; I'll miss the quickness of his thought.

Day 1

Arrived Dawe's Lake 19h00. Ferried to C-I by T, who returns tomorrow, then weekly with supplies. D exhibiting expected dissociative symptoms following reading of R post-GF (automatous mov't, apathy, mechanical speech).

Day 2

$$\begin{matrix} \text{LST} \\ \text{0730} \end{matrix} \supset \delta \Delta C^{11} \times m^{-3} \uparrow \tilde{\Phi} 7^{-4} \otimes \mathbb{N} \times \mathbb{N} \times 2f \left\{ \Omega \sim \sigma^6 \right\} \div \Lambda \neq 2 \mathbb{I} \equiv \Sigma^2 N \Psi(3)$$

$$\nabla_5^{-10} - \left\{ \ominus \right\}_4 \oplus \left\{ \uparrow \right\}_9 \ll \Sigma \left[8 \pm 9 \right] \times \lambda^6 \equiv \mathbb{I} \left| \mathbb{I} \right| \dots$$

The hieroglyphics carried on, broken into chunks like verse. Each one was prefaced by the symbol \supseteq or \subseteq , with digits underneath and LST above. Local Sidereal Time? Marion had told me once astrologer's preferred it, and the digits looked like times of day.

Eleven pages later, at Day 9, *Worried about this* was scribbled in the margin with an arrow to some circled symbols in the facing stanza.

On the next page, just before Day 10, a longer annotation finally appeared:

D still merely tractable. Speaks only when spoken to. Picks at his food (not normal). Multistable artefact from open reading of R not collapsing. Have written R. Will post with next deliveries.

Afterwards, the psychic shorthand carried on with jottings in the margins.

Day 12: *betrayal × trauma-matrix – Self? R? L? (ambig.)*

Day 15: *R's grief replicating here (arrow to a symbol) and here (arrow to a symbol) Open reading ill-advised?*

Day 16: *No, I was right. Event cathexis → synergy → total moral disengagement. D had to see.*

Between Day 20 and Day 21, a second longer entry:

Mail from R. As I feared, open-reading comprehensive, holophrastic, synchronous. D shell-shocked. Suspending prep. Summer holding. D best left on his own.

For the next few pages, there weren't as many blocks of symbols—typically, just two per day with margin notes: “*D vanishing for hours at a stretch... Leaves slow to turn this year... Spending more and more time at the shore... Still not initiating dialogue...*”

*Warm weather holding... Appetite back (note: T—more bacon)...
D offered to clean up today... ”*

Then, at Day 36:

*Found D on the spit today. Turned around and
smiled as I came up. Not unexpected; trend of daily
×2 readings indicates re-assertion of primary
independent constant. Fault not R's. D simply too
receptive.*

Almost ready to begin.

Three more days of gibberish with just one observation: *L* (arrow to a symbol) *proscribed?* *D will not talk about this*—and the writing stopped. I leafed through to the end but there were only empty pages.

The quarto following picked up the thread.

Day 40

JF's theoretical work on memory displacement (#809, 811, 812 et al.) shows that declarative mnemonic artefacts are, in fact, percepts made explicit by surrounding psychogenic fields. In other words, the artefacts are reified; cohesive memories require a context-matrix (“vessel” or “container”) for their content to emerge.

If the matrix cells are deconstructed (“the vessel broken up”) and merged with unrelated background fields, the content of the memories cannot be retrieved until the cells are reassembled.

D presents two types of artefacts to be dereferenced/ immersed: episodic-contiguous (Farm, 6+ yrs.), and semantic-integrated (LA0318GF, “L”). The procedure is the same for both, viz.

target → tag → dereference → immerse

but as dereferencing of semantic-integrated memories risks destabilizing the surrounding fields, I feel it best to start with the contiguous 6 years.

“*The artefacts are reified*”—like that picture of a mace made up of just the little spikes and yet the ball they’re sprouting from appears as if by magic? Or like pages crammed with symbols spiked with little observations? Would some sort of meaning magically appear?

Following Day 40, the arrangement of the hieroglyphs began to look like dialogue. First, there’d be a stanza headed JWS-. Afterwards came two more blocks, the first one introduced by D-. A conversation between minds?

Margin notes became more frequent, so terse they made no sense at all. However longer comments, in plain English, broke the chunks of psychic-speak.

Day 46: *Flue smoking. D up on the roof to check. Squirrel nest. Chinking crumbling; have given D the project of repairing.*

Day 51: *Dissoc. react. post-reading R beneficial to our purposes? D more easily perceiving mind-map as discrete.*

Day 59: *T here with a chainsaw; felled and bucked two trees. Will have D split.*

Day 61: *D entering the stage-3 meditative state as easily as breathing now.*

Day 64: *Never mentions L; not hiding, either. Ambiguous – regions are protected. As if gathering L to himself.*

Day 70: *Targeting of scalar fields (Farm years) better than we could have hoped for. D’s fluency remarkable. Association matrices are temporal-affective; permits indexing eventicles and intervals.*

Day 74: *Today, D seems truly back to his old self. Suspending work.*

Day 77: *Still no remorse or guilt about GF. Poss. bleed from L?*

Day 80: *Needs a challenge. Will start training for stage-4 med. state (for tagging).*

Day 85: *D increasingly distracted between 14h00 and 19h00 LST. L percept appears to be emergent. Spontaneous? D seeking L? Poss. vice versa? Have written R.*

Day 92: *Mail from R: L's neuroleptics holding, psychism/telepathy disabled.*

Day 98: *Watched D playing with a Rubik's cube. Solution times < 2 min.*

There were notations, too, concerning weather and the change of seasons.

*Storm last night; fall is upon us...
Cobalt sky this morning; frost...
Colours yellower this year than last...
"Mists and mellow fruitfulness..."
Last leaves off the poplars...
November sky; Dawe's Lake steely grey...
Skin of ice around the shore...
T's next delivery his last until the lake is frozen
(ketchup!!!)...*

The snow arrived, then more of it, then yet still more. Mr. Shen seemed happy with my progress.

Day 107: *D extremely apt at stage-4 meditative state. Have decided to accelerate the tagging and dismantling of declaratives around his training re. camouflage (footprint). Procedurals must hold if*

learning to be rendered autonomic.

Hypnosis in a stage-4 state leaves artefacts, but will supply instruction to immerge. We need to see how D reacts to trivial mnesic gaps.

Will begin full tagging of Farm memories in the New Year.

Christmas came Day 118. T provided us with turkey, high-bush cranberries and venison. My gift to Mr. Shen, apparently, consisted of not noticing I'd lost my memories of learning how to camouflage the psychic footprint.

Whatever targeting entailed, my skill at it had Mr. Shen impressed. January's notes (approximately journal five) were larded with "*D's fluency in isolating, D's ease at finding, D's mastery of highlighting*"—all in conjunction with the tagging process, something Mr. Shen referred to as "accountants' work".

Somehow I doubted it.

Cabin fever started to set in in journal six.

Day 159: *D distracted. Claims winter is least favourite time of year. Asked if there was any way of going into Paxton. Compromised by asking T to take him for a spin out on the lake on his Ski-Doo.*

Day 170: *Still moody. Tagging of Farm memories complete. By-product is that D is now more difficult to read, like a jigsaw puzzle laid out but not snapped together. Sense impending work's the real problem, i.e. targeting of L.*

Despite success so far – perhaps because of it – beginning to have doubts. Still no indications of remorse or guilt. No antagonism, either. D almost seems to be enjoying this.

Question marks with arrows filled the margins for another week. Then, at Day 177, Mr. Shen grew eloquent.

We were aware that D cathected play with L, but am honestly astounded by how much. The libidinal investment colours every memory he has of growing up. D need only target that, and whole arrays appear. L-objects are fore- and background multistable, and “glow” when D accesses them. Thus, no need for discrete tagging; D can separate the L component easily, like taking out a single image from a composite made up of stacked transparencies

D worshipped L while the two of them were at the foster home, which means that L (D’s container for idealized behaviour), once immersed, will leave a field D can fill authentically with real anterior longings for approval and/or defiant-individuation. Thus no discontinuities—L as an imaginary friend.

While this facilitates our task, D’s skill at accessing cathectic indices (“glow”, above) has started propagating through the tagged Farm memories – in effect, a trail of breadcrumbs. I’m concerned. D remains co-operative, but his acquiescence troubles me. Have written R.

For the next ten days, Mr. Shen went back to being elliptic.

Day 187: *D expressing interest in the final stage.*

Day 192: *Beginning work on altered stage-5 meditative state. D req’d to stay receptive to external stimuli and prompts.*

Day 198: *D proving adept. Enthusiastic, even. Asked again about oblivial hypnosis of the final stage. Demonstrating willingness to go along?*

D so fluent now I can’t be sure.

The next long entry was at Day 200, near the start of the eighth journal. My eyes were getting gritty and I needed to go whizz, so I

padded to the bathroom, then the kitchen for some instant coffee. The clock above the sink read four-fifteen.

Don't stay up too late.

Yeah, right.

Day 200: *Mail from R. Concurr. D's skill is worrisome, even if he isn't laying groundwork for an end run. So far, our work conforms to and confirms all models, practical and theoretical, and indications are immergence implemented under deep oblivial hypnosis will succeed entirely. But...*

R proposes something like a tripwire, indexed to a key event (temporal-affective). Suggests the fire that resulted in our finding D&L.

Have written with ideas.

Dr. Colton answered back eleven entries later.

Day 211: *R rejecting soft proposals. Recursion loops might set up resonance within immergence fields (Präganz → Law of Similarity). D needs to "shy away from," not "replay."*

However, R's suggested psychogenic neural overstimulation strikes me as extreme – esp. if activated by proximity to physical locales, as R sets forth as well. Pain that leads to blackout isn't a deterrent, it's a sentence. We intend that D forget, not suffer for a crime he can't remember.

The season changed again. "Lake ice broke last night... path down to the spit a mudslide... robins this morning... buds swelling on the maples... picnic on the rocks..."

Meanwhile, the correspondence carried on.

Day 225: *R firm – best if D discouraged via negative experiential feedback. Reluctantly agree.*

I've been so focused on our work and D's alarming skill I've missed the obvious: D not showing any fear.

Day 233: *R concedes – need not be irreversible. If ever L no longer in the picture, D potentially an asset. Have written R detailing means whereby if D gets certain proof of that eventuality, the tripwire will cease to hold.*

Day 242: *Go-ahead from R. Wish there were another way. Non-disclosure contravenes our bylaws. More simply, I have never lied to D, and we still have much to do that I would rather not be clouded by deception.*

The eighth book ended. I laid it on the pile beside the chair and sat back, rocking. The same bird I'd been hearing every morning cheeped experimentally. Minutes passed with just his lonely call. I bent forward and picked up the next instalment.

Whatever qualms were troubling Mr. Shen, he'd elected to exclude them. Journal nine was business.

Day 246: *Targeting/tagging of both memory groups complete.*

Day 252: *Beginning prep. for reinterpretation of psychism → notional acumen.*

Day 255: *Isolating geographics.*

Day 261: *D fully receptive to oblivial sugg. in stage-5 state.*

Day 267: *Prep. to generalize artefacts from Children's Aid → helper agencies.*

Day 273: *Found D crying in the woods. Stress of work, or gravity of situation setting in at last? Grief? I would not want to face what he's agreed to*

– tantamount to murdering his memories of L, and, in a sense, committing partial suicide.
Complimented his enormous strength in seeing this thing through.

Day 277: *Have explained how we'll proceed. Immergence must take place by steps. I envisage ± 7 days. D will experience intense confusion as his memories dwindle. To counteract anxiety, I'm administering Xanax (Alprazolam). D asked if, day to day, he'd be aware of what we're doing. Assured him he'd remain compliant and unafraid.*

We'll begin tomorrow.

Ave, D.

The next six days had only one notation: *T on Wed. to imprint Toronto.*

Then nothing.

I reached for the remaining quarto and thumbed through. There were no days, no margin notes, no longer entries. Only hieroglyphs. Pages upon pages of them till the very end.



My coffee had gone cold. The bird outside had gained some company. I reached up for the reading lamp and turned it off. The room turned deep blue monochrome.

I gathered up the journals, returned them to their box and took them to the dresser. I'd put my laptop by the swivel mirror, so I booted up while I was there and in the semi-darkness went online to check on Xanax. What state had I been in that final week? Unafraid, or simply unprotesting?

The drug was indicated for severe, acute anxiety. In addition to the usual rogue's gallery of nausea, vomiting and dizziness, one potential side effect was full amnesia. Some joke it would have been if after ten months working at it I'd forgotten how to go about

forgetting.

What makes us dig for things we'd rather not uncover? What draws us to the places every ounce of good sense tells us to avoid? Navel-gazing *Schadenfreude*? Anticipation of a masochistic thrill? Some sort of imp?

While I was online, I checked my email in Toronto.

To: david@ase.ca
From: mackenzie@pet.csis-scrs.gc.ca
Subject: Re: Not enough

David --

> ...Dr. Colton claims to know me, as do several
> others.

> ...they claim they have the power to restore
> my memories.

> ...unwilling to do anything that might arouse
> suspicion.

Unacceptable. Whatever else is going on, you will continue to report to us.

You may recall I handed you some photographs to look at when I came to your apartment. I ran your fingerprints. Fascinating what the AFIS database turned up. See attached jpgs.

CSIS has no mandate over this, but the matter will go straight to the police if we don't hear from you.

--

Subira MacKenzie

I wasn't logged in graphically and had to ftp the jpgs to my laptop. There were seven altogether, black-and-white, pitilessly detailed in a harsh, forensic flash: Eliot Pierce, livid on his playroom's concrete floor, head turned sideways, vomit on his chin.

Next to him, its oval lenses gleaming like a pair of soulless eyes, the flaccid gasmask death's head that had killed him.

Chapter 42

THE RAW TASTE OF TRUTH

COOK WAS LEAVING with a breakfast tray when I walked in on Dr. Colton. I declined her offer of a Danish and thrust my laptop on his desk.

“David—what’s this all about?”

I flipped the lid and spun it round. He sipped his morning coffee with his eyes on me instead of on the screen. The look was meant to say my barging in was growing tiresome.

Finally he dropped his gaze. “And these are—,” he made a languid gesture at the images of Eliot Pierce, “—what?”

“They’re the price of dropping someone in an alley and expecting them to get along with half their memories gone.”

He set his coffee down.

“No doubt that’s very clever, but forgive me if I fail to understand.”

“The dead guy was a trick. He died while I was trying to earn a buck.”

He bent closer to the screen and frowned. “You did this sort of thing?”

Not murder—S&M.

“It’s a little late to be concerned about it now. Two-thousand dollars isn’t much to start with when you’re only seventeen.”

“May I assume the death was accidental?”

“You weren’t so quick to think so when the victim was your lover.”

His face went hard. “I’ll equally assume you aren’t here just to make allusions.”

“An officer at CSIS did her homework. She’s threatening to go to the police unless she hears from me. Which she will, an hour from now. There’s an email with the Farm’s location queued up on my server in Toronto.”

He pushed back from his desk and spent a stoney thirty seconds studying my face.

“What do you want?”

“Tell me, Dr. Colton—how is it that a group who fears the excesses of BRAZIER has an archive of material that duplicates their work?”

“I see. You’ve been down to Chancery.”

“It wasn’t locked.”

“Why would it be?”

“Don’t avoid my question.”

He took a breath. “Whatever your suspicions, David, our methodology is utterly dissimilar to BRAZIER’s.”

“Why? Because your subjects volunteer? Fucking with a person’s mind is fucking with a person’s mind. Psychotropics, sensory isolation, sleep deprivation—and those are only what I got a glimpse of.”

“Glimpses aren’t enough to tell a story, and I’m not about to justify activities requiring no defence. As you say, our members volunteer for research.”

“Like I volunteered to have my memories excised?”

“I’ll concede that volunteered is stretching it, but you did, in fact, agree.”

“Yeah, when I had absolutely no will left to make a choice.”

Camouflage and misdirection may have kept his mind a blank, but anyone could see his guard go up.

“What’s open reading, Dr. Colton?”

“You’ve gone through John’s notes, too.” He nodded faintly. “Open reading is exactly what it sounds like: exposure to a psychic’s mind with no defences in the way.”

“Is that why it took six weeks to get over—how did Mr. Shen put it—the expected dissociative reaction?”

“Empathy is seldom instantaneous. It takes time, however brief, to circumvent the barriers all minds construct. Open reading happens all at once. For a while, you *are* the person being read. In one as young as you were then, the synchronous experience of two world views, two *Weltanschauungen*, can be traumatic.”

“The same way being blasted with a firehose could be called ‘traumatic’? Most people call it brute force.”

“There was no coercion.”

“Do you honestly expect me to believe that being in your head was all it took to scare me up to Dawe’s Lake for a ten month stint with Mr. Shen? That your fears—not mine, *yours*—frightened me so much I deserted Luke and never even tried to run away? What did you really show me? That you’d hurt him if I didn’t go along? Maybe even kill him?”

Dr. Colton made an exasperated sound. “You read too many novels. And not good ones, either.”

“Or maybe I saw something else, like what you planned for Luke and me if Project Four-One-Two panned out. *Empathy-enhanced imprinting through telepathy*? From everything you’ve told me, you didn’t think it possible till Luke and I screwed up with Garrett. Yet there you were, researching it before we even landed on the scene.”

“Four-One-Two dates to our early years. We considered many theoretic possibilities back then.”

“Including one the Caucus feared would be developed as a psychic weapon?”

“Surely John enclosed that in quotation marks.”

“And how come Four-One-Two’s not down in Chancery? I went looking. Couldn’t find it anywhere.”

“We have many projects, now inactive, not in Chancery. And that one, as I said, was purely theoretical.”

“As purely theoretical as memory dereferencing? My impression is that Mr. Shen knew all about it long before the ‘exigencies of

Luke and me' gave you a chance to try it out. You call it psychic surgery. Psychic lobotomy's more like it. What sort of theoretical use did you have in mind for that?"

"We hoped it might have application in a therapeutic setting."

"What the hell kind of therapy? The only people who can do this thing are psychics. Maybe only *gifted* psychics—ones so good it turns out the procedure doesn't work unless you boobytrap their brains without them knowing."

My voice was rising but the heavy velvet drapes conspired to swallow it.

Dr. Colton regarded me evenly.

"Is that what this is all about? The tripwire?"

His tone was dusty, dry, sweet reason.

My mind went back to waking up on park lawns, heavy with the emptiness of six years gone; to long nights skirting memories that narrowed to a point of pain; to all the years spent never knowing Luke existed; to meeting him again, only to discover he was dying.

"No, Dr. Colton, it's about retaliation. Retaliation by a man who lost his lover to a teenage prank—a prank played by a pair of psychic twins you had high hopes for and had coddled to the point of irresponsibility.

"First you separate them when they've never spent a day apart. Then you scare one into burying his memories of the other, while imprisoning the one who has his memories intact. That way, one of them is forced to live with loss he can't remember, and the other one is forced to live with loss he can't forget.

"But amnesia's not sufficient for the one who can't remember. He needs to feel punished, even if he hasn't got a clue what for. You arrange things so his every effort at recall is agony, and then, in a final twisting of the knife, you ensure his memories can't be restored until he's lost the very person he'll most want to share them with."

Dr. Colton's level gaze remained.

"You're certain of all this? Or have you other theories? Say, some dark secret you discerned while reading me that Luke must never know?"

I returned his look.

“My only theory now is that you think I’m bluffing about CSIS.”

“Are you?”

“Running from a murder warrant isn’t quite the same as vanishing off CSIS’ radar.”

His eyelids dropped, and with them, the charade of supercilious detachment.

“What do you intend to do?”

For once he hadn’t pulled off knowing in advance.

“Make demands, like anyone who’s holding something over someone’s head. You’re more than passingly familiar with the concept, I believe. What I want, to start with, is everything you have on BRAZIER.”

“BRAZIER? Why?”

Any doubts I’d had that he’d been lying all this time, reading past defences I’d been told were autonomic, dissipated.

“CSIS won’t call off the dogs unless I give them something. BRAZIER ought to keep them satisfied until next week.”

His eyes flicked up with interest. “Next week? May I cautiously assume, then, that whatever else your feelings, you intend to see things through?”

“The choice is yours.”

Like the choices he’d been giving me.

“Everything in Chancery’s been scanned. I can burn a DVD or transfer files now.”

A trifle. Happy to oblige.

He slid the keyboard out from underneath his monitor. “May I also ask what you’re intending when the time this buys runs out?”

“You mean, am I going to rat on you? Let me put it this way. BRAZIER scares me, Dr. Colton. So does Jena. Of all your carefully cooked stories, they’re the only ones that have the full, raw taste of truth. But I don’t give a shit about your little gang. If the price of getting CSIS off my case is you, trust me, it’s no price at all.

“I plan to meet up with my contact. Face-to-face, so I can read him and make sure that he—or, more precisely, his superior, the

woman who so kindly sent those photographs—is going to back off when I tell him what he’s going to find out anyway if I don’t kill that email I’ve got waiting on my server. Which gives you till next Thursday, when I go to Ottawa, to clear the Farm.”

“What will you do afterwards?”

“See things through, then disappear with Luke.”

“And further down the road?” *When your brother dies?*

“Track down Mr. Shen. I’m guessing that the final book of his Cassandra Island notes is like a key? A map to where I buried everything?”

“That’s correct.”

“Then I’ll be holding on to it.”

“Thursday’s not a lot of time.”

“I’m not trying to make things easy.”

I turned the laptop round and fired up a terminal.

“One other thing.” I stopped short of entering the password that would log me onto ase.ca. “That electronic tether in Luke’s shoulder? Get rid of it. Remove it, disable it—I don’t care. Just make sure it’s gone.”

Dr. Colton’s cool, assessing look returned.

“Would it surprise you, David, to discover it’s already taken care of?”



I trace the outline of the dressing near Luke’s collarbone. It’s small and clean and white against his skin. My fingernail catches in the gauze.

“How come you didn’t tell me?”

He takes my hand and moves it to his chest.

“I was saving it.”

His heart is pumping fast. I can feel it in the cleft between his ribs.

“For when?”

“Later. When it healed. When we could finally go swimming.”

After my demands to Dr. Colton, it seemed only natural to pack

my things and cart them to Luke's cabin. As natural as stretching out beside him for some sleep.

When he met me at the door with, "Hey, what's up?" and I said, "We've got things to talk about," he'd answered: "Wanna catch some shut-eye first? You look like shit and I'm not going anywhere but back to bed."

His futon smelled of summer dragging on. I fell asleep telepathizing everything: Chancery, the notebooks, Eliot Pierce, Subira's threat. It was less a mind-to-mind exchange than one-way pouring out.

"Roy'll be here soon."

"Oh, yeah? When?"

"Mr. Shen said early afternoon."

He glances at the bedside clock. It's almost noon. The room, which faces east, is roasting. His skin is glowing like it's oiled.

"We don't have to do this thing," I say.

"It isn't like you haven't killed before," he grins.

His legs are underneath the sheets. A hard-on tents the cotton and he doesn't try to hide it.

"We could go anywhere, Luke. Do anything."

He rolls over, props his head and draws a lazy circle on my stomach.

"Luke and David Ase against the world?"

"Yeah," I answer hoarsely. "Like that."

"Hmm..." he ponders stagily, "what shall we do? Go crazy on a holdup spree? Fly the Jolly Roger on the Spanish Main? Hack a bloody swath through eunuchs to some Sultan's treasure?"

"I was thinking more like leaving. Flying off somewhere. Letting Colton and the Caucus deal with Jena on their own."

He drops his head and rests it on his forearm.

"I want to do it, Jimmy-Dean," he whispers in my ear.

He's not the only one who's got a hard on now.

"I don't get it, Luke."

He snuggles closer. "You will when Roy gets here."

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.

Chapter 44

MARBLE PITS, SUMMER NIGHTS

HIS NAME WAS Chase. He hailed from a big estate in Georgia where the live oaks had been planted by his great-granddaddy's great-granddaddy's slaves. His ROTC ring came from the same academy his father had attended: Oak Hill Military, where the motto carved above the gates read *Oculus pro oculo*: An eye for an eye. His mother was a helmet blond who seldom spoke to coloureds and had never met a Jew.

Chase neither liked nor disliked the Casino Lac-Leamy. It overlooked a flooded quarry, and the lounge where Jena's roadies had assembled gave directly on the lake. The midnight water made him think of marble pits and summer nights back home. Otherwise, for him, the québécois casino and the toney lounge were just another exercise in nursing bourbons, feigning solidarity.

His partner, Bridget, felt the same. Culled from INSCOM's shadowy, elite brigades, part of their assignment was to fraternize with Jena's crew. Neither did it well but neither groused. Most of Jena's team was in the dark about her minstrel show. Chase and Bridget's eyes and ears made sure it stayed that way.

At least this was the last time for a while. Jena was returning to the BRAZIER labs. While she was doing voodoo for the white boys, Chase was off on leave.

He told himself he had no feelings about Jena being black. She

was an Asset, and her skin could be bright blue for all the difference it made. She was, however, uppity, and nobody liked that. It never crossed his mind that uppity was not the word he'd use if she were blue.

He looked forward to unwinding from the battering his Southern pride was taking. The first thing he was going to do was lose the chin-strap beard. It worked for the persona he adopted for her shows, but made him look too pretty and attracted the wrong men. He'd keep his red hair buzzed, though, just to bug his little sister, living up in Boston with a journalist these days. He'd try to lure her home again with peaches and a night of Rebel Yell.

Chase's other sister was his elder by six years. Apple of her Daddy's eye, she had been the first to show him how to throw a football, thread a worm and clean a rifle. Navy now and teaching at Annapolis, her classes didn't start until the middle of September. Maybe they'd go hunting coons, and spend some afternoons together hooking bream for supper from the Tulgahoochee Creek.

Across the table, Bridget's rum and Coke was getting low. She signalled for another. As she did, something at the entrance caught her eye. Chase twisted round to have a look.

The guy was wearing Levis with a T-shirt tucked in at the waist. The jeans were faded, old-school tight and rolled up at the cuff. The plain white crew-neck looked as if, up close, it smelled of bleach. He scanned the lounge and glanced at Chase with eyes so green they had to be cosmetic, even if the Wheeler County farmboy duds looked lived in, not for show.

Chase went back to Bridget. She had furlough, too, and planned to hike New Hampshire on the Appalachian Trail. Chase was giving pointers since he'd done the trail twice.

A band set up and started playing eighties covers. Bridget rolled her eyes but turned to watch.

The green-eyed man, his back to Chase, was sitting at the bar. He had a bowl of peanuts. Chase watched idly as he squeezed the red skins off before he popped them in his mouth.

Donovan had done that, too; he didn't like the bitterness. And

like this guy, he'd pulled it off—casual and masculine. Not that they were anything the same. The farmboy thing was wrong. So was his build. Yet there were echoes: the way his arm bulged when he raised his glass, the way he hooked his shoes around the stool.

The band switched into French, and for a moment, Chase was elsewhere.

The last place he had ever seen Lieutenant Colonel Donovan McCreedy—a Georgian like himself, but from upstate, near Elberton, more good ole boy than Chase—was Thibodaux, Louisiana, where they'd stuffed themselves on Creole food, gotten drunk on sazerac, stumbled to their hotel room and fucked to Cajun music from a club across the street. Donovan had driven back to Fort Polk in the morning. That afternoon, his unit had been ordered down to Haiti.

Forty minutes later, as the band was winding down, the green-eyed man unhooked his legs and left. Chase gestured at his partner's empty glass. She shook her head. He waved a waiter over, paid for both of them, and let her take the lead toward the door.

The casino was a glass and cherrywood confection set atop a gambling floor that glittered like a midway. Chase and Bridget stuck to the periphery, strolling past the crowded games of Pai Gow and roulette. Chase stopped at a blackjack table. Once again his partner shook her head. She needed rest; her period was coming on. He waited till she'd walked away, then left the tables and began to troll the slots.

Chase was not a man to cruise in public. He preferred the baths where servicemen collected, men who knew the meaning of *the manly love of comrades*. The too-green eyes had only given him a glance, yet Chase had sensed their owner understood—like Donovan, who from the first had dignified what up till then had only been the hard, hot fumbblings of drunk Oak Hill cadets.

Donovan McCreedy—mowed down at a checkpoint by some Uzi-wielding jungle bunnies outside Port-au-Prince.

Chase had laid that ghost.

Or so he thought.

He spotted his objective in the foyer, heading out.

The quiet on the sidewalk came as a relief to ears assaulted by the *gling-gling-gling* of slot machines. Chase looked right, toward the Hilton where tomorrow he'd be watching over Jena. Its windows had a greenish tint that verged on phosphorescent. The knot of people standing at the entrance looked like wraiths.

Scanning left, he caught a flash of T-shirt past the line of idling taxis. It was gone a second later. The casino's lower levels rested on a limestone shelf that narrowed to a rounded spit. A hairpin in the road led down; the guy had gone around.

Chase set off, keeping to a measured pace. From his vantage higher up, he could see his target making for an arbitrary fence dividing where you were allowed to walk from where you weren't. He hopped it like a soldier, vaulting easily one-handed. Past the floodlights frosting the casino's sides, he disappeared again.

A gaudy imitation of the *Jet d'eau* in Geneva spilled magenta, pink and purple in the middle of the lake. Closer to the shore, the water was an inky black that made the docks and berths of the casino's small marina look like bleached bones floating on the surface of a tar pit.

The temperature dropped as Chase walked down the switchback road. The air felt soft and heavy, like Savannah but without the marshy stink.

No, not Savannah—like the quarry up near Elberton.

The end of junior year at Oak Hill Military had seen Chase and Donovan promoted to cadet-lieutenant. To celebrate, they'd spent a week at Donovan's, a chance to decompress before the start of summer work: marble-cutting in a granite shed for Donovan; for Chase, a junior law-clerk job in Rome, across the state.

Their final night together, Donovan had driven to a disused pit off Hartwell Highway. There they'd climbed down to a ledge that overhung the quarry pool. Three beers later, naked to their tennis shoes, they'd run and whooped and cannonballed the drop of sixty feet. Scaling up had taken every ounce of skill they had. Panting, they'd spread out a thick, felt sleeping bag and flopped down on

their backs.

Chase recalled a moon so bright the stars were hard to find, and granite rockface sparkling beneath a wash of silver.

Donovan had shifted on his side. Chase had turned to face him. Wordlessly, they'd pressed their toughened man-boy chests together, stroked each others' hardened poles, and bound themselves in brotherhood with splatterings of cum.

Chase hopped the fence and made his way toward the rear of the casino. The spit beyond it tapered into night. The figure at the end was waiting, outlined in the fountain's shifting colours. Resemblances to Donovan began to multiply: the set of his shoulders; the swell of his chest; the tilt of his hips. His triceps as he crossed his arms behind his head and slipped his T-shirt off.

Chase picked up his pace. The figure pivoted and once more seemed to vanish.

The blunt end of the spit was stepped, Chase saw when he looked over. The stranger was below him with his face toward the lake. Chase slid down, sparking off an avalanche of pebbles. The stranger turned. Even in the dark, his eyes glowed green. His jeans were open with his cock protruding from the **V**. He held it cupped as if it were an offering.

Dizzy with the memories it promised, Chase accepted, sinking to his knees and swallowing the shaft.



Luke's hand is on his cock and beating hard.

Both of us are fully clothed. He's on his back, his zipper down. I'm beside him, watching. His breathing's getting ragged and he's seeing only what's inside his head.

He didn't want the story telepathically. He wanted it in words, for me to take my time and tell him everything. Reliving it has gotten me hard, too. If I touch myself, I'll probably explode. But I want this as a gift for Luke. His pleasure is the only thing I need for now.

His stomach starts to spasm and his hand becomes a blur. Suddenly, he's cumming—thick white spurts that pool in his fist.

His breathing steadies. He holds his cock upright. I touch the tip and put my finger to my tongue. The salty taste sends pre-cum up my shaft. I crack the waistband of my jeans and slide my hand inside.

He turns his head toward me.

“Can you hold it, Jimmy-Dean?”

His brow is glistening. His eyes are even greener when he's facing me. I brush his mind with Yes and If you want me to and Why? There's no answer but a smile like Mr. Shen's face in repose.

He takes my hand and squeezes, then gets up and grabs a towel from the rack behind the door. We're in a bed-and-breakfast half an hour north of Ottawa. The bathroom's down the hall. He wipes himself, zips up and folds the towel back in place.

Mr. Shen has booked a room as well. The two of them arrived at noon. Far from tired, Luke was itching to explore the village where we're staying. Mr. Shen, familiar with it, happily obliged.

Luke goes over to the window and stares out. The view is on the Gatineau, a twilit river winding out of sight between two rocky hills. Three days travel through geography more rugged than he's ever known and still it's not enough.

“You were keeping something back,” he says.

“Jealous it was me there doing Chase?” I rib him.

He floods my mind with admiration—fierce, fraternal pride without a trace of envy or resentment. “From John,” he clarifies aloud. “You left out something.”

Mr. Shen had asked about Josh Byron. I'd recounted my half of the meeting.

“Sunday is a go, then?” was his only question afterwards.

I get off the bed and join Luke at the window. “CSIS has decided to back off,” I tell him. “They won't be checking out the Farm. Byron didn't even want co-ordinates.”

“The Farm is safe?”

“Completely.”

“Nice bit of payback, then. Getting Colton to clear out for nothing.”

“I wasn’t thinking of revenge.”

“Maybe not, but still. . . ”

A discreet knock interrupts.

“Boys—,” Mr. Shen says through the door, “—any time you’re ready, I’ll be waiting by the car.”

“Thanks, John,” Luke calls out.

Mr. Shen is treating us to supper up the river, at a diner called The Pineview. He says they have great sugar pie.

Luke puts his arm around my shoulder. “This means that we can go back to the Farm.”

“If that’s what you want. I was thinking maybe someplace. . . ”

He kisses me—softly, on the lips, enough to make my hard-on stir again.

“No, it’s perfect, Jimmy-Dean,” he breathes. “Perfect.”

Chapter 45

OCULUS PRO OCULO

IN DAYLIGHT, THE casino's Hilton looked like a displaced Miami condo. Rearing from the middle of a quarry in Québec, its vapid whites and pastel greens screamed wannabe.

We arrived ten minutes prior to the start of Jena's show. Mr. Shen, who wasn't staying, dropped us off in front. *Goodbye, boys—good luck* was all he said before he pulled away. Unaware that CSIS was no longer to be feared—that Luke and I no longer had to run to ground—he was, from his perspective, bidding Luke a last farewell.

You and Mr. Shen already made goodbyes?

Three days' worth.

How're you feeling?

A noncommittal shrug.

The Psychic Fair was in a large, divided ballroom, not as vast as the Convention Centre in Toronto, but swankier. A sinusoidal ceiling, like the inside of an ocean swell, was hung with glass parabolas whose intricately-blown motifs reflected muted lighting on the waves. Everything was shades of mustard, with a border in the carpet adding muted greens and rusts.

A retracting wall, solid as the real thing, separated Jena from the exhibition floor. Open double doors gave free-flow access either way.

Her setup was the same as the Toronto Psychic Fair: a banquet

table dressed in blue, chairs for five with Thermoses and water glasses, towering Klipschorn speakers and a pair of big-screen monitors. The stage's bright red carpet and the purple drapery were not a good match for the mustard colour scheme.

A wide space had been cordoned off between the dais and the audience. The monitors were running clips of Jena—touring the Casino, chatting up the gamblers, winning at roulette.

Luke and I made for the rear. We wouldn't be there long. When things got going we would have to be up front.

Luke was glancing round and fidgeting.

You all right?

Not used to all these people.

That's him up there.

The purple sweatshirt fussing with a floor mike.

I know, remember?

An image of the CRT in Dr. Colton's study, coloured with some telepathic teasing.

There's his partner.

The stocky woman standing by a door she clearly wasn't letting anyone get through.

BRAZIER's pointers, Baldie and The Blonde, were nowhere to be seen. In disguise? Perhaps they'd been retired and were baying with a pack of similarly out-to-pasture hounds.

The monitors went blank. The kettledrums that signalled Jena's theme began. Dom, the empath from Québec, the woman named Jameela, and Franklin, Dr. Colton's hacker-guru, entered from the exhibition floor. If Jena'd overloaded with just me and Kirin in the crowd, how would she react to this configuration?

Nothing we were doing had been tested. No one knew how Jena would respond when Luke and I got down to business. No one knew for sure if we could even pull it off. Luke's confidence aside, the only thing for certain was we wouldn't be connected with the outcome—whatever it might be.

“Mesdames et messieurs, bienvenue au Hilton Lac-Leamy et à la Foire psychique de l'Outaouais. Il nous fait honneur d'avoir été

sélectionnés par les organisateurs de cette exposition annuelle...”

The French voice whipping up excitement got a sprinkling of applause. It took the English version for the fever to catch on.

“...and now, ladies and gentlemen, please put your hands together for renowned TV personality, Jena, and her Psychic Nexus.”

Enthusiastic cheering as the guarded side door opened and Jena and her handlers filed in.

She's shorter than I thought.

On TV, you only ever see her sitting.

She's tiny. Sure hope your buddy's got good aim.

The ovation died and Jena started.

“Welcome, all you good folks here from Ottawa and Gatineau. You ready for a show? I only been here a short time, but I tell you this whole area be sizzlin’ with vibes. *Goo—ood* vibes. You goin’ to see the power today. The cards be glowin’. Omru’s burstin’ to tell all. You know Omru? He’s me spirit guide...”

Luke shook his head disgustedly.

I did a quick check of the room. All eyes were on Jena. Dom and Franklin were together. Jameela had moved off. Hopefuls were already queueing up before the mike. The sentry by the side door hadn’t budged.

Ready to get started?

Time to lock and load.



Chase is in the no-man's land in front of Jena's stage. While one dupe's fortune's being read, he's chatting up the next.

Luke advances to a spot where he'll be visible to Chase. They need to have reciprocal eye-contact. I take up position further back. For me, it only matters he be in my field of view.

I start reading him, but only superficially. Luke concocts an imprint Chase is certain to react to: a commotion in the room. The image-feeling isn't focused. Several people turn their heads the same

time Chase looks up.

He scans the crowd, but nothing's happening. He frowns and double-checks.

His gaze lands on a pair of eerie emerald eyes.

Two men with the same unearthly looks?

The sketchy map inside my head grows spikes of lust and puzzlement.

Luke senses it.

Contact, Jimmy-Dean.

His words reverberate, like echoes of a sound without a source. His face, if I could see it, would be smiling.

Jena scores a string of hits. The spectators go crazy. Chase escorts the patsy from the microphone and lets the next one through. His discipline's superb. The eyes that are not mine form only part of what he sees. Luke's presence is an oddity. It doesn't trouble or distract him.

I have to focus now. I need to pull Chase into me for Luke to go to work. He knows, and lets me be. There's no regret, no emptiness, no loss when he withdraws. His absence or his presence are the same. The daemon process wakes or sleeps; it doesn't go away.

My cock squirms as the image-map of Chase begins to grow. I've seen his full, unguarded Self, in darkness on a spit of rock. He's cum in me; I've cum in him. I know the joists and joins that make the scaffolding of Chase. I'm not suffering the blindness that afflicts me in a crowd.

Chase the BRAZIER bodyguard isn't quite the Chase I screwed. His image-map is altered by the audience, the change of day, the time of day, the venue, and the sum of all he's done and seen and thought about since then.

Luke rises from his quiet place, eager to begin. I sense him rolling mental sleeves and cracking mental knuckles.

He starts off with a pair of eyes, picked out in the throng but set aside as a distraction. Background becomes foreground as Luke teases them to prominence. Puzzle-pieces shift and flow and snap together differently. The image-sculpture flip-flops like an optical

illusion.

As yet, Luke's only toying with the image that he has inside his head—a Chase Chase could be rather than the Chase Chase is.

Chase-prime—like what we did with Roy.

My cock grows stiff against my thigh.

Suddenly the man I'm reading isn't Chase. Luke's imprint and the sculpture-puzzle-map are one. I don't see the transformation. I feel it, like the sweet first thrust of entry after foreplay.

Chase has no idea of the change that's taken place. Nothing has been added or subtracted or transformed. He's always been the kind of guy who'd stare at Luke too long.

The monitors show Jena shuffling cards. So far she's acting normally. I'd read her if I could. She might be hiding her reactions. No one knows for sure what triggers her abilities.

Luke attacks the obvious. Chase works hard to stay in shape. He tells himself it's rudimentary military readiness. It's really for the high of looking better than most men.

His image changes colour-texture-shape-proportion-meaning. A tingle ripples through my balls. He's standing taller, thrusting out his chest.

Jena's finished with a rube. Chase unhooks the cordon and allows another through. His eyes are never far from Luke.

Body-pride is only the beginning. Darker vanities lurk underneath. Chase thinks he's superior to everyone. His birth, his class, his upbringing—all confirm his status as a cut above.

Step-by-step, Luke moulds another Chase, one who's more than usually conscious of the gap between himself and the civilian roadies he's required to go drinking with.

Arrogance of class turns into arrogance of place turns into Southern insularity turns into loyalty turns into brotherhood turns into Donovan turns into bigotry turns into rage.

All of it is Chase. He's a story with the sentences mixed up. The words remain the same, but ending's always different.

He's always hated Jena. She's one of them—a nigger, like those Haitians Donovan was sent to teach a lesson to. They speak French

down there, and here she is, finishing her tour in a place they don't talk white.

She does hoodoo like them, too. And her darkie mojo works. She's got BRAZIER wrapped around her little finger. INSCOM squanders its elites protecting her.

At least she could be grateful. Her kind never is.

On stage, Jena's hectoring a sceptic Chase let through. There's always one. The audience adores it. Jena pulls a psychic ace from underneath her turban and the doubter's forced to yield. It makes for a good show.

But the disbeliever's white, and this little Aunt Jemima has no right to dress him down. Chase wonders how she'd look if someone put a bullet through her wired headpiece. Froze her dead mid-sentence. Blood and brains exploding on the drapery. The purple drapery. Chase can't stand the colour purple.

Bits of dreams and shards of memory and lessons learned and wrongs remembered...

She's protecting her own kind. Coloured psychics never wind up in the BRAZIER labs. Only white folk do.

Donvovan is dead, and no one paid.

Oculus pro oculo. One eye for another.

It wouldn't be that hard. Shoot her here and deal with the consequences. Donovan avenged, the little monkey neutralized...

Something's happening on stage. Jena's flailing uncontrollably. Her head is twisting back and forth. Real spittle's flying from her gaping mouth. She's trying to speak, but nothing's coming out. Her eyes are wild, the pupils ringed with white.

Forget her, Jimmy-Dean.

Inside my head, the words are urgent, low, and ragged. Chase is nearly there. Luke is playing with his conscience now, probing for the soft spots where it wants to give, the sensitive restraints that cave so easily when lusts are roused. I feel Luke quivering. The lightest touch, the faintest nudge, and Chase will shoot...



Pandemonium.

A woman screamed.

A crimson paintball struck the purple drapery.

Jena's head snapped backwards.

Only afterwards, the sound of gunshot—two reports so close they sounded like a stutter.

Who knows? It may have happened in that order. Time is relative, they say. Cause can sometimes follow on effect. I was Chase in me and Luke in Chase and Chase in Luke and Luke in me. Then . . . nothing. A vacuum of the senses. An enraging void. Frustration so intense my body shook.

Bridget was advancing on the spot where Chase had been. Her gun was drawn and aimed toward the floor. Chase's shot—the first—had toppled Jena backwards. I couldn't see her, either. Two white-robos were crouched down where her chair had been. The other two were vaulting from the stage.

The crowd in panic mobbed the doors. I tried to hold my place but terror has momentum of its own.

Get going, Jimmy-Dean. I'll catch up.

I let myself get swept along. Beyond the doors, hotel security was trying to keep the curious from blocking the stampede. I hunted for an opening and elbowed my way through.

In the corridor outside, I sank against a marble wall. The cool seeped through my T-shirt. The outward shakes subsided, but I still felt like a wire stretched to breaking. My body shouted for release.

Luke appeared as uniformed police came sprinting down the hall. His eyes were fever-bright and waves of manic energy preceded him. Wordlessly, we rode the escalator to the lobby, hurried out the doors and hailed the nearest taxi.

Luke slouched down inside and let his head drop back. He looked absolutely wasted. So, his thought confirmed, did I.

Get it now?

His question had a funny twist—wry and grim and goatish all at once.

Rhetorical as well.

Chapter 46

THIS NIGHT LIGHT SUCH A CANDLE

THE PILOT HAD the Beechcraft fuelled and waiting.

“Decided not to go on that adventure, huh?” he asked as we climbed in.

“Guess I had about as much as I could take in Ottawa.”

“*Ottawa?*” He made it sound as if a sofa-flavoured bicycle were more believable. “Say, hope you don’t mind my asking, but you guys *are* related, right?”

He made a **V** with his fingers and waggled them in front of his eyes.

“Brothers.”

“Wish the wife could see you. She’d go nuts. Now, buckle up. We’re cleared for take-off. Beautiful day again. Trip back should be as smooth as the one up.”

He donned his headset and informed the tower of his status.

Luke strained against his harness as we jockeyed to the runway. An awestruck six-year-old possessed him for a while. I touched his mind and felt the first-time rush of taking off again.

When it passed, he settled back and closed his eyes. His lips fell open and his breathing lengthened into sleep.

I dozed fitfully, gripped by flashes where my heart pumped like a piston and my nerves sang like a turbine at a million rpms. The cabin wasn’t hot, yet my clothes felt thick and sticky. I licked my

lips and tasted salt. Sweat was glowing on Luke's forehead, and a smell rose off his shirt as if it needed changing. His legs were spread akimbo and the muscles of his thighs stood out beneath the denim. Even though he wasn't hard, his crotch looked full and heavy.

The forest carpet down below gave way to fields, then scaly-looking urban sprawl that crept up from the blue of Lake Ontario like eczema. The CN tower hove into view, then Hamilton with the escarpment winding through it like a river filled with trees. The north end of Lake Erie was beneath us when we circled round and started our descent.

The change in pressure woke Luke up. He smiled like someone coming out of meditation, not the deep sleep he'd been in, then buckled up and craned his neck until we'd taxied to a hangar holding six or seven planes the size of ours.

Outside on the tarmac, the pilot wished us luck and thanked me for the tip I slipped him. He didn't seem to notice that my hands were shaking when I thumbed it from my wallet.

The day was getting old, and evening shadows stretched across the parking lot. The Jaguar, which I'd never thought to see again, already looked like something from a former life.

"Why here?" I asked Luke, tossing him the keys, too wired to drive. "We really could go anywhere, do anything."

"I know."

He unlocked, slid in and popped my door.

We didn't speak again until we got to Nebo road, where he pulled off to the side.

"What's up?" I asked.

He turned the motor off. "Haven't walked this stretch of road since what we did to Garrett. Any time I left the Farm was always in the truck."

He set the brake and sat a while, staring straight ahead. Not just the day, but summer, too, was winding down. The teasels in the ditch were brown, the pampas grass like flax.

"Why here?" I asked again. "Why the Farm?"



A pickup filled with hay goes by. Gravel crunches underfoot. A red-wing blackbird warbles from a fencepost.

The house exhales the quiet of abandonment. The windows are wide open but the kitchen door is shut. The handle gives beneath Luke's hand. Ghosts of dinners past rush out. The table and the chairs are there, but Cook's big Garland's gone.

The backstairs creak as we go up, the sound of no one home. Luke turns in the room across from Dr. Colton's study. It still has all its furniture. The bed is even made, without a coverlet. Luke goes to the window.

I move up behind and wrap my arms around his waist. There isn't much to see, just the oaks and maples of the windbreak and the roof of Kirin's cabin.

He takes my hand and puts it on his cock. I squeeze it through a taut, worn skin of denim. Fifteen years of holding on builds up inside his throat. He moans and wheels around.

The kiss is fierce. Lips bruise lips, tongues probe, teeth bite. Hard-ons mash together through our jeans. In mirror image we rip off our shirts. More than just revealed, our chests are bare, like arms exposed in springtime after winter's gone on way too long.

I lick his neck and he licks mine. He grabs my biceps roughly while his own bunch in my hands. I bend to suck his nipples and there's hot breath over mine.

We break apart. Again, like two reflections, we unzip and tear off jeans. Face to face, we lie down on the bed, taking hold of cocks that feel like silk-sheathed iron rods. Pre-cum trickles out as tight fists work the fine skin up and down.

There is no awkward scrambling of limbs. His cock is at my mouth, and mine at his, as if we'd lain that way. Tongues flick out and lap the salty fluid. Fingers smear it over swollen heads. Mouths seek out the fold between the scrotum and the thigh. The smell is dizzying, like sweat and honey mixed.

I take him in my mouth the same time he takes me. Our cocks

grow even stiffer. Suddenly he's overflowing—creamy spurts that burst against my palate. I'm shooting, too, in jets that blast in time with his and taste and feel the same.

It's only the beginning. Smoothly, Luke is on his side, behind me with his arms around my chest. My back bends to receive him. His stifled groans, like whimpers, find an answer in my throat, and he's fucking me, and fucking hard.

Then it's me who's plunging into him, thrusting while he bucks and growls, gripping me and clamping down, urging me to shattering release.

We cum so deep the planted seed can never be uprooted.



Spent, we fell apart. My head dropped to the pillow. Sleep crept up to claim its due.

Luke was jerking off when I woke up. His eyes were far away, with the look I used to see on clients' faces while they beat off to a paid-for seventeen-year-old's erection. He flashed an *Oops-you-caught-me* grin and carried on. I joined in. We oozed more than we geysered when we shot.

Night had fallen and the moon was up. Through the window I could see a mackerel sky approaching.

I raised a sticky hand. "We should clean up."

"You think there's still hot water?"

"Haven't got a clue."

"I got a better idea, anyway."

"Yeah?"

Luke rolled off the bed, retrieved his shirt and used it for a rag. "Coming, lazy-bones?"

He balled the shirt and threw it at me. I wiped off while he donned his jeans, then got up and followed suit.

"Whatcha got in mind?" I asked, lacing up my sneakers.

"You'll see."



The bank of clouds had nearly reached the moon. Two thirds of the sky was curdled silver. Luke gazed up, then set off for the barn.

He palmed a switch inside and waited till fluorescents in the rafters flickered on, then headed for a corner with some jerry cans and tins of Coleman fuel.

“Here,” he said, taking down a lantern. “Fill this up. I got something else to do. Be back in a sec.”

He hoisted up a jerry can and headed for the doors.

I couldn’t see a funnel so I poured directly from a tin. The quantity I sloshed evaporated in the time it took to find a rag.

The moon had vanished when I went outside to wait. The sky was charcoal plaid with strips of lunar white between. Minutes passed. Crickets chirped—one here, one there.

The screen door creaked. Luke backed out. Jerry can between his legs, he doused the stoop and poured a trail to the barn.

“Most fucking fun we ever had was torching Bennett’s place,” he grunted, splashing the remainder of the can around the door. “This time, you’ll remember like you should. Plus it’s dark. Should be a beaut.”

“We shall this night light such a candle by God’s grace as I trust shall never be put out?”

“Said it before—should’ve called you Plato ’stead of Jimmy-Dean.”

He sauntered back and pulled his Zippo from his pocket.

“Wanna do the honours?”

“Nah. It should be you. You’ve earned the right.”

He crouched and flicked the lighter. The gasoline ignited with a pop. Cobalt flame raced off in both directions. It reached the barn before the house, where it turned ochre and began to climb. Seconds later it was snaking up the stoop.

Luke got to his feet and took lantern from my hand.

“We better get moving. Going to have to hurry if we want to catch the show.”

We jogged along the track beside the cornfield, Luke in front sure-footed, me behind and stumbling. Halfway up, a reddish glow began to stain the corn. The tassels turned to copper and the blades a dirty orange. By the time we reached the woodlot, smoke was in the air and we could hear a greedy crackling.

Luke veered right. The barn was an inferno. Angry crimson underlit a crown of oily smoke. Siding boards were peeling back like curls of molting skin. The framing underneath was pure geometry in flame.

He kept on jogging till we reached the path that forked off to the pond. He paused to catch his breath, then set the lantern down and ploughed through canes of raspberry toward a thick-limbed tree. Jumping up, he caught a branch and hooked his leg around.

“Come on,” he yelled. “Front row seats.”

My climbing skills were rusty. It took three attempts to snag the branch and scramble up.

Side by side, legs dangling, we sat and watched the blaze. The walls were nearly gone. Liquid yellow sheeted over what remained. Black smoke gyred skyward like a twister in reverse. The clouds above were ruby coals igniting on a moonlit grill.

Something deep inside exploded, sending up a fireball that flattened at the roof. Another detonation and the roof began to cave. Sparks flew high and wheeled off like swarms of orange fireflies.

The roof's descent disturbed the conflagration's symmetry. An outline of the house emerged, shimmering behind the flames. Smoke poured from the windows. Carmine tongues were licking at the frames.

Luke clapped me on the shoulder. “Had enough?”

He leapt and landed in a practised crouch. I tried to do the same but got the wind knocked out of me.

Past the tangled raspberries, he found a twig and drew his lighter from his pocket. Kneeling by the lantern, he pumped it expertly, lit the twig and touched it to the mantle. The mesh flared blinding white. He valved it down to half.

“Feel like a swim?” He straightened up and headed for the trees.

By Coleman light, the forest was a glittering vault of shadow. Leaves turned into ardent shields of silver-green. Sap winked at us from the trees. Creatures of the night espied our passage with unblinking eyes. Harvest mice went scampering by. Chitterings of angry warning sounded high above.

Luke halted well back of the clearing with the pond.

"I need you to stay here," he said. "I want to get this perfect. I'll call you when, okay?"

He walked off with the lantern. The white light dwindled left, then reappeared a good ways distant, bobbing through the trees.

"Okay, Jimmy-Dean," he hollered. "Just walk straight ahead. Watch your step.

I shuffled forward, trusting to my feet to find the roots.

The clearing was a chamber clad in frosted jade. The pond looked like a mirror made of pure obsidian. He'd hung the lantern in a willow near the little sward of stonecrop. Ripples played across the trees.

"Better if you swim across than try to go around."

I stripped down to my sneakers. The water near the bank was cool but still held summer's memory. The chill of coming fall took over further out. I gasped and kicked off for the other side.

Luke was peeling off his jeans.

"You staying in?" he called.

"It's fucking freezing."

"Never used to make a difference."

"Does now," I chattered, wading out.

He wrapped me in a bear hug till the shivers stopped, then rubbed my arms to chase away the goosebumps.

"My turn now. I'd go in if this were dead of winter."

His hand went to the small wound at his collarbone. Crumbs of grey adhesive traced a dirty square around it.

He bounced up on his toes and tore in recklessly.

"Jesusmotherfuckingchrist!"

"Told you it was cold," I yelled.

"Yeah, as if I give a sweet goddamn," he shouted back.

He dove and surfaced quickly, spluttering and flinging water from hair.

"Whoo-ee!"

I stretched out on my back to watch, propped up on my elbows. He was a sleek, aquatic mammal, wriggling and twisting, churning with his arms, diving under, bursting up, flicking off long arcs of spray that rainbowed in the lantern light. Reflections chased each other through the trees like drunken ghosts.

One of us, at last, was whole.

He broke the surface, facing opposite, and spun around.

"Going under for the count!"

The shift from witness to participant was seamless. His thought-voice filled my head and I was floating, motionless, counting off the hollow-sounding seconds. I felt the pressure in his lungs, the trill of panic in his abdomen, the thrashing of his legs as he strove up for a gulp of air.

"Fuck, man—again!"

He dove with more determination, heading deeper. Our voices joined again in an unhurried count, twice as long this time. Sinews spasmed as he pitted will and reflex. When he surfaced, it was only long enough to get the air for going down again.

Three more times he dove. Each time, the interval got longer.

His tenacity was more than pushing limits. He was practising.

Water sheeted off him as he stumbled to the bank. Breathing hard, he fell beside me. Waves of goose-flesh flickered on his skin. He turned and kissed me on the mouth. His lips were icy, but grew warm as tongues explored and wrestled with each other. My cock began to stir. He cradled it and held it while it lengthened past his wrist.

My fingers sought the hardness at his groin. The thick pole felt like home, its perfection in my fist beyond familiar. I eased the tight skin up and felt inaudible vibrations in his throat.

The kiss's warmth turned into something hungrier. Our pelvises began to rock. Luke freed my grip from his erection, moulding it around my own and urging me to stroke myself.

Satisfied I understood, he rose and padded to the water's edge. My heart began to race. I knew what he was going to do. Just thinking of it made dizzy, wondering if this had always been the object of our game.

He waded in and front-crawled to the middle. There he stopped and treaded water, spinning lazy circles, drinking in—recording—everything. His eyes picked up the lantern glow and mirrored back the clear, chrome green that watched him from the shore.

Wordlessly, he slipped beneath the surface.



The water seals around him like a second skin. Resonance, like whispers in a cave, is in our ears. He hangs suspended, gazing up. The surface looks like rags of phosphor blowing in a breeze.

Overhead, the clouds have gone a sooty tangerine.

The cold between his legs has no effect on his arousal. It feels like a cool hand tickling his balls. I squeeze my cock and thrust as if I'm fucking it.

He flips and breast-strokes deeper. The water's black but lam-bent with a billion motes. Pressure builds inside his ears. The whispering we hear is blood.

His hands touch silt that feels like liquid satin. He finds a stone and prises it with both hands from the bottom. Holding on, he rights himself and sinks until his knees are in the mud.

The forest walls blur into swirling, murky green. The wailing of a siren rises thinly in the distance.

A muffled pounding starts inside his head. I feel his ribcage singing and the tightness at his throat. Fire spreads through his lungs. The scorching heat invades my balls. I start to beat off faster.

The thudding grows. His solar plexus lurches. Dimly, I'm aware he'll never make it to the surface. Even if he drops the stone, his body will give out before he makes it to the sweet night air.

The breathing instinct peaks. He stifles it with massive will. The reflex detonates inside him and his body jigs.

My hand is pumping faster.

The urge to breathe implodes again. His limbs jerk with galvanic shock. The inky water swims with stars, pricks of light like neurons flashing in a floating brain.

The liquid darkness mutates into ancient summer nights.

I'm in the attic bedroom at the foster home.

Luke is whispering, The fireflies are out.

We're beside the other pond, awestruck at the glittering display.

It's daylight and we're wandering home from school.

Wanna steal something?

In the park behind Mt. Hope's town hall, flames are rising through the bleachers.

Let 'em burn. Come on!

He's pissing in the mess we've made in some old witch's kitchen, and rolling joints behind the foster home.

We're plotting our revenge on Mr. Bennett for the beating we received.

We're the fire that rages through his barn and changes everything.

We're princelings in a green-gold paradise.

We're Dr. Colton's protégés and Mr. Shen's disciples.

We're old Cook's little darlings and Miss Harper's special pupils.

We're boys discovering a secret gift, and brothers who have always been in love.

We're everything we ever did, together and for always.

The pain starts in my belly—the hot, familiar buzz that always blossoms into agony. This time it's fuel. My fist yanks harder, faster. In unison, we both let go. Luke's lungs cave and suck in cold black water while my cock erupts and splashes me with searing spray.

Low and soft, a howl starts, rising from my throat, wailing like the sirens getting near.

The keening fades as darkness deeper than the night descends.

Chapter 47

EPILOGUE – REGAINING CONSCIOUSNESS

“W*HEN I WOKE up . . . ”*

No, that wasn't right. I backspaced over it.

When I awoke?

Too formal.

When I regained consciousness?

Better—precise, and rich with meaning. Regain: to acquire for the second time. Consciousness: awareness, knowledge, clarity.

“When I regained consciousness . . . ”

Too clinical. I wiped it out. Sometimes the precise words aren't the right words.

When I came to?

I pushed back from my laptop. The table it was on was sleek-teak Danish modern, though the village I'd holed up in was in Norway. Probably Georg Jensen. Raymond would approve.

It felt like I'd been working on the letter for an aeon. In fact I'd only started after lunch. It must have been the days beforehand mulling over what to say.

I stood and stretched and went out on the gallery. The Sognefjorden down below was fabulously blue. A cruise ship was emerging from the cleft between two mountains like a dollop of the winter snow retreating up the slopes.

Months ago, I'd shared a joint with Axel on Cassandra Island's

dock. The giant blond had spoken of his home, not fifty kilometres from my suite at the Kviknes—the hotel in Balestrand, magnet for the famous since the nineteenth-century. Kaiser Wilhelm was a frequent guest. They'd even kept his dining chair.

We could go anywhere, I'd said to Luke, *do anything*. Facing the decision on my own, I'd chosen north. Crisp and clean and rugged. Far removed from anything I knew. My only link to Norway was the recollection of a Nordic Titan's thighs.

My eyes went up the truly verdant mountainsides, utterly unlike the Coleman-frosted green I'd woken to two seasons and a world away.

Woken to.

Regained consciousness.

Gain entails an increase.

Perhaps it was the right expression after all.

As his self-control collapsed, Luke had filled me with—in Mr. Shen's words—genuine mnesic artefacts. The real deal. Authentic shared experience, not digests with the juicy bits left out. And more than just the things we'd done together; incidents I hadn't been around to witness, too.

A gain.

No one had imagined I'd be present at Luke's death. Dr. Colton's "psychogenic neural overstimulation" was supposed to have been lifted by my learning of it—if, that is, anyone had sought me out to tell me. By taking his own life instead of waiting out the tumour that would kill him anyway, Luke himself removed the tripwire thwarting reassembly of my six years at the Farm. With his gift of real memories as landmarks on the way, I could start along the path of reconstruction on my own. I didn't need the hieroglyphs of Mr. Shen's last journal—though, admittedly, they made more sense as time went by and helped a lot.

It took as long to piece things back together as it had to break them up. Some bits flowed together smoothly. Others were more difficult, especially the information gleaned from Dr. Colton. Open-reading of him meant that, as my memories came back, part of him became a part of me.

Another gain.

I went inside and poured a shot of ice-cold *akevitt*. I'd deal with the waking issue later. What mattered now was wrapping up the chronicle of Luke and David Ase.

"Luke was right," I typed, "Dr. Colton didn't lie, but neither did he tell the truth. Misdirection gets to be a habit when a portion of your mind is always doing it, I guess.

"His version of my last night at the Farm began with me in hiding under the veranda, reading Garrett Finnestad while Luke kept him distracted.

"'Distracted' seriously whitewashed what was really going on. Luke was going down on him.

"Dr. Colton had been harbouring suspicions about Garrett for a while. 'Harbouring suspicions' may sound odd—you'd think an em-path would be sure—but even lovers who can sense what's in each others minds keep secrets, even to the point of keeping secret about keeping them.

"The morning after Garrett's death, when Dr. Colton made me read him, he was barely holding on. His lover had just died, a man he'd known for decades. If that weren't bad enough, he now had proof the same man had been messing with a minor—a ward of his, at that.

"For himself, Dr. Colton had grown fond of me, and entertained the notion of a sexual encounter. The context was all wrong, though, so he'd saved it for his fantasies and kept his pants zipped up. Seeing Luke in Garrett's mind, blowing him, brought Dr. Colton's well-suppressed desires to the fore, arousing him and wracking him with guilt he wouldn't otherwise have felt.

"Grief. Betrayal. Guilt. Small wonder open-reading of him left me shell-shocked. Even now, my first few weeks with Mr. Shen remain a blur. Mostly, I remember missing Luke. *Fiercely* missing him.

"There was more on Dr. Colton's plate. When I confronted him with Project #412, he'd waved it off as mere conjecture, a possibility he'd given up on decades prior to the advent of two brothers having mirror psychic gifts. Not true. Empathy-enhanced imprinting

through telepathy had always been his Grail. Amongst other things, its existence would oblige the SPR in Britain to revise its stance on US research into psychotronic weaponry. He'd never gotten over their dismissal of his fears. The very thing he'd hoped for was at last within his grasp, precisely at the moment he was forced to give it up. Added to his turmoil, then, was crushing disappointment.

"And, of course, his horror.

"As a consequence of their ability to imprint states of mind, transmitters can develop psychopathic tendencies. The world revolves around them, so it seems, since everyone responds to their emotions, needs and wishes—voiced or not. Thus they have no motivation to acquire compassion.

"On the reverse side of the coin, empaths have a tendency to moral disengagement—a consequence of their ability to grasp, to *understand*. Their sympathy can lead them into 'going along with things'. Passing judgment's hard when you're attuned not just to feelings, but their origins as well.

"Dr. Colton hoped that our propensities would cancel out each other, or, at least, encourage checks and balances. And who knows? They might have were it not for our telepathy.

"The candle to my moth, in Dr. Colton's words, was always Luke's excitement. What he didn't specify was *sexual* excitement.

"What he 'saw' in Garrett's mind was Luke fellating Garrett for the purpose of initiating wanton play designed to get our rocks off. Don't forget—Dr. Colton open-read me after I read him, and learned that we'd been jerking off throughout the whole affair. Empathy-enhanced imprinting turned us on in ways we couldn't fight—and didn't want to once it started.

"The measures he and Mr. Shen decided on so quickly were the only ones they could have taken. That Luke himself, in time, agreed provided vindication. He wasn't putting up a front, accepting his captivity—which, in the end, was relatively light considering the danger it was meant to hold. He fully understood that if we'd stayed together, nothing could have stopped us from repeating what we'd done. It feels odd to say it, but the Caucus did its best to be compassionate."

Nearly done. Suppertime was getting close. *Middag*, as they called it here. A good one came with lots of boiled potatoes and a pile of rutabagas.

“The story has a postscript. As I’ve mentioned, Luke, in dying, passed on memories of his own—the hardest to unravel since so many *almost* fit with what I knew. Or rather, ‘learned’ as the transparencies of memory slipped back in place, to use an image borrowed from the clever Mr. Shen.

“Luke had always meant our game to end in Garrett’s death. He presented it as just another chance to blow our wads because he didn’t want me knowing what he planned, nor why. Empaths can keep secrets from each other; so can telepaths.

“What Luke was hiding was the truth behind his ‘childish lie’, the one of sexual abuse that Dr. Colton couldn’t quite dismiss.

“For nearly three years Garrett had, in fact, been raping Luke, threatening to do the same to me if he told anyone. Luke had finally stood up to him—what Dr. Colton had believed was he and Garrett “having words”. Garrett, a much bigger man, just laughed and took him anyway, murmuring the while I’d be next.

“Ironically, the blow job Dr. Colton thought was Luke seducing Garrett—cold-bloodedly, so we could get our rocks off—was Luke’s start to ending a much colder sexual psychopathy. Garrett didn’t botch the turn that flipped him in the ditch; Luke had rigged the tractor. What he hadn’t counted on was Garrett being pinned, not crushed, and living long enough to tell the tale, so to speak.”

My stomach growled. Reindeer steak tonight—I’d checked at lunch. It came with lots of gravy, which was doubly good because Norwegians frowned at butter on potatoes. Afterwards, I’d spend the evening tweaking what I’d written, then tomorrow, generate a pdf and have the front desk print a copy.

But for now, I scrolled back to the top and, in the way of things, re-read the opening.

“*Dear Ferko,*” it began, “*I had a brother...*”