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Select Few



All her life she thought
she was alone . . .

MARIT WEISENBERG

Select Few

BOOK TWO



Select Few

BOOK TWO of THE SELECT



MARIT WEISENBERG



For Astrid and Margot—M. W.

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Charlesbridge Publishing, Inc.

Published by Charlesbridge

85 Main Street

Watertown, MA 02472

(617) 926-0329

www.charlesbridgeteen.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Weisenberg, Marit, author. |

Chu, Carol, illustrator. | Rebenschied, Shane, illustrator.

Title: Select few / by Marit Weisenberg ;

illustrations by Carol Chu & Shane Rebenschied.

Description: Watertown, MA : Charlesbridge, [2018] | Sequel to: Select. |

Summary: Julia and John agree to go separate ways for the summer,
freeing Julia to reunite with fellow outcast Angus on a road trip seeking
Julia's parents, but leading to new discoveries.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017056422|

ISBN 9781580898294 (reinforced for library use) | ISBN 9781632897640 (ebook)

Subjects: | CYAC: Ability—Fiction. | Parapsychology—Fiction. |

Adventure and adventurers—Fiction. | Love—Fiction. |

Family life—Fiction. | Fame—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.W4347 Sen 2018 | DDC Fic—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017056422>

Printed in the United States of America

(hc) 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Display type set in Freeland by Trial by Cupcakes

Text type set in Adobe Garamond Pro

Production supervision by Brian G. Walker

Text designed by Diane Earley



Nothing in life is to be feared.
It is only to be understood.

—Mari Curie

JUNE

Chapter One



Ten, nine, eight . . .

I focused on the elevator doors, counting down, tapping my foot, impatient to be out of the small space but always afraid of what I might find on the other side.

Three, two, one . . .

The silver doors parted.

Go.

It was a race to see how quickly I could blend in outside. I strode through the lobby of the W Austin Hotel, eyes zeroed in on the glass and wood door in the distance.

Keep moving, always keep moving.

It was when I stood still in public that someone might recognize me.

“Have a good afternoon, Miss,” the residence concierge called as I passed by. I nodded, then put in my earbuds.

Before I saw them, I sensed the two paparazzi who lay in wait like sentries. An older man and a much younger woman,

both of whom I'd seen before. I knew the exact moment they jolted to life at the sight of me. I could feel the intensity of their desire as they followed in my wake, ten feet behind me.

I knew I shouldn't, but I wanted to prevent their interference in today of all days. I swung the heavy exit door open with one hand and let it fall closed behind me, brushing it with the tips of my fingers and sending enough energy through to make a hairline fracture. A spiderweb of cracks slowly spread through the glass. I was out the door, two strides away, when one of my stalkers touched the handle to exit and the glass shattered, sending shards cascading to the floor and leaving the two paparazzi to deal with the debris and attention inside the lobby.

But I was outside. The muggy, summer city smell hit me, and I started my run. Head down, I cleared the hotel and moved through the downtown streets, feeling my shoulders relax by the second. If there were any photographers, hopefully all they would see was a girl wearing dark running clothes, a baseball hat, and sunglasses.

Suddenly I realized I was happy. I'd really been looking forward to today.

At a stoplight I continued running through the yellow even as pedestrians behind me slowed, not wanting to take chances in the busy traffic. Soon enough I crossed the First Street Bridge to run on the shaded trail that snaked around Lady Bird Lake, its banks lined by thick, green overgrowth. It was cool for mid-June but humid. Since it was midafternoon, the runners had thinned on the trail, but a crowd was on the lake in full sun, paddleboarding and canoeing, the din of their talking and laughing echoing off the water. A few dogs

off their leashes splashed at the edges of the lake while their owners stood nearby, chatting.

The very last stretch was so sparsely populated, I let myself go, running uphill in a sudden burst. The faster I ran, the sooner I'd arrive at the house. The cypress and sycamore trees flew past, the muddy ground blurring beneath my feet, the music pounding in my ears. I kept going, running away from all of it. From all the eyes on me. From the ghosts.

I saw someone up ahead with two pit bulls straining on leashes, and I immediately slowed my pace before he noticed my ridiculously fast speed. I leaned my head back, taking in the fresh air and the heat and life outside the walls of my sterile, white apartment. It was Saturday. I hadn't been outside for three days.

Entering the Zilker neighborhood from the trail beneath Barton Springs Road, I passed Barton Springs pool on my right and kept my eyes straight ahead. It had been almost a year since I'd risked exposing my family's secrets to save my sister from drowning in that very pool. My stomach tightened, and I tried not to think about her, my dad, stepmother, and the rest of those radiant, inexplicable creatures that were my extended family.

When I entered the neighborhood, marked by the ranch houses and bungalows, election signs in front yards, and cracked sidewalks I knew well, I slowed to a walk. Only a block away from my destination, I didn't want anyone to see I'd been running in June heat but didn't have a drop of sweat on me. I slowed even more when I noticed the large number of cars parked on both sides of the narrow street. Upon arrival at the curb in front of the Ford house, I was met with

a “Happy Graduation” banner that hung on the red-painted front.

The door opened and three girls my age, still in their dresses for their graduation, exited onto the walkway, phones in hand. I could hear sounds of a party coming from the backyard. This wasn’t the small family gathering I’d assumed it would be.

The girls glanced in my direction.

“Is that who I think it is?” Though there was distance between us, I could easily hear the brunette with the floral sundress and messy bun murmur incredulously to the other two.

“What, are they back together?”

“No. The world would know.”

“Then why is she here?”

This was the reason I hadn’t gone to the graduation ceremony earlier in the day. I hated the scrutiny. But I’d reached the mailbox of the Ford’s house and turning away would be even worse.

The girls parted in front of the door to make room for me.

“Hi. Excuse me,” I said, trying not to let my self-consciousness show.

I entered the house and carefully removed my sunglasses, tentatively stepping into the small living room. The sectional was piled with boys and a couple of men watching basketball playoffs on the TV. They all glanced up at once. I gave them a tight smile and averted my eyes.

French doors connected the living room to the small kitchen. Beyond it, smoke from the grill billowed past the open back door. From the sound of it, most of the party

was outside. Cautiously, trying not to draw extra attention, I walked past the partygoers stationed in the kitchen and took the single stair down into the backyard.

At least forty people were scattered across the rectangular lawn—a collection of teens, their middle-aged parents, and some younger children playing horseshoes under the oak trees near the back fence, likely getting eaten by mosquitos in the damp grass.

The beat of my heart picked up when I finally laid eyes on John. He stood on the grass in a group that included his younger brother, Alex, two other friends, and someone's dad in a tie. John briefly turned to kick an errant soccer ball back to the little girls who played behind him. I smiled inadvertently and quickly stepped off to one side of the patio, under the scant shady cover of the eaves so I could watch for a moment unseen.

When we first met, I couldn't acknowledge it, but now I saw that John was beautiful. He wore his almost black hair on the shaggy, sexy side. The brothers looked a lot alike, but John took after their father, exhibiting more of his Asian heritage with his much darker hair and eyes. Alex was a couple of inches shorter, and I guessed he would have killed to have John's height since they both played tennis. John had the ideal build for the sport he had come to resent: tall, lean, but still muscular.

The graduation ceremony ended hours ago, but John still wore a white button-down, only now with the sleeves rolled and paired with shorts and flip-flops. I recognized the shirt as the one I'd borrowed the first night I ever came to his house. That was the night I told him the truth about my uniquely

evolved family, when we ended the night pressed up against each other and the wall of his bedroom, unable to keep our distance.

I was glad John didn't know I was studying him. I was always studying him, making sure nothing had changed—that he hadn't changed—since the last time I'd seen him. Six months ago, John scared me when told me about a vision he had of where my family was hiding. Visions were something only Novak, my father, could experience.

The night I ran away from home, the same night our entire clan seemingly disappeared off the face of the earth, Novak told me about a prophecy. He said that we would be able to read the mind of an outsider and that person would be essential to our survival. Up until that point, I'd had an idea that he wanted to prove there were more of us—genetically-advanced humans—or at least that there were people who might be able to shift to become more like us. But I hadn't known the details.

Novak had no idea that I'd been reading John's mind for months already, ever since I'd been banished to a different school and told not to even think about using any of my abilities. At first, I had been embarrassed by my strange connection to an outsider. Then I found I was inexplicably and overwhelmingly drawn to John the more I listened in on his thoughts. When I left my family, I took my secret with me.

But nothing out of the ordinary had happened during the time I'd been with John and since the day my family disappeared from Austin. Now I sometimes wondered if John had had a vision at all. He seemed completely himself, a typical

eighteen-year-old, and different from the perfect, unearthly kids I'd grown up with. That was part of why I was in love with him.

I saw the soccer ball right before it hit the shoulder of the man in the tie standing next to John. The force of the ball knocked the glass out of the man's hand, and it flew through the air, projecting wine in one long, red arc. John extended his foot toward the flying glass, catching it on top of his flip-flop and shifting its descent from impact with the concrete of the walkway to a soft landing in the grass.

A quick, incredulous cheer erupted from the crowd.

"Nice reflexes," the man in the tie said.

Alex shook his head at his brother. "What are you *doing*? Way to risk your tennis career to save a wine glass."

Was this reaction something for me to worry about?

No, the man was right. It was just good reflexes.

The group still laughed, all except John, whose eyes were now on his father, Taro, who stood at one edge of the party, while another parent stood beside him tapping his glass with a utensil. The people in the yard quieted as they also turned their attention to Taro.

In his strong, smooth voice, Taro said, "Thanks, everyone, for coming." He cleared his throat. "They say time flies, but it moves even faster than you think. Suddenly I'm watching my oldest son and his friends graduate from high school. We've known many of you kids for years, and it's been a privilege watching you grow up."

I looked at John who hated being the center of attention. He tensed in anticipation of what was coming next, a trickle of sweat traveling from his temple down his cheek.

“We also wanted to say—since we don’t say it enough—how proud we are of you, John. You’ve always surprised us. Kathleen and I will never forget when you were eight years old and we thought you and your brother were playing in the backyard. Being the most responsible parents in the world, we didn’t foresee that you’d just leave the yard. Much less that you’d lead your brother to the park across the street to watch the kids at a tennis camp. Suddenly we heard a knock on the door, and there was a man holding a racket, with you by his side, asking me if I’d ever seen you hit a tennis ball.”

Everyone laughed.

Taro smiled, but then his tone changed and he seemed to speak directly to John. “It hasn’t been easy having the schedule you’ve had. We worried because you always said yes to more practice and more tournaments and never complained. It’s taken incredible discipline to keep playing tennis hour after hour the way you have and when there were so many other things you said you wanted to try. When you came home early from Florida, we knew you were ready to quit.”

I glanced at John. His face betrayed nothing, which was how I knew Taro’s mention of being cut from the tennis academy got under his skin.

“Then, out of nowhere,” Taro continued, “it was like you became a different person.”

I stood up straighter and adjusted the brim of my hat.

“You got so focused. And that made the difference. You earned your scholarship, and now you’re going to college halfway across the country. We’ll miss you, but we couldn’t be prouder. Happy graduation.”

While everyone clapped, John’s mother, Kathleen, walked

over to her son and put her arm around him. Taro joined them and pulled John's head close to plant a quick kiss on top.

John must have felt someone watching him and looked up. Our eyes met, and our gazes held. Whenever he turned his full attention on me, my stomach still did a somersault. Alex noticed and gave John a small shove and said, "Go."

"Excuse me," John murmured to his friends and family.

My girlfriend's here.

I was surprised for a second—I hadn't been able to read his thoughts in months.

He must have remembered that I could read his mind because it went instantly blank, like he erected a wall to block me. John put that defense in place whenever he was with me now. It seemed like a long time since his thoughts had been an open book.

His dad put a hand on John's shoulder, stopping him from escaping. I heard Taro say, "Can you find a chair for your grandmother?" He gestured to the opposite end of the crowded yard.

John gave me a look that said, "I'll be right back."

Damn. More waiting.

All I wanted was to be with him and now I needed to say good-bye in public while pretending to be just friends. He should have warned me the party was going to be so big.

The clouds had passed in front of the sun and the air felt heavy. While I waited for him, I watched the partying I'd seen many of the kids from school. I never forgot a face; each one was cataloged in my brain. I kept myself mildly entertained observing a boy and girl who had their backs to one

another but whose slight tilt of their heads and the angling of their shoulders gave away the attraction between them.

Still, slowly, as if I were on stage and they were my audience, all eyes began to find me. No matter how I dressed, no matter how I tried to avoid eye contact, I'd learned over time that there was something about me and my family that always attracted people's attention.

Time to move.

"You're Julia Jaynes, right?" A man in a checkered shirt with a heap of straw-colored hair practically jumped in front of me.

"Hi," I said with practiced politeness.

"I recognized you! I'm Louie. I just moved in down the street."

"Ah," was all I could think of to say.

"Any leads on your father?"

"Not that I'm aware of." I tried to take a step back, but the wall of the house was already at my heels.

"What about that kid with the super strength? The one they've tried to explain away. Where's he hiding?" Louie joked, wiping his brow.

When I didn't answer, he said, "I like how you have a watchfulness about you. Do people think you're superhuman too?" Louie laughed.

"That's funny," I said, deflecting.

I searched over Louie's shoulder for John. He was close but blocked by a couple I knew were the Ford's best family friends, visiting from Chicago. They were much like the Ford family—one white parent and one Asian parent. They were extending their congratulations and taking a photo of their

daughter, Allie, with John. I was well aware that Allie had been the first girl John had ever had sex with.

“Pardon me,” I said brusquely to the neighbor.

“What? Hard to mingle with us plebs? Once there was a time when the rich gave a shit—the Rockefellers, the Carnegies.”

Wow. I stepped farther away from the guy.

“Here, let me give you my card.” Louie had his card at the ready and held it out for me. “I have a real estate venture I know you’d be interested in.”

To avoid a scene, I quickly took the card, but he held onto it, pulling it back. I looked up, focusing on him anew.

“You need to put all that money somewhere,” he said, almost leering. Then he let go.

In my mind, I shoved him away from me, hard. He stumbled a foot backward onto the grass, almost losing his balance. The look on his face was startled surprise at first. Half a second later, it turned to wariness as he realized that he hadn’t felt anyone actually touch him.

I had been ready to intrude on Allie and John, but now I had to move. I walked with my eyes downcast, headed anywhere that was away from this man and the party. Now on a roll, I mentally gave a push to the boy who was clearly thinking about the girl behind him. He bumped into her, and from the corner of my eye, I saw them turn toward one another as he apologized.

I made my way to the side yard where the lawnmower and trash cans were kept and drew up short when I saw that Alex’s boyfriend, August, had had the same idea.

“Augustine,” I said by way of greeting.

“Julia Jaynes,” he drawled, smiling and giving a nod of his head in acknowledgment. Besides John’s family, he was one of the few people who knew that John and I were together. August started to put out the cigarette.

“Don’t on my account.”

August pulled the pack out of his back pocket and offered one to me. I looked around and then reluctantly took it. The last cigarette I’d smoked had been months ago with the Lost Kids, my private name for the group of boys from my extended family who, like me, had been told not to use their abilities. We’d been a close group, crushed by the rules, banded together out of desperation and rebelliousness. We had all believed Novak’s promise that once we moved on to a permanent home, once the Puris’ last Relocation was over, we’d all be taught how to use our full abilities. Only the chosen kids, like my sister, had been tutored by the adults without interruption.

Most of us had found ways to cheat. I had most of all. I bowed my head to hover over the lighter that August held for me.

“Or shouldn’t I call you that anymore?” he said.

“What?” I straightened and took a big inhale, leaning all my weight against the wall of the house behind me.

August flicked a piece of tobacco from the tip of his tongue. “Alex said you were thinking of changing your name once you moved to California.”

“Alex talks a lot.”

August laughed. “Well, that’s for sure.”

“I’m thinking about it.” I realized I didn’t need to justify myself to August and explain that all I wanted was a fresh

start. To fly under the radar and blend in, to be able to go to a party like this one and act my age.

I changed the subject. "You should stop smoking," I said, meaning it and then realizing how obnoxious that sounded.

"What about you?"

How to explain it didn't do anything to me? I was immune to the side effects.

"I should too," was all I said, tugging at the hem of my shorts.

"Nice spread in *Vogue*."

"Ha. *Teen Vogue*, right? Someone showed it to John. Paparazzi photos of me walking down the street?"

"You didn't see it?" August asked, amazed.

"No, I stopped reading all news and magazines," I said more vehemently than I had intended.

August tried to smooth over the moment. "I didn't see it, but I heard about it. 'Street-style icon.' Nice."

"Yeah, since then I've stopped wearing nice clothes as you can see." I gestured to my running clothes.

"Why?"

"The less attention the better, I think." I tipped my chin to the greater beyond where John's parents were hosting his graduation party.

"They're just worried you're going to break his heart again," August said.

I'd meant to be light. I didn't want to know what John's parents really thought of me in case it would hurt.

"There's a better chance he'll break mine," I said seriously. I'd promised myself I would never hurt him again.

"Do you have security here?"

“No. I really didn’t want Stuart to come.”

“Why?”

“The Fords would think it was weird. They don’t like the whole circus.”

“I think they get it that you’re the richest girl in the world and you need security.”

“I’m not the richest girl in the world.” I didn’t like to talk about it.

“Do you worry about getting kidnapped?” August asked.

“No. Besides, it wouldn’t be worth it for any kidnapper. There isn’t anyone left to pay my ransom,” I joked. It was a little too dark of a thing to say. For a second, August was taken aback. But what was the point of hinting around about it? Everyone at this party knew I was the daughter of a world-famous fugitive.

“Are you glad you stayed behind?” August asked.

No one had asked me that in the six months since my family—an entire group of sixty people—had disappeared off the face of the earth.

“Yes,” I finally said. It was the truth. But it had been more difficult than I had thought it would be. I missed my sister, Liv, so much. I’d grown up alongside her and then—just like that—she was gone and I would never see her again. It was like she had died.

August kicked at a fire ant pile with the toe of his white tennis shoe. “I can’t believe the whole family is leaving for the summer. Do you think Kathleen and Taro planned to be teachers just in case they had tennis prodigies for children? Then they’d be free to take Alex and John to the big tournaments across the United States all summer? It kind of seems too perfect.”

“Seriously. It all worked out like it was according to some master plan. Why are you hiding over here by the way?”

“Eh. Their grandma isn’t so into me. The black boyfriend.”

“I haven’t met her yet,” I said. “Are you sure she even cares?”

“Maybe, who knows? But Kathleen and Taro and John are all going out of their way to make me feel comfortable. Alex keeps trying to put his arm around me in front of her.”

I started laughing. It felt good to socialize. August was my ally since he was also an outsider dating a Ford son.

“It’s going to rain,” I said, looking up at the sky. I was thinking it would be good time to leave, before it poured, when I heard the heavy breathing of the neighbor’s dog as he barreled up to the fence opposite August and me. He began barking maniacally, sensing I was different, and hurled himself against the weathered wood.

Just then John’s mom rounded the corner. August furiously stamped out his cigarette but was still busted. A beat ahead, I made sure my cigarette was already out of sight.

“August, honey. Really?” Kathleen chastised and gave him a quick one-arm hug to take away the sting. “I just came to investigate why this dumb dog is barking. You two are agitating him by standing here, I hate to say it. And I don’t especially want our guests hanging out by the trash cans. Come back to the party.”

“Yes, ma’am,” August said politely.

“Seriously, August, if you smoke, that’s on you—you know better. But I don’t want my kids smoking.”

August glanced at me, confused because Kathleen was singling him out.

God, I didn't even smoke anymore and I'd almost been caught by John's mom the one time I did. I hadn't even felt her coming until the very last second. I'd been working on dulling my hypersensitivities. It had felt necessary during these past few months of intense scrutiny and speculation, but now I was close to making stupid mistakes.

Kathleen left us to return to her guests.

"Damn," August said. "What is it about the Fords that makes me always want to please them?"

"Because they actually care," I said.

I walked partway back to the party with August.

"Group photo!" someone called. "Quick! Before it rains!"

I stopped in my tracks. I had no choice but to leave now.

"Not your thing?" August said.

"No, I'm trying to keep a low profile. You know, stay off social media." I knew how that sounded. Annoying. Self-involved. I wished I could tell him it was John I wanted to keep off the radar. I didn't want *them* to find him.

I hung back as August rejoined the party. From my vantage point, I watched everyone begin to arrange themselves for the photo. I saw a John I wasn't used to seeing—one who had a life completely apart from me. He was surrounded by people who loved him and had helped raise him. Teammates, coaches, friends. From across the yard, our eyes locked.

He had no idea how much I wished I could stay.

I heard one woman whisper to another, "Is that her?"

The rain started coming down hard, and people scrambled to move inside. In the chaos, it would take a few minutes for John to realize I'd left.

I turned back around, opened the gate, and began jogging

home in the rain. When I was far enough away, I texted John: Got a little camera shy—heading home.

I wasn't in any hurry to shut myself back inside the W so I ran lightly, slowly, only half-seeing the lake now emptied of boats.

Thirty minutes later, discouraged and dripping from the rain, I woodenly walked down the long, empty hallway of my floor at the W. Nearing the door to my apartment, I sensed heat behind it. I couldn't help it—a huge smile broke out over my face.

I deftly punched in the lengthy security code that must have been entered just moments before.

Closing the door behind me, I leaned against it, wishing I wasn't so obviously blushing with pleasure.

John stood patiently in the middle of my living room, his phone at his side, looking like he had all the time in the world, like he hadn't just left his own party. The Ford's new dog, Spirit, pranced excitedly by his side.

"Hey," I said, trying for nonchalant, which was impossible because I couldn't stop smiling.

He smiled gently, his voice gravelly when he spoke. "Hey."

Then he cleared his throat and broke eye contact. John looked around the room, cocking his head to one side. "So I heard about a graduation party? At some rich girl's apartment?"

I pushed myself off the door, already holding my arms out.

"You came to the right place."

AUGUST, two months later

JOHN

I'm just going to silently talk to you for a while so I don't go crazy. I have to take my mind off what's going on. I hope you can hear me, but I don't want you to hear me because it would mean you're nearby. And I want you close, but I don't want you anywhere near this mess.

Thinking back to the beginning of summer, I wish we'd just stayed in your apartment at the W. Why was I always rushing around? I should have appreciated every moment . . .

JUNE

Chapter Two



“I guess the rain stopped,” I said. At the top of this high rise, my sunlit bedroom lived in the clouds. And I was floating, languorously lying with John on my king-size bed, the cool, white sheets half-kicked off, forming shadowed hills and valleys.

“It sucks. Sneaking around, rushing.” John kissed the side of my neck, just beneath my earlobe.

“It’s almost over.” I smiled hugely and watched the ceiling fan whir lazily above us. We were so close to making it out of the fishbowl called Austin. He just had his summer competitive tour to get through, and then we’d finally be together in California, where there would be no parents, and I’d be farther from the place that held so many memories of my missing family. California felt like the promise land.

John rolled on his back to button his shirt and then moved onto his side, propped his head on his palm, and looked down at me. We always did this—push the limits of our time together. One minute became five, five became ten,

and thirty minutes meant he'd be late to tennis practice or family dinner. Recently, he missed an entire match. John bore the brunt of any consequences, but it didn't ingratiate me to the Fords. He began grazing his fingers over my collarbone, absentmindedly drifting down my arm. I held my breath as he lowered his hand to the hem of my T-shirt. Suddenly his fingers slid underneath and ran up to the side of my ribcage where he knew I was ticklish.

"Stop!" I jerked away, laughing. The white duvet at the foot of the bed slithered like a giant octopus to the floor.

I tried to stop laughing and catch my breath, daring to come near him again. I rested my wrist on his shoulder. "I'm sorry about the party. I was just kind of blindsided by the crowd. I shouldn't have left without saying good-bye. So thank you for coming to me."

"Thank you for having me," John said softly.

We both smiled, still staring at each other after all these months like we couldn't believe that we got to be with the other person.

"I wanted to tell you," I said. "I got an email from Stanford last week that I didn't open. Then, this morning, I got something in the mail. I haven't opened it either. It's next to you in the bedside table. Will you?"

John turned quickly and my arm fell away. He opened the drawer.

"It's big. That's good." He sat up higher in bed, leaned against the headboard, and extracted the first page with the official Stanford letterhead. Watching him closely, I knew when he had read for one second too long and the chance for good news had passed.

John handed me the letter. "It's not no. They just want to meet you face-to-face."

I read it and tried not to display my surprising disappointment that more steps to admittance were required. I'd assumed it was an acceptance packet. Still, I should have been immensely relieved it wasn't a done deal. "Look when it's scheduled. That's Nationals."

"Promise me, you'll at least go to this interview. It's only at the start of Nationals. You can be there for the later rounds."

"I don't know. Stanford or not, I'm still moving to California."

"That's not the same as going to college. With me."

I paused and then decided to be honest. Pulling my knees to my chest, pretending to be concerned with the chipped nail polish on one toe, I admitted, "I'd be scared all the time."

I glanced up to meet John's eyes, and I could see I'd surprised him.

"Haven't you gotten used to the pointing and whispering?" he asked.

"No." I shook my head. "That sucks. It's more than that though. It's too hard to be trying not to . . . to have to always be self-aware if I'm doing or saying something I shouldn't. I know there would be a lot I could learn, but I would spend more of my time hiding myself and my abilities. In addition to everyone knowing I'm loaded."

I thought John wouldn't know what to say and would see my point.

"You already made it through senior year at Austin High. You'll fit in a lot better at a big school where there's more freedom." He grabbed the tall, skinny bottle of water on the

bedside table next to him and handed it to me. I'd just been about to ask him for it.

I took the water and unscrewed the plastic cap. "There's more scrutiny now. I've stopped using all my abilities, but I could mess up and do something telekinetic in public, or anticipate something I shouldn't be able to. There's the small stuff that adds up to make people suspicious or it could be one big thing. Some of the Puris tribe went to business school or med school to learn something for the benefit of the whole group, but I don't know how they made it through and now there's no one left to ask. And I seem to have more abilities than the average person in my . . ."

I stopped talking when he gave me a look. With those incredible eyes, he looked deep into mine, making me pay close attention to what he was about to say.

"Don't give up your abilities just because you stayed behind. I know you're scared, but you are the strongest person I know. You broke away from an entire way of life when that was all you knew. You've managed completely on your own. Have faith in yourself."

I smiled, but looked down, blowing off his compliment. "That is such a Ford thing to say. You sound just like your dad giving his toast."

My eye glimpsed something in the open drawer.

John turned his head. After a pause, he reached out and extracted the delicate necklace.

He held it high for both of us to see. A nugget of rough gold hung from a fragile chain.

"You kept it."

"I didn't know what to do with it." I cleared my throat,

wanting to tell him to put it away, but was spellbound. It was original gold carried by my ancestors who'd fled their home in Peru after a genocide. Through all the years of wandering, of hiding their differences, of relocating every twenty years, they'd kept it with them. Loosely translated, our name for ourselves—Chachapuris —meant walkers or those who walk the earth.

We watched the necklace swing like a pendulum, transfixed. The night it had been given to me, I'd been at the height of my abilities. I remembered how good that had felt, however briefly.

“Julia,” John said softly.

“What?” I asked, still staring at the necklace, the last trace of my heritage.

The gold suddenly caught a beam of light, and showers of sparkles shot across the stark white walls. As the gold piece slowly turned, the lights traveled. I held up one arm to catch the lights and watched them play over the back of my hand. My entire body felt illuminated, all my worries briefly banished.

“This is still who you are,” John said. I turned to look at him, the lights playing over his cheekbone. “Trust it. You can control it.”

I had the feeling of *déjà vu*, that I recognized this moment, that I had been here before.

I exhaled.

Gently, I took the necklace from him. The room went plain white again.

“That’s who I was.” I dangled the necklace over the drawer of my bedside table, lowering it gently, then closing it back in the dark. “I have to stop. It’s too dangerous to be different.”

"It's still a part of you. It's okay to miss them. They're your family."

"I don't."

His phone vibrated on the bed somewhere near my hip. We'd been ignoring his phone that had been blowing up with texts and he'd just missed a call. This time, I picked it up and saw a text from Allie: *Where are you?*

John glanced at the text before putting his phone face-down on the bed, knowing I'd seen it.

"You need to get back to the party," I said, before he could.

John stayed silent. He had gone completely still and was studying the room intently, like he was searching for something he'd forgotten. The look on his face unnerved me. I couldn't help it. I tried to read his mind. Then, as if he felt me doing it, he came to attention, made his mind go blank, and swung his legs over the side of the bed so quickly it surprised me.

He stood and walked across the room. "You still do *that*."

"How do you . . . I'm sorry. That's the hardest thing to control. It feels as natural as breathing." I saw him look around the room again, unsettled. "What's wrong?"

"I'm good," he said, shaking it off with a joke. "Why don't you read someone else's mind? Like my brother's."

"That would be 'tennis, August, tennis, where's John?, tennis." I smiled. "No, it's always been just you," I said softly and then wished I hadn't said anything.

"But why me?" he asked, suddenly serious.

"I don't know. Because you're special," I teased. Hopefully not as special as my father believed.

"Are you sure other people from your group can't read minds?"

“Not that I know of.” If that had been the case, Angus, my oldest friend who had also been a Lost Kid, would have somehow found out and told me.

I got off the bed, picked up the packet from Stanford, and walked over to John, noticing for the first time that his eye color had changed, the tiny green flecks had become more prominent.

John turned to open the bedroom door. As if he knew exactly who I had just been thinking about, he said over his shoulder, “I keep thinking Angus is going to show up any minute.”

I followed him from the room, surprised he was worried. “Why would you even think that? He can’t come back here. Everyone has seen the video. He launched himself from a three-story balcony causing an earthquake and a human stampede. He and his parents were lucky to get away from the police.”

“Everyone *everywhere* has seen the video. You’re here, and that’s why he’d come back.” In the usual John fashion, he’d told me his feelings and then had started to walk away.

As soon as we entered the living room, we caught the Fords’ new dog red-handed, lounging on my low-slung couch, one front paw dangling on top of the other. The rescue dog was Taro and Kathleen’s answer to an almost-empty nest. He quickly barreled off the sofa and hurtled around obstacles to reach John before running into his legs.

“Spirit!” John bent at the waist and lightly wrestled the dog back and forth between his hands, a tactic to avoid talking about Angus more. Spirit’s tail wagged crazily, making a hollow thump as it banged against the glass coffee table.

“Want to leave Spirit here?” I offered.

John hesitated. “That’s okay. He’s my cover story. I said I would take him out with me to get ice since he wouldn’t stop barking after the neighbor’s dog went crazy.”

Spirit was getting hyper, beginning to jump. John scooped up the long, sleek dog and put him over his shoulder like a giant baby.

I walked John to the kitchen and set the packet on the counter as I studied my phone, which Stuart had linked to my security system so that I could view the surveillance in and immediately around my apartment. I watched the outside hall, ready to tell John when it looked empty and he could exit unseen.

“Wait, what else was in there?” John asked, pointing to the envelope.

I spilled the contents onto the white marble counter. “It’s information on some program I can apply to called the ‘Institute for Progressive Learning.’”

John set Spirit on the ground. “A learning environment committed to fostering innovation, deeply rooted in Stanford’s pioneering spirit of the West,” John quoted from over my shoulder. “They want you,” he said, suddenly happier. He pulled his phone from his pocket and scrolled. Next thing I knew the apartment was shaking with the sounds of “California Love” blaring from the speakers.

“Hey!” I said, laughing as he sang every single lyric. “Turn it down! Yes, I know you know this song.” I finally had to jump up and grab the phone he held high over his head. I hit pause.

“Look,” I said, before he got too excited. “I don’t know if

they can get over the fact that I'm the daughter of the Oracle of Austin, the billionaire who disappeared off the face of the earth with sixty people and is now wanted by the FBI. That's not the kind of attention Stanford wants."

"All that shit is dying down. I walked in here easily," John said, putting his phone back in his pocket.

"Are you sure?" I asked for probably the fifth time, changing the subject. "No one recognized you?"

"Seriously, it was fine. It's UT graduation. Downtown's packed. Let's go out tomorrow night. I am so sick of pretending that we're not together." He reached out and stroked my hair. "I want to make it up to you about the party."

"We can't."

John shoved his hands in his pockets. "Yes, we can. So what if someone takes our picture and finds out we're a couple? Is it me you're ashamed of?"

He'd said it flippantly, almost like he was joking, but there it was. It was John's only vulnerability as far as I could tell—his fear that I would lose interest, that he wasn't good enough compared to the Puris. Angus, specifically. He couldn't forget how I'd unceremoniously dumped him last year while Angus looked on. At the time, I'd wanted my family to take me back more than anything. But in the end, I'd wanted John to take me back more.

"It's not you. It's me." I hoped he knew I meant it. "You and your family's privacy is way too important." It wasn't just that, though I wouldn't tell him. I didn't care if pictures were taken. It was that I was worried my father would see them.

"We'll be careful."

I didn't want to say no to him this time. *Fuck the paparazzi.*

I didn't want Novak to know I had a boyfriend, to even put John on his radar, but maybe I was wrong to think Novak was watching me. He had much bigger things to worry about than to closely keep track of the daughter who'd always been a thorn in his side.

"If I pick the place?" I finally said.

"Okay, but you're not paying."

John took a step away to go, but I reached for him again, bringing my lips to his. The kiss deepened, and I wound my arms around his neck as his hands wandered my back, down to my lower hips. He set me onto the barstool and stood between my legs, leaning into me. Spirit started barking.

Breathless, I pulled away. I put my hand under his shirt. I never wanted to stop touching him. It was addictive, his broad shoulders, the definition of his chest from all that tennis. John captured my hand to stop it.

"Don't," he said. "Not if I need to go."

"Stay," I said, accidentally, wanting to take it back immediately.

"Come with me," John said, matter-of-factly, like it was so easy. He kissed the side of my neck.

"I can't," I whispered, reluctantly. John let go of me. "We're going to California soon. And before that, I'm going on tour with you. No matter what, that's not going to change."

A minute later, I was alone again, and the apartment was too quiet. Seeing the papers splayed on the counter, I gathered them all and dropped them into the tall, silver trash.

Back in my bedroom, I leaned against the doorjamb, arms crossed, trying to look at it from John's perspective. What in

this room had been bothering him? Maybe he was just restless in my luxurious and empty apartment since it was the only place we spent time together.

I turned and walked back to the kitchen. Every day I told myself I wouldn't do it, but then I did. Like cheating on a diet. Without touching the trash can, I focused and raised the metal lid. *Abhhhh*. Before the guilt set in, the rush felt fantastic. Then I began to sift through the papers at the top of the trash, retrieving every page from Stanford.

AUGUST, two months later

JOHN

Three broken hairbrushes. A shattered terra-cotta rabbit's head. Really, Julia? Broken shit everywhere. When you asked me to open that drawer to read the Stanford packet, I thought you wanted me to see that you were using your abilities. Did you really think I wouldn't notice?

I love you. I notice everything . . .

JUNE

Chapter Three



Southwest Regions Private Wealth Management wasn't located in a downtown high rise in a high-end office suite. It was in the suburbs, tucked into a nondescript limestone building behind a store that made knockoff mid-century furniture.

"Donna?" I called as I stood in the entryway. No one was in the office because it was Sunday, but the front door had been left unlocked for me.

"Hi, honey!" The singsong voice came from her office. I followed it, walking on the industrial carpet through the abandoned cubicle center to meet Donna at her door.

"Hey! How's it going?" Donna gave me her big wave, holding her hand high in the air.

If she wasn't six feet tall, she was close, even when wearing flat, clean, white sneakers as she was today, paired with pristine white jeans instead of her usual workweek business suit. When I'd first met her in the chaotic weeks after my family's departure, when she'd come to the hotel room where I'd shut

myself in, she'd been wearing black pumps that made her thrillingly tall like my stepmother and sister.

She had appeared immediately when I'd finally called the number on the business card paper-clipped to the stack of legal documents I found in my bedroom the night my family left. The card had read, DONNA WILLIAMS, VICE PRESIDENT, SOUTHWEST REGIONS PRIVATE WEALTH MANAGEMENT. I had been scared to call the number at first. I felt besieged by the press and had been relentlessly questioned by the FBI about my father's possible whereabouts and finances. The estate was being held in contention and likely would be for years. For a while I'd lived off the cash that had been left with the documents, but I soon needed more money from the large trust fund my father and stepmother, Victoria, had set up for me to access at age eighteen. Because it had been set up a decade ago, the FBI couldn't touch it. Donna had mentioned that there wasn't any evidence of a similar trust for Liv, only me. Apparently my separation from the family had always been a consideration.

That night we'd met, Donna had arrived at my hotel room and spoke in financial lingo with such a knowing and confident tone that I'd signed with her immediately. She'd talked about how she would sort out my complicated finances, but that, first things first, she'd make sure I had an income going into a checking account. She went above and beyond and arranged for my apartment at the W, the right credit card, and most importantly, a lawyer to push back against the FBI. John excluded, Donna was the first outsider to gain a large amount of my trust. A cynical part of me knew she was gifted at making her clients feel like they were friends, but I also wanted to believe that maybe we were.

“Look at you!” Donna said. “You are a beautiful sight, but you need some sun. How was it out there? Anyone harass you?”

I followed Donna into her corner office that, in contrast to the firm bland exterior, was impressively upscale with a Damien Hirst piece hanging on the wall. Her desk was also a work of art—a large piece of glass on two steel sawhorses. From what Donna had told me, the contrast was intentional. She had a lot of clients who preferred a discreet, low-profile firm. She said my father must have heard of her through word of mouth and that was why she received an email invitation to a Dropbox account that dated back to the day my family left.

I cleared my throat. “No. I didn’t run into anyone. The parking lot was empty. Thanks for meeting me so early.”

Donna began sifting through a file. “Okay, I have some papers for you to sign—shifting money from savings to the distillery investment we talked about.”

I got busy on the paper-signing train. When I was done, I leaned back, flexing my right hand, feeling comfortable in this office and with Donna. She didn’t know much about me personally, but she made my life run smoothly, which was by nature pretty personal. I liked letting her boss me around and, once in awhile, pretending I was being mothered.

“Let’s talk logistics for California.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, smiling.

“All your bills and credit card statements will still be sent here. You have your car. You’re going to need somewhere to live. I’m thinking you’re not going to live in a dorm if they accept you.”

“Correct.”

“Ready to get out of here, huh?” she smiled. “Okay, so would you like an apartment or a house?”

“I don’t know.” I hadn’t thought too much about what California would be like. I’d been waiting on Stanford for some reason.

“Anything in Silicon Valley is going to be an investment. Think on it.” Donna gently removed her Gucci reading glasses.

It seemed like we’d completed business for the day, but I wasn’t ready to leave yet just to go back to the hotel. I got up and wandered around the room, looking at the many tchotchkes around her office, all interesting and perfectly displayed.

Donna stood up and joined me. “You like these?” She picked up one of the small ceramic windmills from a collection. “They were my dad’s.”

“I love them,” I said, thinking again of my necklace, my only sentimental item.

There was a pregnant pause. The meeting was obviously over. Maybe because I just didn’t want it to be or maybe because I knew it was time to understand my own finances, I said, “Donna, can I have hard copies of my account statements?”

There was a momentary surprise in her eyes. “Of course. You’ve got your laptop. I’ll send you a Dropbox invite.”

“Do you mind if I look at the hard copies? I’m still paranoid about the FBI breaking into my stuff.”

“Sure. I’ll have them messengered to the hotel. But remember what your lawyer told us? It’s extremely hard for

them to put a US citizen under that kind of surveillance. That said, they're smart. They're probably still watching you to see if your friend contacts you. The good news is that means Agent Kelly is still around!" She laughed.

"I can't believe you like him. Aren't you dating a player from the Spurs?"

"Nah. That ended. I told you what I found out about Agent Kelly? All that Iron Man stuff?"

"You should ask him out."

"To him, I'm the enemy. Your lawyer and me. All we do is try to block him."

"You can tell he's annoyed he was ever assigned to my case," I laughed, feeling good, joking around with Donna.

"Oh yeah, he's annoyed. He was an accountant. He's just interested in the money. He doesn't strike me as someone who believes in all the voodoo shit they were saying about your Dad. Or the rumors about your friend and what he did to that bar." Donna paused for a moment, and then said, "Well, if you have any questions, just shoot me an email. Better yet, call me. I'll miss seeing you so often once you move. You'll be all caught up in that Silicon Valley lifestyle. Those California boys! Or girls. Sorry, I don't mean to presume. When do you take off?"

"I'll probably be there by late July."

"I can line up places for you to look at then if you'd like?"

"Sounds good. Thank you so much, Donna."

"A little free advice: you're on your way now. If your friend tries to contact you, ignore him and forget that he ever tried. Do not get pulled back in."

"He won't contact me. But yes, I hear what you're saying."

I then realized Donna was looking at me strangely and I was standing in front of the suddenly open office door. It dawned on me that I may have screwed up and opened the door without touching it.

Like a professional, she calmed her expression in a split second. Amazingly, she only said, “Be safe, Julia. I’ll be in touch.”

AUGUST, two months later

JOHN

I was really looking forward to our date even if we were in a private room. It had been so long. I was also planning on surprising you and taking you to a show at Stubbs later in the night if I could convince you. I didn't know if I should get you flowers. I actually asked my brother if I looked okay. Of course in his opinion, I didn't. He and August started making fun of me because of how nervous I was, which made me even more nervous . . .

JUNE

Chapter Four



I stood at the glass dining room table in my apartment in front of the files Donna had provided, a beam of sunlight from the setting sun bisecting the papers. As soon as I opened the folder, I was drawn in, feeling a connection to my family so acutely it was as if they were in the room. Finances were my last tie to them. I enjoyed seeing Donna, but the price I paid was maintaining a link to my family that still felt too close for comfort. I missed my sister so much, I felt like I couldn't acknowledge it or I wouldn't be able to keep moving forward. It happened far less frequently, but there were still some mornings when I woke up and thought I was in the house on Scenic Drive. With Liv. With all of them.

A text lit up my phone, bringing me back to the present.
At the restaurant.

Finally, it was dusk. Quarter to eight on an early summer night. I closed the file I'd been reading. I turned off the light

over the dining table and looked out the living room windows from behind the gossamer drapes. I could still see the outline of Lady Bird Lake.

From the brevity of John's text, I could tell he was semi-annoyed by the complicated instructions I'd given him. Go to Lamberts. Take the underground tunnel across the street to the restaurant where we're really going. Stay in the basement. They'll show you to the private dining room in the wine cellar.

I was annoyed myself. It was a beautiful night. I was tired of being cautious. I looked down at the strapless dress I wore. It was pretty. I actually felt pretty. All I wanted was to see my boyfriend and be outside without worrying.

I decided to walk. *What the hell?* It was only a couple of blocks.

The lobby was packed, the evening's activities getting underway. I walked through the hotel like I had important business and then out onto the street. There had been no paparazzi. Outside, it felt earlier in the evening than it had indoors. The shine of the streetlights and the humidity made me feel part of the world again. I cut around a large group walking en masse to the Congress Bridge to see the bats take flight at dusk.

There was a strange familiarity in the air. Flooded with an unexpected lightness and warmth, I slowed my pace and walked like someone enjoying the evening instead of someone on a mission. Just as I rounded a corner, I drew up short, almost running into a small group of three teenage boys at a standstill on the sidewalk.

I stepped to the side and briefly looked over to see who the group was gathered around. The man's face was blocked,

but I glimpsed grimy clothing and rapid hands demonstrating a card trick.

Oddly the street was very quiet, devoid of many pedestrians. Shaking off the feeling of discomfort, I crossed the street and entered into the stately, red-brick Victorian building, once a general store and now a historic landmark that still bore the name J.P. Schneider and Bros on the facade.

“Hello,” I said politely to the hostess. When I began to explain that I had reservations in the “vault” across the street, I watched her burgeoning realization that I was a VIP.

She led me downstairs, through the underground tunnel beneath the street that connected the main restaurant to the basement of the building that had once been the owner’s second store across the road. Of course, it was Donna who was in the know about the vault.

“Thank you,” I said a second too late as she handed me off to the proper restaurant staff. I was too busy staring at John who was seated at one end of a long table with a distant, preoccupied look on his face.

“Hey,” I said, curious what he was thinking about. John instantly hid his expression and gave me a smile.

He stood to greet me. “You look pretty.”

I was about to ask what was wrong when something prickled at the back of my neck. I whipped around and saw, behind the server, a bald man with a beard, in a black T-shirt and black trousers positioned with his iPhone held high. The scene seemed to freeze as if already caught in a picture. There was no sound or motion as the flash illuminated John and me in a surreal circle of light.

“Hey!” I exclaimed.

The man ran up the staircase located to the left of the cellar. To my surprise, the server got in my way, blocking the exit, pretending it wasn't intentional.

"Move," I said, putting my hands on the server's shoulders to push him to the side. "Goddammit." I bolted up the staircase to catch the man, needing to grab his phone and that photo at all costs. I hurled off my shoes so I could run faster, sending them clattering down the stairs behind me.

"Julia, what are you *doing*?" John yelled from behind me.

All was serene when I arrived on the ground level of the restaurant above. Diners looked up as I stood, wild-eyed, scanning every inch of the space. Moving to the entrance, I whipped open the heavy door onto the sights and sounds of downtown.

Across the street, in front of Lamberts, two men writhed on the pavement, the slighter figure pinning down a larger one while clenching a fistful of hair.

Barefoot, I darted across the street, dodging the oncoming cars. Drawing closer, I recognized the dirty clothes of the boy from the street. When I neared, he didn't look at me. He simply extended one hand with the phone, like he knew I would eventually come and take it. I saw ghost images of tattoos on his arms that looked almost erased. Automatically, I reached for the phone, the object I'd been hunting, confused by how he knew what I'd wanted. As soon as my fingers touched it, I felt the electricity—that expansive, encapsulating energy. I knew before I knew.

The photographer squirmed away from the loosened hold and took off, running full speed. The boy with the warm, gold-toned skin and the flawless face that looked familiar yet

different set against dark hair, stood more slowly, almost reluctantly, refusing to meet my eyes. He began to lope down the street, turning his back on me.

I felt the swarm gathering.

Standing by myself, I squinted into the sudden onslaught of what felt like a hundred flashes though there were only three photographers. It was nonstop, white lights blazing. Instinctively, I put up an arm to shade my eyes and tried to go deaf to the cruel things they began shouting.

Where's your father?

How do you feel about living off stolen money?

I glanced across the street. John was watching the melee and me, frozen in the headlights. Our eyes caught. I saw both how helpless and pissed off he felt before I snapped my gaze away. He was supposed to casually walk away if this happened. That was the prearranged plan.

He would think I was crazy for chasing that man after I'd said the key was to ignore them—the gawkers, the paparazzi. But from the direction that man had aimed his phone and where he had been looking, I knew he had been more intent on capturing John's image than mine.

I turned my head to the right, narrowing my eyes to search for the boy now blended into a group of pedestrians traveling away into the fold of the city. Like he could feel my longing and decided to throw me a crumb, he looked over his shoulder at me once, his blue eyes dancing.

Angus.



I headed straight for my hotel's parking garage. Listening to

the sound of my own shallow breathing, I sat in my current car—an old white Prius, the one car that had been left behind in my family’s underground garage on Scenic Drive, the garage that had once housed ten vehicles. John was sure to be expecting me at his house, but, when I had seen the mystery blanket in my backseat, I had waited to take off.

My back door opened and shut.

“Drive.”

Hearing his voice for the first time in six months, my heart raced with joy and fear. Glancing in the mirror, I saw him flatten himself across the compact backseat, pulling the rough grey blanket over his filthy clothing.

“Have you been sleeping in here?” I asked, incredulous. Since my part-time bodyguard, Stuart, mostly drove me, I hadn’t touched the car in months.

“Go,” he said, his voice muffled.

I heard my own shaky inhale, a hyperventilating sound.

“It’s okay. It’s just me,” he said.

“I know.”

At the first light, I fidgeted. It was dark, but I was terrified that once we were at a stop, paparazzi would see us and hold a camera to our window.

I headed for the freeway. Once we were traveling at seventy miles per hour, I saw the grey mass rise up in back.

“Jesus, Julia. You don’t have any gas,” Angus said in his familiar joking, cutting tone. I wanted to turn around and make sure he was real. “Pull off after the airport. It’s quiet by McKinney Falls.”

South of the airport, I picked an exit at random, finding my way onto a more rural road. I pulled over and stopped

the car partway into a ditch of long, brown grass. I quickly turned the car off. Everything went dark and quiet. Angus got out, stretching his long legs.

“Let’s walk.”

“Are you crazy?”

He started sauntering along the road, the night sky lightened by a bright moon. We traveled alongside the shrub-like trees that wouldn’t do much to shield us should any car approach.

“Stop,” I finally said. Angus halted, twisting to face me.

I launched myself at him, and we hugged.

“I know,” he said, holding me tight across the shoulders, rocking me slightly back and forth.

“Oh my God.” I breathed into his collar. After six months of separation, of not seeing my own kind, I allowed myself to sag into him for just a second, letting him support me.

“You’re good. I’ve been watching you.” Never, ever in the past would we have been this demonstrative. But my guess was he’d been through as much as I had since the last time we’d seen each other.

“Tell me what happened when you left the ER that night,” he said, referring to the last time I’d seen him, trapped and broken in a hospital bed.

When I’d said good-bye to Angus that night, I’d believed I would never see him again. Novak had banned Angus and his parents from joining the rest of the Puris for Relocation because of Angus’s stunt, even though Lati, Angus’s dad, had been my father’s best friend. Safety in numbers and the preservation of the group were the main tenets of the Puris so the ultimate punishment was to be cut away. Angus’s family were

left to evade the police on their own and to find a way to hide from the world.

Angus should have never made a public scene, but he'd done it for me as much as for himself. He'd distracted my Puri friends from discovering my unique relationship with John.

I stepped back, putting some distance between us. "I stayed behind. I snuck out the day they left Austin, and no one tried to stop me. After that, it was interviews with the police, the FBI, moving to the W. That's it."

"And being in the news," he commented wryly.

"Yes. Lots of that." My eyes raked over every inch of him.

"I know. I look like shit," he said. Angus was dirty and worn out, wearing stained jeans that were ripped with gaping holes at both knees, his grey T-shirt dotted with dark stains. His hair was dyed a flat, chocolate brown, his only other attempt to disguise himself besides the laser tattoo removal that was incomplete.

"What were you doing out on the street with those stupid cards? You're insane."

"It wasn't working just waiting in your hotel garage," Angus shrugged, one corner of his mouth tilting up in a half smile.

"Tell me what happened to you. That night in the hospital."

Angus started walking again, crunching gravel beneath his feet, his gait loose. I had no choice but to impatiently follow. Tough roadside grasses switched at my bare legs.

Angus's voice became flat as if reporting events that had happened to someone else. "My dad paid a nurse to wheel me out the back door. A chauffeured car was waiting with my

mom. We drove for almost twenty-four hours to Los Angeles. They've been guests on the estate of a wealthy inventor in Bel Air ever since—turns out that was my dad's plan B. He knew there were these connoisseurs of the unusual out there. In exchange, my parents are asked to occasionally perform for guests, like exotic birds taken out of their cage." His omission of detail made it clear everything was far worse than he let on and he didn't want to talk about it.

"That's revolting. It's also unsafe."

"My dad had to make a deal quickly."

"But you left LA," I said.

"I told them I had to find a better place for us. I wasn't handing control of my life over to someone much dumber than Novak. Why'd you stay behind? For him?" Angus stopped. He lifted a hand and grazed my cheek with his fingertips as if I were precious and he wanted to make sure I was actually there.

"Yes. And no, especially after I found out that Novak was lying to us. You were right—he wanted us to lose our abilities."

"He was your father. You couldn't see it." Angus shrugged generously.

"Was he really that threatened by us?"

"Definitely by you and me. His illegitimate daughter shouldn't have been more powerful than his full-blooded one. And he just hated me." Angus laughed at that memory.

"I was so jealous of the other group. They were finally learning all the Puri secrets. But I actually believed in him. I really thought our time would come. Just later." I was disgusted by Novak, disgusted by myself for having always chased his approval.

“And here I thought you stayed for me,” Angus said lightly.

I touched his arm apologetically. “At first I thought I would find you right away. It’s been so much more of a circus than I imagined. I keep trying to quit my abilities, but I can’t seem to stop and there are so many eyes on me.” I shook my head. “I knew we would find each other, but I thought maybe it would be twenty years from now.”

“What are we going to be doing twenty years from now, Julia? Hiding?”

I understood. I knew he’d made a public spectacle because he’d been scared to go on Relocation—of the restrictions, of losing his ability to move freely—but now I heard disillusionment in his voice.

“Not me,” I said adamantly. “I keep jumping through the FBI’s hoops, trying to earn citizenship in the regular world. I want to just live an ordinary life. I’ll stop using my abilities. I’ll figure it out.”

Angus snorted. “That sounds miserable. And impossible. We’re different. At some point, you’re going to get caught.” Angus put his hands low on his hips, elbows jutting out at his sides. “That’s why I’ve come to get you out.”

I almost smiled. Angus thought he was my hero who had arrived to save me.

Angus continued, “This whole time, how have you not seen that Austin is the absolute worst place to be?” With a swift scorn that took me by surprise, he said, “You know you’re endangering all of us.”

“What do you mean ‘us’?” I squinted at him.

“Me, you, my family. Puris disappear. That’s what we do. Remember what Novak said to my dad at the hospital? He

will be watching us, making sure we give nothing away about the Puris and where they're hiding. Like you said, you can't quit using your abilities. Here you are, in the spotlight, keeping the attention on him. How long until Novak intervenes?"

I didn't like this shaming, and I wanted it off of me. It was like I could physically feel it as it began to seep into my conscience. "I haven't done anything. The FBI knows nothing."

"Novak doesn't know that." Then Angus paused dramatically, cocking his head. "You want him to find out what you've really been hiding?"

"What are you talking about?" I demanded, reassuring myself that I had examined all of my choices from every angle. That was all I did, every day.

"You're not as safe as you think you are. You know, your boy is radioactive." He turned and started walking to the car.

"Excuse me?" I asked, annoyed.

"My dad told me about Novak's mind-reading vision." Angus was walking fast now to irritate me.

"What about it?" I asked carefully, trailing just behind him.

"Novak's vision—that he'd be able to hear someone's thoughts—someone not from the group but similar enough to us. That person was destined to come with us for Relocation, whether they wanted to or not. It's a numbers game for us Puris. They were the new blood we needed since we've inbred to the point of extinction. Just another resource to bring below . . ."

"Stop walking." I yanked on Angus's sleeve. We stopped right under a telephone wire that crossed the road, eerily thick with hundreds of still black birds that watched us.

"I don't like it out here," Angus said, his ears pinning back.

"Let's go."

Back at the car Angus swiftly slid into the backseat again, slouching low. I stared straight ahead. My hand shook when I started the engine. Last winter, I'd confessed to Angus that I'd read John's mind.

"Don't you think it's a little coincidental that you read someone's mind when Novak was on the lookout for that to happen?"

"No," I said, barely seeing the road in front of me as I pulled out of the grassy trough, streams of insects swarming in the beams of light.

He waited for me to say something, but I stayed quiet.

"So Liv was right about everything she said to us that night—about your boyfriend not flinching when I pushed him and how she rose from the dead when he touched her."

Denial seemed the safest thing. But Angus would see right through me.

"He's not like us." I omitted the last thing that had happened six months ago—John's maybe vision of the group's hiding place.

"You stay, Novak's going to find him."

My impulse was to scream at Angus to shut his mouth. Instead, I flippantly said, "There's nothing for Novak to find."

"He's having you watched. You have to know that."

"Even if he is, I have been so careful. We never go out in public together. Until tonight."

"Oh, come on. I've seen you trying to be careful, but Novak has got to know by now that you have a boyfriend. God,

he probably has someone at the W, reporting to someone else who reports to him. If you're near *John*"—Angus spat out the name—"and he does the slightest thing in public that makes him seem like us, Novak will find a way to get to him. You've led your father right to him."

"John isn't—"

"You're prodding the beast, Julia. You have to leave for the summer. Just until it's safe."

I had no choice but to get gas. I pulled off at an exit and drove into an eerily deserted industrial area. "Why the summer?" I could feel my brain scrambling to make sense of the information.

"My dad told me where the group is hiding."

"Stop! Don't tell me, Angus. I don't want to know."

"They're underground in—"

"Stop talking! I mean it!" I uselessly covered my ears with my hands, letting the car drift smoothly into the next lane. I let it go. Down to the millisecond, I intuitively knew how much time I had until we smashed into the median. Angus knew it too, but it never made it any easier for the passenger.

"Fine!" he said, impatient. I placed my hands back on the steering wheel. "But you need to know one thing."

Angus paused, giving me a last opportunity to shield myself. I remained silent. Finally Angus spoke, "They have a hard deadline. I know because my dad is counting the days until he knows he'll never see Novak again. It's September first."

"Why September first?" I searched my mind for the relevance of that date.

"That's when a mining company begins work close to

where they're hiding. At that point, they need to seal themselves in if they don't want anyone to come across their spot."

Angus sat up and rested his chin on the back of my leather seat, speaking softly, close to my ear. "That means Novak only has until September to keep tabs on you and to search for people like us."

"What did Lati say? Did Novak plan to search for one person specifically or many?" I refused to name John in this scenario.

"Both." Angus's voice became mocking. "No one believes him by the way—that there are others. But the bad thing is, you and I know he's right. And deep down Liv knows the truth about your boyfriend. Even if you talked her out of it."

We were silent. "You're going to need to leave soon," I finally said.

"Yeah, for sure. And you need to come with me."

"This is because you're lonely. Obviously. You were even doing cheap magic on the street. Trust me, I know—"

"No, I'm trying to keep Novak far from the Puris who are still left above ground," Angus said with a sudden force, uncaring that he'd just served up more information than I ever wanted. "Don't you understand? The closer you are to John, the better the chances that Novak will find him and abduct him and punish you. You need to separate from him if you want to protect all of us. It's only for the summer, until they're gone."

"We're fine! I'm about to leave Austin. I'm going to be on the road."

"What do you mean 'the road'?" Angus made quotation marks with his fingers.

“It’ll be good—nine tournaments in nine different cities across the US for the next eight weeks. I’m going to be using cash only. I can stay under the radar with John.”

“Wait, so following him around the country to watch him play tennis is safe? People aren’t going to start clueing into your presence?” Angus laughed in my face.

I obstinately shook my head, but my tone was gentle. “I’m not going to leave him. There’s no reason, Angus. He’s not one of us.”

“You have blinders on. What about that guy taking pictures? Something has you scared.”

“I’ll just be more careful.” I didn’t know for sure he’d been after John’s picture.

“Why would you risk his life and ours? After this summer, you’re free and you can decide what—or who—you really want. Lie to him if you need to but leave with me.” He lowered his voice to almost a whisper. “Come on, Julia. Come now. You know it’s the right thing to do.”

The quiet weighed between us. I slowed and edged the car over to an old gas station. The fluorescent lighting was startling. Angus abruptly flung open the car door, and the smell of gasoline permeated the car’s interior.

“Make up your mind soon. I don’t think you have as much time as you think.”

The car door slammed. When I whipped my head around, he’d already vanished somewhere in the dark.