

Select



In an exclusive world,
she is the exception

MARIT WEISENBERG

Select

BOOK ONE



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For Jeff—M. W.

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In all things of nature there is
something of the marvelous.

—Aristotle

Select



AUGUST

Chapter One



“Julia!”

That startled me. I turned my head, tucking my hair behind my ear so I could see Angus come to stand beside me.

“Hey.” He stopped and focused on the wall-length curved panel. The light of the TV sliced into the dimly lit room, rudely cutting through the Zen-like atmosphere. I thought my family would just flash across the screen, but the camera held on them.

“Novak Jaynes and his wife, Dr. Victoria Jaynes, major donors to the new University of Texas Medical School, are here with their daughter.” You could tell the commentator was unsure of what he was allowed to say, and that he wished the camera would move on. Due to a well-publicized Securities and Exchange Commission investigation, this year there would be no hailing “the Oracle of Austin”—my dad, the investor with preternatural abilities.

Angus was temporarily still while he watched Novak,

Victoria, and my sister in their suite at the football stadium. I was impressed with Liv. I knew the toll this must be taking on her, trying to keep the public from penetrating the imaginary wall of glass Novak had taught us all to erect. No one in my family looked overwhelmed by the sensory overload of the football game or by the fact that people—now a cameraman—were studying them. It was impossible not to stare. Even for me. They were a perfectly matched, elegant family, with their sun-streaked brown hair and beautiful, fine features, although now my sister was taking it to a different level. It was like they'd externalized being members of the One Percent.

Angus paused to look again—at my almost-grown-up sister, I knew—a second longer than I would have liked before getting back to business.

“Come on. They're waiting for us,” he said.

To my surprise Angus ran his hand down my tattooed arm before catching my wrist, then my hand, and pulling me out of the room. We interlaced fingers. He didn't ask why I wasn't at the game. He knew. Everyone knew I wasn't invited. But Angus was maybe the only person who actually seemed more interested in me than in them.

A voice in my head whispered that maybe he only wanted me for what he thought I could teach him.

“You suddenly interested in UT football?” Angus joked lightly.

I laughed and said, “Very interested in football.”

But I was embarrassed I'd been caught watching.

We walked hand in hand through Paul's parents' many living rooms. Through the windows we could see some of

our group wrestling on the grass in the side yard. When we stepped outside, Angus immediately dropped my hand.

I didn't understand why it hadn't happened between us yet. Every night this summer I thought he would make the first move. Maybe he was waiting for me to take the first step, but I wanted it to come from him. He got everything he wanted, and I didn't want to fall in his lap too.

The moment I stepped outdoors, I felt as if I were enveloped in a swamp. Not everything could be controlled, I guess. But the landscape was lush. Only money could tame a garden like this into submission in the August heat of Texas. The harshness of the black gravel contrasted with the softness of the flowers, the symmetry of the stone pathways, and the soothing paleness of the white-brick monolith behind me.

The boys were unusually sweaty. T-shirts clung to shoulder blades, and I could see beads of perspiration on those necks not covered with light-brown hair. They looked uniform with their honey coloring. I was always aware of how I stood out.

Angus and I came to stand near the boys, waiting patiently for them to finish playing. Next to me, Angus removed his hand from the back of his neck, revealing one tattoo. His arms were covered with ink as well—designs of black bands around them, as if he were in mourning. I wasn't sure if it was in honor of our ancestors or if it was a statement about his current situation. I could tell he felt me appraising him, and I quickly looked away.

We watched the dog pile. The boys looked like they were going to kill each other tonight. Their cuts and bruises would be unusually bad, but at least they would disappear quickly.

I noticed Paul standing off the path and directly on top of some landscaping, size-thirteen boots crushing flowering ground cover—a minor fuck-you to his parents. He lit a cigarette and, through that first cloud of smoke, squinted up at us as we joined the all-male group. Instantly Paul's body language changed, now less the punk and ready to defer to Angus. And when they realized Angus was there, none of the boys resisted the instinct to turn their bodies to face him, in an act of deference and respect—the same as we all did when my father was in the room. I wasn't sure if Angus was aware of it, but when it was just the two of us he in turn angled his body toward me.

Sebastian had been blocking my view of Ellis, and when he shifted I saw what was going on. A knife was plunged into Ellis's right hand—a steak knife with a curved silver blade protruding from his golden flesh. There wasn't the least sign of blood. The boys stopped wrestling all at once and gathered around, watching and taunting, voices too loud for the serene setting on the water. Driving it deeper, Ellis maintained his impassive face, and the group, fiercely competitive with one another, attempted to look unimpressed. Ellis was getting good.

All at once he crashed, turning white as the blood drained from his face. Angus broke through the group, grasped the handle, and in a smooth, confident maneuver removed the knife. I saw the deep wound between the knuckles begin to seep just a bare amount of dark-red, almost-black, blood. *Well done*, I thought. Ellis had almost controlled his response to the pain. Now he seemed to be recovering. He hid his compromised hand behind his back, wanting to protect it from the critical eye of the group.

“I should go,” I said, always aware I was the only girl.

“She didn’t like the trick,” Cyrus said, laughing.

Despite that I’d grown up with these seven boys and that no one in this group would ever think of doing anything to hurt me, I felt vaguely uneasy when I looked around. Over the past year they had transformed their appearance like I had. They were deeply attractive, but they appeared hardened now with their abundance of tattoos and scars. And they were in fact hardened after a year of living with their wings clipped.

I reminded myself it didn’t matter that I was the only female. It had just been me for the past year. I couldn’t help thinking that if any other girls had been included in our particular group, things wouldn’t be as out of control. There was too much testosterone. Every night the boys wanted to play in secret, practicing skills we didn’t understand and weren’t supposed to explore—thanks to me and my moment of weakness telling Angus what had happened last spring.

I had explicitly disobeyed Novak when I shared my secret, wanting to impress Angus. Novak had warned me not to say anything after I’d gathered my courage and told him about the odd experience I’d had on a ski trip to Park City, Utah.

It had started with a stupid mistake. I’d locked myself out on my bedroom balcony when I went to smoke a cigarette in the middle of the night. For hours I’d been trapped in the well-below-freezing temperature in shorts and a T-shirt, kicking myself because the cigarette wasn’t even worth it—it had no short-term or long-term effects on us. It was just something to do. I told my father how, instinctively, I had closed my eyes and focused inward, visualizing the color blue turning

to warm red, and I must have raised my core temperature because I didn't feel cold while I was stranded out there. Then I showed Novak how, if I concentrated my energies on an object, I could move it or even break it—like a door lock, which is how I got back into the ski house after I eventually grew bored waiting for someone to come rescue me.

I was surprised how fast he shut me down. “Those are only tricks. We're capable, but we don't practice them because they aren't worth the exposure. Don't tell anyone what happened, and don't do it again. Understood?”

Immediately I felt like an idiot because I actually thought I'd done something extraordinary. Apparently it was nothing. I had irrationally hoped it would be enough to get me moved to the other set of teenagers in our group. In keeping with tradition, those sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds were finally getting answers about themselves and all the inexplicable things we could do. Those of us who remained, myself and the other teenagers in my group, were the first of our kind ever to be kept in the dark. I thought of us as the Lost Kids.

Paul suddenly began to back away from the group, walking toward the driveway. We understood. We could all sense there were suddenly more of us in the vicinity. His parents were almost home. Moments later we could hear their car driving toward us, just a few blocks away now.

“Come on.” Angus breezed past his friends, walking toward his brand-new and badly dented black BMW without giving them a glance. He knew they would follow.

“Where to?” Rob unfolded his long body from a steel bench and stretched, showing off defined abs.

“Julia!” Angus pulled my attention away from Rob. I could

tell Angus noticed I was noticing, and he didn't like it. I smiled to myself, feeling more optimistic about tonight. I walked down the path to join him and arched an eyebrow. Whatever trepidation I was feeling inside, I had almost complete confidence I was masking it. Even if I was the bastard child and a Lost Kid, I was Julia Jaynes, Novak's daughter. And I owned it. Because if I didn't, I'd have no place in the world.

"Where do you want to go tonight?" Angus looked in my eyes and, briefly, we shared a moment. I knew he was wondering if I would play along tonight and that he was willing to try to charm me into it. I didn't totally trust Angus, not after he broke his promise to me at the beginning of summer and showed these boys what I'd taught him how to do. They had taken the idea that they could assert their minds over their bodies and quickly gone to extremes. I understood: it felt good. It was a way to channel that pent-up feeling that physically hurt. But I couldn't show them anything else or Novak would kill me and he might punish the boys.

The ultimate threat of being left behind was almost enough to dissuade us from breaking the rules. Almost. More often the residual anger at being demoted and segregated from our other friends just empowered us to rebel.

Still, for tonight I could go along for the ride and enjoy as Angus continued to try to make it up to me for telling my secret.

"The train tracks," I said. I tossed my hair and stood at my full five feet four inches. It was an announcement, not a question. I saw surprise and respect on Angus's face.

"You going to jump trains with us tonight, Julia?" he asked flirtatiously. We all started pairing off and climbing into the collection of luxury sports cars in the circular drive

of Paul's parents' contemporary monstrosity. We weren't that far from my house.

"We'll see," I flirted back. I wished I could stop the blush that warmed my face when Angus opened the passenger door for me. I hated it. No one else in the group did that. Everybody seemed to have near-perfect command over their emotions and only showed what they wanted others to read.

Car doors slammed behind me in perfect unison. Angus and I would lead them where I wanted to go. It was a powerful feeling. Train jumping should distract them. It was challenging enough. They might not ask for more.

Chapter Two



“Julia. Wake up.”

I was in such a deep sleep—finally—it took me a moment to surface and realize my sister was standing over me. Her hand was on my shoulder, gently shaking me awake. My eyes snapped into focus, and I quickly sat up.

I was so glad to see her, but then I was scared. “What’s wrong? What’s going on?” She never came into my room anymore. I knew it was because she was uncomfortable. In keeping with Liv’s new status, her mother had had us switch bedrooms this summer—my old bedroom had been the bigger one with the better view. Now it was Liv’s. I didn’t blame her, though. It hadn’t been her decision. She could have it. We wouldn’t be here too much longer anyway. I smiled indulgently, having missed spending time with my little sister. It was only a bedroom, I told myself.

“No. Nothing, nothing. It’s okay. I didn’t mean to scare you. I just came to say hi.” Liv perched on the side of my bed, blocking the clock, dragging a finger along the white blanket. The blackout shades were drawn, but she was fully

dressed, giving me the feeling I'd slept in and it was afternoon.

"What time is it?" I sounded like a frog, so I cleared my throat. My mouth felt like an ashtray. Liv remained where she was. It felt like we hadn't been this physically close in months. Reluctantly, it seemed, she stood up and walked over to the shades. Disappointed, I realized this interaction would still have the tinge of awkwardness.

"It's ten. Do you mind?"

"Go ahead."

She stood up and slapped at the panel on the side of the wall. The shades retracted and an expansive view of Lake Austin appeared, but I had seen it a million times. I took in my sister instead.

Liv could have been from my dreams. She was so beautiful. Like me, Liv had my dad's blue eyes, but that was the extent of any similarity between us. She had high cheekbones that set off the small, perfect features of her heart-shaped face. Her thick, long hair almost matched her skin tone. Tall and willowy at five ten, she somehow also had curves. I wasn't used to it yet. She had been a late bloomer, and it had happened so fast over the course of this summer, just as she turned sixteen. It felt strange to live with someone your whole life, and then suddenly need to adjust to their physical appearance every time you saw them.

"So, what's up?" I felt self-conscious in my tank top, and smelling like cigarettes. And I was sure my hair was a mess. I didn't like being surprised.

"What'd you guys do last night?" Liv asked, then wandered over to where my guitar sat in a corner and picked it

up. *Help yourself*, I thought, mildly annoyed. Liv tuned the already perfectly tuned guitar while pretending she wasn't listening intently for my answer.

"Nothing. The usual," I said.

"What's the usual?" she asked.

"Just hanging around. I don't know. Why?" There was an edge in my voice. Had she heard something? Why was she suddenly so fascinated by what the Lost Kids and I were doing?

"No, I just—you guys make it seem like you're always off having so much fun."

She had to be kidding. She made it sound like we'd turned a negative into a positive. That we weren't dying for the training they were getting, that we weren't just looking for things to do, biding our time.

"Trust me, we aren't." Liv glanced up at my sharp reminder.

"You all seem close, like a secret club."

Maybe the Lost Kids and I tried to pretend we were the cool ones, but Liv couldn't seriously envy a group of rejects forced into humiliatingly typical teenage rebellion.

I tried changing the subject. "Hey, how was your first soccer practice yesterday?"

"Fine," Liv said shortly, clearly not wanting to talk about it. I could tell she was frustrated. Liv was good at soccer, but she wasn't nearly as good as I'd been. I knew that must kill my stepmother. I wondered if being compared with me ever bothered Liv.

Liv wouldn't look at me, I realized. I heard her heart rate accelerate, which was highly unusual for any of us. So now we were getting to the real reason she was here.

“What are you doing today?”

“I’m not sure. Why? What are you doing? Is Dad home?”
I suddenly sat up straighter.

“No, I don’t know,” Liv said quickly. “I was wondering. . . . You’re probably going with that group to swim at Barton Springs?”

“What?” I felt like I wasn’t getting what she was saying.

“Angus. You know?” That instantly got my attention. I nodded warily. “He texted me about it,” she said.

Many things were strange and wrong about this—mostly, why in the world would Angus be texting my little sister? I didn’t like that at all. Also, our two groups didn’t mix, and we definitely didn’t go out in groups to public places. All those outsiders. All that noise. And most of all, the exposure. What was Angus up to? The risk-taking was escalating. A nod was all I could manage. “Can you hold on for a second?” The lift of her eyebrows indicated, *Of course*.

Attempting to look nonchalant, I let the sheet fall away and swung my legs over the side of my king-size bed, grabbed my phone, and bolted to the bathroom and dressing area. Closing the door behind me, I tried to calm my nerves in the soothing darkness, focusing on the cool marble beneath my feet. A rash was spreading up the insides of my arms. With the back of my hand, I turned on the lights, bringing the bathroom to life.

I had to have some kind of release. With a cracking sound, the hairbrush on the counter split down the middle. Right away I felt calmer. I looked down and saw the rash receding in answer.

I glanced up at the mirror. My heavy mascara was smeared,

and my bottle-black hair was a rat's nest. I looked the opposite of my sister—night to her day. But I enjoyed how tough I looked. It hid how not-tough I was inside. I took a few more breaths.

I checked my phone. Sure enough—and thank God—there was a text from Angus about Barton Springs. I felt better. But how had he gotten my sister's number? And why would he use it?

That Liv and I had been separated into different groups made things tricky. It had been a shock when my dad announced his plan to split up the kids, and even more of one when my name was randomly selected for the group that needed to “lie low” and underachieve for the sake of appearances. It was one thing to have to fake it at school—to not be so smart, so good at sports, so quick at absolutely everything. It was another when Novak told us my group would not be receiving any kind of instruction for now and any natural skills we had would have to lie dormant.

This was why the boys had begun to live for what I'd shown Angus how to do. We were all in the same boat: going crazy having to suppress our instincts. Not to mention that we had to deal with the migraines, the fitful, sweaty sleep, the waking up to find the contents of our bedrooms broken around us. It all felt wrong. We had been assured that our dormancy was just a temporary precaution during our remaining two years before we disappeared from Austin due to the recent scrutiny. So far we'd made it through one year and two months, but it had changed us.

I opened the bathroom door and reluctantly walked back to the bedroom, trying to decide what I wanted to do. Liv looked

nervous to be in my room, nervous awaiting my answer. At least one thing hadn't changed: I was still her older sister and, like old times, her ticket to where she wanted to go.

I sat back down on the bed, watching her as she attempted to look uninterested, twisting her brown and gold hair into a messy ponytail. It was a new and scary feeling to be jealous of her. She had always been the baby in my eyes, so sweet, and the bright spot in my life in this house. I had been proud of her when she replaced me as captain of the soccer team and I'd had to watch from the sidelines, the team moving in unison like a flock of birds. Watching them never grew old. It was like they had eyes in the back of their heads, they were so in tune with each other's movements and unspoken signals. I missed it so much, it almost killed me—that beautiful feeling of connection and flow. It had been exchanged for the constant, maddening feeling that something essential was missing.

I was ready to have every privilege restored to us in our next place, to not have to hold back in any way, to stop feeling the emptiness. I never blamed Liv. She had felt guilty, but she'd had to listen to her mother. I saved my resentment for Victoria, though I tried, with every ounce of my being, to hide it.

Liv was waiting. She knew I couldn't say no to her. I didn't think I ever had. But my biggest reason for agreeing to go on this ill-conceived excursion was my absolute confidence that Liv would be scared off when she saw Angus, Lord of the Lost Kids, in his element.

“What time do you want to leave?”

Happy now that she was getting what she wanted, Liv let out a breath and smiled.

“Soon, maybe. It’s getting hot.” That was the understatement of the year. “Is that a new tattoo?” Liv moved closer to me and pointed to the vine lacing itself across my upper chest.

“Yes, sort of new.”

She nodded. “It’s beautiful.”

“Thank you. I’ll have to get rid of it soon enough, I guess. Ten more months.” I could tell she noted my sudden coldness. I didn’t like that she was idly picking up things on my desk.

Liv consulted the rose-gold Rolex Daytona on her tan wrist. “Meet you in what? Fifteen minutes downstairs?”

I nodded.

“Hey,” she said over her shoulder as she left my room. “I’m excited to hang out. We never see each other anymore.”

I smiled halfheartedly. As soon as she was gone, I walked over to what she had been fiddling with, hoping it wasn’t anything I hadn’t wanted her to see.

It was a loose photo of Angus. I was frightened by the sharpness of my anger. Liv clearly knew that Angus and I were close, and she was pursuing her little crush anyway. But then, why wouldn’t she? Regardless of her reluctance, what was mine always became hers. It was all she knew. But now she seemed to expect it.

A few months ago I would have thought Liv’s fascination with Angus was cute—one more thing that showed she looked up to me, much to my stepmother’s anxiety. Now, considering this womanly and newly empowered Liv, it wasn’t funny anymore. The question was, what was Angus thinking about her? Even if he didn’t see her as a little girl

anymore, surely he wouldn't dare go near her, out of fear of Novak? There was no way forward. Even for Angus.

It was the first time Liv had ever disappointed me. I felt the loss of the little girl who wouldn't be coming back.



I closed my bedroom door softly behind me, leather tote slung over one shoulder. I hesitated, wondering if I should go back and change.

Even though I was inside the house, I wore my large black sunglasses so Liv wouldn't see my eyes. Already I knew putting on the black string bikini was the wrong move. It had somehow ended up in my drawer, and I'd never before had the guts to wear something so tiny. What had felt like an I-don't-care moment a minute ago now felt somehow desperate.

I passed the gallery of photos on the wall of the hallway that spanned the entire length of the upstairs. So many of them were of Victoria and my father that it felt forced, as if Victoria wanted to prove Novak was in love with her, that they were as connected as all the other couples in our group. In some of the photos, they were so young. My father had been with someone else before Victoria, as evidenced by my existence, but in our culture that was atypical. We paired off early—in our late teens or very early twenties—and stayed together for life. I was at that age now. Almost all of us kids were. Which made this Angus and Liv thing even more irritating.

The same photo always caught my attention, as if it wanted to remind me on a daily basis of the reality of my situation. It was one of the few of Victoria, my sister, and me. My sister sat to the side, one of her chubby four-year-old

hands at ease on Victoria's knee. I was almost six in the picture and I seemed to be sitting in Victoria's lap. My face was blank. A young Victoria was looking down, her eyelashes demurely on her cheeks, a curtain of long hair casting a shadow on her face.

The picture was hung because it looked like we were a happy family, outside on the lawn, Liv and I with musical instruments in our little hands. What I actually remembered was the staging of the photo and Victoria's hands under my armpits, aggressively trying to reposition me on the other side of her. For me there was never any touching her, let alone sitting in her lap. At some point I realized why my presence was hard for her. She had been left to raise Novak's daughter by a rival, I presumed. But I must have been confused at that age, not understanding why she treated me differently from Liv. As much as I'd tried to be an easy guest in her home, Victoria never softened. At the time the photo was taken, we had been in Austin for five years. All of Liv's life and all but the beginning of mine.

I headed down the floating staircase, the living room below looking sparse and grand at the same time—glass, cool stone, beautiful furniture of various luxurious textures. The living room had a retractable glass wall that opened onto a terrace, the first of three tiered levels of garden leading down to the lake. The basement housed the underground garage and basketball court. At the western part of the property, near the guesthouse, was a more contemporary-style glass-and-steel gym. Most spectacular was how the house itself had a wing that reached almost to the water and connected to a boat garage, making the boats as accessible as the cars.

I wound my way through the other spacious, hushed rooms painted in natural shades and decorated with orchids. I paused midstep when I registered his presence a few seconds before I saw him. When I entered the kitchen, there stood the king.

Once I made the joke that seeing my father was like spotting an elusive elk. It was rare and exciting and you never knew when it was going to happen. Liv didn't get it, or at least she didn't think it was funny.

Since we ran cooler as a whole, I knew the show of affection and exuberance now taking place was for the housekeeper's benefit—a simulation of an everyday family's interactions. Still, I wished I could take a picture. My youthful, handsome dad, in running clothes, bent down to greet Liv with a hug, their golden-brown heads resting together as he gave her a squeeze. He'd just come in from a run, and they were laughing about him getting her sweaty, their identical blue eyes showing genuine fondness for each other. Both of us were daddy's girls.

I didn't realize I'd stopped in my tracks to look at them until I felt someone else in the room watching me watch them. I caught Victoria's eye. I dropped my gaze.

"Hey, doll!" Novak came over to me and wrapped his arms around me too, instantly making every worry disappear. I lived for the infrequent moments when he acted not just like a leader but like a dad.

Even though Novak had a slight build, he was wiry and strong. I didn't even care that he was sweaty from his run. And of course he wouldn't really think we'd mind. He was too used to being adored by all of us. He was the sun. For a

second I lost myself in this uncommon hug. He pulled away first and began to loudly chug a green energy drink, the only thing he ever consumed. He raked a hand through his hair. The curls were cut short but still there. It was hard to believe he was my father when he looked like he was twenty-five.

I felt an imperceptible exchange between Victoria and Novak. Lydia, the latest in the line of short-term housekeepers, had left the kitchen, and you could feel a bit of the act fall away. I knew the calm that replaced it would look eerie to outsiders.

“Where’ve you been, Dad?” Liv asked. As a precaution, Liv continued to speak in a measured tone of voice instead of taking the easier route—speaking quickly and just above a whisper.

“Just working my ass off.”

I knew we were alone, but it was so unusual, I felt like looking behind me for the people who almost always surrounded Novak. There were always members from our group around him, even at home. And when he wasn’t home, they were here too. We were all related to one another and we instinctively preferred to be together, weaving in and out of each other’s homes as if living in mansions separated from one another was an unnatural lifestyle.

I glanced up at Victoria, who was hovering. There was the Victoria, Dad, and Liv family unit, and then there was the Dad, Liv, and me unit. The second was never given a chance to breathe. Victoria was annoyed I’d interrupted her time to enjoy her family. I knew it was my place to stay away at moments like these, and I would have if I had been paying attention.

“I’ve got to go, gals.” Novak lowered his face to Liv’s for a quick kiss and then walked over to me. Same thing.

“Do you need me today?” Victoria asked. I wondered if he realized he hadn’t kissed her as well.

“No.” Novak was already busy checking his phone.

“My dad wants a meeting,” she said. Novak had been voted in as leader—already a legend for being the youngest we’d ever had—replacing Victoria’s father soon after we’d arrived in Austin.

Novak didn’t look up. “It’s not a democracy,” he joked. It was in fact a democracy. Or it used to be, with everyone’s needs equally considered. But if Victor had been a traditional leader, Novak was more like a shaman. He had a small inner circle, but these days it was clearly just Novak calling the shots.

Novak’s leadership had been divisive. On the one hand, by making us rich, he’d bought us a kind of security we’d never had before. On the other, we found ourselves living further than ever from how we used to live. According to stories, we had once been a communal culture of what’s mine is yours, with no emphasis placed on acquiring personal possessions.

“He—”

“I can’t stop everything to have fifty council sessions a month like he had.” Novak looked up at Victoria when he said this, and she stared back for a millisecond before breaking eye contact first.

“Do you really have to leave? You just got here!” A whine crept into Liv’s voice.

“I’ll see you tonight,” he said.

We knew it was unlikely.

Liv nodded. For some reason I felt sad, and a flash of the

old protectiveness for Liv. It was never enough. His presence and the energy he exuded made you want more. Always more.

It was what got him in trouble with the people he interfaced with at work. Among us kids there was speculation that maybe Novak had the power to affect people's emotional states and that's why we felt almost high in his presence. The outsiders who weren't too shy to interact with him could too easily become infatuated with him, his intense focus making them feel like the center of the world. Novak came across as deferential and unwaveringly polite to anyone he had dealings with, which was a heady combination in someone so powerful and attractive.

Novak was our liaison to the outside world, but he was maybe too good at it, because now the business world and admirers in general followed his every move. The SEC had been plaguing him now for the past several months.

With Novak gone we were left alone in the kitchen with Victoria, a different energy completely. "Where are you going?" she asked. *Dammit.*

Dressed in an expensive tunic she wore as a dress, Liv was all legs. She opened the glass door of the refrigerator and grabbed a few bottles of water. Except for the fruit, breakfast sat untouched on the table. Presumably Victoria had explained our plant-based diet to the housekeeper, but it had probably seemed so unsustainable, it went ignored. I wondered if anyone else was always hungry like me.

Victoria walked over to Liv and touched her sleeve almost like she was holding on. Victoria was trained as a doctor, but she had never practiced. Instead she waited around, bored,

like everyone else in the group, until Novak called on her for her area of expertise to consult on his grand plan. Our goal was to relocate somewhere that would be environmentally more protected and less directly impacted by the climate change that was worsening every year. Not to mention the other man-made messes that were inarguably coming home to roost. Novak knew future wars would be fought over water, just like wars were fought over oil now. None of us felt bad about Novak's plan to pump water for our sole use, not when outsiders had first disturbed our way of life, not when they had almost exterminated us.

The teens in our group never stopped hearing how our generation was lazy in comparison with previous ones, that we lacked any sense of urgency about contributing to the group's well-being. Maybe it was because we had a sense of futility about the future. We were the last generation. Not one child had been born to the group in sixteen years. None of the couples in their twenties and thirties had children. Liv had been the last, and it was a never-ending source of grief.

The childless couples and even the adults my parents' age had done everything they could and had kept trying in spite of Novak's vision, which had predicted it would be futile. From a pure biological standpoint, the group, now numbering fewer than sixty, had stayed too insular. The idea of diluting our DNA wasn't an option anyone ever discussed. It seemed we would rather die out. Otherwise, what would all this have been for—the decades of running, the hiding in plain sight? Everything had been in the name of staying together in spite of the odds.

My eyes flew to Victoria when she loudly placed a water

glass on the countertop. Victoria was tall—in heels, taller than my dad—her hair a darker shade of brown than Liv's. She always kept her lips bare, even though the rest of her face was made up. It suited her to appear always a little edgy and not just a little severe. Today she was dressed in a tight black dress worth thousands.

Victoria and I were both experts at wiping our faces of emotion when we entered each other's company. So proud of her daughter, she melted every time she laid eyes on the younger, almost-identical version of herself. Since I looked nothing like my dad or Liv except for the color of my eyes, I knew I must take after my mother. Whoever she was.

I assumed my birth mother had not been allowed to relocate with the rest of the group when we moved to Austin, that maybe there was truth to the rumor that not everyone had made the cut. I wondered if Victoria had something to do with it. That was the best explanation I could come up with. To keep our identities as protected as possible, everyone was prohibited from talking about the past, even among ourselves.

Years ago, I realized I would never learn who my mother was or why the older members of the group seemed to avoid meeting my eyes. My whole life I had always exceeded expectations, even for our people, but I'd never been praised for it. I'd had to come to terms with never having answers. It was either that or go crazy.

When I'd hugged my dad, I'd left my sunglasses on the counter next to where Victoria now stood. I debated leaving them, but the sun would hurt my eyes and I'd lose that layer of protection that would hide my expression. I left my position

behind Liv and casually grabbed my sunglasses from the marble surface where Victoria was leaning. She straightened at my proximity and must have seen down my black tank top.

“Why are you wearing my bathing suit?” she asked acidly.

“It was in my drawer. I thought it was Liv’s.” Wrong thing to say, I realized too late. She’d think I was saying she was too old to wear it. “I can change.”

“No,” she said flatly. The resentment aimed at me was subtle, but I was sensitive enough to pick it up. It vanished as quickly as it flared. “Keep it.”

Shaken, I walked back to my sister. In spite of our distance this summer, Liv was still my safety in this house.

“Where are you going?” Victoria asked again, as if the thought of Liv and me going somewhere together was completely unacceptable.

“I’m dropping Julia off at Ellis’s, and I’m going to Emma’s. To swim,” Liv lied.

She had actually lied. The old Liv wouldn’t have bought into that. I felt like someone had just kicked me in the chest. Even worse, Victoria knew Liv was lying. The trickle-down of that would only land on me.

“Bye, Mom.” Liv quickly kissed her cheek. Victoria looked back at Liv, clearly not satisfied. “Come back by three. Remember, I’m taking you to Grandma’s tonight.” I wasn’t included in that plan.

There was a moment of silence, and then Liv and I made our way to the elevator. When the doors opened into the garage, Liv automatically walked over to the black Range Rover without asking me first. She wanted to drive her new car. It was a change for me to ride in the passenger’s seat.

For a second it seemed as though Liv was going to say something. I stared straight ahead. Liv apparently decided against it.

When she started the car, the music came on loud, jolting us both, but she didn't bother to turn it down. It made for good filler.

We wound out of our neighborhood, which was lush with greenery and hanging vines, then down the curves with water views and large homes hidden behind tall trees and massive gates. At the base of Scenic Drive, the car was spit out onto flat, hot pavement.

Chapter Three



The first time I saw him, he had on a battered baseball hat and Ray-Bans. I noticed him getting out of an old white Ford Explorer close to where we'd parked, in the dusty lot at Barton Springs. I didn't know why I was immediately drawn to him. I was always vaguely and automatically scanning my surroundings—especially in public, where there was excessive interest in us.

He saw us almost instantly, turning his head, along with the other people in the parking lot who were now staring. As soon as Liv exited the car, everyone tried to place her, wondering if she was some kind of celebrity hiding behind her sunglasses. Teenagers typically didn't look like her or pull up in a car like that.

I felt his eyes on me, but, unlike everyone else, his gaze didn't switch back to Liv. As we walked to the entrance, I was aware of how I looked beside her. Short and thin next to her tall curvaceousness, I was all hard exterior with my tattoos, my chin-length black bob, my skin pale against my black clothing. In contrast Liv was a natural beauty, dressed in all

white, her hair cascading down her back. Self-consciously I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, then kicked myself for allowing an outsider to make me feel self-conscious.

It wasn't just him, I told myself. I wasn't used to all this public gawking. It would be better when summer ended and we went back to school on Monday. It would keep Angus from wanting to push the envelope.

Involuntarily, I turned my head to look at the boy again as he trailed us to the admissions booth. He was over six feet tall and had dark-brown, almost-black hair. There was something in how he carried himself—a type of confidence that made him immediately eye-catching. Confidence meets I-don't-give-a-shit meets calm. Standing right behind me in the long line waiting to pay, he was acutely aware of us. I could feel it. I wondered if I was making it up, but I thought his attention was wholly directed toward me.

So softly that it was impossible for anyone else to hear, Liv said, “He smells good,” referring to our usual revulsion at the scent of outsiders. I knew who she was talking about. I'd noticed it too.

“It's probably his sunscreen,” I said.

I glanced over my shoulder and saw him deftly juggle his things from one arm to the other in order to take his phone from his pocket. The glass face of the phone had a long crack in it, and a picture of Johnny Cash on the lock screen. He checked it quickly before putting the phone back in his pocket, vaguely annoyed. He wasn't just looking at the time. I could tell he was waiting for a call or text that hadn't come. I felt him bring his focus back to me. I didn't know why he made me feel so self-aware when usually I was a master at

blocking people out. At least watching him was distracting me from the nearby crowd.

Once Liv and I paid at the booth and walked through the entrance, it was like stepping into a different world smack in the middle of the city. Shaded by pecan trees and dotted with towels and chairs, the lawn sloped steeply down to the sunlit water. The din of the shouting swimmers and intermittent spring of the diving board carried up the hill. The bathhouse was on the opposite side of the water, that lawn already filling with a different kind of group—mostly people with kids.

It was around noon and not crazy-crowded yet. It was ridiculously hot already. As Liv and I stood at the top of the grassy hill, deciding where to sit, I realized everyone in the vicinity was looking in the same direction.

The Lost Kids were here. It was like a haze of gold surrounded them—partially because of their coloring, but also because they were half in the sunlight and half in the dappled shade beneath the trees. It was jarring to see them together in public like this. With their almost identically colored hair that nearly matched their skin tone, the seven boys looked like an otherworldly grouping of models posed as gorgeous young skate rats. They were all very tall and skinny, reminding me of the ectomorph cross-country runners I'd see running in packs, except that my friends' chests and backs were covered in tattoos. The boys acted like they were in their own private world, but it was far too obvious who they were.

Usually we were so careful to go out alone or in small groups so the public would see just one or two people with tan skin and perfect features. I could feel everyone around us

begin to realize who the girl next to me was. And now they were looking at me too, wondering how I could be with her when I didn't match.

People were using their phones to take pictures and to text, presumably about the sighting. Angus and the boys stood on the slope, shoving one another, blatantly oblivious to the stares and the space they were taking up.

Liv, thankfully, didn't walk over to the Lost Kids. She was too wary. Then I saw Liv's friends on a different section of the lawn—another group of seven teens, looking like royals trying to relax at a public pool. They waved her over, but Liv breezed down to the central part of the wet, green hill, putting us squarely between the A-group and the Lost Kids. No way would I have come if I'd known there would be this many of us in public. This wasn't allowed.

“Did you invite George?” I asked.

“No. I told Emma I was coming. I can't believe they're here.”

“He's trying to protect you. I heard you're dating him.”

Liv laughed a *whatever* laugh.

“This is making me nervous,” I stated flatly. “All of us shouldn't be here.”

I shook out the turquoise hand-woven cotton blanket that had no business being on the ground and Liv sat down, lounging back on her elbows. I sank down next to her, wanting to get out of the crowd's line of vision.

Angus was watching us. I could sense his smirk from fifty feet away. Shirtless, with shorts falling low on his hips, he had no body fat, just a lot of lean, defined muscle. He turned and I saw the telltale wing tattoo that spanned his entire back. I forgot what meaning it had at the time—freedom, I guess—

but it reminded me of a fallen angel. And he definitely looked like an angel gone bad, with his curls and that fierce gaze in his icy blue eyes. Actually, he looked a lot like my dad.

“You can go sit with them if you want,” I said to Liv, gesturing with my chin to her friends. The schism between the two groups of kids—the haves and the have-nots—was stark. Novak’s decision to form two groups had been disastrous for our friendships. It was too painful for us Lost Kids to be around the others, knowing they had to keep secrets from us. And they were scared off by our derision, which was mostly fueled by our jealousy.

But Liv was looking at Angus as she said, “No, they can come to us.” I couldn’t believe she actually thought I was telling her to go to my friends. She’s young, I kept reminding myself, making excuses for her self-centeredness.

Sweat trickled down my back. I had a metallic feeling in the back of my throat—I was beginning to recognize this as one of the signs that the rash was coming on. I needed to leave. I didn’t want to be the one blamed for bringing my sister here. There was bad energy in the air. The boys continued to draw attention to themselves, doing neat backflips they shouldn’t all have been able to manage.

If I had been smart, I would have stood up right then and driven home. Unfortunately a much bigger part of me wanted to stay, in order to stand in the way of whatever might have been happening between Liv and Angus.

Angus lit a cigarette, and I immediately looked over at the nearest lifeguard. I saw the lifeguard quickly look away, pretending not to see the infraction. He didn’t want to approach. It felt like everyone in the park was holding their breath—

partially out of wonder and partially from tension. I knew that in their minds it wasn't clear what our group might do next.

Liv angled her body to look behind us. Craning her neck, she stared at something. "What?" I asked, and turned around.

I had been so busy freaking out at the heat and the noise and the spectacle that I hadn't noticed where the boy from the parking lot had landed. He'd spread out his beach towel just behind us, but he was ignoring us completely. The only personal items around him were a bottle of smartwater, a phone, and a paperback book. He had the aura of someone who wanted to be alone. I was wondering if he was about my age—seventeen or eighteen—when he obliged me by removing his hat and sunglasses, and I could see my guess had to be close. Then, almost violently, he whipped his shirt off over his head. Balling it up, he stuck it behind him where he could use it as a pillow, grabbed his hat and sunglasses, putting them back on before he lay down on his towel, and reached for his book. Not even a glance our way, though I'm sure he could tell we were both openly staring. Now that he had his shirt off, I looked a second longer than I should have.

I was embarrassed and wanted to cover. I didn't think I'd ever wanted to really look at an outsider before. At least in that way.

Liv seemed fascinated also. "What do you think his story is?" she asked, finally facing forward.

"I don't know—some guy here feeling sorry for himself. He's wondering why his girlfriend hasn't called." I was just trying to sound dismissive, but as soon as it came out I knew with

certainty it was true. I knew his girlfriend was cheating on him at this very moment. And that he was far too good for her.

Liv laughed at that.

“Since when do you care about outsiders?” I asked her, wanting to blow it off.

She shrugged. “Since never.” But she turned back around again and stared. Suddenly she looked like she was actually about to call out to him.

“Liv!” I said quickly.

“What?” she asked, annoyed, as if I’d just interrupted something.

“Emma’s trying to get your attention.” We could feel Emma and the other swan-like girls staring Liv down from across the substantial distance.

Liv looked over in her best friend’s direction but made no move to get up. Luckily I’d managed to distract her, and she was facing the water again. Her persistent interest in the person behind us was peculiar.

We both trained our eyes back on the boys.

I saw Ellis take a pull from a flask, in full view of the roving lifeguard now swiftly walking toward them. My eye caught the flash of silver traveling from one point in the circle of boys to another, but by the time the lifeguard approached, there was no sign anyone had been drinking anything. The lifeguard looked baffled, probably wondering if he was crazy and had never seen a flask to begin with. The boys blatantly laughed in his face, and the lifeguard instinctively backed away.

“Hey, man.” It was the boy behind us talking on his phone, his voice low and gravelly. I realized with a shock that if we could hear him, he could hear us. Liv and I had automatically

switched to the way we spoke to one another in public, like we were supposed to. He'd most likely heard everything we had said, about a girlfriend, about "outsiders." We were in a pocket where sound carried perfectly. It sounded like he was speaking directly to us.

Liv and I both listened. It was impossible not to. He spoke quietly, probably assuming—correctly—that we were eavesdropping.

"What's up?" Pause. "I forgot. Sorry. I can be there in thirty minutes." I surreptitiously looked behind me and saw him, phone in hand, head bent and looking at the ground, trying to be as private as possible. Then, reluctantly, he said, "Barton Springs. No, by myself." It was like he was shy about revealing his location and that he'd come alone. "I don't know. I haven't been here since I came back. . . . I'll tell you next time. I gotta go—my phone's about to die. I have one of your rackets in the car. Okay. Later."

He checked his phone again before tossing it aside. He picked up his book, *All the King's Men*, and acted like he wanted to shut out everything around him for just a few more minutes. After a second he gave up and closed it. I found myself wondering where he'd just come back from. I knew that had been his brother on the phone.

I knew *information* about this person. That had never happened before. My first instinct was to blow it off as a fluke. I mostly felt weak that some regular person had broken through the barrier I was so good at maintaining between outsiders and myself. Why him?

All of us had better senses than outsiders. Just like we were faster, stronger, and smarter than regular people. We

were also healthier and lived longer. It had always been a fact of life that we were biologically different—better—and that this had to be kept secret.

We were also more perceptive. English felt like a secondary mode of communication. We were more like other animals—constantly reading body language for unspoken signals and information. Outsiders had no idea what they were always unconsciously conveying. In turn we maintained such a state of calm that it made it almost impossible for us to read one another.

Our contact with outsiders was typically brief and minimal—with teachers, housekeepers, restaurant servers—but if we wanted to we could tell you things about them that were lost on most people. We knew when a stranger hadn't slept or was distracted, angry, in love. The rhythm of their heartbeat and their scent also gave details about them away. Mostly we'd been taught to block those signals out. Novak said outsiders were a bad influence—caught in their never-ending cycles of fear and desire.

But this was different for me. I was positive that what I knew about this person was correct. *Jesus*. I didn't know if Novak could read anyone's mind, if the other adults could. . . . It felt hard to believe it was commonplace.

For the next several minutes, I tried to refocus on what was happening around me—on pretty, upstanding George staring at Liv like he owned her, on Angus, on needing to get Liv out of here.

“Let's just relax. We're making people nervous.” The exact moment I said it to Liv, it was like the boy behind me held up a hand and asked for it all to stop. All of the tension I felt, he was feeling too.

I instinctively sat up and turned to him. I knew I was looking at him like I was asking him a question. He didn't respond like I was crazy. He took off his sunglasses as if his instinct was to let me see him. Just the two of us existed at that moment. I had never felt anything like it—as if he were looking into me and I suddenly wanted him to.

He knew who we were. He'd heard about us before. He'd picked up on my calling him an outsider. He also thought we were elitists, and he was offended that I thought he was a loser waiting for his girlfriend to call. He'd only wanted to get away from his life for a few hours, and he disliked the keyed-up atmosphere we brought with us.

And he thought I was so incredibly beautiful.

I could only describe it as recognition. I knew him even though I didn't know who he was. And he felt it too. It was the oddest, most right moment of my life.

Liv broke the moment. "Here comes Angus." And then the feeling was gone. I turned my back on whatever was happening, hoping my expression conveyed that he was no longer worth my time. I wanted no part of it. It was the last thing I needed right now.

After I turned around I waited for the flash of excitement I felt whenever I saw Angus. That ridiculous longing and unrequited crush was something I could grab on to.

Angus strutted up to us, all cocky half grin and knowing blue eyes. A sheen of sweat was on his hairless, tan chest, tattoos covering almost every available inch. I tried to see him through Liv's eyes and couldn't tell if she would be repulsed, or attracted the way I was. But when I saw them look at each other, they suddenly made perfect sense to me. I knew they

would end up together. I felt a beat behind, like I'd shown up too late to the party to put a stop to what was happening in front of my face.

"Livvy Jaynes, you slummin' today?"

"Apparently." A huge smile played on Liv's face. God, she could light up.

"What took you so long?"

"I wasn't sure I could make it."

I rolled my eyes at that one.

They eyed each other intently for a moment. I was surprised to know Angus was slightly nervous, which was not something I'd ever seen.

"I'm sitting down. Sorry, assholes." Angus pointed his chin in the direction of George and friends, who were staring down hard at Liv from their position.

Angus sprawled next to me on the blanket, putting me between them. Then he proceeded to plaster himself against my side as he leaned across me to talk to Liv. I inched away and wondered if he cared. Angus was always overfamiliar—touching me all summer by leaning against me, holding my hand. I had thought it was because he liked me. Now I felt sadness, disgust, and an *Of course* feeling all wrapped together. I felt another surge of unrecognizable and totally unacceptable anger. She could have everything. I'd given her everything. Why this . . . ?

What a total d-bag.

I looked up to see who had called Angus a douchebag and was about to get the shit kicked out of them. It hadn't been said in a joking way by one of the Lost Kids. It had been said in the most derogatory tone you could imagine. But there

wasn't anyone near us, except for the person behind us. Then I realized Liv and Angus had had no visible reaction. Liv sifted her hand back and forth through the grass while Angus tried to make her laugh. They hadn't heard.

I whipped around.

It had been *his* voice. But he was looking off into the distance, pretending to study the people swimming down below. It sounded like he had said it to himself, in his head. I stumbled on that thought for a moment before deciding he must have murmured it and I was the only one listening. It actually kind of cracked me up that he had such disdain for Angus, who was starring in the worst love triangle anyone had ever seen. A one-sided love triangle, I guess. And then I felt uncomfortable that this stranger was seeing this.

"I had your sister out late last night," Angus was saying to Liv.

"I know. What were you doing?"

Angus looked off into the distance at his friends, who were not-so-discreetly watching him in amazement. He was talking to Liv. It was a big deal. He was going to catch a lot of shit from them.

Angus turned back from the Lost Kids and looked at Liv, deliberately not answering her question. I wanted to say, *Angus and I were out and he begged me to teach him more of the tricks I know. In fact, he had a knife through his hand at one point in the night, and then he hung himself from a tree, to see how long he could last, until I threatened to leave.*

I tried to tell myself that if I hadn't shown Angus my "tricks," these guys would be deep into mind-numbing drugs. That's where they'd been heading before this near-death crap. I completely understood they needed a release of some sort.

These small tricks kept me sane so I could quash my instincts for the rest of the day. But if our families found out . . . I absentmindedly watched the sparkling water below. Of all the eyes on us, I was most conscious of the gaze coming from directly behind me. I tried again to block him out.

“I’m going for a swim.” Liv stood up suddenly and with two hands grasped the bottom of her short white dress and whipped it over her head. It was like all of Barton Springs turned to her in unison.

Liv clearly expected Angus to join her. But to my surprise and Liv’s, he didn’t move an inch.

“Enjoy.” He gave her a Cheshire grin. Liv pretended she didn’t care that he wasn’t following her like a puppy, and she walked lightly down the hill, resplendent in a white bikini setting off the glow of her tan skin.

Angus openly watched. I couldn’t believe it didn’t make Liv want to bolt, but she carried herself like she was impervious to scrutiny. I had to resist the urge to look over my shoulder to see if *he* was looking at her too.

Now that there was room on the blanket, I shifted so I could see Angus. He was looking at the water, momentarily lost in thought. I concentrated hard on maintaining a neutral expression so he wouldn’t have the satisfaction of knowing I was hurt.

From the intensity I’d felt in the air between them, it struck me that maybe Angus had spent the whole summer getting even closer to me in order to gain access to Liv.

That sudden realization made my stomach hurt. As if on cue, the sun broke through the trees and blazed onto my side and legs. Suddenly I wasn’t able to keep the noise from the

water, the groups of people all around me, and the intensity of the stares at bay. I needed to process what had happened seconds before Angus sat down. I felt the tingle on my arms. The rash was about to appear. I didn't know where I planned to go, but I made a move to stand up.

“Hey! Hey.” Angus's voice suddenly gentled, and he grasped my wrist to pull me back down next to him. “Julia, it's going to be okay. Shhhhh. Breathe.” He knew. He was the only person who understood what I was feeling and that I needed a release. As much as I hated myself for it, I let myself be soothed by him because it would work. When I let Angus hold me, I had the distinct sense the person behind me was reacting to the sight of Angus touching me. He didn't like it.

As angry as he could make me, I had never been able to distance myself from Angus for long. He changed when he was around me. With his friends, he was the alpha dog whose moods were unpredictable. When he wasn't playing mind games, he was outright taunting them into the next dare. But with me, when he wasn't teasing and flirting, he was kind. I have to admit I loved it because I thought maybe he understood how hard my situation was in my family. He knew why I'd showed him the tricks. It was just one way to secretly be special in a family that said you couldn't be. He'd wanted what I had so badly. I'd had no idea he'd be smart enough and talented enough to take it to a new level, using his own body for practice.

Angus examined me to see if I had pulled it together, and then his attention moved on again. He looked back at the water, searching for Liv. Without glancing at me he said, “Are you okay?”

“Why did you want to come *here* today, of all places?” I asked, my whisper so soft, I knew only Angus could hear. Too many confusing things were happening. It was rare for me to feel so out of control. I realized Angus must feel it too, but it was feeding him, giving him some kind of thrill.

Angus spoke softly, taking my cue. “What? You don’t like big groups of people?”

“No. Why would I?”

Angus shrugged. “I like watching them. You should too. There are well over seven billion of them, and they’re the ones in charge.”

“I think you like the chaos,” I said.

“I don’t know. They’re pretty predictable in their stupidity.” Angus suddenly changed the subject. “I heard your dad is back in the country. Do you know where he was?”

I shook my head. The whole point of Relocation was no one knowing where we were going. It minimized the risk and enabled us to start fresh someplace where no outsiders knew who we were, where it would hopefully take another twenty years before there was too much suspicion of our abilities, like there was now in Austin.

“I hear it’s going to be different this time.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, squinting at him.

“Like, not just changing identities and location. Not just removing this shit.” Angus held up an arm, referring to his tattoos.

“But how else would we do it?”

“I don’t know.” Angus sounded pissed. “Maybe Novak tells *them*.” He looked over at Liv’s group of friends and gave them a dead-eyed stare.

Roger, one of the Lost Kids, interrupted us. He felt free to saunter over now that Liv was absent, and he started ribbing Angus about her in spite of my presence, which was doubly insulting. I thought the boys had assumed Angus and I were together.

“Shut up,” said Angus simply and seriously enough that Roger backed off immediately.

“Hey, we’re going in.” Roger stalked off, duly chastened and out of favor.

Angus made the move to stand up and leave me. I could sense he was antsy, and also feeling protective of Liv, who was in the water alone. My answer was to lash out.

Forever, I’d look back and wonder why, after all the years of mastering my emotions, I’d lost control so easily. I wanted to scare Liv away from Angus. I wanted to tempt him away with something I thought would trump his feelings for her. I wanted to hurt Liv for growing up and becoming like the rest of them.

But what if Roger had stayed, or what if Liv hadn’t gone to Barton Springs that day and jealousy hadn’t gotten the best of me? What if I’d left moments before instead of sitting back down? So many things could have changed the course of what happened next. One question turned my life upside down.

“Angus?”

He raised his eyebrows, as if to say, *What now?*

“Have you ever tried to drown?”

Chapter Four



It was like you could see the wheels turning in Angus's head. Then he wordlessly descended the hill to the water.

For a moment I felt nothing except self-satisfaction. Angus would choose the dare over Liv. That's where his focus would go for the rest of the afternoon while she stood by, disgusted.

I took off my tank top and lay back on the blanket, feeling like I'd put everything back in order.

I sensed him behind me, and I tried not to care. I knew he needed to meet his brother. Any time now he would leave Barton Springs, and I'd never have to think about him, and what happened, again. But with my eyes closed, I realized I was listening for his movements.

Perhaps fifteen minutes passed, and I wondered if he'd left and I'd missed it completely. At the thought I sat up quickly, surprised by my disappointment.

He was reading his book again, but as soon as I sat up he looked over, his eyes scanning my body for a split second. Sweat trickled continuously down my back. I felt far too naked. Trying to cover his interest, he threw his book aside

and felt for his phone. But now it was to check for the time, not for texts from his girlfriend. I felt it—he wasn't thinking about his girlfriend now.

He stared at his phone, annoyed. Before I could turn away, he looked directly at me, making eye contact. "Excuse me, do you know what time it is?"

He obviously knew I'd heard him, but for a moment it seemed not answering would be the best thing to do, making it clear I didn't want any contact.

But I couldn't leave him hanging like that, I told myself. Without consulting a phone or a watch, I said, "Just after two." My voice sounded a little huskier than I would have liked.

I was about to face forward again when he said, "I'm John." And then to my pure mortification, I blushed.

I wasn't sure what I was about to say in return when, without warning, I felt all the blood drain from my face. The feeling was like a connection had been severed, like a light had been switched off. I wasn't sure how, but I suddenly knew Liv was gone.

I didn't think about concealing anything. I ran so fast down the hill, I knew I was a blur, maneuvering too precisely between the groupings of people camped out on the now-jam-packed hillside.

Once I got through the people and leapt down to the sidewalk next to the springs, I ran directly to the far end of the pool, which was marked by a chain-link fence. Behind and below it was the runoff, a rocky pool a steep drop down where people took their dogs and swam for free. The Lost Kids were there at the entrance to the runoff. You could see the group of them diving and popping up like fish before

going under again. It looked like they were taking turns trying to see something at the bottom of the pool, laughing and shouting to each other whenever they'd come up.

I heard myself scream, "She's trapped!" I dove into the water, leaving behind me a crowd of people who'd risen to their feet.

The shock of the cold knocked the wind out of me. I swam hard over to the general area of the boys. It would seem suspicious that I hadn't come up for air yet, but I was close now. I opened my eyes underwater. There were plants floating everywhere, and rays of sunlight were shining through the brown water in dusty beams. The stillness was in complete contrast to the chaos on the surface.

Between the bodies of the boys treading water, I saw Liv flattened against the runoff grate, sucked hard against it, long hair fanned eerily out around her. She wasn't moving. I could hear the group shouting above the surface, yelling, "What are you doing? Leave her!" I heard Angus scream, "Shut the fuck up!"

Then I felt the intensifying suction of the water drawing me. I suddenly flew toward Liv, landing my feet against the metal bars to stop myself. I grasped at one of her arms, which floated lifelessly out from her side. Using all my strength, I tried to break away from the water's pull and swim us to the surface. Her body didn't follow. Through the haze, I saw her leg caught from the knee down in one of the slats of the grate, pinning her. I began desperately trying to free it. Her body was motionless, and I realized I was staring point-blank at someone who had drowned. I felt my own body begin to go into shock just as someone swiped at me underwater, trying to get my attention.

Like it was happening on a movie screen, I saw Angus

angrily make a banging motion against the runoff grate. When he did it, a rusty slat bent outward, freeing Liv. Her body slammed against the grate again, the suction reclaiming her, and I struggled to grab hold of her.

Someone reached out to take her from me. Angus tried to stop him, lashing out with one long arm. I remembered his name was John. In the midst of the complete chaos, it came to me very clearly. He was the one who used his strength to haul Liv to the surface.



Everything happened in slow motion. John pulled Liv to the side of the pool, some of the Lost Kids right behind them. Hands of strangers reached out and helped move Liv's body so that it was lying flat on the pavement. I flew up the silver ladder and rushed to Liv, Angus a second behind me. Somehow the group of us edged out the bystanders and circled Liv, trying to protect her from prying eyes.

"Livvy, come on." I put my hands on her cheeks, until Angus pulled them away and started slapping Liv not so gently on the face.

"Come *on*, Liv." This was lasting too long now. For a second Angus's eyes met mine. "Are you kidding me?" I snarled at him. "She's not like us."

Angus couldn't look at me and turned his attention back to Liv, determined to somehow make this okay.

"Liv!" I shouted at her, rubbing her arms. In my peripheral vision I saw George attempt to remove Angus.

"What did you do, you asshole? Get the fuck away from her."

Within one second of George laying a hand on Angus, the Lost Kids jumped him. Marko, Daniel, and Max from Liv's group descended upon our group to defend George. Suddenly I was surrounded by a nasty brawl, the Lost Kids choosing this moment to release months of repressed rage on Novak's chosen ones.

"CPR?" It was John. Somehow he had remained in the inner circle, right there at Liv's side.

"Not yet," I answered.

I was vaguely aware of the shrieks of lifeguard whistles and sirens in the background. I bent low and started whispering in Liv's ear, "It's over. You've got this." Before I could stop him, John moved fully over Liv and began using his hands to try to warm both her arms, undoubtedly the first stranger who had ever touched her.

In a blink Liv came to. She sat up, twisted her body, and exhaled all the water that had filled her lungs. She took one look at John, who moved aside, and then, in full view of the crowd who had just seen her all but dead on the pavement, Liv simply stood up to her full five feet ten inches.

I let out a ragged breath, as if I'd been hyperventilating this whole time. "What were you *thinking*?" I yelled. It was pure instinct, I was so scared. I had never yelled before in my life, and most definitely not at her.

Startled, Liv looked at me, and I watched the expression in her blue eyes cloud. I realized my mistake immediately. Lowering my voice, I asked, "Are you okay?" I stood and reached out protectively.

"Jesus. I'm fine." She shook my hand off her arm.

Angus appeared, a gash under his eye and blood seeping

from a cut on his head. He placed his hand gently on Liv's back. Liv looked from me to Angus as if we were her parents, hovering. I could see she was deeply embarrassed, and I knew she suddenly felt like an inept little girl.

Liv took in the crowd around her. Things had suddenly grown very quiet.

"Thanks, Julia," she said nastily, gesturing around her.

John sat back on his heels, trying to catch his breath, a long, raw scratch on his cheek from Angus. He looked up at me. His eyes told me he'd seen everything. He'd seen more than any other person had.

Excess adrenaline coursed through my body, and I felt like I was going to vomit as the enormity of what had just happened began to sink in. How had I known from halfway across the park that Liv was trapped underwater? And I had created a spectacle. We all had.

After being hyperfocused on Liv, I was fully coming out of a daze. With tunnel vision I saw lifeguards leading a pack of EMTs, all of them running toward us.

Moments before, the two groups had been beating each other to a pulp. Now, in what looked like a choreographed wave, the Lost Kids and Liv's friends turned on the descending EMTs and lifeguards, forming a wall to block them from examining Liv. I saw Angus take hold of John's arm to push him from us, but John jerked away. Everyone was yelling and shoving.

A police officer grabbed me roughly from behind, dragging me backward to make way for the medical workers. Angus lunged forward to stop him, his fingertips gouging the cop's shoulder. The policeman was thrown backward as if electrocuted.

I stumbled forward and John caught me. I heard a sickening crack as the cop's head smacked the pavement. Whipping around in John's arms, I saw Angus standing over the cop he'd rendered unconscious.

It was like time stood still as we all accepted the inevitability of what would happen next. Seconds later Angus allowed himself to be tackled to the ground.

Chapter Five



The heavy door opened, letting fresh air wash into the humid, stale room. In with a youngish cop came Angus, looking no worse for the wear, behaving like it was no big deal that he had just assaulted a police officer. They had taken Angus separately in a police car. The rest of us were driven in a white corrections van, a police chaperone riding in the back to make sure we didn't talk and change our stories. After a fifteen-minute ride, we'd pulled into an underground parking garage. They'd taken us in and questioned us individually before leading us to this large room with a concrete floor and benches lining the walls.

Angus's smile disappeared when he saw why we weren't talking. There were twelve of us in the room, and one stranger.

I'd heard him give his full name and date of birth to a cop when they had us sit on the low concrete wall, out on display for all of Barton Springs to see, some people even taking photos. *John Ford*. Four months older than me. Already eighteen. I knew that was going to make things worse for him.

I couldn't believe they'd slapped handcuffs on him as well.

The only thing he'd done was pull Liv out of the water. But happily it worked in our favor. There was no need to even discuss it; we automatically knew to coordinate our statements and point the finger at him for the damaged public property. We'd completely screw him over.

Everyone waited for the cop to call the next name. Liv's friends Emma, Serena, and Kate had escaped the roundup at Barton Springs, so we knew support would arrive soon. Until then we waited. A couple of the boys were vibrating with anger but were barely moving—just knees bouncing up and down and sudden shifts from upright to elbows on knees. Whenever they made eye contact with John, they simply looked bored and unimpressed, the standard reset face when dealing with the public. Then their gaze would slide away as if they had already moved on.

John sat directly across from me on a bench by himself, long legs crossed at the ankle in front of him. Once in a while he'd subtly roll his left shoulder, like he was testing out an injury. I saw him scratch the back of one of his hands, and I suddenly remembered seeing his hands on Liv, how they'd been unexpectedly scaly and raw. It was eczema. His hands were a crazy contrast to his otherwise tan, smooth skin. Like he knew I was thinking about it, he shoved his hands deep in his pockets to hide them from view.

It was impressive how contained he was in light of the fact that he was essentially trapped in a jar with a different species. He didn't know, but subconsciously it had to unnerve him. I knew it was eerie to be in such close quarters with this many people who looked so much alike and pretended you didn't exist.

I tried to avoid eye contact, which was difficult. I found myself continuously looking sidelong at him, wanting to know what he was thinking. Maddeningly, whatever that had been—reading his mind—was gone. It was like I'd imagined it.

He knew exactly what had really happened: I had predicted an emergency from hundreds of feet away, and he'd seen Angus bend steel. He must have known I'd stayed underwater a little too long. And he may have been the only other person besides Angus and myself to see what happened to the cop when Angus touched him.

No one would believe him, I told myself. Or if they did, they couldn't do anything about it. Everything that had occurred sounded right out of a ridiculous urban myth, no matter what any bystanders or even police claimed they saw. We could cover our tracks somehow. We always did. I wasn't sure we had ever had an incident on this scale, though. And the police had taken our fingerprints.

Everyone I knew had instantaneously iced me out while we were at Barton Springs. I began to realize that among our people, this was on me. It seemed lost on them that Liv could have died while they watched. I was being blamed for doing the one thing we weren't allowed to do.

I turned my gaze to the dirty floor, shocked at my friends' coldness. It was terrifying, like being completely separated from a lifeline.

The walls were so glaringly white, they hurt my eyes. I stared at the fluorescent tube lights that lined the ceiling and decided to put three of them out with a glance. When the room dimmed, I expected some sort of acknowledgment—a half smile—something to let me know we were going to be

okay. I felt the Lost Kids refuse to even look over, though they obviously knew it had been me.

And so I sat by myself at the end of my bench, isolated just like him. Angus and Liv now sat together. Liv whispered in his ear.

John caught me watching the exchange. This time I didn't turn away from him. He looked back at me, openly questioning. Even though he appeared calm at first glance, I could see in his eyes that he was exhausted and stressed. I wasn't sure if he was trying to figure out the ramifications of being arrested or if he was mentally ticking through all the unbelievable things he'd witnessed today, wanting to grasp a plausible explanation.

I stared deep into his eyes, silently asking him to never talk about what happened. I experienced a glimmer of the feeling I'd had at Barton Springs when we looked at each other for the first time. He looked straight back at me, and I realized he wouldn't say a word. He was smart enough to know no one would believe him anyway. Still, he wanted answers. I couldn't give him what he wanted, so I dropped my eyes from his and cordoned myself off. He didn't exist. Again.

The young cop entered. "Julia and Olivia Jaynes," he called out. I felt John recognize my last name from the Jaynes Pavilion sports arena. I wondered if he now realized me and Liv were sisters.



Things had changed at the police station since the last time I'd been out of the room. Now it was dominated by suits—a combination of our parents and their lawyers. They were

here to fix this thing. In a matter of hours, wheels had been set in motion. You would have thought a celebrity or political figure had been caught breaking the law, not that a group of kids had been merely detained.

“Wait here.” The police officer gestured to some chairs. I could wait all day. I wasn’t ready to face what was coming next.

Liv stared straight ahead. I rested the back of my head against the wall behind me, settling in for another wait, my eyes burning, covered in a film of grime from both sunscreen and sitting for hours in that warm, airless room.

“He’s not even supposed to be here. He was supposed to be safely on scholarship at that goddamn academy.” The woman’s voice sounded angry and teary at the same time.

“We’ll figure it out. There’s no way he would vandalize some runoff grate. They just want to hold someone accountable for shutting down the pool and costing the city money.”

I realized I could faintly hear what was going on directly behind me through the wall. It was obviously John’s parents talking.

“No matter what, we’re going to have to pay for a lawyer.” The way his mother said this made it clear this was going to be a financial hardship. “What the hell kind of charge is ‘criminal mischief’?”

“Let’s talk to him first, before he feels this enormous disappointment coming from you. It’s been hard enough on him this summer.”

“That’s not fair. I’m sorry, but how did we get here? He was on this great track, and now it feels like everything has gone completely off the rails.”

“He got injured. He came home.”

“But he was going to get a great scholarship to a top university. Have this tennis career if he wanted it. And now? He seems like he doesn’t give a shit about anything since he came back.”

“Stop, Kathleen. Okay? Let’s just get him home.”

“How are you not worried about this?” Her voice sounded incredulous.

“I’m very worried.” When the calm voice said that, it was worse than Kathleen’s outburst.

Just then a door clicked open and the hallway hushed. Victoria, hair in a tight bun, stalked out of an office across the hallway. She was wearing sky-high heels, making her six feet tall, and she looked made of ice.

“Dr. Jaynes, I’m sorry you had to come all the way down here.” An older police officer approached, holding out his hand. They obviously knew each other, since he didn’t introduce himself. She eyed him but didn’t say a word and didn’t take his hand, then turned abruptly to one of the lawyers. She whispered something to the lawyer, who looked up and said, “They go through the back door. Understood?”

“I didn’t see any media. . . .” The cop stopped talking at their expressions and changed direction. “Of course.”

The apologies were beginning. This was exactly why Novak donated millions of dollars to campaigns, to the university, to other powerful people’s causes. He needed to have this kind of influence just in case something like this happened.

I watched Victoria dismiss herself from the conversation and wander farther down the hall. At first her mind was elsewhere, but then she focused on something. And she smirked. I leaned

forward to see what she was looking at. Victoria had heard about the stranger in our midst and was checking him out.

John sat on a chair across from where Victoria was standing. He had the balls to confidently lock eyes with her, which probably accounted for her smirk. I'd never seen anyone stand up to her like that, let alone an eighteen-year-old boy. Or maybe that was exactly the type of person who was unafraid: someone like Angus.

I saw John had been given his phone back. He looked down at it and then up at Victoria again, as if reconciling what he was reading with the live version of her. I guessed what he was reading. Victoria probably did too. I understood why he was questioning his sanity right now, wanting to know more, trying to justify what he'd seen. John actually succeeded in making Victoria uncomfortable. She pivoted on her heel and stalked back down the hallway toward us.

"Let's go," Victoria rasped at Liv and me, exposing the fact that she wasn't totally in control. The police officers snapped into motion, ready to provide us with an escort. Liv stood up, and I reluctantly followed. We had to pass John on the way to the exit. His was a front-row seat to this Kennedy-like show of power—the rich people getting their kids off, the regular person completely screwed. I kept my eyes down, not liking at all that I felt ashamed.

I saw him slide his feet back in anticipation of our passage, either to be polite and make room for us to pass, or because he didn't want us near him. As I drew closer, I strained to see out of the corner of my eye if I'd been right about what was on his phone, but I couldn't quite see.

John loosely cradled his phone in one hand and then put

it in his pocket. His ratty beach towel and *All the King's Men* had been returned as well and sat in a pile on the bench beside him. With a look I forced the paperback book to fall from the bench and skid under Liv's feet as she walked by. She tripped and stumbled forward. John reflexively half stood up and grasped her arm to steady her. I was one step behind them and deftly removed the phone from his pocket during the diversion.

Liv recovered from the rare stumble and shot John a look of death for touching her. She replaced the flip-flop she had lost, and our procession continued toward the exit, his phone now plastered to my side. I looked straight ahead and kept walking, feeling his eyes on my back.