

# H.E.A.R.





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ROBIN EPSTEIN

**SOHO  
TEEN**

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For Raymond Pero, a man of vision



“There is no logical way to the discovery of these elemental laws. There is only the way of intuition, which is helped by a feeling for the order lying behind the appearance.”

—ALBERT EINSTEIN





# AUTHOR'S NOTE



*Over almost three decades, a small laboratory at Princeton University managed to embarrass university administrators, outrage Nobel laureates, entice the support of philanthropists and make headlines around the world with its efforts to prove that thoughts can alter the course of events.* —*The New York Times*, February 6, 2007

**WHEN I READ THAT** first sentence in Benedict Carey's front-page article about what sounded like an ESP lab, I shook my head in disbelief. A laboratory that studied psychic phenomena? At Princeton University? Impossible!

But after racing through the article, then tumbling down a Google hole of curiosity, I discovered that not only did the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research lab (PEAR) exist, it was modeled on similar laboratories at Stanford and Duke. And the more I read on the subject, the more fascinated I became, especially after learning that the Department of Defense, CIA and US Army Intelligence had spent millions of dollars studying parapsychology, the quantum physics of consciousness, and

training their officers to become psychic spies. They weren't the only ones; the Soviets had a psychic warfare program, too.

The lab and university I write about in *HEAR* are entirely made up. But though the study of ESP is real and well funded, the subject itself remains controversial: Is it true science or science fiction? The doubters know their answer. Yet a lesson I've learned over the years is that just because I don't fully understand something doesn't mean it can't exist. If that were the case, I wouldn't trust math or believe in love either.

—Robin Epstein, New York City

# PROLOGUE



“You’re cheating.”

Pankaj laughs at me, flicking his hair away from his eyes. His hair is jet black, and his amber eyes broadcast the confidence of a criminal who believes himself bulletproof.

I look at the three others and wait for them to respond. Surely they know he stacked the deck; they must.

But Mara just sighs, pretty-girl-speak for “Enough, loser, you’re boring me.” Alex slowly turns away to face the sun, which is dropping out of view beyond Sinclair Lake. Dan at least gives what I think is a nod, but he won’t meet my glance. His light-blue eyes remain inexplicably focused on the building to our left, the Henley University boathouse.

“Come on, you didn’t catch the way he manipulated the cards?” I ask them.

Alex stretches out on the dock, resting on his elbows. Maybe he does this on purpose to show off his biceps. Of course he does; seeing that doesn’t take a mind reader. Guys like Alex know exactly how good-looking they are. He closes

his eyes. "Sorry, Kass, I didn't see anything. My head's not really in the game."

"He's thinking about the action he's going to be getting at the party tonight. Aren't you, tiger?" Pankaj flings a card at Alex, making him smile.

"Should be fun," Alex says.

I shake my head. "Not if our one great hope here keeps playing this badly."

"Me?" Pankaj points to himself with one hand, sweeping his winnings out of the center of our circle with the other. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't I just beat you? Why, yes, I did! In fact, I *schooled* you. I think you're just jealous you're not as good as I am."

"Jealous?" I snort. But as much as I hate to admit it, I am impressed. I know how hard it is to pull off an artful sleight of hand, and to put one over on this group requires more than just skill: it takes *huevos*. Hard-boiled *huevos*. "You're just lucky that no one here was paying attention. But if you start screwing with the deck tonight and someone catches you, the only action you'll see is an EMT giving you mouth-to-mouth."

Pankaj smirks. "For someone who thinks she knows it all, it's amazing you don't realize how dumb you sound, Kass."

I take a cue from Dan and turn away, toward the campus, toward the view of the towers and spires. Thanks to the university's prosperous alumni, Henley maintains the well-groomed look of country club awash in sunshine and green.

"Mara, back me up," I say in the silence. "You know as well as I do that those weren't the cards he was dealt."

She curls a lock of hair around her ear, thinking, and leans forward to examine Pankaj's hand. Then she takes the cards and lays them in front of her. After a moment, she replies, "These are the cards he was supposed to get."

This gets Alex's attention. "You're basing this on what?" he asks. "Regular playing cards or your special voodoo deck?"

"Tarot is not voodoo," Mara says, an edge in her voice. "And you can get a reading on someone with any deck of cards if you know how."

"Wait." Dan's eyes dart to Mara before quickly looking away again. "You just said those were the cards he was supposed to get. What does that mean?"

"Means I didn't cheat." Pankaj sounds as cocky as ever.

I shake my head. "That's not what she means."

"Kass is right," Mara concedes. "Regardless of how you got those cards, Pankaj, they suit you."

"I'm *suit*ed by three sevens and a pair of queens?"

Dan's eyebrows knit together. "Three is a prime number, and seven is a 'happy prime,' but when you combine them with the queens, it's forty-one. So what's the significance? What does that mean?"

"Let's just say the sevens and queens fit his path," Mara says.

For the first time all afternoon, Pankaj looks rattled. "Say what?"

"If your perception's so great, shouldn't you be able to see it?" I tease. When I give Pankaj a "gotcha" glance, there's a flash—a clip in the reel of real life that shouldn't be there. Just like that, a murky vision there and gone. But something still blazes between us, and I know this means we both saw the image, that we both just shared the same disturbing glimpse of the near future.

*What the hell?* I ask silently.

*I don't know,* he answers. *But we don't tell anyone about this.*

*No, we do not,* I agree.

"What's going on?" Alex asks us.

"Nothing," we answer at the same time.

Mara, Alex, and Dan glance between Pankaj and me. And though they're all tuned in enough to sense we're lying, they're not on our frequency. So they don't yet know the hazy, partial vision we just shared: that three members of our group will form a powerful union, and one will die.

# CHAPTER ONE



There's no announcement when we arrive. Everyone else just seems to know we've reached the final destination. I wait for a moment before I stand and watch those around me hoist their suitcases and backpacks. They all look calm and confident. Even the ones who are forced to turn around when they see the train conductor's "wrong way, asshole!" gesture. But I'm as nervous as I am excited, and I'm so excited I feel like I might throw up.

I still can't believe I'm here. I'm lucky, I know it. I always have been. Henley University's footprint is small, but its reach and reputation make it one of the most prestigious liberal arts colleges in the country, a staple on those U.S. News and Blah-Blah-Blah lists. And though my father took advantage of the system to get me here, I'll do whatever I have to do to stay.

When I step off the train, the sticky-hot summer air assaults me. It's as if the atmosphere itself is testing me by turning up the heat.

"Kassandra?"

I turn to see a tall elderly man striding in my direction. He's

dapper in a crisp Oxford shirt rolled up to the elbows and green-and-white-striped seersucker pants. Though I haven't seen him since I was little, I recognize Great-Uncle Brian right away because the family resemblance is striking; he's the much older image of my dad.

"Kassandra?"

"Kass," I say with a nod.

"Welcome to campus, Kass." He scans my face as if doing a computer analysis. "Well, you look nothing like your father."

"Thank you," I reply quickly, before realizing the potential offense. "I mean—"

But Brian laughs. "Come, let's go. I'm afraid we have quite the hike back to my office. They built the engineering quad on the other end of campus, presumably to prevent our majors from trying to escape."

Uncle Brian is the reason I'm here, and I need him to like me. He only let me into his summer workshop because my father begged him—and though Dad wouldn't tell me the specifics of how the deal was struck, he did let me know that the favor was costly. So if my great-uncle wants me to take that hike barefoot on grass, off go the shoes.

He threads his way through the people loitering on the train platform. As we trek across Henley's campus, I gawk at the buildings and their cool mash-up of designs. I didn't appreciate the details when I was here as a kid, but there's a heavy dose of Gothic architecture interspersed with hypermodern stuff, which makes it all feel vaguely CGI. It's like it's a movie-set version of a college, not the real thing.

"Not far now!" Brian says over his shoulder. I approach the curb where he's waiting for the light to change. "Once we get to Greaves Street, our quad is right there."

"And how much farther is Greaves Street?" I ask.



“A mile or so.”

“What?” I gasp.

“That’s not so bad, is it?”

Maybe this *is* a test. “No, no, that’s fine,” I say as I try to rebalance the beast of a bag I’m carrying before it cuts off the circulation to my right arm.

Brian smiles. “Okay, green light. Let’s roll.”

**TWENTY MINUTES LATER,** MY arm feels as if it’s about to fall off.

“We have arrived,” Brian announces. “Welcome to our SEAS, the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences. We’re big on the acronyms here at Henley.”

I have no idea what Brian’s specific area of study is. All I know is that he’s the J. J. Dyckman Distinguished Professor of Applied Engineering. He opens the glass doors of the Merion Building, and we enter a two-story atrium. The space is open and bright: floor-to-ceiling glass partitions, white walls, oak doors.

There are a few indoor picnic tables, and he points to a fancy-looking hot-dog truck with a Henley blue-and-gold umbrella in the corner of the lobby. “If you’re hungry, the Snack Wagon has all manner of sugary supplements as well as a large selection of healthy items. Too many healthy items if you ask me. But we’re very fortunate here.”

I nod, struggling to keep up.

“Most of the other buildings in the SEAS quad were designed in the nineteen seventies, by people I assume were blind,” he continues dryly. “They were constructed almost entirely out of cinder blocks, giant fortresses of ugly. The Merion Building, however, was built by architects who knew something about aesthetics—it even features drywall.” Brian raps on one of the walls with the knuckles of his right hand. He seems genuinely enthusiastic about the white drywall. Before I can wonder why,

he adds, “You can tell how important a professor is by how much drywall he has in his office. Onwards.”

His office is almost too predictable. There are papers and books piled everywhere; models of an anatomical cross section of the human head, the solar system, some sort of chemical structure. What’s surprising is how sunny it is. Of course, this might have something to do with all the bright-white drywall. There’s a lot of it.

“Sit, sit, please!” He removes the stack of papers from the visitor’s chair. Pile in hand, he walks behind his desk then promptly dumps it on the floor. “It’s my own system of organization. I call it ‘dis-organization.’”

I try to smile, try to feel at ease. Not so easy. Dad gave me the impression that Uncle Brian was, in essence, a brain with teeth. Someone so brilliant he couldn’t relate to normal people. “Peculiar,” “cold,” “never been married”—those were the descriptors overheard at the family gatherings Brian didn’t bother to attend. The party line is that for all his eminent genius he isn’t “quite right in the head.” On the other hand, by letting me come here, he’s saving my ass, so I’m trying to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“Kass, close the door, will you?”

“Sure.” I turn around in my chair and swing the door shut. On the back of the door is a poster with four class photos attached. At the top someone has stenciled HEAR SUMMERS, and underneath each head shot, names are printed.

“What are HEAR Summers?”

“Ah yes,” Brian says. “They’re the Henley Engineering Anomalies Research team. Meet Mara, Alex, Dan, and Pankaj—pronounced like punkedge.”

“Punk edge?”

“Run it together like one word,” he corrects. “Punkedge.

They're the students you'll be spending your time with while you're here. Now look at me."

As I turn back from the door, his phone's flash snaps in my eyes.

"Not bad." He nods and hits a few buttons on the screen. The picture begins to materialize from his printer. "An action shot. Here." He hands me the printout along with a thumbtack. "Will you put that up there with the rest? I'll print another to use with your Henley ID."

I glance at the photo, and he's right: it's not terrible. Thankfully I'd plucked the Birchbox out of the mail just before leaving, so while on the train I'd busied myself by applying some of the samples: Midnight Blackest liquid eye liner, the Smashbox Intuitive O-Gloss. It took some effort in the tiny bathroom mirror, rocking back and forth on the tracks. Still, in the end, the makeup looked sharp. But as I'm about to tack the photo to the poster, I look more closely at the pictures of the others. They are not an average group of teens. They're all gorgeous. Like, modeling-agency attractive.

"Truly an extraordinary group of young people," Brian says.

"They certainly look extraordinary," I hear myself say as I attach my photo at the bottom of the bunch.

"Yes, they also happen to be good-looking; it's true. So you'll fit right in, Kass."

I turn and laugh. "Thanks, but I don't think—"

Brian holds up his hand in a "spare me" gesture. "As I was saying, your peers all have some marvelous qualities. Mara's an excellent artist. Alex speaks multiple languages. Dan is well known in the tech community for having created an alternative programming language. And Pankaj . . ." Brian pauses. "Well, he's what I'll call a character. He—"

There's a knock at the door.

“Professor Black,” a voice says, “You home?”

“Yes, come in, come in.”

I open the door, and one of the poster boys is in the hallway. He’s even hotter than his picture: chestnut hair, slate-grey eyes, and swimmer’s shoulders.

“Hi.” He extends his hand to me. “I’m Alex.”

“Kass.”

“Kass is our newest HEAR Summer,” Brian says. “She just arrived this morning.”

“Glad you made it.” Alex touches my arm just below the shoulder.

“Thanks.” I awkwardly lean against the wall. “I was just learning about your group . . . Are you the computer guy?”

Alex shakes his head. “No, that’s Dan. My claim to fame is that I can speak a couple of languages.”

“He’s being modest,” Brian interjects. “He speaks *five* languages. And not just your standard slacker Romance-language fare. In addition to Spanish, this young man is fluent in Arabic, Mandarin, Greek, and Hindi. He can communicate with at least one of every three people on the globe in their native tongue. He’s bound for Harvard in the fall. The State Department nearly had me killed for taking him out of their intensive language program so he could join us here this summer instead.”

I try not to stare at Alex, opting for his photo instead. “That’s . . . amazing.”

Now Alex leans against the wall, managing to appear much less awkward. “Languages are easy for me. So it isn’t a big deal. And I’m sure people would kill for you too. I mean, just *look* at you.”

I feel a bright, hot blush spreading across my cheeks. “Speaking five languages sounds like a good party trick at the very least,” I say quickly.

He laughs. “Trust me, where I’m from in Texas, it’s considered only slightly cooler than juggling fruit. So I’m curious, Kass: What’s it like to have an uncle like Professor Black?”

I try to think of the most diplomatic way to explain it. I catch Brian’s gaze but can’t read his expression. “We haven’t really spent much time together,” I reply honestly. “I’m glad that’s going to change this summer.”

“We did spend *some* time together when you were a young child, right here on campus,” Brian clarifies. “I have pictures somewhere around here . . .” He picks up one of the avalanche-worthy piles on his desk, looks underneath it, then shrugs, acknowledging the futility of the effort. “Well, I’ll find the photos at some point. Your parents would bring you when they came back for reunions. And you were also here for one of the many summer enrichment programs my colleague Chris Figg and I used to run on campus.”

Dad had reminded me of that too. But I only have the vaguest memories of the camp and the ponytailed man who ran it. Mostly I remember that it wasn’t very camp-like. Not much fun, no swimming or volleyball, but lots of puzzle matching memory game type stuff. What stands out most vividly, still, is one mean little boy stomping on a popsicle-stick house I’d built. My first reaction was to cry; then I punched him. I think I was “excused” from the rest of the day’s activities. I don’t recall going back to camp after that.

“My parents met as students at Henley,” I tell Alex, mostly to fill the sudden silence. “At a Hounskull party. It’s one of the Concord Clubs.” I hear myself spouting the story of my parents’ romance, and I feel slightly ill.

“You wouldn’t think so looking at me, but there are some very good genes in the Black family pool,” Brian adds.

“Obviously.” Alex smiles agreeably and gives me a wink. “So, Kass, are you staying in the dorms with the rest of us?”

I look at my uncle.

“She’ll be residing with me,” Brian explains. “My nephew, Kass’s father, made that a condition of her stay here.”

“Well that’s too bad,” Alex replies.

When our eyes meet, I wonder if he has a girlfriend. He must . . . though maybe they have a “what happens at Henley stays at Henley” policy?

Brian wags his finger at Alex. “We might have to watch out for this juggler.” Before either of us can reply, he continues, “Kass, I know your dad hasn’t told you much about what’s expected of you this summer.”

I nod, feeling Alex’s eyes on me.

“As I mentioned, HEAR stands for Henley Engineering Anomalies Research,” Brian explains. “It was established in the nineteen forties as an interdisciplinary department, comprised of engineers, physicists, neuroscientists, and psychologists.” He pauses and I feel like he’s waiting for me to ask a question.

“So . . . what do you study?”

For some reason, this makes Alex laugh. I can feel my face getting hot again.

“As the name suggests, we study anomalies,” says my uncle, shooting a stern glance at Alex. “Phenomena that deviate from the common order.”

“Let me translate,” Alex says wryly. “He means they study random stuff that no one can seem to explain.”

“You could do your research at my high school,” I say, hoping to redeem myself.

Brian arches an eyebrow. “Really? What makes you say that?” He leans forward across his desk.

“I, um . . .” I summon my confidence. “A lot of kids pride themselves on being ‘anomalies’ . . . you know, bizarre and unknowable creatures. But most of them are just basic, trying to

act cool. Then there are the kids who are far from normal but have no idea that's the case."

Alex laughs again. "That's every high school, isn't it?"

"Indeed." Brian nods. "And what we also find is that many young people who possess truly extraordinary minds try to hide their gifts. They're worried they'll be thought of as different, even freakish. But even average teenagers have fascinating brains from a neurological standpoint, far more interesting than the average adult brain."

I picture the lunch line in my high school cafeteria. I'm not sure I can agree with that statement. "What makes them—us—so interesting?"

"The adolescent brain is still growing and forging neural pathways, the roads on which thoughts travel. A teen brain also processes at lightning-quick speed. It tends to respond rapidly to chemical stimuli. That's part of the reason teenagers frequently act on immediate desires and gut instincts. Previously I worked with research volunteers and our graduate-student population at Henley, but I've found them lacking. The group I've recruited here this summer is special in part because yours is the time in life when people's minds are most open and receptive to triggers. That's what I'm interested in exploring and tapping."

*Tapping?* I look at my uncle. "Can I ask—"

"How do I plan to do this?" He laughs. "You're picturing me sawing open the top of your skull and poking around in your brain?"

"Well I wasn't until just now," I mutter.

"She's funny, your niece," Alex says.

Again, I feel a flush. I keep my eyes focused on my great-uncle.

"I want to access your brain at the point where thought processes form," Brian says, all business again, looking back and

forth between Alex and me. “We’ll be testing the chemical reactions that are involved in activating key neurons. We’ll be trying to establish simultaneous reactions in all the group members. And we’ll be running tests to see if we can establish neuronal networking.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about.

“Does that make sense?” he asks.

I nod. At least I’m not lying out loud.

“Everyone else in the group has already signed their releases.”

Releases? To access our brains? I glance over at Alex.

“When I heard about the chance to work with Professor Black . . .” He shrugs as if he needn’t bother completing the thought.

The skin between my eyes pulls together, a habit my mother tells me will lead to a set of wrinkles known as the “angry eleven.”

Uncle Brian catches my reaction. “Kass, you’re not having second thoughts, are you?”

“No,” I lie again. But duh, yeah, of course I am. Neuronal networking? All I can picture is a mad scientist running jumper cables between jars full of brains—mine included. Still, I can’t risk getting tossed out of here on day one. “No, no, of course I’m not having second thoughts. I’ll sign whatever you want.” I smile, trying to defuse any tension. “So, have you guys already started this testing?”

“Individually, yes, among the other four these past two weeks. But I planned to wait for your arrival to begin the rest.”

I shoot my uncle a *that’s impossible* look.

It was only decided that I’d be coming here two days ago. That he “planned” for my arrival can’t be right.



# CHAPTER TWO



I confess I wasn't upset when I was escorted to the principal's office back in May and informed, "Because of your reckless and delinquent behavior, Kassandra, we are expelling you." Getting booted from high school during the last few weeks of senior year seemed more like a present than a punishment. Especially since I had justice on my side. I may have been breaking the law, but I was doing it for a righteous reason, and my principal knew it.

Then the news from Columbia University arrived.

The letter, henceforth known as TLTRML (The Letter That Ruined My Life), stated that my admission to the incoming freshman class had been revoked.

That was it. I couldn't petition or argue or plead. Since I'd applied and been accepted early decision, I hadn't bothered applying anywhere else. In short, I was now hugely screwed. Everything I'd worked for in high school was gone, along with my prospect of an Ivy League diploma. My prospect of *any* diploma.

I didn't fall into a depression exactly. It was more of an

extended panic attack. And it was in the throes of this “I have no future” meltdown that my father stepped in. After lecturing me about responsibility and the need to think about “the consequences of your actions,” he promised he’d handle it. My father, a hedge-fund manager, is a guy who has a way with these things; if there’s an angle to work, he finds the corner. *The Wall Street Journal* even printed a cartoon of him in a wizard’s hat for his seemingly magical ability to make the stock market move in whatever direction he wanted.

So a few days later, when Dad told me he’d indeed found a solution, I naturally assumed I’d be in New York City come fall as planned.

I was wrong.

The rest of his words came out in a jumble. Apparently I was heading to his alma mater, Henley University. Dad explained that his uncle Brian, a prize-winning professor at Henley, had a “gold card” there, which entitled him to one student admission—no questions asked—per year. If I was willing to participate in Uncle Brian’s research this summer, his gold card would go to me. “I know you had your heart set on attending Columbia, but people kill to go to Henley; just remember that.”

I started crying.

At least I think I did, because my normally unaffectionate father pulled me into a hug. Then he whispered on the top of my head, “Kassandra, everything will work out.”

I started packing my bags for Henley. That was less than two days ago.

**NOW, FORTY-SIX HOURS LATER,** I am in my great-uncle’s office, trying to figure out what the hell is going on. Alex has fallen silent. Brian has crossed his arms across his chest. I am tempted to bolt, future or no future. I find myself leaning toward my bag.

“Rest assured, your dad’s on board with all of this,” Brian says. “A fair number of people object to my test subjects being minors. They find it controversial; they think I’m coercing subjects who don’t have the discernment to say no.”

I stiffen like an animal that knows it’s trapped.

“You don’t feel like I’m coercing you, do you, Kass?”

“No. I’ll do whatever you need,” I reply, steeling myself. I hear my dad’s words: *people kill to go to Henley*. “Sounds like it’s going to be a lot of fun.”

“Wonderful,” Brian replies. “And don’t you worry; the electroshock treatment will only curl your hair temporarily.”

“What?”

Alex nudges me. “I, uh, think your uncle’s kidding, Kass.”

Brian laughs. I start to laugh too, weakly—but then his lips press into a tight line.

“I’ve kept you here long enough. There are two more things I must mention in all seriousness. Texting is a distraction, and it muddles brain function.”

I open my mouth to object.

“You may protest, but you know it’s true,” he continues. “That’s why I ask that you limit the amount you text, doing it only when absolutely necessary.”

Annoying. “Can I write letters?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “Can you?”

Really annoying. “*May* I write letters?”

“Yes,” Brian answers. “To your friends. And this brings me to my second request. You’ll see on the release that I ask my subjects to refrain from contacting or speaking to their parents for the first six weeks of our program.”

“As if being here could get any better!” Alex exclaims.

“That won’t be a problem for you, will it, Kass?”

It’s less a question than a statement. Brian knows very well

that my parents are leaving later today for a business trip to China; it's why they couldn't drop me off themselves. He knows that they'll be hard to reach. Which makes me wonder again about what exactly had been "planned," and what my dad was willing to get "on board" with before leaving the country.

"Very good," Brian says, before I can respond. "Okay, so now that you've gotten the lay of the land here, let me take you home so you can drop off your bag and relax. I think it's best to get a fresh jump on things tomorrow morning."

I turn to Alex. "It was really nice meeting you."

"You too," he says. "Hey, what about getting dinner with me later?"

My great-uncle is sitting less than five feet away, and I can feel him watching me. He already indicated that I should watch out for this boy; this seems like a test. So despite how much I'd like to accept, I know what I have to say. "Thanks, I would love to, but tonight I'm going to cook for my uncle to thank him for letting me come here—"

"Nonsense," Brian interrupts. "Yours is a very generous offer, Kass, but I insist you take Alex up on his invitation."

I turn to him. "You're sure you don't mind?"

He shakes his head, gathering up his belongings. "Go."

I try not to smile too widely at Alex. "Okay then."

"Great," Alex says, giving me another wink. "I'll meet you at Rosalie's on Shea Street at seven thirty."

## CHAPTER THREE



Brian wants to give me a tour of the campus before he takes me home. I follow him, dutifully feigning interest by repeating, in question form, each fact he tosses out.

“Eighty-four miles of books in the Peabody Library?”

“And that’s spine-to-spine, not cover-to-cover,” Brian says. “The librarians will be quite pleased to tell you that our campus offers a higher number of books per student than at any other university library in the world. Over there is the art museum. Some very important collections. I’m sure you’ll like it.”

I’m more drawn to the students on the grass: sunbathing, reading, tossing Frisbees. I’d like to stop and rest, maybe even nap, but Brian continues to power walk across the green. I hustle to keep pace. The straps of my unwieldy suitcase have begun digging into my neck, and the bag drops as I try to swing it to my other arm.

At the sound of the thud, Brian turns around. “Forgive me! I completely forgot you’re carrying all the necessities of your summer vacation. I’ll bring the car around. Meet me at the front of Amory Gate. I’ll pick you up.”

And he's off.

*A shame I don't know where the gate is.* My uncle is already out of earshot. How does a man his age move so fast? I start twisting the signet ring on my right pinkie, a nervous habit; I've worn it (and anxiously twisted it when needed) ever since my parents gave it to me for my thirteenth birthday. I find myself hurrying in my uncle's wake, past a building with two bronze lions perched at the sides of the stairs. From here I can see another green where a large wrought-iron gate looms, topped by the blue-and-gold Henley shield. That has to be it.

I'm about to walk through the gate when I feel a firm shove to my right shoulder. It almost knocks me to the ground.

"What the hell?" I bark, spinning around.

"You're welcome," says a preppy-looking guy in a Henley T-shirt. "Students can't leave through the gate's middle exit until they graduate. You can enter the university through the middle door, just can't leave through it. I saved your skin."

I stare at him openmouthed. *Saved my skin from what, exactly? Some ridiculous campus superstition?*

"Like I said, you're welcome." He stomps off, making a big point of using the exit at the far edge of the archway.

Before I can process any of this, I see my uncle's arm waving out of an old Volvo station wagon idling in front of a bus stop. Not wanting to risk another tackle, I take the side exit and dash across the street. After I throw my bag in the backseat, I open the front passenger door, and with a whoosh of air, papers cascade from the seat to the floor. I get in and slam the door shut behind me before anything can escape.

"And we're off!" Brian says. "Nothing fell out of the car, did it?" he asks after we're halfway down the block.

I look down at the massive pile at my feet, wondering if he'd really miss any of the loose pages. "I don't think so."

“Good, that’s some sensitive stuff there.”

I glance back at the papers, and what I see resembles the contents of a calculus book: lots of Greek letters and equations that will make me carsick if I try to focus on them. I turn to face the window and close my eyes instead.

**THE FIRST THING I** notice is how organized his house is.

“Nora comes through on Mondays and Fridays to clean up for me,” he says, answering the question I didn’t get the chance to ask. Then he adds, “I’d wind up barricading myself in here if she didn’t keep the mess at bay.”

I make my way over to the mantel in the living room and spot a photo I recognize among the framed pictures: my parents on their wedding day. There are several other photos, taken in the era before digital cameras. There’s one of Brian with two male colleagues. They’re standing in front of a wall engraved with some sort of large company seal. The man on Uncle Brian’s left is skinny, wears blocky glasses, and appears mildly constipated. The man to his right stands proudly with his chest puffed out, a dark ponytail flopping over his right shoulder. I’m almost sure I’ve seen this man before; that unfortunate hairstyle was too “awesome” to forget.

“Wait, is ponytail guy the one who ran the camp here?” I ask.

“Yes,” Brian replies, “that’s Chris Figg.”

“Ah.” I have nothing else to say about the man since I last saw him ages ago, but I think the ponytail speaks for itself.

The final photo shows Brian in a goofy Hawaiian shirt, sitting at an outdoor café in some tropical foreign locale. He looks to be in his thirties, and a woman about the same age sits next to him wearing a pretty peasant blouse. She has her hand on top of his, and looks as if she’s holding his hand down for a reason. He’s gazing at her with obvious affection, clearly enjoying the game.

He looks truly happy, smitten. I'm immediately curious about the woman.

"These pictures are terrific," I remark. "I love that last one."

He waves me away from the photos. "It's . . . I was . . . That was a long, long time ago." He seems embarrassed. "Let me show you where you'll be staying. You'll be boarding in the observatory."

We head up a wide staircase.

"A bed and closet space are all I need," I tell him. Though it would be nice to have a television, WiFi, air conditioning, and a minifridge.

"Then this should do the trick."

Brian opens the door. He wasn't kidding. The room actually looks like an observatory, the kind meant for astronomers. The deep-blue walls are stenciled with constellations, and there's a refractor telescope perched on a tripod, its long gleaming tube trained out the window.

"That's a pretty powerful gadget, that telescope. You can get either an excellent view of the moon or insight into our neighbors' sleeping habits. But I trust that you'll use it only for the purposes of good?"

I'm not sure what he means. Maybe this is another test. "Education only, I promise." I swing my bag off my shoulder and set it down on the enormous bed in the corner of the room. I nearly jump when the mattress rumbles and undulates. When I put my hand down on the bed, waves ripple out.

"A water bed?" I exclaim, grinning. I've never actually seen one of these things before.

Brian nods. "They were all the rage once. I could never get used to the bobbing, though. You don't have issues with motion sickness, do you?"

I climb on board and lie down on my back. It feels like I'm



on a raft in a pool. “I think I’ll be fine.” I stare up at the ceiling. “Are those—”

“Afraid so.” Brian flicks off the lights, and the star stickers on the ceiling glow in the dark. “I created this observatory around the same time several of my colleagues were conducting the first governmental experiments with LSD.”

I struggle to sit up. “The government experimented with LSD? Why?”

He chuckles. “A lot of people asked exactly that question. Initially those in charge were convinced the drug would unlock the secrets of the universe.”

“Which secrets?”

“Chaos theory for one.”

We did a unit on chaos theory in physics. Feeling the need to impress the professor, I decide to show off. “Oh yeah, the uncertainty principle, right?”

“Correct.” Brian seems pleased. He taps his index finger to his nose. “And if we pay attention to the uncertainty principle, what’s the one thing we know we shouldn’t rely on?”

I rack my brain for an answer . . . something . . . anything . . . Nothing comes.

He smiles. “Well, it’s a bit of a trick question, because I was referring to those extended weather forecasts. We know weather is a complex system made up of the total behavior of all the molecules that comprise the Earth’s atmosphere. So if even one of those tiny particles starts dancing around in an unexpected way, it creates chaos. And chaos, as the name suggests, throws everything off, making your weatherman, Storm Fields, look as silly as his stage name sounds.”

I laugh, and Uncle Brian’s eyes twinkle. He clasps his hands behind his back. “The other key element of chaos theory, of course, is its paradox. *Despite* all its seeming randomness, no

matter how complex a system may be, it still relies on an underlying pattern. It still follows a certain order. And the trick—the trick!—is figuring out what that order could be.”

I close my eyes for a moment, the mattress rocking gently beneath me. “So the government thought they could find the order by giving its scientists hallucinogenic drugs?”

He chuckles. “It was the early seventies. We’ve come a long way since then.”

I open my eyes and struggle to get up from the water bed; I also struggle to imagine my great-uncle hanging out with people who took LSD. Both prove difficult.

Brian lends a hand and pulls me up. “That part just requires some practice,” he says. “Now I’ll leave you to do whatever it is young women need to do to get ready for the evening. My quarters are upstairs on the third floor, so while you’re here, this will be your domain. I’ll stay out of your area if you stay out of mine. Deal?”

“Deal,” I echo, though now, of course, he’s got me wondering what he’s hiding above me.

“Good. One last thing: I tend to pace. It’s a habit I formed when I was a young man, much like your ring twisting.” He nods toward my hands; they instantly fall to my sides. “If the shuffling overhead gets too loud or wakes you up, just bang on the ceiling with a broom. I’ll get the point.”

I glance around for a broom. I don’t see one. I force a smile. “I don’t think you’ll need to worry about that. I’m a champion sleeper. Fire alarms have blared, and I’ve slept through them.”

“Well, that’s very reassuring,” he says dryly. “These will get you into the house.” He hands me a key ring. It’s anchored to two thin strips of metal. One looks like a flattened IKEA Allen wrench; the other tapers to a squiggly line with three rounded ridges on one end. If you didn’t know better, you might think

they were dental instruments. But since I do know better, I laugh out loud.

“I take it you know what they are?” Brian asks.

I nod. “They’re redundancies.”

“Clever girl. Though I prefer to think of attaching keys to a lock-picking set as an example of my wit.”

“Or maybe it’s an example of your craft?”

His eyes twinkle again. “Yours as well, perhaps? It seems like my nephew’s been doing at least one thing right all these years. We did have our doubts.”

Before I can ask what he means by that (or get a sense of how much he knows about my lock-picking past), Brian hurries out and closes the door behind him. An overwhelming—and rare—desire to speak to my parents wells up, driven entirely by the need to pump them for any and all information about this peculiar relative of ours. I look at the clock. It’s not quite three o’clock. I might be able to catch them before they board their plane for China. But as I twist the ring on my pinkie, I think about Brian’s request that we not communicate with our parents. My mind—that impulsive teenage mind, so ripe for research—drifts from them back to my own predicament.

What the hell *have* I gotten myself into?