

YOUR
ONE &
ONLY

YOUR ONE & ONLY



Adrianne Finlay

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

Boston New York

Copyright © 2018 by Adrienne Finlay

All rights reserved

For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book,
write to trade.permissions@hnhco.com or to Permissions,
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company,
3 Park Avenue, 19th Floor, New York, New York 10016.

hnhco.com

The text was set in Sabon LT Std.

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file.
ISBN 978-0-544-99147-7

Printed in the United States of America

DOC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Jeremy

YOUR
ONE &
ONLY

Chapter One

ALTHEA

Althea-310 waited for class to begin, sitting in a neat row with her nine sisters. They'd spent the morning on their floor of the Althea dorm twisting bright ribbons into their hair, and all ten of them had a different color winding through otherwise identical dark curls. Althea-310 had chosen lavender. Althea-316 had wanted lavender, so they'd agreed to draw sticks, but Althea-316 still scowled three seats away with her blue ribbon, even though it had all been fair and she didn't have any reason to sulk like that. As the sisters casually communed while waiting for class to start and their emotions mingled together, Althea-316's resentment threaded through them all like a far-away hum. A Gen-290 Althea had admonished them for inviting the conflict into their group, but Althea-310 overheard the older woman comment a few moments later how she'd secretly laughed about it all.

"They should use white, like our generation did," she'd said. "It'd be so much simpler. I guess it's something Altheas have to learn on their own. I just thought the Gen-310s would have

it figured out by the time they were fifteen. We certainly knew better.”

Althea-310 didn't care what Altheas were supposed to learn. She liked the way the silky colors fell down her sisters' backs, a rainbow in an otherwise boring classroom. Anyway, she felt pretty. Lavender really was nicer than blue.

The sisters' nine faces all turned in Althea's direction as they sensed the pride coming from her, and Althea-311 gave a small shake of her head, a silent warning. Althea clasped her hands together and focused on tamping the feeling down. It would only make things worse with Althea-316, and there were other things to worry about today besides ribbons.

Vispera's town council had told the class there would be a test. They were to expect a visitor, someone who was part of a new research experiment that would make the three communities better. Though Althea had a hard time imagining that Vispera, or even the other two communities, could be any better than they were now.

A Gen-290 Samuel walked in brusquely and put his books on the desk up front. It was Samuel-299, who wasn't actually a teacher, but a Council member and also a doctor at the clinic. So the experiment to make the community better was something medical. That was odd, however, since genetic modification meant that, in three hundred years, no one in Vispera had ever had so much as a cold.

The Samuel's gaze passed quickly over the ten Carson brothers in the back, their feet spread lazily in front of them, taking up as much room as possible. The younger versions of himself, the Gen-310 Samuels, filled the middle row. Then he took in the front row of Altheas, their posture straight and hands folded on

their desks. He shook his head at the different colored ribbons in their hair, smiling absently.

“You Altheas,” he said. “Always up to something.” He fiddled with his books, acting strangely nervous for a Samuel. “I know the Council talked to you some about what we’re doing today,” he said, perching on the edge of the desk. “You need to meet someone. He’s going to be part of our class from now on, part of our community, and if things go well, you’ll see a lot more of him. Now, understand, you’ll find him . . . different. But I expect you all to behave and be polite.”

Althea had no idea who the Samuel would want them to meet. And what about the test? Althea had spent last night with her friend Nyla-313 quizzing each other on history, so a medical test would be a disaster.

Althea liked working with Nyla-313. Nyla was learning in the labs how to engineer clever little oranges spliced with wild seeds so they tasted of cinnamon, and she would bring her experiments to Althea for their study sessions. Also, the Nylas never teased Althea about the scar on her wrist, and Nyla-313 often told her she shouldn’t bother hiding it. But while Althea enjoyed the colored ribbons, she didn’t like her scar. When it wasn’t covered, the eyes of those in the community landed on the smooth line of white skin circling her wrist, and she hated how they’d inevitably say, “Oh, Althea-310,” as if all they needed to know about her was that she was the sister born with the defect, the one who’d needed a replacement hand grown separately in a limb tank. She used to wonder why she hadn’t been eliminated once it was discovered. It must have been apparent while she floated in the tanks, months before she was born. But it would have shown up too late to start creating another Althea. It had

happened before, usually through accidental death, that a model's generation had only nine people instead of ten, but it caused a lot of discontent, even some disruption. That must have been the reason she hadn't been eliminated.

Now all the studying they'd done would be for nothing. This was all very unusual; they never strayed from the curriculum. Maybe Samuel-299 had brought in someone from one of the other communities, maybe from Copan or even all the way from Crooked Falls. Maybe even an Althea. Althea had always wondered how the Altheas in Crooked Falls might be different. Was their penmanship as elegant as the Vispera Altheas'? Did they cut their hair shoulder-length, like the Altheas in Copan? Maybe there was another Althea out there who was born with a defective right hand and also had a scar like the one around her wrist.

But it couldn't be an Althea from Crooked Falls, of course. The Samuel had said *him*. It was probably just another Samuel, then. Althea sighed, realizing the ribbons were probably going to be the only real excitement of the day.

Samuel-299 paused at the door before stepping out, his brow creased, his voice plaintive. "Remember, just . . . be kind."

When Samuel-299 returned, a boy entered behind him. On seeing him, the row of Samuels collectively sucked in a breath. A Carson huffed an incredulous laugh. Every Althea reached a trembling hand for the hand of the sister next to her until their fingers wove together in an unbroken sequence. Althea communed with them, feeling their emotions as she felt her own. Every sister and brother communed in small, subtle ways all the time when they were close together, as did everyone in Vispera, but in moments of stress or fear, it was important to seek a strengthened connection through touch. Her sisters' collective

effort to calm one another coursed through her like liquid. It was warm, seeming to fill her limbs. She exhaled as, little by little, the shared anxiety eased.

The boy fidgeted miserably. He ran his fingers through his hair, then pushed his hands into his pockets. Althea tried to figure out his age. She thought he was probably fifteen, like the rest of them. He looked scared, but no one stroked him or tried to comfort him, no one held his hand to commune, not like the brothers and sisters did for one another.

His eyes glanced from student to student, quick and nervous. He looked like he might be somewhat intelligent, but it was hard to tell. *Even if he is*, she thought, *he's still so strange. He's not one of us. Not at all.* He was like no one else.

Althea had seen so many faces. She'd seen all the nine faces of the nine models of *Homo factus*, at all different ages. She'd seen these faces in Vispera as well as on a school trip to Copan. They were the same faces she'd see in Crooked Falls as well. There was nothing beyond the walls of the communities but an empty, overgrown wasteland left by a long gone civilization. The faces in the three communities were the only faces that existed anywhere in the whole world, the only ones that had existed for over three hundred years.

The picture on the wall on the far side of the classroom showed these nine faces in a painting an early Inga had rendered based on a photo of the Original Nine. They were the human scientists who'd founded Vispera, using their genes to create the nine models. They stood on the steps of what was now Remembrance Hall in two rows, serious and self-assured. Their hands rested on one another's shoulders, and they gazed out at the students in the classroom as if glimpsing the future, hopeful and

confident about the new world they were building. The same painting hung in every classroom, and the very first version resided in Remembrance Hall.

There were the Samuels, with their dark skin, even darker eyes, and their sharp, angular jaws. They radiated compassion in their thoughtful expressions, which helped when they treated a scraped knee or broken bone. Every model had a specified set of skills and a role within the community, and the Samuels were the doctors, nurses, and caretakers. The Altheas were historians, of course, which meant they kept records and preserved the history of Vispera.

The Nylas, the scientists, had eyes as dark as the Samuels', but with a life and humor in them that the Samuels didn't have. The Nylas' eyes reminded Althea of a black stone on the shore, still wet from salt water and shining with hidden colors. The Ingas, the community's artists, were tall and broad shouldered, as imposing as statues, but with light, creamy brown hair that would start turning white in their fortieth year, at about the same age the Carsons' faces softened and widened, right along with their waists. Not like they were now, in class. As young men the Carsons were sleek and flat-stomached. Though whatever age the Carsons were, they always strode through the town Commons like it belonged to them. They were the engineers, and they thought that made them more important than the other models.

The Hassans, the ecologists, carried themselves gracefully, like leaves floating over rippling river water, and their small, agile fingers could tinker with a threshing machine so adeptly you'd think they were talking to it and telling it in which direction to move. The Hassans were the complete opposite of the Viktors with their brooding foreheads and hulking shoulders. The Vik-

tors were the philosophers, which meant they were always ready to lay a thick hand on the arm of anyone who broke even the smallest rule. They kept the community safe and regulated.

The Meis and the Kates were a study in contrast, too. Althea admired the Meis' sense of style, which went far beyond colored ribbons. As theologians, they loved the rituals of the community and always knew how to put the final touches on a ceremony, something that would keep it familiar and comforting, while still offering a new element, like when they hung a glittering chandelier from a balsa tree. They had delicate limbs, and always dressed with careful thought and precision, never forgetting to include something shiny in their matching dresses. If they wore a ribbon in their perfectly straight hair, it would always be something shimmering. The mathematician Kates, on the other hand, shunned anything sparkly, preferring instead their serious, demure outfits that went along with their turned-down mouths and sloped brown eyes that always made them look somehow disapproving. Or at least that's how they often looked at the Altheas, who were too unpredictable to ever please the Kates, especially the older ones.

These were the faces Althea knew. She'd known them her entire life, and knew them at every age, and in every mood. Sure, sometimes an accident or slight genetic nuance would alter a familiar face—the tiny freckle on Inga-313's ear, or the little indentation on Viktor-318's collarbone from when he broke it in a wrestling match. And of course, Althea's own scarred wrist. These faces were her whole world. They *were* the whole world.

She'd never seen a face like this boy's.

And his *eyes*. Something was wrong with them. The eyes of the nine models were all brown, though they varied in the range

of shades. This boy's were almost colorless, watery and cold, an odd bluish-gray. How could eyes be gray?

Althea shook herself, shivering at the ghostly translucent color, but at the same time realizing it was not simply what he looked like that was disturbing. She also *felt* nothing from him. It certainly looked as though he was nervous in front of the class, but the only indications of fear were what she could *see*—his shuffling feet and shaky hands, the way he blinked nervously. Emotions that strong should have been radiating off him like a fever, infecting the whole class. Instead, he was isolated, a solitary figment as cold as the stone wall that surrounded the town.

Everyone in class was rustling and shifting in their chairs. They felt the bone-chilling detachment from the boy as well.

"What's wrong with its face?" Carson-315 asked.

Althea had wondered the same thing, but couldn't imagine asking the question herself. The boy's ears brightened red, which meant he had heard and understood Carson-315.

"Nothing's *wrong* with his face," Samuel-299 said. "He's simply different."

"Different from what?" a Samuel asked, Samuel-317.

"From the nine models." Samuel-299 nodded to the painting on the wall. "He's human, like they were."

"So he's not *Homo factus*," a Carson said, grimacing.

"No. Like I said, he's human—*Homo sapiens*."

"Where are his brothers?" Althea-316 asked.

"He has no brothers—he's alone."

Alone. The word struck Althea's ears, its awful power tightening her chest. She leaned back, trying to put distance between herself and the strangeness of this boy.

“Why would we bother making a human? What good is it?” Carson-317 said.

Samuel-299 rubbed his mouth as if realizing this situation—whatever it was—should be going better. He took a breath. “The Council has been conducting an experiment. Humans were a great people. It’s because of them that life continued through us.”

Althea noticed that the Samuel hadn’t actually answered the question. He hadn’t said what the Council’s experiment was for. He was hiding something.

“They couldn’t have been that great,” Samuel-314 said. “I mean, they’re dead.”

The Carsons cracked up at that. Carson-310 slapped Samuel-310 on the shoulder, and then all the Carsons copied the same action nine more times, right down the row of Samuels. Samuel-299 watched them mimic each other, one by one, a strange look on his face.

“They’re extinct,” Samuel-299 finally said. “Humans reproduced genetic lines that shouldn’t have been allowed to continue. Their mistakes are what caused the Slow Plague.”

It was hard to imagine what it was like when humans covered the planet. Althea pictured a world overrun by an unrestrained population, reproducing like animals, their genes mingling unpredictably and disastrously. The communities now were entirely regulated and controlled. Her people maintained the same three communities with populations that never rose above nine hundred. There were ten generations of each of the nine models, and a new generation born every decade. But before Vispera, every face was unique, and there were millions of them. To Al-

thea, it sounded horrible, like thousands of insects crawling in a thousand directions.

A Carson nodded his chin at the boy. “So is he going to get sick and die like they did?”

The strange boy looked up at Samuel-299 as if waiting for him to say something that would make the others stop looking at him with suspicious glints in their eyes, like they didn’t know whether they should laugh at him or actually be angry that he was contaminating their classroom. The Samuel rested a hand on the boy’s shoulder and said, “He’s healthy so far. His lack of abnormality is one of the reasons we chose his genetic material from the Sample Room.”

The boy’s shoulders turned in, deflating under the Samuel’s hand. Althea thought perhaps he wasn’t happy with the way the Samuel was talking about him.

“All of you,” Samuel-299 said, “come from the Originals who lived here back when the humans called it Costa Rica. Our genetic lines are refined and perfected. Where humans relied on natural selection, we have technology and science. That’s what makes us fundamentally singular from humans. We have no mutations, no genetic outliers, no mistakes or abnormalities. We all work together, communing and cooperating. Jack, on the other hand . . . genetically, his cells were never altered. He’s an exact copy of a human boy who lived in the twenty-first century. And that makes him different. But while he may be different in some ways, in many other ways he’s just like you.”

“Does it talk?” Carson-312 said.

“Yes.” Samuel-299 pierced Carson-312 with a stare. “*He* talks.” Samuel-299 turned to the boy, hovering over him, his

body rigid and impatient. “Go ahead, say hello. Introduce yourself.”

They waited while the boy shuffled his feet.

“My name . . . my name is . . .” He spoke uncertainly, but then stopped as if making a decision. He straightened his shoulders to stand with more assurance. “I’m Jack.”

One of Althea’s sisters giggled. “*Jack?*” she said. “That’s not a name. There’s not even a number after it. What generation is he supposed to be?”

“Maybe he’s Jack Zero,” a Samuel said, and everyone laughed.

“Hey, Jack!” one of the boys called. Almost immediately a chorus of calls followed, with the name being shouted by everyone in the classroom. They shouted as if testing the name out, though the more it was said, the more they took delight in jeering at the boy. His name did sound strange, Althea had to admit. Foreign and unfamiliar. Her fingers slid unconsciously to her wrist. She didn’t join in the shouting.

“Please, everyone,” Samuel-299 said. “That’s enough.”

Jack’s chest rose and fell, and then rose again.

“Sam,” the boy said, which was odd, because he was talking to Samuel-299. Nobody called any of the Samuels *Sam*. It seemed disrespectful, though Althea couldn’t say why exactly.

Samuel-299 looked at him sharply. “Jack? Are you all right?”

Jack wiped his nose with the back of his hand. His breath wheezed. Carson-318 snorted laughter, repeating the name Jack, mimicking the concerned way Samuel-299 had said it, though the man was too focused to hear.

“Is it an attack?”

The boy nodded. Althea couldn’t figure out what the problem

was. He seemed to be having trouble breathing. Sensing something wrong, the class went silent until the only sound in the room was the whistle of air being sucked into the boy's lungs. As she watched him struggle to breathe, the seconds moved so slowly that Althea imagined for a moment she could see them shimmering the air like heat.

Jack fumbled in his pocket, producing a plastic tube gripped in his palm. Samuel-299 touched his back.

"It's okay," he said to Jack. "Calm down."

Jack put the tube in his mouth, pressed down, and sucked in. It looked like something he'd done many times before. A tension seemed to release from Samuel-299 as Jack's breathing eased.

"What was that?" a younger Samuel asked.

Samuel-299's eyes closed briefly before he looked up, reluctant to talk about what had just happened. "He uses that device, an inhaler, for a condition called asthma. It makes it hard for him to breathe sometimes, that's all."

"That's all?" Carson-317 said, distaste showing on his face. "He's sick. What if we catch it?"

"You can't catch it."

"You said he wasn't abnormal. That looked pretty abnormal to me," Carson-314 said.

"He's not abnormal. He's human, and in humans a certain amount of abnormality is, well . . . normal."

The Carsons looked disgusted at the Samuel's response.

Samuel-299 braced his hands on the desk and seemed to come to a decision. "You know, let's continue this after lunch, shall we?"

"It's too early for lunch," someone said.

"Nevertheless, we'll have a break," Samuel-299 said dryly.

“Everyone should go outside. Maybe you can all get to know Jack a little better.”

As Althea stood with the others, her pencil bag fell from her desk, spilling its contents. Her sisters were already at the door, so she quickly bent to gather her things. She found herself at eye level with the top of her desk, and there was Jack right in front of her, holding out one of her pencils. She froze, and then realized it was rude to stare at him. Still he waited, his hand steady and patient. She reached to take the pencil, and her sleeve rode up to reveal the scar.

One of the Carsons strode past. “Need a hand?” he snickered, as if proud of a joke she’d heard a million times before.

Althea grabbed the pencil and tugged her sleeve down. Her eyes met Jack’s, and his head tilted questioningly. Up close, his eyes startled her yet again with their pale gray.

Altheas were an observant model, so even though Jack seemed unable to commune, Althea could see in his face that he was curious, and also lonely. The other eight models relied exclusively on communing to understand the emotions of others. They would never notice the way his eyes dipped down to her hand holding the pencil, or the way he sucked his lip against his teeth.

He gave her a tentative smile. Two of his bottom teeth overlapped just a tiny bit, a distracting imperfection none of her own people had. A carved bead hung at the base of his neck on a leather string. As with everything else about the boy, this was strange too. None of the four boys in the community wore necklaces.

“Thank you,” she murmured, clutching the pencil and allowing herself to smile back.

A remaining Carson bumped into her, and then a sister re-

turned to grab her arm and hurry her along with the rest of them. When she glanced back, she saw Jack still watching her.

Outside, the students milled about the schoolyard, unsure of what to do. The brick school was on the edge of town, bordered on one side by the stone wall that surrounded Vispera, safeguarding it from the jungle outside, the wild animals and poisonous plants. Jack leaned against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. Everyone else had clustered as far from him as possible, their feet kicking up dust from the rust-colored gravel of the yard.

The usual games and sports didn't feel right. Activities were supposed to happen after lunch, and Jack was making everyone nervous. Althea saw her own worry mirrored in the faces of her sisters. They huddled together, their hands lightly touching hair and arms and backs. The Carsons and Samuels were in their own clusters, and then the Carsons all laughed simultaneously. They passed the Altheas and sauntered toward Jack, who pushed himself away from the wall as they came near.

Carson-312 smirked. "That's Samuel-299 who brought you, isn't it? He's on the Council." He looked Jack up and down. "What'd the Council do, make a hairless monkey? Isn't that all a human is, a bald monkey?"

"You're humans, too," Jack said. "You're clones of the Originals, and they were human."

The Samuels crowded Althea and her sisters as they gathered to watch while keeping a safe distance from Jack.

Carson-312 smirked, then casually picked up a handful of gravel from the ground, jostling it in his palm as he moved closer to Jack. "He's not very smart, is he? He just called us *clones*."

Jack licked his lips uncertainly. "Isn't that what you are?"

A young Samuel came forward. “Don’t you know anything? We don’t say *clone*. We’re *Homo factus*.” He straightened as if proud of the title. “We’re the self-made man.”

“You,” Carson-317 said, looking Jack up and down, “you’re just some defective experiment of the Council. You’re an accident.”

The boy couldn’t be an accident. The Council didn’t make mistakes.

“I’m not an accident,” Jack said, clearly wishing he could offer more of a rationale for his existence.

“Yeah?” said another Carson. “So you want to tell us what we need a monkey-boy for, then?”

Althea could tell that Jack was trying. He wanted the other boys, and the Altheas too, to accept him. The Carsons especially were being mean, but Jack looked hopeful, as if somehow things would still be okay. Althea kept quiet. The Altheas weren’t involved in this, and there was something wrong with the boy, something much worse than a replaced hand. Whatever *asthma* really was, it was obviously a disease her people had spent generations eradicating. Her people didn’t suffer from disease. That Jack had a thing like asthma was terrifying. Despite what the Samuel said, human illness was contagious. It was what had killed them all. It was better to keep her distance, as the rest of her sisters were doing.

Jack’s eyes flickered between the Carsons. He looked to the Samuels for help, searching for a friendly face. While they wouldn’t join in with the Carsons, not with an elder Samuel right inside, they also wouldn’t try to stop them. A few of Althea’s sisters chewed their nails.

Carson-312 flicked a pebble at Jack’s shoulder. “Well,

monkey-boy?” he said. “If you’re not an accident, what the hell are you?”

“I . . . I don’t . . .” Jack struggled, not knowing what answer to give.

“You’re not one of us,” Carson-311 said.

Carson-312 flicked another pebble, hitting Jack’s arm. “You don’t belong here.”

A third pebble immediately followed, this one striking his shoulder again. Jack backed away, his tongue pressing his teeth. The boys sniggered, and now the Samuels joined in. More of the Carsons took up handfuls of gravel.

Jack closed his eyes and pulled an unsteady breath into his chest. “Stop it,” he said, his voice thin and strained. His fingers reached into his pocket, seeking the inhaler he’d used inside. It was the asthma again. The Samuel had called it an attack, as if the boy’s own body were assaulting him just as much as the Carsons seemed ready to do. Althea shuddered. Jack finally got the inhaler out but then dropped it in the dirt. He fell to his knees, his hands scrambling for it frantically, panic etched on his face.

All ten Carsons grinned at once.

Althea’s sisters stood like her, watching. They were feeling what she was—fear, and also disgust. Carsons were confrontational. They were engineers, but also leaders. They liked being in charge, even in Vispera, where the only hierarchy was age and decisions were made by consensus. Still, the community celebrated the Carsons’ sense of leadership as much as it did the Nylas’ work in the labs or the Ingas’ paintings. The community taught the young people that they should think of the differences in the models as the various organs of the body,

each with its own role, but working together for the good of the whole.

This, however, was the bad side of the Carsons.

As much as Althea didn't like what the Carsons and Samuels were doing, it was painfully clear to everyone that Jack wasn't *Homo factus*. He did mostly look like all of them, but that only made the blankness they felt from him more terrible. Everyone's emotions were so strong. In one moment of communing, Althea could most palpably feel her sisters' sick fear. Under that, she sensed the uneasy, excited tension of the Samuels, and then the current of gleeful anger emanating from the Carsons. Like everyone else, she felt nothing from the boy. As if he were an animal. As if he were dead.

Jack's shoulders hunched forward. Another Carson threw a pebble at his forehead. The pebbles weren't large enough to cause more than a brief sting, but Jack's eyes darted from face to face as if he feared what might come next.

Althea peered toward the window of their classroom. Where was the Samuel? And then she saw him. He was watching the students through a window. He was frowning and taking notes. Why didn't he do something?

It occurred to her then that this was the test the Council had planned. It wasn't on history or science, or anything they'd studied for. The test was how they acted today, with this boy the Council had thrust upon them. And perhaps they were watching Jack as well, to see how he would fit in. But surely Samuel-299 wouldn't let things go too far. Althea didn't like the sneers growing on the Carsons' faces.

"Look at you," Carson-312 said, taking a step forward. "You

think you're not an accident? You're so defective you can't even breathe right."

Jack flinched as another pebble hit him. He clutched the retrieved inhaler close to his chest, and the students closed in.

Althea didn't know what to do. Her sisters didn't know what to do. They met each other's eyes, silently communing with the same feeling. This had to stop.

Althea-313 said, far too softly, "Quit it, you guys."

It was as if she'd said nothing. The boys paid no attention.

The Carsons continued throwing the pebbles while Carson-318 tore a narrow switch from a nearby patch of brush and handed it to Carson-312, who whipped it back and forth, testing its heft. It hissed as it cut the air. Standing over Jack, Carson-312 snapped it against Jack's arm, leaving a thin welt. The brothers continued to jeer and gather more pebbles. Carson-312 swung again, striking Jack's back.

Althea couldn't see Jack's face, but his limbs tightened with each snap of the switch, and she saw his shivering, barely contained control. There was a rigidity in his muscles, like his entire body was a spring straining for release.

He was using all his will to hold himself back. He was still hoping they'd stop.

It was too much to watch. Althea broke away from her sisters and grabbed Carson-312's arm as it rose up again. His elbow hit her eye, and she fell to the ground. Her sisters ran to her, closing her in their protective circle, touching her face.

Althea cupped her aching eye. Her sisters held their own eyes, feeling the burgeoning pain themselves. Carson-312 hadn't even paused, had probably hardly noticed her near him. The whip slashed across Jack's back until specks of red dotted the fabric

of his shirt like a string of beads. Carson-312 licked his lips and aimed for those lines of red, a glint in his eye. *He's enjoying it*, Althea thought. Seeing Jack recoil at the targeted strikes, Carson-312 quickened his swings. Breathless with exertion, he muttered, "Go back to whatever lab they've been keeping you in, *human*. You don't belong here."

As the switch came down once again, Jack's hand shot out and caught it. It sliced into the flesh of his palm as he yanked it from Carson-312. He launched himself off the wall, a yell wrenched from his throat, and flew at Carson-312 faster than Althea thought possible. Jack tackled him to the ground and straddled his chest, striking him over and over. The other Carsons didn't dare touch him, even to protect their own brother. They'd never seen such fury.

Jack slammed his fist into Carson-312's face, and blood poured from his nose. Jack's wild hits landed again and again. The Carson brothers began to collapse on the ground, moaning and clutching their heads, the sound and pain of the blows echoing in their own skulls. One of Althea's sisters clutched her stomach, and at the same time, Althea felt sick too, all the Altheas did.

The class looked on in horror as Jack pummeled Carson-312 until his face was swollen and bloody. Only a few moments had passed, but to Althea it felt like an eternity before Samuel-299 finally ran outside. He hauled Jack off Carson-312. Jack fought, heedless and wild, as Samuel-299 dragged him across the yard and through the school doors.

The class stood silent and motionless, like a held breath, the only sound in the yard Carson-312's wet, snuffling moans. Althea felt everyone's anger and alarm slowly recede like a tide.

The Carsons gathered around Carson-312, ghosts of his pain stirring in their own bodies.

A couple of them pressed their white shirts to Carson-312's face, and the cotton bloomed red. Eventually, the Samuels came and took Carson-312 away to the clinic. By the time the students filed back into the school, Jack was nowhere to be seen, and a Hassan was at the front of the room.

Once more the faces in the painting of the Original Nine stared down at Althea and the rest of the class, their expressions as placid and confident as ever, as if nothing at all had happened.

Chapter Two

JACK

TWO YEARS LATER

Jack sat in the grass on the steep side of the hill, knocking a ball against the side of the white-boarded cottage. He heard Sam's heavy breathing from climbing the steep rise, and he didn't need to turn around to know he'd find the man standing over him, wearing his white lab coat and disapproving frown.

"You shouldn't be here," Sam finally said.

"I should be dead," Jack said. Although if he thought about it, that wasn't really true. It wasn't that he should be dead, but that he should never have been born. He should be extinct, like all the other humans.

High on the slope, Jack could see the entire wall encircling the town, six feet high and broad enough to walk on; a double-winged gate of wrought iron faced Blue River. Within, the school sat on one end, where the Gen-320 children played in the gravel-covered yard, the same one where, two years ago, he'd attacked the Carson; next to that was the cluster of labs where the clones conducted their experiments and grew the new

Gens in their tanks. On the other end stood the stout line of nine dorms, one building for every model, a separate room inside for every Gen, each with its own row of ten beds. In the middle of the dorms was the dining hall, a circular, two-story building of limestone quarried from the distant cliffs. All the clones gathered there for meals at wooden banquet tables, at least when they weren't outside celebrating one of their seemingly incessant rituals. In the center of everything stood Remembrance Hall and the Commons, an expanse of lawn around a large kapok tree where the clones held their ceremonies and parties. Sometimes Jack watched at night from a distance while they danced and lights twinkled in the lanky branches of the huge tree.

Beyond the wall at the foot of the cottage's hill, the lawn dipped down to the banks of Blue River, which flowed north until it disappeared, swallowed by dense jungle. On the far side, fields of corn, barley, and wild rice, dotted by the lingering shadow of summer clouds, stretched all the way to the Novomundo Mountains. *Novomundo*, the New World Mountains. They'd been named by scientists, years before Jack was born, and the world they'd made was no longer new.

Jack had spent his whole life isolated from the clones his own age, and when he'd finally been allowed to join them, it'd been a disaster. The Council never let him go back to school. Now he spent his days living in the tiny bedroom they'd built for him in the labs, occasionally performing some task in the clinic for Sam, like rolling bandages or folding linens. They would never let him forget what had happened, or that it had all been his fault.

Jack hadn't spoken for several moments, so Sam sighed and sat next to him in the grass. He watched Jack throw the ball. Again and again, he caught and threw, and Sam waited.

If that's how Sam wanted this to go, that was fine. Jack plucked the ball out of the air once more.

For some reason, Sam couldn't catch a ball if his life depended on it. Jack had tried to figure out why Sam had such a hard time. He simply couldn't get the rhythms down, and he missed every throw. Inga-296 had given Jack the ball when he was little. Jack couldn't remember exactly when, but he must have been about five years old.

"It's called a *baseball*," she'd said. "Young people from your time, they played with it." She held it out, smiling. "Who knows, maybe your original did."

Jack had looked up a description of *baseball* in one of the books that filled the little cottage he and Sam and Inga-296 had shared back then, before Sam brought Jack to live in the labs in town. Before she died. The book said you needed nine people to make a team, so now he just tossed the ball at the side of the house. If the clones ever wanted to play, even with their lousy coordination, they already had their nine models. They wouldn't include him.

Sam stopped watching the ball. He frowned at Jack while Jack ignored him, each trying to outlast the other. Sam finally heaved a breath and gave in.

"I've been looking everywhere for you," he said. "It's not safe outside the wall. You need to come home."

"This is my home." Jack felt familiar resentment welling in his veins.

"This hasn't been your home for years. Your home is in Vispera."

Jack tossed the ball. "You should have told me."

"My brother told you."

“*You* should have told me. You act like you’re all the same person, but you’re not. You’re different from them.”

Sam bristled. “I’m not different from them. They’re Samuels, and I’m a Samuel.”

“They’re Samuels. You’re Sam. Don’t send them to me thinking I can’t tell the difference. They don’t care about me. They wouldn’t care if I died.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

Jack knew Sam didn’t really believe they’d care, but he let the man lie to him.

“I’m sorry, Jack. The Council won’t budge.”

“You’re on the Council. Did you even try?”

“Of course I did.”

“It’s that fat Carson, isn’t it? He thinks I’m a freak, and the others listen to him.”

“It’s all of them. They think it’d be disruptive.”

It wasn’t fair. He was turning seventeen, just like the Gen-310s, and he should be in the Declaration with them. He’d had as much of an education sitting in the labs as they had at school. More, he’d guess. It was just like last year, when they wouldn’t let him participate in the Gen’s first Pairing Ceremony. He’d wanted to, desperately, but the Council had said no, citing that disastrous day at the school.

That night, when everyone had Paired for the first time except him, he’d watched their celebration hidden in the branches of a tall tree. They’d danced and eaten colorful foods he’d never seen before. The girls wore gauzy dresses, and the boys wore the ceremonial robes tied with leather belts, and in the evening they’d all chosen their partner for the first Pairing and then spent the

rest of the evening laughing together and talking. Jack wasn't even allowed to sit at the table with the Gens in the Commons for their meal. Sam would bring him potatoes and carrots from the dining halls, or rice and lentils, and sometimes Sam would stay and eat with him, but mostly he was alone. For Jack, those nights were the worst. And it would all happen again tonight after the Declaration. They would eat and dance and laugh, they would Declare and let the community know what apprenticeship they'd chosen, and then they'd Pair in the evening.

The laughter of the children in the schoolyard carried up the hill on a breeze. Usually they romped on climbing ropes, swings, and slides that the Ingas had made for them, but today they played a game. The children stood in a row with their fisted hands extended, while a single girl walked down the line and cupped their hands in her own one by one. Jack had seen this game before. Sam had told him it was called Button. One child would hold a button in his hand, and the rest would pretend they also had a button. The finder had to guess who actually had it. When Jack had first seen it, he'd thought the point of the game was to keep the secret of having the button, but he'd been wrong. He slowly figured out that the child wanted to be found out. If they played the game well, everyone would know where the button was. It was a way for them to practice communing, not just with their siblings, which seemed to come easily to them, but with the other children in their Gen.

The laughter stopped as abruptly as it'd started, and even from a distance Jack could tell that smiles had spread across their faces as if they'd all heard the same joke at the same time, though nothing had been said. There were no words in this

game. Another eruption of laughter ran through the group in eerie unison.

Sam had once tried to describe communing to Jack. He'd had difficulty finding the right words, like describing colors to someone who'd never seen them. He said communing was like a *mur-muring*, a sort of whisper of emotions passing from one clone to another when they touched or were close. They didn't know each other's thoughts, but they sensed each other's feelings.

Jack couldn't commune, of course. He could never play their strange, silent games, and maybe they'd never let him participate in their rituals and ceremonies. But why shouldn't he be in the Declaration? It only happened once, and then they could send him back to his room in the labs and forget again that he ever existed. What harm would it do to let him be part of the community in this small way? He hadn't asked to exist. He'd heard the Council talk. They called him an experiment, like one of their genetically modified cows. They called him a de-extinction project, and maybe they called him an accident, but they had *created* him.

Earlier that morning, the jagged cliffs in the distance had been covered in gray mist, now burned away. They'd looked like pre-historic beasts hiding under the earth. Jack wondered, as he always did, what lay beyond those hills.

"I could leave," Jack said. "Grab supplies, go to the jungle. Nobody would care anyway."

"You can't leave."

"Why not?"

"Because," Sam said, puffing out his cheeks, "you would die in the jungle. You can't survive out there alone. I've kept you

safe here because Inga-296 asked me to. I'm not going to stop now. She said we needed you."

"That's a joke, Sam. No one here needs me."

Sam's eyes lingered on the baseball that had fallen idle in Jack's hands. "I know you come here because of the Inga. I know you miss her."

Jack touched the bead around his neck. He was surprised Sam had mentioned her. Inga-296 had called herself Jack's mother, even though mothers didn't exist in Vispera. Jack hadn't cried about her in years, not since he was little, because early on he'd sensed too keenly Sam's discomfort with Jack's emotions at losing her. It was one of the many things that kept Jack apart from everyone else. The clones didn't miss anyone. They saw themselves as the countless iterations that they were. A part of a whole. Replaceable. But Inga, his mother, had been different from anyone else in Vispera. She'd been different from the other Ingas. She had loved him.

"Of course I miss her. She was my mother."

"Yes, your mother." Jack noticed how the word *mother* rolled in Sam's mouth, foreign and strange. Not unpleasant, just something to work his tongue around, like a sour candy. "I didn't agree with her using that term, but she'd taken charge of the experiment, so I didn't argue. Now I think perhaps I should have." Sam spoke more to himself than to Jack. "And maybe it was a mistake for her to give you all those books."

Sam was talking about the *human* books. The ones Sam never read. Jack had learned about humans by reading those books, and one of the things he'd learned was how, even though the humans couldn't commune, they still cared about each other.

Maybe it would never be enough to *tell* Sam how he felt and Sam was capable of caring about someone only if emotions emanated from them like a cloud of reeking smoke.

Deep down, even Jack sometimes wished his mother hadn't given him the books. According to Sam, she'd been the one who wanted to raise him in the cottage on the edge of the jungle, outside the walls of Vispera. She'd wanted to raise him the way his original might have been, the way a human boy would have been raised in human times—with a home, parents, with human books and games and his own bedroom instead of a line of beds in a dorm. She'd raised him to give him some sense of who he was as a human, when really all he wanted was to be like everyone else and have friends his own age. Sometimes he resented all the ways his mother had made him different. And then, in the process, she'd made herself different too, and that had ended in the worst possible way.

"I'm sorry you won't be part of the ceremony, Jack. But listen, I do have good news. The Council has agreed to let you have an apprenticeship. We'll meet with you after the ceremony, and they'll let you Declare."

"Declare an apprenticeship?" Jack hadn't considered this possibility that they might let him have a job in town, serve some useful purpose. He stood. "I'll show them my music," he said, thinking of the instrument Sam had given him years ago that was tucked away in the lab.

It's a guitar, Sam had said back then. *At least, that's what the catalogue in the Tunnels called it.* As a child, Jack had built a crude wooden box with strings pulled across the top, trying to mimic the sound of the human recordings his mother had given him. Once Sam had figured out what he was trying to do, he'd

brought Jack the guitar from the Tunnels. From the beginning, Jack had been entranced.

“I can tell them how it works,” Jack said. “I’ll explain the history and play for them.”

“That’s a bad idea,” Sam said, eyeing him worriedly. “They won’t understand. I don’t even understand it, and I’ve been listening to you play for years.”

Jack had learned a long time ago that the guitar mystified the clones. He played it sometimes in his room during the day as the lab workers outside the door peered into their microscopes. They’d cast him sideways glances, grumbling under their breaths, but the resonant sounds and the strings under his fingers soothed him. Sometimes playing his guitar was the only thing that made him feel sane, the only thing that made him feel like he could keep trying for another day.

In the beginning, watching Sam’s reaction to the sound, it had taken a while before Jack understood. The clones actually couldn’t hear the music. No, that wasn’t right. They could hear it, but they couldn’t *hear* it. They called it noise and compared it to the drone of insects outside in the forest. Once or twice, as if they felt like they should research the question, the clones in the lab had asked him why he sat on his bed for hours, making that racket on a hollow piece of wood. How could he explain that, from the first time he’d held an instrument and strummed his fingers over it, he’d felt the pulse of the strings like it was his own beating heart?

When Jack realized the clones couldn’t hear music, he’d grasped for the first time how different he was from them. He’d always known they communed with each other and he couldn’t, but somehow, their inability to hear music made him feel even

more of an outsider. He'd put the guitar away then. But now, with an apprenticeship, it could be different.

"Don't you see?" Jack said. "I'll teach them, really help them understand. I'll show the Council what I can contribute to the community."

"No, I've already thought about this. You'll Declare an apprenticeship in the clinic, work with me. You'll learn medicine, something useful."

"The clinic?" Jack said.

"Of course." Sam stood, done with the conversation. "Just be ready. You'll talk to the Council tomorrow, after the ceremony's done."

Jack chewed the inside of his lip, thinking.

"Don't look so worried. This is a good thing. And I'll be there to help. It'll all be fine."

Sam walked down the hill, back toward town. Jack's gaze followed the man's path until he reached the school, where something had happened in the children's game. They'd clustered together, their hands resting on each other's shoulders, and seemed to collectively sigh into each other as if they were one body. Then, just like that, they broke apart and ran across the field, as sudden and synchronized as a flight of birds.

The next day, Jack sat in the chairs facing the outdoor stage in the Commons, waiting for the ceremony to end so he could make his presentation to the Council.

The Gen-310s had each Declared already. The Meis would apprentice in the kitchens, working on the menus for the dining hall and telling the Hassans, who had Declared as livestock managers and field planners, what food they would need

and what to cook. The Viktors, as always, were order keepers. They'd never Declared anything else. The Carsons would work with the Kates and Nylas in the labs, monitoring the tanks, researching genetics, and preparing for the next Gen to be born in three years. The Samuels, as always, Declared as doctors. The Ingas would be designers, keeping the open spaces in town manicured and beautiful, and the dorms comfortable and clean. The Altheas Declared as record keepers.

They carried on with the ceremony as if everyone didn't already know what the models would Declare, as if the community hadn't gone through the exact same motions of the Declaration every ten years. Samuels never worked in the kitchens, as far as Jack knew. But it didn't matter. Every ten years, they played out the ritual.

With the Declaration over, the Gen was performing the dance now. Jack would speak with the Council when it was done. His guitar lay next to him on the ground, and he tapped his foot nervously. He'd thought about making graphs and charts, but had decided in the end to just play for them, and talk to them about the history of music, about how it was a vestige of human history. For some reason, it had been forgotten, but they could get it back again. Jack would help. He had a skill, an ability, and it wasn't new or strange. It was old, had been around for millennia. It was simply waiting to be picked up and dusted off.

Sam still thought he was going to Declare to work in the clinic. He wouldn't be happy about this, but Jack didn't want to work in the clinic. He had to show them that they didn't need to be afraid or repulsed, or think he was strange for offering something like music to them. It could make them better. *He* could make them better by giving them back something they'd lost.

Jack wiped damp hands across his pants. He felt the inhaler tucked in his pocket and took a deep breath in and out, searching for any telltale signs that his lungs were going to betray him. He watched the dance. The Gen-310s traded partners and moved silently across the stage, their performance punctuated only by the sound of their tapping, shuffling feet and the birds in the distant trees.

The clones had many dances. The Pairing dance, for one, and the dances for the Binding Ceremony, or the Yielding Ceremony. The one being performed now wasn't particular for the Declaration, it was simply a dance of contentment, meant to express a kind of pleasure or happiness that things were as they should be, and as the Original Nine intended. The Carsons grasped the Altheas and moved in quick, sure steps, holding the girls' hands with a certain confident authority.

Jack pushed down his dislike for the Carsons. He had to learn. He had to get along with them if the Council was finally going to allow him to have a real purpose in the community. He'd made a mistake when he was fifteen, fighting with the Carson-312, and the Carsons had spent the past two years making sure he didn't forget it. They taunted him, tripped him on his way through town, or acted as if he was invisible, knocking into him as they walked past.

They weren't all like that, though.

Jack searched through the ten Altheas, looking for the 310. The Altheas were graceful as they danced. They moved with a fluid ease that left their dresses flowing behind their legs like birds' wings. They were pretty, with their long dark hair and smooth limbs. He liked the way their mouths turned down in a flat, serious line when they were thinking hard about something.

He always remembered Althea-310 from that day at school. She'd been the only clone that whole day who'd looked at him and smiled. He'd search for her anytime he walked through town. He'd see her, sometimes with one of the Nylas, or he'd pick her out from her group of sisters by searching for the scar on her wrist. She never spoke to him. He'd tried a few times to talk to her, but she always scurried off or was pulled away by her sisters. There were times, though, he was sure of it, when he caught her staring at him, and there was something in her eyes. It wasn't pity. It was something else, something better. Like maybe she understood him.

The Altheas' long sleeves covered their arms and the scar that would be on her wrist, and as they swirled together in the dance, it was impossible to tell which one was her.

Jack kept watching, though, and as he did, his foot tapped to their movements. It was a struggle for them, learning these dances. It reminded Jack of Sam trying to figure out the rhythm of catching and throwing a baseball. None of it came naturally to them, and their only hope of learning the intricate moves was through rote practice, memorization, or careful counting in their heads. Dances for the clones were an exercise in mathematics as much as anything. Jack never let on how different it was for him, the way he could hear music in his head pulsing steadily in time to the steps.

He picked up his guitar, getting ready for the end of the dance and to speak to the Council. He was second-guessing whether he should actually play for them. They wouldn't enjoy the music, after all. Maybe he would just show them the instrument and introduce the concept. He would Declare as a teacher, perhaps, rather than a musician, but he would teach them music.

His fingers brushed the strings absently as his eyes lingered on the dark hair of the Altheas all spinning with the other clones. The pad of his palm thumped lightly against the wood, and he strummed the strings again. Slowly, he picked up the movement of the dance, and without thinking about it at all, he plucked the strings in time until a soft melody only he could hear synced with the dance.

It was several moments before he realized a hush had spread across the crowd, and the dance he'd been lost in came to a confused, disjointed halt. A Mei bumped into a Carson, who had stopped suddenly. They all stared at him. Not just the Gen-310s onstage, but the entire audience of all the other Gens in Vispera. The 290s, 280s, the old 240s at the food table, even the little 320s. And the line of Council members, seated in the front row, who'd twisted around to see what was going on. And they weren't just staring. They were glaring, their eyes cold and resentful. The last reverberations of the guitar faded away as his fingers stilled, and the echo was loud enough for him to understand that he'd been playing much louder than he intended. They'd heard him. He hadn't meant to play at all. He'd assaulted their ears with a noise that to them sounded like no more than wasps droning in the roof of a barn, and he'd done it without thinking. He'd just ruined everything.

It was such a stupid mistake.

Jack saw Sam in the line of Council members. The man met Jack's gaze, and the only thing Jack could see in his eyes was disappointment. Jack's throat burned.

They could hear it if they tried.

The rebellious thought crept its way into his mind, and he forced it away. That kind of thinking wasn't going to help.

His mother, at the end, had heard it. Her eyes had shone with the understanding. It was right before she'd run away, taking him with her, that she'd first heard it.

Carson-312 jumped down from the stage, a furious crease between his eyebrows. Jack could tell it was the 312 by the patch in his eyebrow where the hair had never grown back after Jack's fist had split his skin. Before Jack could stop him, he'd wrenched the guitar away.

"What's wrong with you? Why are you even here?" Carson said, raising the instrument out of Jack's reach.

It stung that Carson's questions were the same ones Jack asked himself every day.

"Give it back," Jack said.

Adrenaline pulsed through him, but he tamped it down. The Council, and Sam, were watching. Jack refused to give them a reason to punish him. After that day in school, they'd locked him in the labs for a long time. He wouldn't let them lock him away again. He knew they'd spent days back then discussing whether they were going to let their experiment continue. Jack had been too scared to ask Sam what terminating their de-extinction project would mean for him. He clenched his fists against his side and stayed seated, waiting.

"Give it back," Jack repeated.

Carson's eyebrows rose with Jack's words, and Jack realized he'd made yet another mistake. He shouldn't have let Carson see how much the guitar meant to him. Carson grinned and moved closer. Jack stood and backed away until his legs hit the chairs behind him. Maybe if he played nice, Carson would quit squeezing the neck of his guitar, knocking the strings out of tune.

The Declaration was in disarray. Most of the remaining Gen-

310s were still onstage, though the dance had ended. The audience had begun to disperse, not really clear on what was happening and confused by the interruption caused by Jack. A small cluster nearby still watched the two boys, including the Council members. Jack was on display. They wanted to see how this confrontation would play out, and Jack would bear the brunt of anything that went wrong.

“Are they letting you Declare, monkey-boy?” Carson said, bumping the guitar against his hand. “What are you Declaring as, town freak?”

“I’m Declaring as a teacher,” Jack said, his gaze flicking from Carson to the guitar.

Carson pulled at one of the strings. It gave a sharp twang. “What’s that got to do with this thing? I mean, does it do something?”

“Give it back, and I’ll show you.”

“Why, so you can attack me with it? We all know you’re violent. Do you think I’m stupid?”

“I don’t know. Are you?”

Carson tilted his head, that cool grin widening. In the corner of his eye, Jack saw Sam stand from his seat, but the man didn’t move forward or speak.

Jack shook his head. He was clearly the stupid one, insulting a Carson in front of everybody. Why couldn’t he just keep his mouth shut?

“Listen,” he said, taking a breath, his voice low. “It’s nothing. It plays music, that’s all. Just . . . give it back, okay?”

“Okay,” Carson said. “Come get it.”

The onlookers murmured when Jack reached for the guitar and Carson brusquely pulled it away.

He drew Jack close, and Jack felt the other boy's breath as he snarled, "You want to hit me, don't you?"

Jack pressed his lips together, stifling the desire to do just that. It was exactly what Carson wanted, for Jack to lose control in front of everyone.

"It's okay," Carson said, pushing Jack back and suddenly feigning friendliness. "I'll give it back, for real this time. But listen, tell me what it's called first."

"Why?"

"Don't be so suspicious. I really want to know."

"It's a guitar," Jack said curtly. "It's called a guitar."

Jack watched Carson while, as if in slow motion, he dropped the guitar on the ground at Jack's feet.

"You shouldn't have ruined our dance, monkey-boy. Say goodbye to your guitar." And with that, Carson smashed his foot into the base of the instrument, splintering the wood into fragments. Jack yelled incoherently as Carson crushed the remnants with the heel of his shoe.

The Council was watching. Sam was watching. The Altheas' brown eyes were on him, too. The Meis, the Hassans, all of them were watching now. None of that mattered as the anger exploded in Jack's chest. He rushed at Carson. Immediately, two Viktors and a Hassan grabbed his arms. They must have been behind him the whole time, waiting for him to do exactly this. Before he had a chance to connect with Carson or even realize what was happening, he was on his back, the breath knocked out of him. They pinned his hands, then hauled him up again. His limbs shook with unreleased energy.

"Good job, teacher," Carson said, his mouth twitching up. "I think we learned everything we need to know from you."

One of the Viktors twisted Jack's arm, steering him away from the snickering Carson and the stage.

"Sam!" Jack called into the crowd. "Sam, where are you?"

Jack searched across the Commons. Countless dark heads mingled in the crowd, at least twenty different Samuels, any of which could have been Sam. It was impossible to tell. Sam had abandoned him. Again.

The Viktors escorted him back to his room in the labs, locking the door behind them. The usual punishment for bad behavior.

Jack had grown a lot in the past two years. He was taller than the Viktors, taller in fact than all the models. He was stronger than them, too. There were times Jack would look at them and be struck by how delicate the clones were. Thin and narrow-chested. It didn't matter, however. They controlled every situation, every move he made.

When Sam came by that night and unlocked the door, Jack wanted to scream at him, tackle him to the ground and hit him the way he'd wanted to hit Carson, hit him until that desolate expression left his face. Instead he said, "You left," and hated the sorry plea in his voice. "You just left."

Sam sat in a chair, crossing his ankle over his knee. Jack's room in the labs was nothing like his room in the cottage. It was a small, sectioned-off corner of the building, with linoleum floors and white-tiled walls. It was as sterile as the larger sections, where banks of fluorescent lights swung over rows of marble-topped desks fitted with gas spigots and sinks. He had a narrow bed, a small chair and desk, and a doored-off bathroom. The lab workers could see him through the small window in the door that led out into the hall. They didn't bother him much. He

sometimes watched them working in the daytime, and then at night the bright lights were turned off, and everything was silent and dark.

“I’m sorry,” Sam said with a heavy sigh.

“They locked me in. You told me after last time they wouldn’t do that again.”

“Not everything is in my control.”

“You’re afraid of them. You’re afraid of the Council.”

“I’m *on* the Council. I have to consider the needs of the community. I can’t just worry about one boy.”

“What am I even doing here? I can’t figure out the point of your experiment. Why the hell was I born, Sam?”

“You have so much potential, Jack, but you certainly weren’t born so you could disrupt the entire community.”

Jack’s heart sank even as pinpricks of anger pierced him. “My mother, she used to call you my father.”

“The Inga wanted to give you something human. Fathers are something humans had. I never had one—none of us do. I’ve done the best I could.”

Sam used to read to him, before Inga died. Not from the novels that Jack liked, the ones Sam called *human*, but from the histories, his physiology books, and the books that had taught him to be a doctor. The clones didn’t get sick, but he’d read to Jack about setting a limb and treating a concussion or infected wound. When they’d all lived in the cottage, Jack remembered Sam sitting in the creased leather chair studying textbooks and psych manuals, discussing with Inga how humans lived their day-to-day lives. Occasionally Sam would see something in the books and then abruptly declare some new activity, like reading

aloud together or throwing a ball outside. Jack still remembered Sam dressed in his lab coat and black shoes, chasing after the balls Jack threw.

“It must have been tough, pretending to care for the sake of your experiment.” Jack heard the venom in his own voice. “Acting human, like some kind of animal.”

“I care about you, Jack. More . . . more than I should. It *has* been difficult. My brothers don’t understand. It’s put distance between us, and you don’t know how hard that’s been.”

“So what now?”

“The Council will meet about what happened. I don’t know what their decision will be for your apprenticeship. Why did you have to bring the *guitar*, Jack? What were you thinking?”

“You’re not even going to stick up for me, are you? You’ll abandon me like always. Like you did today.”

“I have to do what’s best for Vispera.”

“So go, Sam. Go away and leave me alone.”

“Please, listen—”

Jack didn’t want to be mad anymore. Instead his voice was almost gentle when he said, “You can stop trying to be a father. You’re not very good at it, and I don’t need one anymore.”

Jack thought he saw something in Sam’s eyes, but he turned away too quickly to see what it was. He looked up only when the lab door closed and the sound of the latch, this time unlocked, rang through the room.

Later that night, Jack lay sleepless on his bed in the dark, his eyes sore and his head aching. Light from flickering lanterns outside shone through the tiny window above the bed, mottling the floor of his room. Distant voices floated in with the pattering of rain over the wide jungle trees.

With the Declaration over, the Gen would be holding their monthly Pairing Ceremony now. He could picture the girls in the circle of the Commons, each choosing her partner. In his mind he saw a girl with dark curls walking down the path to the Pairing tents, teasing and playful, hand in hand with a boy who couldn't possibly grasp how much it meant for her to take him in her arms, their bodies lost in a pile of quilts and tapestries.

Jack curled into himself, burying his head under a pillow in an effort to block out the soft laughter of the strolling couples outside.

Chapter Three

ALTHEA

Althea-310 gazed out the window of Remembrance Hall. She was only a few weeks into her apprenticeship, and she was already forgetting to pay attention to the minutes she was taking of the Council meeting. Remembrance Hall was the oldest building in all three communities. It was the very building where the Original Nine had lived and slept, before there were dorms. Inside the meeting room, mahogany walls framed tall windows that looked out on the Commons. Althea sat at a desk in the corner while the nine members of the Council, one representative for each model, sat at a long table, the gold badge of the Council, embroidered with the words *Harmony*, *Affinity*, *Kinship*, sewn into their clothes.

In contrast to the hushed voices and shuffling papers in the meeting room, the Commons outside was a flurry of activity. The Gen-310s would have their Pairing Ceremony tonight, and all day the four boys and four of the five girls would hardly be able to concentrate on their apprenticeships as they looked forward to the coming celebration. One of the girls always hosted, and this month was the Meis' turn to sit out the Pairing and

instead plan the décor and menu for the evening. They'd already converged to hang lanterns and garlands from the kapok tree in the center of the Commons, and they'd encircled the huge trunk with lighted, colored stones, a new decoration they'd created that Althea knew they were particularly proud of.

Altheas tended to choose Hassans at the Pairing Ceremonies. Since the Gen-310s had turned sixteen and celebrated their first Pairing a year ago, the Altheas had chosen the Hassans half the time. Althea-310 turned her attention back to the meeting, but she studied the Samuel at the conference table while her fingers flew over the letter machine, recording a conversation about the rice mills. Perhaps the Altheas could choose the Samuels tonight. They were pleasant, and more decisive than the Hassans, who tended to be timid.

Althea shook her head. It was impossible. The Kates had already made it known that they were choosing the Samuels, and Althea's sisters had made a specific decision for this month's Pairing. The Gen-290 Altheas had had a long discussion with them about how conspicuous it'd become that the Gen-310 Altheas never chose the Carsons at a Pairing.

"I don't understand why your generation seems to have a problem with the Carsons," Althea-298 had said. "The rest of the Altheas are fine with them. You've hurt their feelings. It's causing problems."

If the others in Vispera sensed a lack of harmony between the Gen-310 Carsons and Altheas, then Althea and her sisters were obliged to seek a resolution. It was the way things were always done in Vispera. As a result, they had agreed to choose the Carsons tonight, and there was no way around it. Althea had to go along or risk upsetting her sisters, all the older Altheas, and

really, the entire Pairing Ceremony itself. She sighed, returning her full attention to keeping the record.

Carson-292's voice picked up and droned through the meeting hall. They were discussing the amniotic tanks.

"The timers on the tanks are missing," he said. "They disappeared, and they're not the first thing to disappear from the labs either, but they are the most critical. The next generation will be born soon. If we don't find the timers, how will we control the oxygen levels in the amniotic tanks? We have to get to the bottom of this."

"We're as interested as you in figuring it out, Carson." The Inga sat at the head of the table, presiding over the Council meeting. "We're all aware of what's at stake, and we're working on the problem."

Althea noted the gray hair at the Inga's temples and realized she'd recorded the wrong Gen. In the end, which individual Inga was acting on the Council made little difference. Council members were chosen with a Gen communing and deciding by consensus who should represent the models in a given month. Those selected were usually the most adept at weaving through communing currents and picking out slight intimations of difference, swirling eddies of dissent and divergence. Though everyone was capable of serving on the Council, these were the ones who won a nomination time and again. Althea went back to the transcript and adjusted the record, noting that a 280 was representing the Ingas this week. If Althea wanted to be respected as a record keeper and future historian, she couldn't afford silly mistakes.

"That's not good enough," Carson-292 said. "We need security in the labs." He leaned back in his chair. "Those timers were stolen. This is sabotage."

The other Council members slumped in their chairs as if weary of an old argument.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Carson,” Inga said. “We’ll post some Viktors there, but I’m sure they’ve just been misplaced by the new apprentices, that’s all. They’ll turn up soon.”

Carson-292’s lips tightened, but Althea noted in the record his assent to the proposal for new security.

Inga turned to her agenda. “Next item to discuss is the proposed modification of the de-extinction project. Samuel, since you’ve had the most involvement, would you like to address the Council?”

Althea’s fingers paused on her machine. They were talking about the human, Jack. After that day in school, no one had seen him for a long time. Then suddenly he started appearing now and then, walking with his eyes focused on the ground in front of him, keeping to himself. Sometimes she’d see him carrying baskets of linen to and from the clinic. And then at the Declaration, he’d attacked Carson again. That was the first time she’d been reminded of the violence that shimmered just under the surface, the same violence that had ended with Carson-312 out of class for a week. Althea remembered the anxiety of the Carsons during their brother’s absence. It’d made them jittery and short-tempered.

The brothers had been excused from class for the last few days Carson-312 was gone. They seemed about ready to fall apart, and the Council was concerned Carson-312 might fracture and there would have to be a Binding Ceremony. Althea had seen one once. A few years ago, a jaguar had come over the wall and attacked an older Hassan. He hadn’t simply been injured, he’d been traumatized as well. He refused to walk any of

the paths hidden in trees, and eventually he wouldn't even leave the Hassan dorm. His erratic behavior distanced him from his brothers, and when there was nothing more to be done, Althea had watched with the rest of the community as the remaining Hassan brothers said their ritualistic goodbyes before slipping a needle into the arm of the fractured Hassan. He'd drifted off, closing his glassy eyes, and then the community drank cups of punch and chatted solemnly about having uneven numbers at the Gen's next Pairing Ceremony.

Fracturing was rare, but it was painful for everyone. In the end, Carson-312 hadn't fractured. Everyone was relieved they hadn't needed the Binding Ceremony, and they subsequently remained silent about that terrible day. Althea avoided thinking about it all as much as possible. She couldn't help watching Samuel-299, however, wondering what he was going to say about Jack and the project that seemed to have caused so much trouble.

"First," Samuel-299 said, "I'd like to point out that the decision to exclude the subject—Jack—from the ceremonies and rites of passage for the Gen-310s, a decision I never thought was the best course of action, has not improved the situation. I'd like to ask the Council to allow him to apprentice with me. We agreed to it before, and nothing's changed."

"No one is denying you've done well with the subject, Samuel," Nyla-298 said smoothly. Althea enjoyed hearing an older version of her friend Nyla-313's voice, gentle but direct, and always poised. "But he's caused too many problems. I'm worried about the effect he'll have on the 310 generation. We know what happened to Inga-296. That was a direct result of her work with him."

“That was ten years ago,” Samuel said.

A Viktor leaned forward. “Samuel, even you have to admit he’s emotionally unstable. After what happened in Copan last year, I seriously think we should revisit termination. We need to move forward with another subject. Better yet, why not terminate the project altogether? I don’t think it’s even necessary.”

The Nyla spoke again. “The project has provided us with valuable DNA. And this thing he does, the music, perhaps that’s something we can use. Our spectral analysis shows there are number properties in the sounds he makes. The Kates, as mathematicians, may benefit if we isolate that particular gene and integrate it into the next Gen.”

“Please.” Carson puffed out his cheeks. “I for one am not comfortable integrating the defective genes of an asthmatic human with violent tendencies. It’s time to end it, as we should have ten years ago.”

“And to be fair,” the Viktor said, “his intelligence hasn’t made anything easier.”

“Intelligence,” Carson-292 scoffed. “I’d hardly call what we’ve seen *intelligence*. He has no impulse control. He’s violent.”

“That’s not true, Carson,” Samuel said. “Listen, this project represents decades of work. We can still learn from it.”

Carson-292 leaned forward, punctuating his words with a finger thumping the table. “We have other avenues—”

“Avenues that have already failed us,” Samuel said, looking around at the rest of the table. “All of us, we started this project for a reason. We simply cannot continue copying the exact same genetic material over and over again. The samples are degrading. I know you don’t all see it, but we’re losing something. Something Jack might help us get back.”

“*Something?*” Carson said. “You can’t even articulate what that *something* might be. Show me a DNA sequence, a genetic marker, anything! I’m done talking about *something*.”

“He’s talking about that music nonsense Nyla brought up,” Inga said. “It offers us nothing. Even you, Samuel, can’t explain what that’s supposed to be.”

“It’s more than that,” Samuel said. “Carson, you’re so quick to dismiss our human ancestry, but part of who we are is undeniably human. I’m worried we don’t understand how important that part is, and as a result, it will disappear before we’ve even realized it’s gone. I know how some of you feel about Jack, but let’s not let a personal issue color our thinking on the matter.”

“Personal issue?” Carson-292 exploded. “That boy is unstable! Carson-312 has a *scar*, on his *face*. Do you realize the damage it’s caused, having a deformity that makes him so distinct from his brothers?”

An image entered Althea’s mind. She pictured the boy on top of Carson, tears streaming down his face and his body bunched into an angry coil, more primitive than anything she’d ever seen.

“Oh, please,” Samuel said. “It’s barely noticeable, a scratch above his eye.” He gestured around the table. “Hassan-295’s nose is different since he fell from a tree when we were nine, and Mei-298’s got the scar on her chin from tripping on the dorm steps. This is nothing.”

“It’s the *way* he got it,” Carson said. “He was attacked, in his own school, by a human who has no more self-control than a chimp.”

“Did you ever consider it was the isolation itself that caused his violent behavior? That his hostility toward us is a result of the segregation *we* imposed on him, are still imposing on him?

Let him truly be a part of the community. There's a Pairing Ceremony tonight, if he can't have an apprenticeship, let him participate in that at least."

Althea's hands froze in their note taking. Let him participate in the Pairing? Would the Council actually consider such a thing?

"Samuel," Inga said firmly, "the Pairings are for the nine models, with ten siblings each. How would that even work?"

Samuel made an obvious effort to soften his tone. "Well, why couldn't it? We continue the ceremony when a model loses a sibling, don't we? Inga-296 wanted to give him a human environment, but what he needs is for us to allow him to be one of us. He has no brothers, and the Gen-310s have never really accepted him. We haven't been fair to him. Even the animals in the jungle have families."

Carson-292 laughed. "Then let him live in the jungle. The thought of him taking part in the Pairing turns my stomach."

"Samuel," Nyla said kindly, "I think you're too close to the subject to be objective. The next time we discuss this, we'll have one of your brothers stand in for the Samuels."

"You think I can't represent the Samuels?" Samuel said, struck.

"Not in this instance, no." She looked around the table. The Council members all joined hands, and Althea felt the threads of intricate thought weave through them as they eased the tensions and communed on their decision.

"Good," the Nyla said as their linked hands dropped. She closed the agenda. "There's too much resistance to him participating in the Pairing, but he may have an apprenticeship. It must be in the clinic, and only with you, Samuel. The others don't want to work with him."

Althea had never witnessed such a conflict among the older generations. She'd always thought by the time a cohort was thirty or forty, they'd gotten over their squabbling and differences. And to see such argument at a Council meeting, where they were supposed to be acting in everyone's best interest, being mature and rational . . . *Why, they're no better than the rest of us*, she thought. Her sisters, with their disagreements about which pattern of new dress to sew, the bickering with the Kates, a Carson trying to push others around, a Hassan getting petulant about the inflexible Ingas. Althea unexpectedly felt the decades of her life stretch before her, taking part in the same arguments and conflicts over and over again. Except with each decade, the stakes would be raised. It wouldn't be about dresses and ceremonies anymore; it'd be about important scientific experiments, food resources, and the embryo tanks. She'd been so pleased to choose her recorder apprenticeship. It was a privilege to sit in on Council meetings and hear important decisions being made. But this fighting hadn't been what she expected.

That was exactly why the Pairing tonight was so important, she realized. If they couldn't get along at a Pairing Ceremony, how were they going to learn to work together when decisions were more critical? Althea resolved to have a better attitude than she'd had for the past few days. She would Pair with a Carson, just like her sisters, and everything would be smoothed over, paving the way for the future ahead.