

## EXCERPT FROM 'LOOKING FOR LIFE'

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### WORTHY OF CONSIDERATION

Julia Parbuckle, dressed in jeans and a white sweatshirt, wandered slowly down the corridor. She didn't so much as lift her feet, but progressed in more of a sliding motion, as if she were walking tentatively on a sheet of ice. At twenty years of age, she was small of stature and skinny, possessed short mousy hair, and held her narrow face high. The posture gave her a haughty look, but she didn't really care; it helped her concentrate.

The corridor had a black floor and white everything else, except for the twelve doors, six per side, which were red and all numbered. She passed them one by one, pausing now and again, listening with her mind, not her ears.

Outside number five, she stopped and put her hand on the door handle.

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At the age of seven, Julia had lost both of her parents in a car accident. She was an only child, and the decision to put her in the care of her aunt, her mother's sister, Jennifer, had been an obvious one to make by the authorities.

The problem was, Jennifer had no children of her own, wasn't even married or living with a partner, and Julia soon realized that Jennifer had taken her under her wing because she craved company—essentially, she wanted someone to talk to.

After four years, Julia had become ill. Jennifer wasn't her mother, or her father for that matter, and the constant encouragement to discuss and debate, to share her world, to live her life as Jennifer demanded, took its toll. She had fretted and threatened rebellion, but she remained under her aunt's wing, until one day she took to fisticuffs. And the bruises were there for all to see, including the medics who attended Jennifer.

Julia must have been one of Dr Sandra Bronte's youngest patients. The doctor was kind, gracious, and downright persistent. Sometimes she behaved like a guardian elder sister, but often she was obnoxious to the point of being a clone of Jennifer in one of her *tell me everything* moods.

So, at the age of twelve, Julia ran away. Or, in her own words, she made a bid for independence.

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Julia turned the knob and opened the door. There was a man in the room, as she knew there would be. He was sitting at a small desk with a spare chair. She stood at the door waiting. The man gestured to the free chair.

"Very good, Julia. Your best yet. Twenty-seven seconds."

She walked to the chair and sat down. *Now comes the hard part*, she thought, attempting to clear her mind of extraneous clutter. Taking a deep breath, she waited in silence.

"First name?" the man enquired.

Julia closed her eyes, but not for long. "Markus."

"Surname?"

This was always harder, but this time it was better. Just under five seconds.

"Shapiro."

The man nodded and leaned forward. "Middle name?"

What! They had never asked her that before. Not the middle name. She calmed her nerves, bit her lip, slowed her heartbeat, and listened with all she had—but received absolutely nothing. Thirty seconds passed. Still nothing.

She suddenly smiled. "Trick question. You don't have one."

The man returned her smile. "Correct. Well done."

Julia looked at him and decided to take the initiative.

"You have another meeting in exactly fifty-four minutes," she stated. "Not about me. About another candidate."

"And the name of that candidate?"

She pursed her lips. *Am I trying to be too clever?* The first name came to her; she couldn't get the surname. "Walter."

"Very good." He stared into her eyes, and she knew that he was actually attracted to her, which was ridiculous. She was not an attractive person, far from it; everybody had told her that. "What am I thinking now?" he asked.

"You're thinking: 'I'm a married man and shouldn't be thinking what I am thinking.'" She returned his stare until his eyes dropped.

"Your mind, Julia; I'm attracted to your mind."

*Like hell you are,* she thought, but she said, "Sure."

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They had found her and put her in a residential group home, and there she had remained until she was seventeen. She hadn't minded it, mostly because it was there that she developed what she called her powers.

For the most part, the other kids gave her a wide berth, especially when she started telling them about their inner secrets. It had been fun for a while, until she had gotten bored. And it was then that the Department picked her up.

It had been Mrs Heckle who had told them. She was ex-military and had carried some of her bearing into the home. She also had contacts. *Julia, Mrs Heckle had written, is a very insightful teenager with a great deal of promise. She is worthy of consideration.*

Julia did not see the actual missive that Mrs Heckle sent to the Department, but she had known what was in it and whom she had sent it to. She had sensed it, even before Mrs Heckle had clicked the send button. Her powers, she had realized, were growing.

And so she had been recruited, although Julia had thought it was more like being pressganged. Straight out of the group home and into the employ of the Department. There had been tests, of course—simple stuff like reading Zener cards and playing card tricks. She

graduated with ease, and when she heard about the pay and conditions, she could hardly refuse the offer.

There were other recruits; she could sense them all around her, but she was not allowed to meet them. Something about them being a distraction; a negative drag on the neural circuitry of her brain. As if she cared two hoots about that.

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She had walked the corridor for three weeks, initially once a day, but eventually in the morning and in the afternoon. On day one, it had taken her three attempts to find the door with the person behind it—always a different person, of course, never the same one. But for the past twenty attempts, she had been right the first time.

Julia presumed that would mean something, and she was right. After she had located and named the man who for some inane reason had found her attractive, she found herself in a completely different situation.

The corridor was replaced by a room: a room with twelve people in it, every one of them talking nineteen to the dozen. Julia stood near the doorway, hesitant, knowing what she had to do, but unsure whether she should go ahead.

A smartly dressed woman in a white trouser suit and high heels approached with her hand outstretched. “Julia, lovely to meet you,” she said, displaying two rows of immaculate white teeth.

Julia nodded, took the hand. “Likewise.” The woman’s name sprang into her mind immediately. Mary Truong. Head of Communications: people communications, that is.

“A simple task for you, I’m sure,” Mary was saying. “Just go straight to the person with the toy car in their pocket.”

Julia grimaced. A new game. She surveyed the people: a motley crew, to be sure. She picked out a chunky male, bearded, wearing a blue track suit and runners. Not that he looked like he did much running.

Walking over, she tapped him on the shoulder. “Ken Jamieson,” she said. “Carrying a Chevrolet Impala 2011, grey metallic, one forty-third scale.” Just for the hell of it, she added: “Somewhere uncomfortable.”

Every one of them burst into laughter and started clapping. Julia held her arms in the air and strolled back to the smiling Mary Truong.

“Excellent,” Mary gushed. “Just one more of these this afternoon. Then it’s on to the next phase.”

“Great,” Julia responded, and left the room to return to her quarters. It was nearing the point where she really wanted to know where all this was going. Sure, the Department housed and fed her (much better than she had ever been housed and fed before), and her bank balance was growing at a phenomenal rate. But the questions were building.

She knew that they were working to increase her telepathic ability. That much was obvious. But when the training would end and the real work begin—well, she had been given no information whatsoever. It occurred to her that maybe she could use her powers to tap into

the collective minds of the Department's hierarchy. Perhaps she could search whatever was between their ears for clues to her eventual workload.