



# Summer Constellations

So much can happen when the stars align.

ALISHA SEVIGNY

JULIA IS SO READY FOR SUMMER. Now that her little brother has finally recovered from a serious illness, all she wants to do is enjoy peak season at the lakeside campground her family owns.

Then Julia's mom completely blindsides her: a wealthy developer thinks their campground property is the *perfect* spot for a casino. They have to consider the offer, Julia's mom says, because of their crushing medical bills.

Heartbroken and afraid, Julia takes her telescope down to the dock one night, seeking solace in the stars.

That's when she has a chance encounter with Nick, a hot guy who offers some surprisingly sage advice. Too bad this guitar-strumming stranger is the developer's son ...

As plans for the sale move forward, Julia is desperate to find a way out. Nick is desperate to separate himself from his family's business. Together, he promises, they can save the campground.

But can Julia trust him to conspire against his own father? And could she ever trust him with her heart?

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*For my parents, who camped us all over the countryside.  
And for the stars, which inspire the dreamers, the artists  
and those who wish to change the world.*





“We are all connected. To each other, biologically. To the earth, chemically. To the rest of the universe atomically.”

— Neil deGrasse Tyson

“A starry sky is something that touches your soul. Our civilization’s religion, philosophy, science, art and literature all have roots with our views of the heavens, and we are now losing this with consequences we cannot fully know. What happens when we cannot be inspired by the night sky?”

— Fabio Falchi (on light pollution)



# Chapter One

“I can’t believe you’re leaving me.”

Wind whips through the cab of the ancient Chevy, stirring my hair across my face. I gather frenzied strands into a high ponytail using the elastic around my wrist. Hot sun beats down on the chipped windshield.

Paige looks over at me, expression pained, hands fixed at ten and two. “It’s not like I really have a choice.”

“But for the whole summer?” I fiddle with the volume knob. Old Blue only gets the oldies station, and some doo-wop song warbles through tinny speakers.

“I know.” She sighs, then makes a face at spending the next two months with her philandering father and his new girlfriend. Her words, not mine. “It’s all so tragically cliché.”

“On the bright side, you get to go to Japan and see all your relatives. How cool is that?” I inject false cheer into my voice; it sucks seeing her so down. The truck huffs its way up a hill as the sun starts to set on

the mountains, casting a tangerine glow over the surrounding forest.

“Yeah.” She gives the steering wheel an encouraging pat. “I feel bad for my mom, though.”

“She’ll survive.” I lean my head against the rusty window frame, flecks of copper blending in with my hair. “Just like me.” Though not entirely sure how I’m going to cope without my best friend for the next few months, I don’t want to add to her guilt.

“At least you have dreamy Dan Schaeffer to look forward to,” Paige says as we finally reach the summit, lake sparkling in the distance below. The truck shudders with relief.

“True.” I’ve been trying to rein in the excitement at seeing him, but now that the day has actually come, something in my chest swells, finally breaking free of its bindings. We begin our descent, my heart racing along with the vehicle, down the steep slope.

“When’s he arriving, anyway?” Paige says over the roar of the wind.

“Tomorrow. At least that’s what the reservation says.”

Paige pumps Blue’s brakes, which seem to be working decently this week, anticipating the right-hand turn around the bend. A weathered wooden sign in fading white paint reads “Charming Pines Campground.”

Home.

The paved road turns to gravel, crackling and crunching under tires as we drive through the entrance.

“I wonder if it’ll be weird seeing him in person after all this time,” I say. Dan Schaeffer and his family have been coming to our campground every summer for the last five years; I’ve been falling for him since the first one, when I was twelve. Last July things heated up and some intense make-out sessions ... transpired. Though we never really talked about our status then or in any online chats since, I’m hoping — make that determined (Paige is always reminding me to think positively) — that this summer it’s going to be more than just a seasonal romance.

“So, you gonna lock it down this time, or what?” One of her big brown eyes winks. “I want to get a text that Julia Ducharme is officially off the market.” She turns the wheel to the left. “Preferably while I’m eating mind-blowing sushi and belting out karaoke with my cousins. Hopefully, Shinto and Haru have some cute friends,” she muses.

“I’ll do my best,” I vow. Paige has been helping me dial back the tomboy while turning up the femme fatale all year. Judging by the reactions of a few boys at school, she says it’s working, but I have my doubts. More likely it’s just that skirt of hers I borrowed, but I’m crossing fingers that her lessons in Flirting 101 and Being Irresistible in Real Life 102 will pay off. There’s only so much charm a girl can exude onscreen and by text.

We pull up in front of my house, and Paige puts the truck into park as my little brother ambles up our driveway.

Paige leans out the window and waves. “Hey, Caleb.”

He gives a shy wave back, then pulls his ball cap farther down, slowly climbing the porch steps. His limp is getting slightly better, for sure.

“How’s he doing?” Paige murmurs as the screen door closes after him.

“Pretty good,” I say, voice soft, as I slip on my sandals. It’s been a tough year. Not only have I been pining for Dan, but infinitely worse is that my little brother’s been sick. Like, really sick. Paralyzed for months after contracting some rare disease called Guillain-Barré syndrome. Unable to breathe on his own, hooked up to all sorts of freaky machines. But then last month, thank goodness, he slowly started getting better. “Though he’s pretty self-conscious about his face.” The paralysis hasn’t completely released his left side, resulting in the limp and a crooked smile that appears once in a lunar eclipse.

“Is physio helping?” Paige taps her fingers on the wheel.

“Yeah, but he still spends most of his time alone in the basement playing video games.” The old Caleb used to play outside all day, climbing trees, swimming and generally raising hell around the

campground. “And he’s not happy about having to repeat fourth grade.”

“But the doctors say he’s going to make a full recovery?”

“That’s what they say.” I feel grateful that after such a crappy year, things are finally turning a corner. A light breeze rushes through the trees.

“Well.” Paige sighs, pushing back smooth straight hair that never looks less than perfect. Mine usually resembles a red squirrel’s nest, complete with leaf pieces and the odd twig. “Guess I better get going.”

Hopping out of the truck, I dart around to the other side and jump up on the oxidized running board, flinging my arms around my best friend. “Have a great time.”

She gives a wistful laugh. “We’ll see. But I meant what I said about texting me. I’ll be waiting.”

“Who knows what kind of texts you might get.” I wiggle my eyebrows up and down suggestively, holding on to Blue’s battered flank.

“Why? What?” Paige’s voice rises. “Jules! You’re not seriously considering losing your V-card, are you?”

I shrug as nonchalantly as I can manage, given that my heart’s pounding at the mere thought. I repeat her words back to her. “We’ll see.” Though Dan and I never went all the way, it wasn’t for his lack of trying. But I hadn’t been quite ready. Then.

She smacks my arm.

“Ow!”

“Every detail. Got it?”

Jumping onto the gravel, I rub my bicep. “Every detail,” I promise.

\*

After heaving an ATV wheel out of the back of the truck and waving Paige off, I roll the wheel up to the big shed at the side of the house.

Red, maintenance man for the Pines, strolls out, his paint-splattered overalls so worn the blue denim's almost white. Along with Mom and me, this guy basically keeps the place running.

"Hey, Red," I say, as he holds the door open for me.

"Hey, Jules, thanks for grabbing that for me. How was the last day of school?" he asks.

"Good, especially now that it's over." I duck under his arm, rolling the tire inside. It's weird to think that high school is over. Done. Finished. I'm not really sure how to feel. But I have to admit I'm looking forward to spending all day and night outdoors and under the stars, swimming in crystal-clear lake water and breathing in the sweet mountain air.

And seeing Dan, of course.

"So, you're officially on summer vacation, hey?" Rubbing a hand over his gray beard, he reminds me of a rugged Santa Claus.

My eyes narrow. "Yeah, but don't get any ideas. I don't 'officially' start full-time around here until tomorrow."

"I was just gonna get you to check out some boards at the dock." His tone is cajoling. "Some campers mentioned that there's a couple o' loose ones."

"A woman's work is never done." Sighing, I lean the wheel against the wall. "I'm headed down there tonight. I'll take a look. Supposed to be a killer meteor shower later on."

"Thanks, girl." Red's worked at the campground for as long as I can remember and is pretty much family. He was a good friend of my grandfather's and took over mentoring me in the ways of the handyman, or handyperson, I should say, after Gramps passed. They both felt that girls should be able to do things like change a tire, frame a cabin and manage basic plumbing. The latter being extremely gross. Useful. But gross. Thanks to Red, I can do all three.

"No problem," I say, wiping my hands on my shorts and exiting the shed after him.

I inhale the comforting smells of fresh cut wood and campfire. The campground's been open to the public for more than a month, but now that school's out and summer holidays have officially begun, we're gearing up for our busiest season. It's mostly just been retirees and weekenders, so far, but soon we'll be booked full. Which is good. Though Mom doesn't like to let on, I know money's been super tight this year with all the recent medical bills. I walk into the house, where the fragrance of baking supplants the campfire smoke.

Weird. Mom doesn't usually bake unless it's one of our birthdays or something.

"Mom?" I yell. "I'm home."

"In here," she calls from the kitchen.

I walk into a war zone. Our refrigerator has exploded.

"Been busy?" I survey the mess and the undomestic goddess that is my mother.

Her apron reads, "Get your Asana in Gear!" Aside from running the campground with Red, she also teaches hot yoga and is a bit of a fanatic about it. You'd think a hard-core health nut would love to cook, but she prefers we eat mostly raw whole foods from the organic market. At least that's the story she's selling. "Just wanted to make you and Caleb a special dinner tonight," she says, slightly out of breath. My mom has a pretty rocking bod for someone in her mid-forties, but I notice a few more fine lines around her eyes. Caleb's illness was rough on us all, and Mom pretty much lived at the hospital when he was in there. "Red's joining us."

I inhale deeply as another uncommon smell drifts under my nostrils. "Is that meat?"

"Pot roast," she says, pride tinged with regret.

"Seriously?" Mom's a vegan, though the rest of us are carnivores.

"Free range, grain-fed and hormone-free." She opens the oven door and takes a peek. "Poor thing."



“Yummy.” I look at her. “What’s the occasion?”

“Can’t I cook a nice dinner for my family?” she says, the tautness of her shoulders belying her innocent tone.

I look at her more carefully. “No, really, what’s up?”

“We’ll talk about it at dinner.”

Okaaay. My heart drops into my stomach, thoughts automatically going to Caleb, though he looked fine when I saw him a few minutes ago.

“Where’s the C-man?” I ask.

“He’s fine, Julia.” Our semi-telepathy goes both ways.

Despite her reassurance, I want to check for myself. Most girls my age find their little brothers annoying, but Caleb is a pretty awesome kid. And I thought that *before* he got sick. I head for the stairs to the basement, leaving Mom to put the final touches on dinner.

I descend into near darkness. The glow from the fifty-inch television illuminates Caleb’s white face. He’s wearing a headset and talking to one of his gaming friends, playing the latest Minecraft installment.

“Hey, Cale.” I pronounce it like the leafy green vegetable.

“Hey,” he says, staring at the screen.

“How you feeling?” I examine him closely.

“Fine.” Despite his overall pallor from too much time spent in the hospital and down here, it does look like he’s added a couple of pounds to his too-skinny frame.

“Are you winning?” I ask, flopping down beside him on the worn olive couch.

“Yup.” Such a dazzling conversationalist.

“Did you notice anything up with our dear mother?” One of my legs bounces up and down.

Pressing the pause button, he looks at me with the clear blue eyes he got from Mom. I’ve inherited my dad’s algae green ones, one of the few things I have to remember him by. “What?”

“She’s making pot roast. And baking.”

“Sweet.” He goes back to his game.

“Aren’t you the tiniest bit curious?” I am not the most patient person. My brother, on the other hand, could give a Buddhist monk a run for his prayer beads. I wonder if all the lying around in a hospital taught him to accept things as they come. It had the complete opposite effect on me. Now I get super anxious, super fast.

“Nope,” he says, still staring at the screen.

I sit there for a few more minutes, watching his fingers fly around the controller. The sound of a screen door slamming has me jumping to my feet.

“Red’s here,” I say, adrenaline thrumming. Caleb’s fine, but I have a lingering sense of foreboding. I seriously need to find out what’s going on. Then I can get back to daydreaming about reuniting with Dan. I’ve been imagining the scene in my head for weeks. Will it be down at the lake? Will he come up to the house looking for me? What am I going to wear? You can’t really dress up in a campground. Well, you can, but you’d look like an idiot. Did I give Paige back her skirt?

“Dinner!” Mom calls down the stairs.

Caleb mumbles a few words into his headset then removes it. He gets up stiffly and turns the game off.

“It’s probably just something to do with the grounds,” he says, as we head for the stairs. I love that, my little brother trying to calm *me*. “Maybe we’re getting new fire pits installed down at the beach and they need our help.”

His small hands grip the railings. His right leg lifts, comes down on a step, the weak left dragging up after it. The right one leads again, followed by the left.

“Maybe.” I watch his progress.

“Or maybe we’re canceling Wakestock this year,” he adds, turning his head with one of his rare half smiles.

“Don’t even joke about that.” I’ve been practicing my 560 for the annual wakeboarding festival for the last two months, despite the subarctic temperature of the water. I can’t wait to show Dan.

“Kids!” Mom calls again, voice strained and over-cheery, just as we walk into the kitchen.

“How you doing, bud?” Red walks over and ruffles Caleb’s hair. I wonder why he didn’t mention he was coming for dinner.

“Happy to be done school, Jules?” Mom asks. “I’m so proud of you!” Then, without waiting for an answer, she winks. “And the Schaeffers arrive tomorrow.” I blush. Everyone kinda knows that Dan and I have a thing. His parents are good friends with Mom, and I’m sure they’ve talked about it. Not humiliating at all.

Mom has the picnic table in the backyard set up, so we head outside. The good china rests innocuously on Grandma’s fancy tablecloth.

“Are we celebrating anything?” I ask, folding my hands and placing my chin on top of them. Maybe my instincts are all wrong.

Mom and Red look at each other as we sit down to eat. “Actually, we’re having someone come by tomorrow to assess the property,” she says without preamble.

What? “Why?”

“Well.” She clears her throat. “I’m thinking of possibly selling it.”

I pick up my fork and knife, looking at both of them. “Like, part of the land?” The campground is situated on a lake with tons of undeveloped forest stretching for miles in almost every direction.

“Like the whole campground.” Mom’s voice is calm. She glances at Red, who remains silent, then from my brother to me.

*Boom.*



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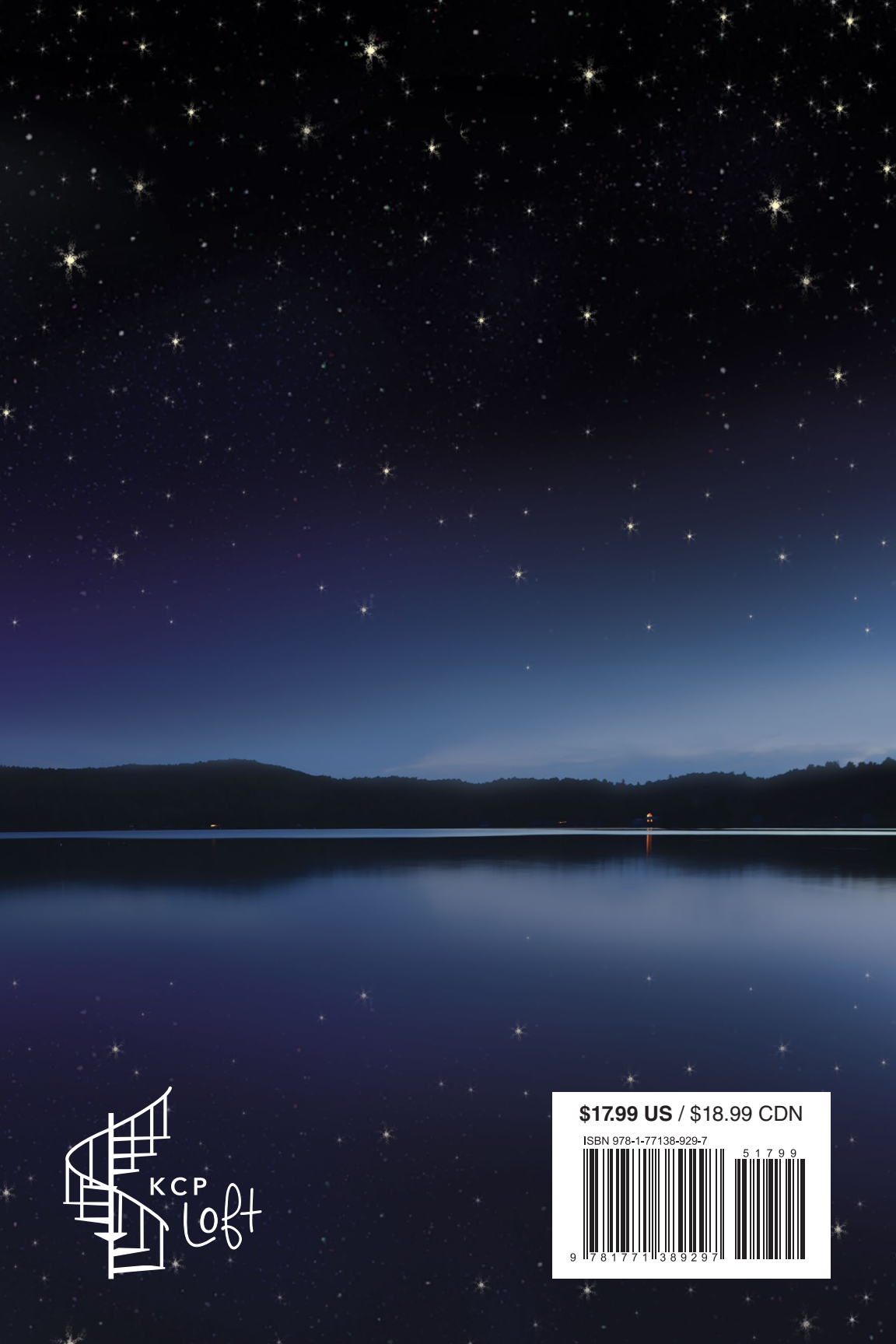
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