

!TWENTY-SEVEN

MY LEGS ALMOST BUCKLED, BUT I REACHED OUT AND grabbed a table near me, managing to stay upright. Lexie ran into our father's arms; Eddy right behind her. He squeezed both of them in an embrace. They stayed that way for a long moment, then they stepped slightly apart, Dad's arms still around them. My gaze went from my father's face to my sister's to my brother's.

"Dad?" I took a step and found myself in his arms. He smelled of aftershave and pipe tobacco. My face smashed into his shoulder, the silk of his aloha shirt slippery and cool on my cheek.

I stepped back then and looked at him.
My father was alive.

How was he alive?

He looked good. He'd put on weight since the last time I'd seen him . . .

The last time I'd seen him had been that night. The

night he threatened to hurt Lucas. The night we finally escaped him. The night he had died in the Compound . . . Except he hadn't.

Because he was standing right in front of me.

The spontaneous joy at seeing my dad alive evaporated as all the questions flooded back. But I didn't even know where to start.

Where are we?

Who is Tony?

How the hell are you alive?

Dad squeezed Lexie and Eddy closer to him and said, "I'm sure you have a lot of questions."

I said, "I thought you were dead."

He grinned. "Almost was. I managed to get out at the last second and the helicopter barely made it out."

"With Phil." My voice was low and hard.

"Yes," he said. "With Phil."

"Why?" I asked.

His forehead creased. "Why what?"

Why did you leave?

Why did you let us think you were dead?

Why did you let Phil take over the company when you were alive?

But the one question that made its way out made me sound five years old. "Why didn't you come and see us?"

Why didn't you make things right?

Dad reached out and ruffled my hair with his hand.

"I think that would have been the wrong thing at the wrong time."

"Why?" I asked. "Mom has a new baby. She is trying to do everything by herself. She thinks you're dead."

Dad drew his hand back. "My showing up . . . would have led to a lot of—let's say—*unpleasantness*. It was easier for me to slip away, come here. Phil had been preparing this place for years. My timeline got moved up a bit." He paused. "I just don't think I would have been received well had I gone with you all to Seattle."

Eddy said, "Because the world thinks you did something bad."

"Thinks?" I asked. I was relieved to see my father alive, despite all he had done, but was Eddy delusional? "He kept us down there against our will. Of course it was bad."

Dad said, "See? Better the world thinks I'm dead and buried."

"What about Mom?" I asked. "And Terese? And the little ones?"

"I'll see them soon." Dad let out a loud breath. "Come now. Let's not spoil our reunion. There's plenty of time for talk."

And then I looked at Eddy and Lexie. They were so happy. Why? Why weren't they freaked out that we'd been drugged and taken against our will?

And then it all hit me. Not only Dad being alive, but him orchestrating our arrival on the island. A plan that must have been in motion almost since the day we arrived back in Seattle.

"I've gotta sit down." I went to the nearby glass dining table and dropped onto one of the white damask chairs.

Dad had been behind all of it.

Tony finding Lucas that day couldn't have been a setup, because I'm the one who left Lucas alone. But Tony could have been following us for a long time, simply waiting for the chance to befriend us. Maybe a setup had been coming, and opportunity had simply presented itself early when Lucas went out the emergency door.

Tony. Tony had been the one who'd leaked our outings to Barron. Had to be.

Which meant Dad had been in on it all. Tony was on the payroll.

The trip to Colorado had been just the right moment to get us in the jet, to bring us here.

Eddy asked, "You all right?"

I shook my head.

He said, "I'll get you something to drink."

I nodded.

Dad had come and sat at the head of the table, while Lexie sat on the chair to his right, smiling up at him. He placed a hand on her cheek.

Eddy set a tumbler of ice water down in front of me and I held the cool glass for a moment, and then struck my hands on my face.

I was so hot.

After a long drink of the water, I set the glass back down. I looked at Dad. "You planned it. All of it."

"Eli, now's not the time for debate," said Dad. "We're here together, can we simply—"

"No!" I slammed my hand on the table. "I need to know."

"All right." Dad sighed. "I needed to get you all here."

Lexie said, "Eli, we're here. Dad's here. That's all that matters."

"Are you kidding me?" My voice got louder as I continued, asking, "You're fine with Tony lying? Drugging us?" I glared at Dad.

"Daddy?" Lexie frowned. "What's going on?"

Dad walked over to the sidebar and picked up a small pair of silver tongs. "Now that you're here, I'll tell you everything." He plucked out an ice cube from the matching silver bucket and dropped it into a glass with a *clink*. "I became aware of Dr. Barkley's research—"

"What?" Goose bumps rose on my arms.

"Who is that?" asked Lexie.

I said, "He's a doctor at the Progeria Institute, where I visited. YK funds his research." I looked at Dad, waiting. Dad continued, "As I said, I became aware of Dr. Barkley, and his discovery, a few weeks before Eddy and Eli's ninth birthday." He dropped another ice cube. *Clink*.

I sucked in a quick breath and Eddy stiffened beside me. Lexie frowned at me and Eddy. "What's so special about your ninth birthday?"

"Our ninth birthday was . . . the camping trip. When we entered . . ." I couldn't say it.

"Oh." She frowned and looked back at Dad.

He put a couple more cubes in his glass, poured himself

some water; then took his drink over to the glass wall on the opposite side of the room. My father stared out at the jungle for a moment before speaking again. "His discovery was . . . astounding, to say the least."

Eddy asked, "What discovery?"

When Dad didn't answer, I explained. "He'd isolated the compound that triggers aging."

"Really?" Lexie asked Dad, "What did that have to do with anything?"

He lifted his arms out to his sides. "It had everything to do with everything!" He dropped his arms, still grinning as he walked back over to us and sat back down in his chair. "Dr. Barkley's discovery meant so much more than just a potential cure for progeria." He leaned forward. "It was a possible cure for aging itself."

Eddy cleared his throat. "Is aging something to be cured, though?"

Dad laughed. "Spoken like a true teenager. Wait until you're thirty or forty or eighty. Then you'll understand."

Lexie asked, "What does this have to do with Tony?" I wanted to know that myself. How Tony got involved in Dad's scheme to get us here. And who the dude really was, because it was apparent he was no skateboarder from the wrong side of the tracks.

"At first I wasn't completely sure what we had," Dad said.

"Wait." I held up my hand. "You skipped a bit, don't you think? How about telling us how you got your hands

on the research?" I only had a hunch, but I had to call him out.

Dad shot me a scathing glance and sighed. "Fine, fine." He twirled the fingers of one hand in the air. "I had it taken."

I knew it.

Eddy asked, "Why would you have to do that?"

"Yeah," said Lexie. "Couldn't you have bought it?"

Dad scratched his chin. "I did buy it, really. I wrote Dr. Barkley a very significant check after the fire and—"

"What fire?" Eddy burst out.

"There happened to be a fire at his research facility and I provided the funds to get him back on his feet. Start up his research again."

"Wait." Lexie hadn't acted like the conversation was worth listening to, but now she had a serious expression on her face. "Was the fire before or after you took his research?"

Dad didn't answer.

So I took a chance and said, "The fire was a cover-up. For the robbery. And you ended up with the research and no one was any wiser."

"Very good, Eli." Dad smiled at me. "You always figure out my secrets, don't you?"

Yeah, I guess I did.

Then why did it feel like he was still hiding something? Eddy fidgeted in his chair. "So what did you do with the research?"

Dad leaned back in his chair. "I took it with me into the Compound. Spent years with it."

"How?" I asked. "You were busy with the cloning."

Eddy asked, "What cloning?"

Dad waved him off. "I'm not God. There was never going to be any cloning."

"But that room, the lab . . .," I said. "I saw it!"

Dad shook his head. "You saw exactly what I told you to see. Did you open any of the tanks?"

I swallowed. "No, I—"

"Why not, Eli?" asked my father. "Why didn't you check for yourself?"

Why didn't I? "Because I—"

"Because you believed what I told you."

I nodded.

Dad laughed as he rubbed his hands together. "Of course you did!"

Lexie said, "What were you doing if you weren't . . . trying to clone things?"

Dad looked at me. "I was decoding the key to aging."

"Why?" asked Eddy.

"I know," said Lexie. "Mom spends a fortune on anti-wrinkle cream." She nodded. "You could make a fortune on antiaging medicine. Everyone would buy it."

Maybe I was right about the vaccine for antiaging. Maybe he had done it after all.

Dad tilted his head slightly to one side. "Not quite what I was thinking . . ."

Confident with my answer, I said, "A cure for aging. The fountain of youth. People wouldn't have to get any older ever again."

Dad smiled at me. "I didn't want to just stop aging." He nodded at Lexie. "Or find a cure for it. I wanted to do more."

Eddy said, "More? How could there be more than that?"

Dad looked at me. "Eli? Don't you have this figured out?"

No one said anything. Suddenly, I felt my heart pound faster and my hands started to tremble. I didn't want to hear him say what he was going to say. Because it would not be anything good.

Dad said, "It wasn't enough to stop aging. I wanted to reverse it."

Reverse it?

"That's impossible!" I said. "No one can reverse aging."

"Really, Eli? You honestly think I can't do anything I put my mind—and money—to?" Dad had this look on his face as he watched me. This smug look.

The same kind of smug look Tony had given me on the plane before I'd passed out.

The same kind of smug look Phil had given me that day in the boardroom.

What was I missing? I couldn't help thinking it had something to do with Phil.

Dad interrupted my thoughts when he asked, "Did you see my jellyfish?"

"The tank in the foyer?" I asked.

Eddy said, "We saw them."

Lexie nodded.

I asked, "What are they?"

Dad said, "*Turritopsis nutricula*. Originally from the Caribbean, but they've spread all over the world."

There had to be a reason for their prominent display in the foyer. "What's so special about them?" I asked.

Dad said, "The *Turritopsis nutricula* is technically a hydrozoan, a cousin of the jellyfish. I heard about it while I was working on Dr. Barkley's discovery. And it's special because once it matures and mates, it is able to revert back to a juvenile form."

Lexie asked, "So it shrinks or something?"

"No." Dad shook his head. "It is the only animal capable of reverting completely to its younger self." Dad set his drink down. "Most members of the jellyfish family die after mating. But this creature has the ability to re-turn to a polyp state, an earlier stage in its life cycle."

"How does it do that?" I asked.

Dad said, "Through trans-differentiation." He must have seen the confused looks on our faces, because he added, "They turn one kind of cell into another. Some animals have the ability to do this in a limited capacity, like how salamanders can regrow limbs. But the *Turritopsis* can regenerate its entire body. It reverses its aging process."

An immortal jellyfish. I swallowed.

Had Dad done it? Had he figured out how to reverse aging?

The implications . . .

I couldn't breathe.