

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE NEXT DAY I WOKE UP AND EVERYTHING WAS CLEAR. I wasn't ready to have to deal with telling someone, anyone, who I really was. I wasn't ready for a negative reaction from them.

Verity was nice. I could see myself hanging out with her. Maybe liking her. Maybe liking her a lot. But having her look at me strangely when I told her the truth? That my name wasn't even EJ?

That would hurt.

So I texted her to say I couldn't do anything that weekend.

She replied, asking about the next one.

I didn't answer.

Saturday morning we all got ready for the Mariners game. I pulled on a pair of jeans and then a throwback Mariners shirt. When we'd first arrived in Hawaii, Eddy

had one like it. I thought it was cool, so when Mom started ordering clothes, I asked for one.

Downstairs in the kitchen, Mom was in her bathrobe, her hair up in a loose, messy knot on top of her head. She looked exhausted as she held Finn, who was fussing like crazy.

"What's up with him?" I asked.

Mom shook her head. "I don't know. But Lucas started throwing up in the middle of the night, and I think he's got whatever Cara had. Gram's with him. I think I'd better stay home with the three little ones."

"Why don't we just do the game a different time?" I asked. After the day at the aquarium, I was fine with delaying our next outing.

"Do what a different time?" asked Eddy, who bounded into the kitchen, wearing jeans and the same shirt I had on. Well, the same except that his was softer, more worn, and mine probably still smelled like the plastic bag it had been shipped in. He stopped and stared at my shirt, then said, "I'll go change." He headed back up the stairs. My face turned red.

I got that it would be stupid for us to wear the same shirt, but the look on his face . . . it hadn't been a harmless reaction of *Oops, better change so we don't look like the identical twins we are*. It came across like it was more an annoyance, like I was someone he had to put up with.

Mom looked at me. "You okay?"

I nodded. "Yeah, sure."

She put Finn up on her shoulder. "You're fine with Tony going?"

I frowned. "Who?"

Mom said, "Tony, Eddy's friend that helped find Lucas the other day."

Eddy's friend? "He's going with us?"

Mom bit her lip. "You didn't know."

I asked, "When did that happen?"

"Eddy just kept asking and I figured it was okay."

My mouth dropped open. "How is it okay? Tell me how it's okay! You don't want anyone to know who we are or where we are, but then you'll let a stranger go to a baseball game with us?" I realized I was yelling.

Mom held up her palm toward me. "Sweetheart, calm down. I know I have to accept the fact that you all want to go out into the world, and it will happen sooner or later and—"

"Mom?" Reese walked into the kitchen in a flowered nightgown, her hair down and fluffed out around her face. She held her stomach with both hands. "I don't feel good." Then she threw a hand over her mouth and ran into the small bathroom off the kitchen.

We heard her throw up.

"Uh-oh. Another one down." Mom handed Finn, who had finally calmed down and was whimpering quietly, to me. "I'd better go check on her."

Just then, Eddy came back into the room, wearing a Cubs shirt. Almost the opposite of mine.

I said, "So your new *friend* is coming, huh?"

Eddy's face turned a bit red and he headed to the fridge and opened it. "I thought it would be a nice thank-you for helping with Lucas." He pulled out a gallon of milk and poured a glass.

"So you're going to tell this stranger who we are?"

He shook his head. "No, not really."

I rolled my eyes. "How is that going to stay a secret?"

Mom came back in and took Finn. "Reese is sick, too. Looks like it'll just be you two and Lexie."

I crossed my arms. "And *Tony*. Don't forget Tony."

Mom said, "If this is a problem, we'll just cancel. Forget the whole thing." She sounded miffed.

Eddy said, "No! I don't want to. God!" He shoved the milk back in the fridge and slammed the door. "It used to just be me and Gram and it was so much frickin' easier. Now everything has to be decided by a hundred people and I never get to do what *I* want!"

Mom's mouth fell open and I had to sit down on a stool. So that was how he really felt? That his life was easier when we were all . . .

"I'm so sorry we're not all *dead!*" I snapped.

"Eli . . ." He looked at Mom. "I'm sorry." Eddy paled and shook his head. "That's not what I meant. I didn't—"

"It's pretty clear you *did* mean it," I said. "Or you wouldn't have said it!"

"Eli!" Mom narrowed her eyes at both of us. "Just go. Both of you. I have sick kids to take care of and it'll be easier without you two around."

Lexie walked in the room, wearing jeans and a Mariners shirt, her dark hair in a loose bun on top of her head. She looked excited, but her face fell as she saw us. "What's wrong?"

Mom said, "Nothing's wrong. You look pretty, sweetheart."

"Where's Reese?" asked Lexie.

Mom said, "She's sick." Then she looked at me and Eddy. "Now go and take your sister to the ball game."

Eddy turned and headed outside. Lexie started to ask me something, but I just brushed past her and went outside. In the SUV, Lexie and I sat in the backseat and Eddy rode shotgun with Lee. Eddy pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and punched an address into the GPS. "This will get us to where we need to pick up Tony."

I leaned forward. "You seriously are still bringing him?"

"Who?" asked Lexie.

Eddy said, "He texted me, said he'd be there."

I slumped in the seat. "We don't even know him."

"Who?" repeated Lexie.

Eddy turned around and looked at me. "We've been texting. Tony's cool."

Lexie grabbed my ear and twisted.

"Ow!"

She asked, "Who is Tony?"

"Let go!" I said, trying to get loose from her grip.

Eddy said, "This guy who helped us find Lucas when he ran off at the aquarium."

Lexie let go of me and I rubbed my ear.

Her eyes narrowed. "Does Mom know he's coming?" Eddy said, "Yeah."

Lexie looked at Eddy and back to me. "And she's fine with some stranger knowing who we are?"

Eddy said, "It's easy now, with just the three of us." He pointed at Lee. "He's our uncle." He pointed at me. "You're EJ, since that worked so well for you before."

Lexie asked, "And who am I?"

Eddy shrugged. "You can be . . . Alex."

"Oh, just *awesome*." Lexie glared at Eddy. "I can't believe Mom is okay with you inviting some stranger to go with us! How would you have explained all the kids? And Mom? Everyone knows what Mom looks like."

Eddy said, "That's why this is way easier."

"Yeah," I said. "Because we know you like things to be easy. I'm sorry Lexie and I are here to mess up your day."

He shot a glance at me. "I said I was sorry. Just let it go."

Lexie raised her eyebrows at me, but I ignored her and looked out the window.

"Uh-uh." Lexie shook her head so hard a few strands of hair escaped from her bun. "That kid is not coming with us."

Eddy turned around. "Oh, come on. I told him we'd pick him up."

Lee took the next exit and we pulled into a sketchy strip mall that had seen its better days. The sun was

shining over the blacktop, and a lone figure stood at the end of the parking lot near a bus stop.

Eddy pointed. "There he is."

"I'm the oldest here, which makes me in charge," Lexie said. "Mom must have been sleep deprived or *insane* to agree to this and I say no way. You just pull up there and Eddy, you tell him . . ."

She trailed off as we got close enough to see Tony. Instead of the ragged hoodie and jeans from the other day, he wore a Mariners shirt and clean jeans and running shoes. Nice ones. His hair, which had been covered by a cap that rainy day, was dark and curly. He saw us and waved, then smiled, revealing even white teeth and dimples.

I heard a click.

Lexie had unbuckled her seat belt and slid over into the middle seat. "Eddy, tell him he can sit by me."

My mouth dropped open. "Wait! What happened to him being a stranger?"

Lexie pulled on her bun until her hair fell down, loose around her shoulders. She ran a hand through it. "He doesn't exactly look *dangerous*."

Resisting the urge to bang my head against the window, I watched as Tony opened the door. He smiled and greeted all of us, then got in the car.

I scowled the rest of the way, watching Eddy and Lexie gush over Tony. Eddy fist-bumped him and said, "Glad you could make it."

Tony said, "Me too." He turned to Lexie and held out a hand. "I'm Tony. Nice to meet you."

Lexie shook it and giggled a little.

Was she blushing?

Seriously?

Eddy said, "That's Alex. And EJ." He patted Lee on the arm. "This here's our uncle."

I rolled my eyes and glared out the window at the traffic. Great. Part of me had been hoping Tony would be so obviously not a good fit with us that Eddy would agree with me and never invite him anywhere again. But in less than five minutes, that strange teenager had my sister swooning.

Tony said something that made both Eddy and Lexie laugh, and I stopped listening.

When we got to the stadium, Lee pulled into a VIP parking area and we all walked in together through the sky bridge and up to the small, private suite that was ours for the day.

A buffet was laid out on a side table, and silver dishes of ice held a variety of sodas, juices, and bottled water. "Wow," said both Tony and I at the same time. We looked at each other, and then I looked away.

Sure, I'd grown up with similar layouts, never giving a thought to where my next meal was coming from, but it had been awhile. Having so many options of food and drink at my fingertips was something I had not yet learned to take for granted. I grabbed some napkins and

dug in, taking a hot dog and dumping sweet relish all over it.

A couple tables were set up by the windows and I sat down at one. Our vantage point was high up, but right over home plate. Eddy, Lexie, and Tony were filling their plates, and Lexie came and sat with me.

Tony and Eddy sat down in leather chairs right beside us. Tony leaned back in a leather chair, looking totally relaxed as he and Lexie talked. How in the world was he fitting in so well with my family? Obviously from the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak, he should have been feeling uncomfortable, or at the very least, he should have been one of those people who rebels against the excess of the suite.

But he was just enjoying every moment.

I wasn't. But maybe I wasn't being fair to him. Maybe I was being elitist by thinking he should bow over backward with gratitude.

I finished eating. There was still time before the first inning started. "I'm gonna go find a bathroom."

Lee stood up to go with me, but I shook my head before Tony could notice my "uncle" wanting to accompany me to the bathroom. Lee didn't look happy, but he sat back down and pointed. "There's one down the hall."

I smiled at him and whispered, "I'll be fine."

Out in the hallway, there were a lot of people gathering at the door of a suite. There was an exclamation, and a little girl in a wheelchair was pushed inside, and several

people followed her. A bartender had just walked out of the room with a tray of dirty glasses and headed my way. I moved out of his way and kept going past that suite to the bathroom. On my way back, I passed the open door and someone called out something.

I kept walking.

"EJF"

The sound of her voice made me stop more than the name did, since I certainly didn't answer to it. I turned around.

Verity Blum was standing right in front of me.