

SIXTEEN

CHAPTER

I SAT THERE, TRYING TO TALK MYSELF THROUGH IT ALL. Tom Barron wasn't a problem. But whoever tipped him off definitely *was*. Could it be someone in our security force? I went through the faces in my mind. Joe and Sam who minded the front gatehouse during the day; both joked with us whenever we went around them. Neither seemed capable of stabbing us in the back like that. William, the older guy who took over every night: very buff, with a tinge of gray in his hair. He had an adult child with special needs and was always thanking Mom for the job. No way would he risk his paycheck like that. I could be wrong, but my gut felt strongly about those three.

Then I thought about Lee.

I shook my head. "No way." Gram had vetted him herself. There was a family connection, a level of honor, and I was sure he wouldn't cross that. Other than those

guards, and a few other loyal people at YK, no one knew where we were living. No one at YK would risk their well-paying job in order to tip off a guy selling survival condos.

And then I stopped trying to think of people who would give us away. Why *would* someone tip Barron off? A commission of some sort? He didn't mention anything.

And if the tipster was looking for us, well . . . obviously he'd already found us and seemed to know our every step.

He was watching us.

I went over to my window and looked out, first at the lake, then at the woods. The woods were just outside the fences, but if someone wanted to watch us, that would be a good spot.

Still, that didn't answer *why*?

Did someone want to mess with us?

No. Mess with *me*.

I had been the only one to suspect being followed, and I was the one who had just found out for certain that we were. Was that planned?

I went back to my computer and sat down, then swiveled slowly around in my chair. Should I tell Eddy? Mom? Or no one?

In order to know where we were, someone would have to have connections to YK. "That doesn't exactly narrow it down." I stopped twirling and drummed my fingers on the desk. "Who would want to piss us—me—off like this? Who at YK would want . . ."

Phil.

He knew about our new place; he was capable of finding out the license plates of our vehicles. He could have hired someone to follow us wherever we went.

I thought back to the places I'd been in the past few weeks, other than YK.

The Progeria Institute.

People at YK had been aware of that trip, had even arranged for a car. I didn't know the driver of the company car, and even though Lee ended up driving me that day, Phil could have paid the driver to keep tabs on me. I shook my head. Too easy. So many people knew I was going there.

Costco. No one knew but Lee and us.

The aquarium. Same thing.

Someone had to be tracking our vehicles. I glanced at my phone.

Or us.

I grabbed the phone and went to Eddy's room. I held up my hand to knock when I heard him talking to someone. His voice was muffled through the door, but I could still hear what he was saying. "I know! That was hilarious." He was quiet for a moment. Listening to whoever was on the phone? He laughed. "Totally! We have to do that."

I stood there, hand frozen in the air. Maybe he was talking to a friend from Hawaii. I glanced down at my own phone, which held less than five contacts. His probably had dozens.

I dropped my hand and went downstairs.

Mom was in the kitchen, waiting for the teakettle to boil. She smiled at me. "How was the ball game?"

"Fine." I held up my phone. "Where'd we get these?" Mom tilted her head. "Gram bought them."

"Where?" I asked.

"Why?"

"I just want to know."

Mom frowned, as if she were trying to remember. "I think she got them at Costco in Hawaii. They're not traceable, if that's what you're worried about. She made sure of that. They're just so we could communicate when we're not together."

I asked, "Why didn't you give them to us then? Why'd you wait until now?"

She smiled. "I was hoping you'd never leave the house."

I smiled back, relieved. Had the source of the phones been YK, Phil could have easily been involved in the phones, somehow added trackers to them. But he was obviously out of the picture. And maybe I was just being paranoid again. Barron could have made up the tipster for any reason. Maybe just to freak me out. Maybe just to make himself seem more serious than laughable, which is exactly what he was.

The kettle whistled.

"Making enough for me?" I asked.

She nodded. "Of course." She got another mug off the rack. "Lady Grey?"

I nodded and sat down at the counter. She poured water into each mug, then set one in front of me. She bobbed her tea bag up and down in her mug. "So what's on your mind?"

I shook my head. "Nothing." Part of me wanted to tell her about Lexie's quest to find her real parents. Instead, I asked, "Do you think that Eddy is embarrassed by me?"

Mom's eyes widened. "Why would you think that?"

I didn't answer right away, because I didn't know how to put into words the way I felt. Feeling bad about clothes was so stupid, but that was the only concrete evidence I had; he didn't want to be seen in the same clothes as me, which actually happened to make complete sense. We hadn't dressed alike since we were kids, a fact that took the air out of my argument. But he seemed so much happier around Tony. Like he couldn't relax around me. Couldn't have fun. I shrugged. "Sometimes . . . I feel like we kind of cramp his style."

Mom stiffened. "Is this because of what he said this morning?"

"Maybe."

Mom set a hand on mine. "We've been through so much that we expect him to understand. But we have to understand what he's been through. He had to adjust to us being gone. And now, he has to do the opposite."

"Wouldn't that be easier?" I asked. "To know we're here instead of gone for good? To just be normal again?"

"Who's to say what's normal?" Mom drizzled honey

into her tea, stirred, and took a sip. "He used to have three siblings, now he has four more. That would be hard enough to get used to. Give him some time, Eli."

She was probably right. Maybe Eddy's normal was him and Gram, on their own, and we had messed it all up. We'd even blown Eddy's whole belief of Dad as a hero. And Phil as a good guy.

I pulled my mug toward me and swirled my tea bag around by the string. Without thinking, I asked, "Do you think Phil is dead?"

Mom froze, then whispered, "What?"

"Phil," I repeated. "Do you think he's dead?"

"I don't know." She took another sip of tea, then set her mug back down and licked her lips. "Is it wrong of me to say that I hope he is?"

"No." I swallowed. "But . . . I think he's alive."

She looked at me, her forehead wrinkling. "Why do you say that?"

"Just a feeling I have."

She set a hand on my face for a moment. "He's gone. Whether he's still out there or . . . not . . ." She took a quick breath. "He's gone as far as we're concerned. He's out of our lives. For good."

I only hoped she was right.