

# SEVENTEEN

I ENDED UP WITH WHATEVER STOMACH VIRUS THE OTHER kids had, and with all of us recovering, we didn't go anywhere that week. Besides feeling sick, I was kind of relieved. Going out was stressful.

I had to be the only teenager in the world who preferred staying home to going out, and I wondered if that would ever change.

Mom and Lexie were busy planning Quinn's birthday party, an event that caused a bit of tension in the house, ever since Eddy had asked Mom, "Can I invite Tony to Quinn's party?"

"I don't think that's a good idea," she said.

"Why?" He frowned. "We can trust him."

Mom shook her head. "I'm just not ready to invite a stranger. The ball game was one thing."

Eddy said, "He doesn't know who we are."

Mom swiped her hand through the air. "He'll figure it out as soon as he meets all of us."

"Fine." Eddy rolled his eyes.

On Friday, Mom sent Els and Lee out to get supplies for the party. They came home with a penguin cake, and shopping bags from Whole Foods. I helped unpack drinks and whole-wheat buns. There were a bunch of chips and snacks as well.

Els said, "There are balloons in the car you could bring in."

I went out to the SUV and found almost a dozen silver Mylar balloons, all with various designs, all proclaiming HAPPY BIRTHDAY! I grabbed a handful of balloon strings, holding on tight so I wouldn't lose any to the breezy day. Inside, the kitchen was chaos. Gram was at the oven, checking on her Kalua pork for sandwiches, while Els arranged buns on a glass serving tray. Lucas was running around the tiled floor, Cara running after trying to catch him, both of them screeching so loud that Cocoa was curled up in a corner, looking like she'd rather be anywhere else.

Eddy set the cake on the counter, where Els immediately pulled off the cover and frowned at the penguin, obviously not happy with the workmanship. "Hmmp." She stuck a candle, a large blue 1, in the center of the cake and went back to stacking buns.

I walked up behind Gram and told her, "That pork smells wonderful."

She shook her head. "Roasting in the oven for a few hours is not the same as roasting in a pit for three days."

I hugged her. "It'll be delicious."

She patted my arm. "Go help your sisters. They're setting the table."

"Okay." The dining room table was spread with a bright blue tablecloth covered with penguins. "I'm sensing a theme."

Lexie was bent over a pile of silverware. "What was your first clue?"

I split up the bunch of balloons, tying some on to a few of the dining-room chairs, then I went back into the kitchen. Lucas and Cara had disappeared, and Gram was pulling apart her pork with two forks, which she set down on a towel when she saw me. "Can you fill a pitcher with ice water and take it in?" She wiped her hands on her apron.

I found a pitcher and filled it, then carried it into the dining room.

Everyone else was inside the dining room, clustered around one end of the table, except for Cara. She was stopping at each chair with a balloon, untying each and watching it float up to the fifteen-foot ceiling. Five already bounced around up there. "Hey!" I said. "Does no one see what she's doing?"

No one looked up from whatever they were doing. I set the pitcher on the table and picked Cara up. "If you let all the balloons go, you won't have any to play with."

She scowled and wriggled her way out of my arms, back to the ground where she ran over to Mom.

"What are you guys doing?" I asked.

"Quinn is opening a present," said Reese.

"Aren't you gonna wait for all of us?" I asked.

Eddy said, "It's from me. Just a little kid's skateboard."

Just then Gram walked in with a platter of pulled Kalua pork on whole grain buns. Els followed her with coleslaw and a fruit salad, which she set on the table. She said, "We're ready."

Dinner was nice, with no arguments or tension, and everyone just enjoying the food. When we had finished, Eddy and I went into the kitchen and lit the candle on the cake. Then we carried it into the dining room. Lexie turned off some of the lights, so it was dim, the light of the small candle glowing.

I looked around at all of us. The little kids all had smiles and wide eyes. Actually, Reese and Lexie did, too. I couldn't help but think of the lackluster birthdays we'd all had in the Compound. Everything to do with a celebration had been a task of making do with what we had.

I glanced over at Mom, who had tears in her eyes as Quinn squealed at the cake.

She had always tried so hard to make things special for us the past few years. I wondered if she was relieved to be out of that situation, and back in the world we'd all been used to. A world where anything we wanted was at our fingertips. A world where a birthday celebration meant a fancy cake and candles and presents.

Reese helped Quinn blow out the candle, then Gram got dessert plates while Els started cutting the cake.

Eddy, on the other hand, didn't seem particularly thrilled. He was smiling and laughing at the little kids, but it was different. Maybe because he'd never done without, had to make do like the rest of us had. The little ones would forget. Soon, they'd never know anything but this world, a world where they could have anything.

But Reese and Lexie would never forget what those years had been like. And neither would I.

Els set a plate of cake in front of me. The layers were made of red velvet, and the filling was white. I took a bite. Cream cheese. I shut my eyes and nearly moaned. "Wow." Then I took another bite, and another.

I smiled as I watched the members of my family eat their cake. Except for Quinn, who wore more than he ate. Maybe we wouldn't forget, but celebrations, especially ones that included cake like this, would certainly help.

After we'd finished, Quinn opened the rest of his presents. Then I offered to give the cake-covered birthday boy a bath, after which I ended up reading stories to him and Cara and Lucas until they all fell asleep. They'd stayed up later than usual, after nine by the time the last one fell asleep, and the house was quiet.

I was all sticky from Quinn, so I took a shower and watched some television. But I couldn't stop thinking about the whole evening, how nice it had been to have everyone get along. It made me reevaluate things, realize that I needed to mend whatever rift there was between

Lexie and Eddy. Maybe the way to do that was to let him know I hadn't chosen her over him.

So even though it was almost eleven, I went and knocked on his door, lightly in case he was asleep. He didn't answer, but I really didn't want to wait until morning, so I knocked again. Then I turned the knob and pushed the door open. "Eddy?"

The small light was on by his bed, so the room was dim. His bed was made, perfectly empty. Figuring he was downstairs watching television, I turned to go. But then I noticed the small garbage can by the door, and what lay on top. I picked it up. The Mariners shirt he'd had on the day we went to the ball game. The one like mine.

I dropped it back in the garbage and started to leave, when I heard voices. The yard light shone in the door that opened to the balcony, and the curtain moved with the breeze. I stepped toward the open door. One voice was Eddy's, but I wasn't sure about the other. I tiptoed over to the open door. No one was on the balcony, so I stepped out the door, crouching so I wouldn't be seen.

Through the bars on the balcony, I peered down at the pool area. Eddy's head was just visible above the back of a chaise lounge. And someone sat next to him in another one. I couldn't tell who it was. One of the guards maybe?

Eddy said, "I'm glad they're back, don't get me wrong. Thinking they were all dead . . . that was the worst day ever."

The other person spoke: "This must be hard to get used to."

Tony? Tony was there, in our yard?

I grabbed a hold of one of the metal bars and squeezed. How could Eddy have let him in?

Eddy said, "Some days it all just seems so frickin' weird. I've got my sisters back, only they're different than they used to be. And the little kids. They're cute and all, but, man. I feel like I'm the babysitter that they hate. I'm getting to know them, but it takes awhile. And Eli . . ."

I froze and held my breath. My heart pounded as I waited for him to go on.

"Sometimes he's normal. We get along and do stuff. And then other times, he's, like, my project. Like he's this foreigner that I am forced to teach American ways." He breathed out. "I find myself just feeling sorry for him. And some days, to be honest, all that pity feels like work."

I realized I was clutching the bar so hard I'd lost feeling in my hand. I let go and turned around to head back into Eddy's room. I didn't want to hear anymore. I didn't need, or want, Eddy to feel sorry for me.

But then Tony said, "So you up for it? Should we go?" Eddy said, "Yeah, let's do it."

I turned back as they headed around the side of the house. I quickly ran out Eddy's door and back to my own room, and over to the windows that looked out on the woods at the edge of the property. As I watched, they

walked over to the wooded area, climbed over the fence, and disappeared.

My heart was pounding. Should I tell someone?

I sank down on the edge of my bed.

Eddy had left with someone we knew nothing about. We didn't know Tony's last name or where he lived. Eddy could be in danger.

I picked up the phone on the bedside table, and my finger hovered over the button that went directly to the guardhouse. I would call William, who worked the night shift, and tell him to go after Eddy.

But then I set the phone back down.

The reason I wanted William to go after Eddy wasn't to keep him safe. It was to get him back. To keep him away from Tony.

The truth was I wasn't worried about my brother; I was jealous that he'd rather be with someone other than me.

While I was hard to be with, *worł* as he put it, apparently Tony wasn't. And if my own brother would rather be with someone he'd just met, then . . .

. . . that was one more thing in my life that was messed up.

Eddy not only told a stranger who we were, he brought that stranger to our house. And then he snuck out.

My hands clenched into fists.

After all his lecturing to Lexie about not making Mom upset, here he was, doing something that would send Mom over the edge.

My heart pounded. Two could play at that game.

I went over to my desk and picked up my cell phone. I hit #5 on my speed dial.

"EJ?" Verity sounded sleepy.

"Yeah," I said. "Sorry to wake you, but I wanted to ask . . . can you meet me sometime next week?" I swallowed, and then gathered up the nerve to add, "There's something I need to tell you."