

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

VERITY AND I TALKED, AND MADE PLANS TO MEET THE next week. I would've liked to choose somewhere nice, where we could get coffee or dessert, maybe go for a walk; something to make it seem like a real date.

But it would be too hard to get out of the house.

Going back to the Progeria Institute was probably the only place I could talk my mom into letting me go on my own. Even then, I'd probably have to come up with a pretty decent lie.

But when I woke up the morning after we talked, I regretted calling Verity.

I lay there, looking up at the ceiling.

Eddy may have been ready to tell someone who we were, but I wasn't ready to trust anyone like that. No way. And after sleeping on what I'd heard Eddy say about me, I woke up feeling more reasonable about it.

His wanting to hang out with Tony actually made sense.

All I did was worry about things: my sisters, my mom, the little ones. I'd even told Eddy about some of my stranger, more paranoid worries, like the doomsday prepper people following us.

And Phil. Eddy was probably tired of my saying bad things about Phil and our dad.

When it came down to it, I was like an old lady with my constant worrying; being ultra-cautious about everything. Someone like that is no fun to be with.

Not only that, I didn't even have the confidence to choose my own clothes, instead I copied whatever he had.

With a house full of children, Eddy was already reminded every day of how his life had changed. It wasn't fair for me to expect him to sit around waiting for me to catch up to him. Be his equal again. Be normal.

Furthermore, why would he want to?

I got up, changed into running gear, and started on the treadmill.

Maybe Eddy felt like I did, that it was never going to happen.

So, of course, Eddy would see Tony as a better choice than me.

But being reasonable about it didn't make me any less envious. Or curious.

As I ran, I looked out the window at the section of fence they'd climbed over, and the woods where they had disappeared.

Where did they go?

Did they meet up with anyone? Girls maybe?

And how long had they been sneaking out? Maybe Tony had been coming over before then, maybe this hadn't been the first time.

I pushed the button to increase the speed.

The part that made me feel the worst was that Eddy hadn't told me about Tony. He hadn't told me about where they went or what they did.

That part felt like betrayal. Because he was leaving me out.

I finished my run and then went down and poured a bowl of cereal. Sunshine poured in the windows, so I took my breakfast outside. Cocoa ran over to me, wagging her tail.

"Hold on, let me finish."

A FedEx truck pulled up to the front. Joe went out the small door in the gate and came back with a package, which he took into the guardhouse with him.

I finished my cereal and set the bowl on the ground so Cocoa could drink up the leftover milk. Then I walked over to the guardhouse.

Joe was standing there talking to Sam. They both greeted me, and I said, "I can take the package in."

Joe glanced at Sam.

"What?" I asked. I was close enough to see the mailing label with Terese's first name on it, along with Gram's grandmother's maiden name, like we used for all the online shopping. I frowned. Usually Gram's first name was on all the packages, just as an extra precaution.

Sam said, "We kind of have special instructions."

I frowned. "From who?"
Joe pointed at the label. "Your sister. We're supposed to call her when she gets a package from there, and then she comes and gets it."

I glanced at the label again, searching for the return address.

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What the hell?

I picked up the package. "I'll take it to her."

Joe started to protest, but I added, "I promise, I'll tell her you two told me not to." The package wasn't that heavy, a few pounds maybe, and made a shuffling sound when I shook it.

I grabbed my cereal bowl and went into the house.

Even though it was after nine, no one but Gram and Els were in the kitchen, so I set my bowl in the sink and took the box upstairs. I knocked on Reese's door.

She groaned. "I'm sleeping!"

I opened the door and walked in.

She was facedown under the covers, her head covered with a pillow, one dark braid spilling over the side of the bed. Clementine was lying on Reese's back, purring. "Go away." Her voice was muffled.

I set the package on her computer desk. "You've got mail."

Her head shot up, eyes wide. Then they narrowed as she saw the box. Reese shoved the covers aside and the cat went flying with a hiss as my sister leaped out of bed, grabbing for the box just as I snatched it up, holding it over my head.

"Give it to me!" Reese jumped up, flailing with her arms as she tried to grab the box away.

I straightened my arms, keeping the package well out of her reach as she got more and more irritated. Her chin crumpled and she started to cry.

When she saw that getting the box was hopeless, she threw a fist into my stomach.

"Oof!" I doubled over and clutched my stomach, dropping the box.

She grabbed it and ran over to her bed, climbing back in.

When I finally got my breath back, I went and sat on the edge of her bed. "That wasn't nice," I said.

"You shouldn't have taken my package."

"What's in it?" I asked, deciding a calm and even voice would be the best way to find out what she was hiding.

She sniffed. "You'll tell Mom."

"I promise I won't. You know it's only a matter of time before she finds out anyway. It's pretty hard to keep a secret around here."

Reese shook her head. "You keep secrets."

"No, I—"

"Yes, you do! You and Lexie and Eddy all have secrets." She wiped her eyes. "I just—"

"You what?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said.

"Reese, just show me what's in the box. I won't tell anyone. Then we can have a secret together."

She didn't look completely sold on the idea, but she

went over to the desk and got a pair of scissors and cut into the tape. When she unfolded the top of the box, I saw a familiar brown label.

"M&M's?"

Reese turned the box upside down, dumping out several one-pound bags of the candy. She tossed the box beside them. "There."

I laughed, but then quickly stopped when I saw the serious look on her face. "Why M&M's?"

Her eyes filled with tears once more, and I put a hand out to her. She came and put her arms around my neck and cried, snuffing into my shoulder.

After a little bit, when she seemed like she was calming down, I asked, "Reese? What is it?"

She shuddered and then stepped back. She picked up a bag of M&M's. "Remember in the Compound?"

I nodded. We'd all had a supply of our own favorite treat. "Those were your treat."

"I ran out."

I smiled. "We all kind of ran out." I remembered my own stash of Snickers, and how, after the years went by, each one I unwrapped looked worse and worse, until I finally stopped unwrapping them and simply kept them under my bed. Maybe it made me feel better to know I still had a small piece of the old world there. An inedible piece, but still.

"No," said Reese. "I ran out two years after we went down there."

"How?"

"I was sad. And they made me feel better. Remember my store?"

I nodded. For a while in the Compound, before the little ones came along, the yellow room had been Reese's playroom. She had a cash register and shelves and play money. I'd only seen it once, when I'd been on one of Dad's early tours of the Compound. I wouldn't know for certain, because I isolated myself very early on, but I could guess she spent a lot of time playing there.

"I put the candy on the shelves. And sometimes Dad would come and give me real money for them. And it made me feel . . . normal. Like we were outside and I was just playing. A normal kid. So then I made Mom and Lexie come to my store, too. But I never . . . I never thought I might run out." She looked at me.

I knew what she was thinking. Why would anything run out when we'd always had everything we wanted?

She swallowed. "So I kept selling them, making Mom and Dad and Lexie play in my store, and I kept eating them, too, and . . . then one day they were gone."

"When was this?" I asked.

She ignored my question. "I looked everywhere. I couldn't believe that I'd used them all up. I knew Dad had to have more, somewhere."

I set a hand on her arm and squeezed. "But he didn't." She shook her head and a few tears slid down her cheek. "I didn't know what to do. Nothing else was like them and . . ." She shrugged.

"When was this?" I was beginning to put a timeline

together in my head, trying to remember when Reese had become . . . different from who she'd always been.

She didn't answer my question. Instead, she said, "So I went looking for something else. Something that made me feel happy on the outside."

I froze. "*Mary Poppins*." When Reese ran out of her favorite candy, the one thing she had left from the outside world that made her feel normal, she reached for another. And that was when she started watching *Mary Poppins* nonstop. And when she—

"That's when I started talking like I was British. I wanted to be one of those kids, I wanted to live with Mary Poppins."

I looked over at her. "I always wondered why."

She picked up a bag of M&M's and let them drop on the bed. "See? I'm living proof that candy *is* bad for you." She smiled a little.

I hugged her. "How long have you been stockpiling?" She sat back and looked down. "Awhile." Then she knelt on the floor beside her bed and lifted up the bed skirt.

I got down beside her.

Boxes packed the entire space beneath her bed. All the same, all obviously from Sugarworld, LLC. "Holy crap," I said. "Do you even eat any?"

She shook her head. "That's the weird part. I don't even want to. I just want to know that they're there." She watched for a minute. "I'm a freak."

"No," I said, and put my arm around her. "Not at all. This is . . . this is about the most normal thing I've seen in a while. But . . ."

"What?"

"I think you have enough now. And if you need more, just tell me. I'll go to Costco or something. Okay?"

She nodded and wiped her eyes, then took a deep breath and smiled. "It's better than talking in an English accent, right?"

I nodded. "Candy is fine by me." Then I picked up a bag and opened it, watching for her reaction. She didn't really seem to care. It was more about having some at her disposal.

So I poured a few into my hand and held them out. She made a face and simply watched as I ate them, then stuffed the bag back into the box along with all the others.

She closed the box and shoved it under her bed. Then she sat back on her heels and tilted her head as she looked at me. "You won't tell anyone, right?"

I rubbed the top of her head, messing up her hair. "Nope. Just between us." I stood up and held out my arms to her, then pulled her to her feet.

"Thanks."

I glanced around. "How have you kept anyone from seeing them? Doesn't Gram come and vacuum?"

Reese said, "I've been cleaning my own room."

Then I realized. "That's why you vacuum! Not to help out, but to keep people out of here."

She shrugged.

"You're too smart for your own good." I smiled and went out into the hallway, shutting the door behind me.

I'd been so worried about Reese. But it seemed like she'd found her own harmless, if slightly obsessive, way to deal with her leftover demons. I only wish the rest of us could be placated with several pounds of chocolate with a colorful candy shell.