

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I HAD QUITE A JOG FROM WHERE THE BUS LEFT ME OFF, SO by the time I climbed over the fence and snuck back into the house, I was wiped out. I managed to make it into the house and up to my room without anyone knowing I'd left. At least, I thought so.

When I woke in the morning, sun was streaming in my window and my clock read ten after ten. I quickly threw on some sweats and grabbed Eddy's hoodie and shoes I'd worn the night before. He wasn't in his room, luckily, and I threw them in his closet. He tended to be a bit messy, so he probably wouldn't notice. I wondered whether Tony would tell him about our outing.

Maybe he already had.

I heard the little kids yelling and laughing in the playroom, but I passed by and headed for the kitchen. Eddy and Lexie were both there, eating strawberries. I told Eddy, "You look better."

He said, "I feel better."

I poured myself a cup of coffee.

Lexie looked at me. "You slept late."

I shrugged. "Stayed up late reading."

Gram came in with a stack of mail, which she set on the counter. "For no one knowing where we live, we sure get a lot of junk mail."

I pulled the stack toward me and started leafing through one at a time. Every envelope and catalog was addressed to Gram, or at least Gram's real first name and her grandmother's maiden name.

"Junk." I tossed an envelope aside. "Junk." I tossed that one at Eddy's face. "Junk." I threw that one up in the air and it landed on the floor.

Gram narrowed her eyes at me. "Recycle those when you're finished picking them up." She left.

I was just about to toss the next envelope in the air when I saw the name *Yanakakis* on the front. I looked closer. Alexandra Yanakakis. I glanced at the return address. The information about Lexie's birth parents.

Eddy and Lexie had begun to argue about whether the little kids would enjoy going to a mall, so they didn't see me slip that envelope into my lap as I kept sorting the rest.

Eddy stood up and put the empty strawberry bowl by the sink. "Want to shoot some hoops?"

Happy for the invite, I nodded, probably a little too enthusiastically. "Yeah, after I eat something. I'll meet you out there."

"Cool." He went upstairs.

I lifted the envelope out of my lap. "Lex. It came."

"What came?"

I handed it to her. Her eyes widened as she read the return address. "This is it?"

I nodded. "Want me to open it?"

She shook her head. "No. I don't know if I'm ready."

"Okay. I'm here if you need me."

A corner of her mouth turned up. "I know. Thanks." Lexie stood. "I'm gonna go up to my room and open it." She lifted the envelope higher and squinted at it. "Maybe."

I put on some sneakers and went to join Eddy outside. We played one-on-one for a while, until we were both sweating and panting, and needed water. Back in the kitchen, Mom was talking to someone on the phone. She must have just been exercising because her face was red, her temples were sweaty, and her T-shirt was damp. "They're my properties to do with as I want. It's not the company's decision."

Eddy got two glasses out of the cupboard and handed one to me. I filled it with the sprayer in the sink and handed it to him. I'd just started to fill up the other one when Mom finally noticed us. She told the person on the other end, "We'll discuss this later." She hung up and smiled at us. "How was your game?"

"I won," I said.

Eddy smacked me in the chest. "Did not."

"Really?" I aimed the sprayer at him.

He held up a palm at me. "You wouldn't dare."

I sprayed at him, just enough to get his shirt a bit wet. "You did not just do that." He stepped toward me and I sprayed him more, laughing as he tried to get the sprayer from me.

"Boys!" Mom looked like she was trying not to laugh as she admonished us. "Els will have a fit if you get the kitchen all wet."

"Sorry," I said. Then I spritzed her in the face. "Oops." She sputtered and blinked, then started to laugh. "Eli!" She widened her eyes at Eddy. "Are you going to let him get away with that?"

Eddy grabbed my arm and tried to twist the sprayer around at my face. I was laughing so hard I couldn't hold on to it, and he turned it on, soaking my shirt. I yelled, "Mom! Help!"

"Eddy!" she said. "Give me the stupid thing." Eddy handed it to her.

"This is ridiculous." Then, laughing, she took aim and let both of us have it full blast, as we yelled and tried to block the spray with our hands.

"Clear!" Gram stepped in the kitchen.

Mom stopped spraying and let her arm drop to her side.

"The floor is soaked." Gram crossed her arms and glared at all of us.

Mom pointed at us. "They started it."

Eddy and I looked at each other and grinned. "Right, Mom," he said. "Gram? Did you see either of us with the sprayer?"

Gram didn't look like she was going to believe anything that any of us had to say. "All I know is you'd better get this place dried before Els sees it."

Mom laughed as she put the sprayer back in the sink. She told us, "Get some towels. I'll help you clean up."

"I said, 'That's the least you can do since you started it.'"

She rolled her eyes at me.

Eddy came back with a stack of towels and the three of us got down on our hands and knees and started wiping up the water. Eddy stopped and looked at me. "That was fun. Like old times."

"Yeah." I grinned, glad that he noticed I could still be fun.

When we'd finished, Eddy took the towels to the laundry room. Mom was making some tea, so I asked her, "Who was on the phone?"

She said, "I want to sell the Colorado house."

Eddy had just returned. "Why?"

She didn't look at either of us. "I don't think we need all our properties. It's too hard for all of us to go anywhere. I think we should sell and think about getting new ones that no one knows about."

I guess I understood that logic. Fresh start and all. But still. "I'd like to see the Colorado house before you sell it. I mean, it's been so long."

Eddy said, "Me too."

Mom said, "It's so hard to travel with all the kids right now. I don't think I could deal with it."

Eddy looked at me. "What if just Eli and I went?" Mom started to shake her head, but I said, "Yeah, why not? There's staff there, right?" Staff paid nearly as well to be discreet as they were to be efficient caretakers.

Mom nodded.

"And we can take the jet," added Eddy. "It's not like we're unsupervised at any point."

Mom stopped wiping and sat back on her heels, looking at the two of us.

"Please, Mom? Since we're not doing school yet?"

She scratched her head. "I don't know. What if—"

"What if what?" asked Eddy. "No one can get into the place when we're there." He looked at me. "We'll just go for a couple days, right?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Just to see the place again."

Mom sighed. "I suppose."

Eddy grinned.

I went upstairs to get out of my wet clothes and shower. As I headed toward my room, I walked past Lexie's. And I heard her crying.

I knocked. "Lex?"

"Go away." Her voice was muffled.

I twisted the knob and it turned, so I pushed open the door.

"I said go away!" Lexie was on her bed, clutching a pillow, her face and eyes red. "I don't want to talk."

I shut the door and stepped inside. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head and dropped her face into her pillow, sobbing.

I went and sat beside her, then set my hand on her back. She knew it was a long shot, which might not work. Softly, I said, "Hey. We'll find your birth parents some other way."

She croaked out a no, then pointed at her desk.

I went and sat in her swivel chair. Her computer was on, and a balled-up piece of paper lay near the keyboard. I opened it and smoothed it out until I could read the letter from the state adoption offices. I scanned it until I found what I needed. Lexie's birth mother's first name and occupation.

The first name was Laudine. "That's unique," I said. "We should be able to find her. What does she—" My gaze went to the next line. The one where the occupation was listed. The line held one word:

*Inmate.*