

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I GOT TO MY FEET.

"Where you going?" Eddy asked.

"Bathroom. I'll be right back." I started to leave, then turned back and told Eddy, "I think we should invite Lexie to go with us."

"Where?" asked Lexie.

Eddy slowly began to nod. "Yeah."

"The Colorado house," I said.

"Why are you going there? Does Mom know?" Lexie asked.

"Yeah." I nodded. "She's good with it. And it's just a visit." I didn't think it would help anything to tell her Mom was thinking about selling it.

Lexie said, "I'll go." She glanced at Eddy. "Wait. Are you sure you want me to go?"

"Yes," he said. "Maybe . . ."

"Maybe what?" I asked.

He offered up a half smile. "Maybe it'll help us get a fresh start. The three of us, I mean."

Lexie's eyes were still red from crying, but she smiled, too.

Eddy said, "Let's go tomorrow."

I frowned. That was when I was meeting up with Verity. But as I looked at my brother and sister, I knew I had to put them first. There was no way I could think about letting in someone else, starting a new relationship, until I had fixed the ones I already had.

I went to my room and picked up my phone.

Verity answered on the first ring. "Hey, EJ."

I wanted so much to tell her that wasn't my name. I wanted to spit out who I truly was, and everything else she needed to know. But I didn't. "Hi."

She said, "I'm really looking forward to tomorrow."

"Yeah, me too, um..." I took a deep breath. "Listen, that's why I called. I can't make it and—"

"Why am I not surprised?" She sighed. "Why did you even bother to set it up if you knew you weren't gonna make it?"

"But I planned to! Something just came up and I can't."

"What is it this time? Another paper? Something with your family?"

"You don't understand."

"No, I guess I don't. Care to fill me in?"

Filling her in would mean *letting* her in. And even though I thought I had been ready, I knew I wasn't. Especially after talking with Eddy and Lexie. Even though

Eddy had let Tony in without telling us, I felt like I owed it to my brother and sister to be in on the decision to tell Verity everything. Because it wasn't just me anymore. It wasn't that simple. So I said, "I will. I promise. Just not now." That sounded so lame.

"Oh, okay. Let me clear my schedule and we'll set a date for you to let me know all your deep dark secrets. How about that?" Her voice had a rough edge to it, and had gotten louder as she went on.

I couldn't blame her for being mad. Why would she even waste time on me? "I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Okay. Me too." The click of her disconnecting was loud in my ear. I just sat there, wondering if I should call her back. And I did. The call went straight to voice mail.

I didn't want to face Eddy and Lexie right away, so I turned on the television to something mindless for a while, and ended up dozing off. It was daylight when I woke up. I went into Eddy's room. He was in the shower, so I stared out the window until he came out with a towel around his waist.

"Hey," he said. "You never came back last night."

"I fell asleep," I said. "I just wanted to check and make sure you were okay with Lexie going. I know I kind of made it so you couldn't exactly say no..."

"Yeah, I am."

Was he being honest? "Really?"

Eddy sat down on the edge of his bed. "I know I haven't been the best brother since you guys came back.

Especially not to her. But when you showed me that stuff about her birth mother . . .” He trailed off.

“That was pretty bad.”

He nodded.

I said, “Even though she wouldn’t admit it in a million years, she needs us.”

Eddy said, “I do want to be there for her. I want her to know I’m her brother, too.”

“Cool.” I smiled. “I had one other idea.”

His eyebrows raised.

“You should ask Tony.”

“To go with us?”

“Yeah. I think he would be a good distraction for Lexie.”

He frowned. “I thought you didn’t like him?”

“I was jealous that you seemed to have more fun with him than me.”

Eddy started to say something, but I stopped him.

“And that’s fine. I haven’t been very fun. But I’m really gonna try to get back to normal. And I think this trip would be really fun with the four of us.”

“Okay,” said Eddy. “But what about Mom? She barely went along with Tony going to the baseball game with us.”

“She won’t be at the jet when we leave. She won’t ever have to know.”

Eddy grinned. “You are *bad*. Okay, I’ll call him.”

Eddy picked up his cell phone. “I’ll call YK first, make sure the jet is ready.”

“I’d better pack.” I went back to my room and threw

on some jeans and a black T-shirt, then quickly packed a bag. My phone beeped. A text from Eddy. We’d be leaving at twelve thirty. And Tony would be there.

My phone beeped again. The battery was low, so I opened my drawer to pull out the charger. The cord was tangled with something else that dropped on the floor. I leaned over to pick it up.

Phil’s flash drive.

I had time, so I inserted the flash drive into the computer and went down the list of files.

Hadn’t I seen it all before? I wasn’t looking for anything in particular. I just felt like looking. Then I noticed one of the files was named Barkley.

*Dr. Barkley from the Progeria Institute?*

The last time I looked at the file, the name would have meant nothing to me, because it was before I visited the Progeria Institute. The thought of which reminded me of Verity.

My heart beat faster. Would she ever speak to me again?

Probably not.

I clicked on the file. A bunch of lab reports popped up, all with *PDL Project* at the top of them. I didn’t really understand any of them, but I wanted to. I wanted to know what the PDL Project was. I looked up Dr. Barkley’s number and called.

A woman answered.

“Hello,” I said. “This is EJ Smith for Dr. Barkley. I’m with the YK internship program.”

“Is he expecting your call?” she asked, not unkindly.

"No," I admitted. "I just had a couple of questions."  
"Of course," she said. "I'm sorry he's not available right at this moment, but he should be able to return your call sometime before noon. Will that work for you?"

That would be cutting it close, with the jet leaving at twelve thirty. "Sure," I said. "Have him call my cell." I gave her the number, thanked her, and hung up.

I went to close my drawer, but saw the printout I'd made the day of Phil's disappearance. I started to read.

*Philip A. Whinkler...*

Philip A. What did the A stand for?

There was a knock on my door and Lexie opened it and walked in, wearing jeans and a white blouse with black ballet shoes. Her hair was back in a precise ponytail and she wore makeup. "So we're really going?"

"You look nice," I said.

She started to scowl, thinking I was messing with her, but then she smiled a little as she realized I was serious.

"You think?"

I nodded. "And, yep, we're going." I put the paper back in the drawer and shut it.

"Why did you ask me to go?"

I shrugged. "It seemed like it would be fun."

She rolled her eyes. "Since when do you and Eddy think I'm fun?"

"Since... you're turning over a new leaf and you're going to start being fun?"

She laughed. "When did you become an optimist?"

I smiled.

She said, "I thought it had something to do with what I found out. About my birth mother. I thought you were doing it because you felt sorry for me."

I shook my head. "I think we can all use a getaway."

"A *getaway*." Lexie seemed amused with the word.

"Yeah, maybe a getaway is exactly what I can use."

"Having some fun might get your mind off it."

Lexie slumped against the door. "It doesn't change the fact that I'm the product of a monster."

"Lex, come on." I stood up and went over to her.

"You've got to stop saying that. That woman only gave you life. Nothing else."

"I keep telling myself that, but it doesn't sound any better when you say it." She let out a deep breath, just as Eddy showed up. He put a hand on her shoulder. "You packed?"

"Almost," she said. "I'll go finish."

As soon as she left, Eddy closed the door. "Here's the plan. Tony's meeting us outside the airfield. We'll pick him up as we get there. But Lee is out there with the SUV and I don't think he'd keep that a secret from Mom. So you need to stay here and come a little later, with Lexie. I'll go now. I already called another driver from YK."

My phone beeped again, signaling the low battery.

"Oh crap." I'd gotten so involved in the flash drive that I still hadn't charged my phone. And I didn't want to miss Dr. Barkley's call. "I have to charge this up anyway."

"Cool. So we'll see you there?" Eddy glanced at his watch.

"Yep." He left. I was glad, because when Barkley called

back, I wanted to take that call in private. I didn't feel like answering a bunch of questions, which I knew would be inevitable when Eddy heard me asking Dr. Barkley about his research.

I was glad Eddy and Lexie were getting along. Despite Eddy blaming it on his own feelings, I knew the rift between them was mainly my fault. Lex and I were a lot closer than we'd ever been before we went in the Com-pound. Back then, she had been more of an enemy than a sister to the both of us. I could totally see how it was probably hard for Eddy to see such a change and not be part of it. So it was a relief to see him be completely different overnight, making an effort to get along.

I plugged my phone in. While I waited for it to charge all the way, I remembered the hot tub at the Colorado house and added swim shorts to my bag. At eleven thirty, I knew I couldn't wait any longer to leave. I had just unplugged the phone from the charger when it rang.

I answered.

Dr. Barkley sounded very happy to hear from me. "YK has renewed the funding! I don't know how much you had to do with that, but I wanted to thank you." He rattled on a bit more.

Finally, I managed to get a word in.

"Dr. Barkley, I wanted to ask you a few questions."

"Of course, anything."

"I have a question about the fire? The one that destroyed your research?"

He sounded a bit deflated. "Yes?"

I said, "You said you'd figured out what turned on aging."

"We'd isolated the compounds that caused aging, yes." I wasn't sure what I needed to ask, so I just kept going. "And you said that could lead to a potential cure for progeria?"

"Yes," he said. "Which is why it was so magnificent that Mr. Yanakakis came through so quickly to provide the funds to start over. He was such a great man. It's a shame you'll never have the chance to meet him."

I stifled a groan. I really wanted him to stop talking about my dad and the stupid funding. "Dr. Barkley. Could that discovery, the isolation of those compounds, have had any other . . . ramifications? Besides a cure?" I needed to know what else that discovery could have meant. What interest my dad might have had in it.

Dr. Barkley chuckled a bit. "Well, I suppose that . . ." He trailed off.

"Dr. Barkley? Were there other ramifications?"

"In the right hands."

"What?" I asked. "*In the right hands* . . . what?"

He breathed loudly into the phone. "In the right hands . . . that discovery could have led to the fountain of youth."

My hand tightened on the phone. Holy crap. So that discovery was not just a potential cure for a rare childhood disease. That discovery could have led to . . .

"Dr. Barkley, one more question. What was the date of the fire? Do you remember?"

He sighed. "Of course I remember. One of the worst days of my life." And he uttered the date with more than a trace of contempt. I thanked him and hung up. I worked at the date in my head. That date was . . .

That date was mere weeks before my ninth birthday. Mere weeks before that night when we entered the Compound. I quickly printed out all the pages from the PDL file. Again, it was just a bunch of research, but I checked the date. The date was before we went into the Compound.

My heart started pounding.

Was I looking at Barkley's research?

The research that had been destroyed by fire so many years before?

And if so, how did that research end up on a flash drive belonging to Phil?