

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

LEXIE CAME IN. "YOU READY?"

I stuffed my tablet computer into my bag, along with my phone, the flash drive, and the PDL printout. I was still reeling from the phone call and walked downstairs in a daze. I hugged everyone good-bye and was glad to get out in the fresh air. Lexie climbed in the front of the SUV and I got in the back.

I pulled out my tablet. But I didn't even know what to search for. No search engine was going to answer the questions I had.

Had Dad known about the research? When Barkley applied for funding, he could have mentioned his recent discovery. Did Dad have something to do with the fire? Did he steal Barkley's research and then start the fire as a cover-up?

No. Dad never got his hands dirty. I knew that. He

would have had someone else do it. Steal the research. Start the fire.

But why? To find a cure to progeria?

There had to be more to it. Dad could have just funded the research and had Barkley continue.

The discovery must have had more meaning than the cure alone.

I slipped the printed pages of the PDL file out of my bag and scanned them. Barkley had talked about the ramifications of the discovery I held in my hands. A cure for progeria, yes. But also the fountain of youth. What would Dad want with that?

I glanced at the top again.

PDL.

Fountain of youth.

PDL.

I gasped.

Ponce de León?

The fountain of youth. PDL had to stand for Ponce de León. It had to be.

The Ponce de León Project.

What had Dad been up to? Had he considered a vaccine to stop aging? If it was even possible, whoever did that would be the wealthiest person on the planet.

I leaned back against the seat and looked out the window.

Did any of it even matter? Dad was gone. Phil was gone. I couldn't believe anyone else had been involved. I could just give the contents of the PDL file back to Dr.

Barkley. Except, if they were the lost research from the fire, what would I tell him? How would I explain that an exceptional high school student/intern somehow happened to have research that had been destroyed years before?

I couldn't. It would have to be my secret to keep.

We reached the private airstrip and pulled up to the jet. Lexie said, "Will you take my bag on board?" She pointed at the office building. "I want to pee inside before we leave. I hate going on the plane."

I nodded and got out, grabbing both our bags. I climbed the short flight of steps onto the jet. Tony was standing in the back, near the small kitchen area.

Eddy was stretched out on a seat, already napping from the looks of it.

Tony waved at me. "Want some juice?"

I nodded. "Yeah, thanks." I sat down behind Eddy, in the second row of leather reclining seats, and stuffed Lexie's bag under the seat next to mine. I started to shove mine under when my phone and the flash drive fell out. I picked up the flash drive and noticed the tiny P.A.W. on the edge. Did Phil put his initials on everything? I shoved it into my pocket.

Tony handed me a glass and I downed half of it.

"Thanks," I said. "I was thirsty."

"Guess so," he said.

"Hey, if you could not mention our... outing the other night, I'd appreciate it."

He nodded. "I kinda figured you didn't want Eddy to know you were posing as him."

"Thanks." I took another drink and finished the juice. Phil's middle name was still bugging me. What was it anyway?

I got out my tablet, went online, and Googled Philip A. Whitaker. The connection was slow, probably because I was on board the jet. Finally it popped up. The A stood for Anthony.

As I started to read more, my vision grew blurry. I rubbed my eyes, but it got worse. I stood up, but immediately felt dizzy and collapsed back into the seat.

"Whoa." Was I sick?

Then Tony's face was inches from mine. "Elif?"

"I don't feel well," I said. My words were marbles in my mouth. "Something's wrong."

"You'll be fine." Tony smiled. "Just be a good boy and take a nap like your brother."

"What?" I tried to stand up, but I couldn't. My fingers fumbled and my tablet slid off my lap onto the seat next to me. The screen blurred, but I could still see Phil's name.

"Let me go," I said.

I struggled, tried to stand, tried to push him away. But my limbs wouldn't do anything I wanted them to.

Tony laughed. But then he stopped. "Do you know how painful this has been? To be nice to you all and pretend to be your little family friend? I'm so glad this is almost over."

What? What's almost over?

"I'll tell the pilot." I tried to stand up.

He simply pushed me back down and buckled my seat belt around me, cinching it tightly. "Just sit there and enjoy the ride."

He lowered his head so he could look out the window toward the office building. "And here comes your pretty sister."

I could no longer speak, but in my mind, I screamed at Lexie.

Ram!

Get help!

Do not get on this plane!

But then my sister stepped on board and smiled at Tony, who handed her a glass of juice.

Nooo!

She took a drink, and then noticed me.

Her smile faded as she saw me and then Eddy.

She said something to Tony.

And just as Tony reached for her, everything went black.