

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT

I SHOVED MY CHAIR BACK AND DROPPED MY HEAD BETWEEN my knees.

"Eli?" Eddy put a hand on my back.

I tried to breathe.

This can't be true. It can't. I have to be wrong.

Immortal jellyfish? The reversal of aging?

None of it was possible.

Despite the air conditioner, I was sweating, my shirt nearly soaked through. My jeans felt as if they weighed a ton, and something was poking my leg.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the flash drive I'd shoved in there earlier. I reached up and dropped it on the table.

Eddy asked, "You okay?"

I nodded. "Just a little light-headed."

Somewhere a door opened and shut, and then I heard footsteps.

"Good afternoon, all."

I sat up and barely missed braining myself on the edge of the table.

"Tony." Lexie stood up. "You *are* here."

Tony wore a blue rash guard and flowered swim trunks. He walked right past Lexie, slid out a chair, and sat down. "Family meeting?" he asked. He reached for the platter of sliced mango and papaya at the center of the table, then took a plate from the stack of china next to it and filled it.

Eddy watched him with narrowed eyes. "Did you drug us?"

Tony struck a forkful in his mouth and slowly chewed, then swallowed. He shrugged. "Figured it would be easier than trying to fly the jet plus keep you all in line."

"You were the pilot?" Lexie frowned. "You work for my dad?" She glared at him. "But you let me think . . ."

Tony looked at her. "Let you think what?" Then he grinned. "Flattering, for sure, but you're not my type, sweetie."

"Watch how you talk to my children," snapped Dad.

"Sorry, Rex." Tony held up both his hands, palms toward Dad. "I'm just used to playing the role."

"What role?" I turned to Dad. "*What role?*"

Tony sighed. "Seriously, kid. The role of buddy and protector to all of you. Get in good, make you trust me, then get you on a plane." He looked Dad's way. "I did finish about a month earlier than you expected."

Dad nodded. "Yes, you did. I appreciate that."

"Bonus time, Boss?" Tony smiled.

Eddy shoved a thumb in Tony's direction and asked Dad, "He was part of a plan?"

"From the get-go," I said. "He followed us everywhere we went." I turned to Dad. "Didn't he?"

He nodded.

Tony started talking with his mouth full. "I had a few things go my way. Like you leaving your little brother alone in the bathroom. Tsk-tsk-tsk."

My hands turned into fists. My first instinct, to neither like nor trust Tony, had been right. I reached out and picked up the flash drive, turning it over and over in my hand.

Lexie asked Dad, "How could you send someone like that into our life? We could've had him in our *house*?"

Dad and Tony exchanged a quick glance, then Tony said, "I've been in your house."

Was he talking about the nights at the mansion when Eddy snuck out with him? When I snuck out with him? But we hadn't been inside.

Eddy said, "What are you talking about?"

Obviously, Eddy hadn't taken him inside either. So—I froze and looked at the flash drive in my palm. The initials on it.

P.A.W.

Philip A. Whitaker.

Phil's middle name.

Anthony.

My heart dropped.

I set it on the table and stood up. My heart pounded and my hands trembled as they turned into fists. I strode over to Tony. "Dad had no problem sending him into our lives, because he was already there."

Tony stood up, so we were chest to chest. He said, "Take it easy."

My face mere inches from his, I repeated, "*He was already there. Had been for years.*"

Eddy asked, "What are you talking about?"

"This is not some teenager named Tony." I swallowed. "He's a middle-aged douche bag named Phil."

And I punched him in the face as hard as I could.