

# ITWENTY-NINE

TONY WENT DOWN, HITTING A CHAIR ON HIS WAY, AND LAY there on the floor, holding his nose and swearing.

Dad was on his feet. "Eh! That wasn't necessary."

"Really?" I yelled. "I've wanted to do that since I was five years old!"

Lexie was standing by Tony, not helping him, just watching him. Eddy stood up and pulled on my shoulder, yanking me around to face him. "What is wrong with you?"

"Absolutely nothing." I looked at Dad. "It took me awhile. I even knew his whole name. Philip Anthony Whitaker. Clever to use *Tony*."

Eddy fell back down into his chair. "Somebody seriously needs to tell me what's going on."

"The reverse-aging process works," Dad said matter-of-factly. "I used it on Phil so he could go back and get you all here."

Lexie grabbed on to the table. "What?" She pointed at Tony. "That's Philip?" She made a face of disgust, then covered her mouth. She walked over to the sectional, where she perched on the edge of an arm, eyes wide.

Eddy sat there, shaking his head, as Dad put some ice in a towel and handed it to Tony. "Probably should head over to the infirmary and get that X-rayed." He helped Tony get to his feet. Tony glared at me as he left.

I said, "I want to see the rest of this place. Now."

Dad smiled. "Of course. You each have your own room and—"

"No!" I was so frustrated I couldn't help yelling. But I knew it wouldn't help, so I tried to sound calmer as I added, "I meant the rest of the island."

Dad said, "How about a nice meal first? Then we can—"

"I don't want to eat." I paused, giving myself another moment to chill out. "I couldn't eat right now if I tried. I want to see where we are. What this place is."

Eddy said, "I do, too."

"Not me," Lexie called from across the room. "I'm staying here."

Dad sighed. "Fine. I'll give you the tour. But then we're sitting down to a nice meal."

He led us past the fireplace and out a different door from the one we'd snuck in. Right outside the house was a circular veranda of brick, accented with tropical flowers and plants, and a large fountain in the middle. A bronze sculpture of a man kneeling, resembling the one on the

wall, sat next to it, creating the illusion that the man was actually reaching into the fountain.

A few drops from the spray landed on my arm as we passed. I asked, "Is that Ponce de León?"

"Yes," said Dad. "He's sort of our mascot around here."

"The fountain of youth," mused Eddy. "So you really created it?" He sounded impressed rather than disgusted, which was how I was feeling about it.

"Yes, we did," Dad answered.

I asked, "Who's we?"

Dad headed past the fountain and onto a path made of shells that led into an area of thick bamboo. "I always thought money could get people to do anything. But to some, there is something even more valuable than wealth."

Eddy asked, "Happiness?"

Dad kind of laughed. "Actually, no. The people I needed for this project, the *brains* I needed for this project, weren't about to be swayed by money. They were too busy, too focused on research to even entertain a proposal based solely on wealth. Their goals were not based on what they could obtain in their lifetime. Their goals were based on what they could *discover*."

"Time," I said. "You offered them time."

Dad smiled and clapped me on the back. "You got it. They laughed when the offer was for millions. But when I assured them they could get back their youth, get another lifetime—and unlimited funding with which to work on their discoveries—well . . . let's say I didn't have many say no. Can you imagine if Einstein could have

been young again, lived fifty more years? What he might have discovered?"

I let that sink in a moment, then asked, "But what about their families?"

"The offer was only extended to scientists who had devoted their lives to their research, never had time for families, or had gotten so old that they had no family left to speak of, only themselves to think about. Most of them were living in homes for the aged, just waiting until their time ran out. My people went all over the world to find them: Prague, Berlin, London . . . I'm still recruiting."

That jogged something in my brain—*old-age homes, London, BBC News*. That day in Reese's room. The missing scientists . . . they had come to Dad's island.

Eddy asked, "What did they have to do in return?"

The shell path ended at a tall fence formed of thick logs covered with dark green vines. Dad stopped there and turned to face us. "In return?" He shrugged. "They would have to leave everything and devote half their time to my aging research."

I said, "I don't see how anybody would do that. Give everything up."

Dad smiled. "You'd be surprised." He reached over and opened a door in the fence. "See for yourself."

I stepped through the door and uttered a shaky "Holy crap."

I stepped onto a vast, seemingly endless cobblestone plaza that webbed out into narrow paths that ended in large, windowless metal buildings. I counted six of them,

each the size of a football field. A few palm trees and wooden benches dotted the area, but they didn't make the place look anything other than scientific and industrial. They gave me the feeling that, in order to grow a society, the jungle needed to be razed. Those lonely trees were all that remained.

Several men and women of varying ethnicities, all in white lab coats, walked quickly between the buildings, or were paired off, standing side by side with heads down in what looked like serious discussions.

Eddy joined me and whistled. "Whoa."

Dad came up behind us and set a hand on my shoulder. I turned and saw he had done the same to Eddy.

"Boys, this is your legacy, too. I did this for all of us."

"The largest software company in the world wasn't enough?" I asked. Eddy glared at me, but I ignored him.

"Seriously. I think the world's reaction to watching their grandpa turn into a teenager is going to be slightly different from finding out they can get faster Internet." I paused. "Don't you think?"

Dad said, "Exactly why we're working so hard. Can you imagine if man had gone from chisel and stone directly to a wireless tablet? They couldn't have handled it. They wouldn't have believed. They would have thought it was sorcery or something else . . . something inherently evil."

He took a breath. "It's the curse of the discoverers through history, the nonbelief that surrounds them. Look at Galileo. He believed the earth revolved around the sun."

Eddy said, "The earth does revolve around the sun."  
Dad held up a hand. "Of course it does. But the Inquisition could not accept an alternative to the pervasive belief that the sun rotated around the earth. They forced Galileo to recant and he spent the rest of his life under house arrest."

"But he was right," I said.

Dad nodded. "*But* his theory wasn't accepted until about a hundred years later. This is exactly why discovery happens in stages. It *must*. Man needs time to adjust and accept. Which is why I intend for the world to get this discovery in stages."

Eddy asked, "What stages?" He pointed across the plaza at one of the men who looked all of about twenty-five. "How old is he?"

Dad said, "Actual age? About seventy-five."

A chill ran up my spine. "That doesn't sound like stages to me."

"Exactly," said Dad. "The public could never adjust if we went directly to the reversal of age. So first we're going to arrest age. Show people we can stop the symptoms of age that debilitate them. Cure the diseases of age. Progeria, for one. Alzheimer's, for another. And then, slowly, we'll introduce them to the concept of curing age. That everyone can be young again. That they never have to grow old. And by then, once they've accepted that, they'll be ready to hear more. In fact, they won't be satisfied until they hear more. They will *expect* to hear more." He smiled. "And I won't be the one to disappoint them."

"Is it about the money?" I asked. "Is that all this is for?"

Dad laughed. "I have more money than I could ever spend." He waved a hand at us. "I have more money than *you* could ever spend." When he spoke, his voice was much quieter. "No, it's not about the money."

"It's proving you can do it. Just like the Compound." Goose bumps covered my arms.

Eddy looked confused. As he should.

He had no idea what Dad had said to me in the Compound, that it had all been a challenge, to see what he could do. His testing us to see how far we would go to survive. And that feeling of powerlessness that overcame me when I found out.

Eddy said, "I don't get what's so bad. I mean, think of all the people who won't have to go through old age." He looked at me. "Maybe we won't have to."

Dad put an arm around Eddy. "Exactly, son. It's a good thing we're doing here."

Was it a good thing? To want to control something as natural as aging?

I understood wanting to cure diseases; those kids with progeria deserved a cure. I even understood, maybe, putting a stop to age-related ailments or discovering how to smooth wrinkles without plastic surgery.

But to actually conquer aging itself?

Wasn't that . . . playing God?

My hands started to tremble and my heart beat faster. Nothing had changed.

My father hadn't changed.

If anything, he was worse. Because, except for the people on this island, no one knew he was alive. No one knew what he had done. What he *was* doing.

And no one knew he had us.

Once again, I was powerless.

And, once again, I had to stop him.

So, once again, I was going to try.

"I want to see the labs," I said. "I want to see how it works." Because finding out how it worked would be the only way to figure out a way to put a stop to it. To put a stop to him.

Dad held his hand out to the left. "This way. Follow me."