

CHAPTER THIRTY

UNDER THE HOT SUN, DAD LED US TO A BUILDING DIRECTLY across from where we came through the fence. Double glass doors, so large you could drive a truck through them, opened automatically and we walked in. They closed behind us with a long, quiet *shh*, and I felt a chill on my sweaty skin from the temperature, easily twenty degrees cooler than outside.

Eddy rubbed his arms, which were covered with goose bumps, just like mine. "I wondered how everyone could wear those lab coats and not be dying from the heat."

Dad said, "We keep it a pretty steady sixty-five in here." He walked straight ahead down a long hallway of industrial-tiled floors. We passed several closed doors and my breaths became short and shallow.

We reached a silver door at the end of the hallway and I shivered, less from the cold than from the memory of

another silver door. Dad punched a code into a keypad and the door swung open. Dad looked at me and frowned. "You all right?"

I couldn't speak.

He glanced at the door and then back at me. He grasped my arm and his lips turned up in the kindest expression I'd seen on him in years. "It's okay, son. This one is only locked from out here. You can get out anytime you want." He motioned to Eddy, who walked through the doorway. Dad held out his arm and I shook my head. "You first," I said.

He shrugged. "Okay." He walked through.

I followed, ever so slowly.

We walked down another hallway and into a white room. Clear plastic curtains hung down across the entire space and Dad pushed them aside and stepped through. Eddy was next, and I brought up the rear.

The first thing I noticed was something that looked like a large rolling oven with a black half on the left and a white half on the right. The left side bore a large dial in the middle and two small yellow handles beneath it. The right side had a dial on top with a metal tube the size of my arm snaking out of it. The bottom half of the white side contained a glass door, making that side of the contraption resemble a mini-fridge.

"What is that thing?" asked Eddy.

"A particle delivery system." Dad walked over to it and picked something off the top. He turned around and held it up.

The device looked something like a gun. No, not a gun. It looked like a ray gun, like a phaser from the original *Star Trek* series.

"What is *that*?" I asked.

Dad smiled. "A gene gun. It's loaded with genetic information. And this is how we inject the cells and cause the differentiation. How we change from one type of cell to another, reverting the cells to a younger stage in development.

"Like the jellyfish," I said.

He nodded.

"You mean that's how you did it?" I asked. "How you . . . *de-aged* Phil?"

"De-aged?" Dad laughed. "I like that. That's exactly what we did."

I looked at the ovenlike thing. "You invented that?" Dad shook his head. "Oh, heavens, no. They've been using gene guns for years on plants. But I found that for our purposes, it didn't quite work the way we wanted." He shook the gun a bit. "So I came up with this prototype."

"How does it work?" I asked.

Dad said, "Just like you'd expect." He held the gun to his bicep. "Pow."

Eddy asked, "Does it hurt? I mean, did the scientists . . . did Phil . . ."

"Feel pain?" asked Dad.

Eddy nodded as I cringed.

"Some discomfort at first." Dad shrugged a bit. "But he

was sedated, of course, so when the process was complete, he barely remembered any of it."

I asked, "He just woke up and was younger?"

Dad nodded. "He was the same person, just physically *de-aged*, as you put it so eloquently."

"Wow," said Eddy. "That's cool."

I glared at him. Cool? Seriously? And then I reminded myself that Eddy hadn't been in the Compound. He hadn't experienced what Dad was capable of. To him, all of the stuff in that room probably was . . . cool.

Unable to watch Eddy fawn over our father, I turned around.

At the far end of the room stood a large metal door with a latch that seemed to lock from the other side. I didn't want to know what lay inside. My gaze went to a bank of shelves along the wall. On one of them sat a small black box, almost like a remote. It looked so familiar. Where had I seen something like that before?

"Ellie?"

I jumped at Dad's voice and quickly turned around. "What?"

"You look pale," he said. "When did you last eat?"

"Breakfast. Right before I was kidnapped."

Dad rolled his eyes slightly. "Well, let's go eat. There's plenty of time to see more."

I couldn't wait to leave. I'd seen what I needed to see. I was first out of the plastic curtain, then the silver door, and first to get back outside, happy to be back in the sun

and heat, even if I was sweating to death. I quietly followed Dad and Eddy back to the house, as they chattered the entire way. Eddy asked, "Did you consider taking a few years off yourself?"

Dad hesitated a moment. Was he searching for an answer? But then he sounded very sure of himself when he said, "No. I have a family. It wouldn't do to be younger than my kids."

Strange, but that seemed like the most rational thing to come out of his mouth in the past hour. Which made me question whether it was actually the truth.

Back at the house, Lexie was at the dining-room table, eating slices of fresh mango. My stomach growled. I sat in the chair next to her and put several slices of mango on a plate. Then I picked up a fork, stuck it in a slice of mango, and popped it in my mouth. I closed my eyes and groaned. "That is great mango."

Dad sat back down. "We grow our own here."

My eyes snapped open and I finished chewing and swallowed. I realized I needed to know more than just what lay on the island. I needed to know about the island itself. "Where is here, exactly?"

He rattled off a latitude and longitude that lay somewhere south and west of the Hawaiian chain.

He had poured himself a drink and seemed really relaxed, so I decided to keep him talking, spilling information that might help me later.

"Why bring us here?" I asked.

Dad smiled. "That was always my plan. Bring my family here. Start over."

My face grew hot and I couldn't help saying, "We have started over." I pointed my fork at him. "Without you."

"Eli," said Eddy. "Our family has a chance to be together again."

I threw my fork down on the plate and stood up. "Are you serious? You think we can just pretend none of this happened? Pretend that none of the last six years have happened?"

Eddy frowned. "We're family. Family sticks together. Being together should be all that matters."

Dad shook his head at Eddy. "It's okay. He needs time."

"Time for what?" I asked.

"To adjust," he said. "To the island. To me, perhaps." Dad stood up. "The lab I showed you was just part of the island. It's a beautiful place. You don't ever have to see the labs again if you don't want to."

"I don't want to," I said. "I want to go home."

Dad said, "It's nearly evening. That can't happen before tomorrow."

"Fine." I finished eating my mango and pulled my shirt collar away from my neck. I reeked. "Any chance I can get a shower? Change maybe?"

Dad nodded and stood. "Follow me." He called over to Lexie. "Want to see your room?"

The three of us followed him down a wide hallway, lit by wall sconces. Halfway down lay an open stairway,

and we climbed up to the second floor and entered a hallway identical to the one on the first floor. Dad stopped at the second door on the right. "Eli, this is your room." He paused. "Unless the two of you want to share a room?"

Eddy shot me a look. Obviously he didn't want to share.

He smiled. "It is good to see you both together again."

My stomach churned. He could have had us together anytime in the past six years. If he had wanted. Instead . . .

He had kept us apart. Let each of us think the other was dead. Let *me* live with the guilt for all those years, the guilt of me thinking I had been responsible for Eddy's death.

I went into the room, locking the door behind me. I closed my eyes and leaned back against the door.

I shut them out.

My father, my brother, my sister.

I needed to be alone.

I took a couple of deep breaths, trying to relax, trying to adjust to the past few hours and all the truths, however horrible, that had come to light.

Dad was alive. Phil was alive. Only he was Tony, because my father had figured out how to reverse aging.

And I was on an island. Somewhere in the middle of nowhere.

But the worst truth of all?

I was back under his control.

And Eddy seemed completely enamored with him, hanging on every word. Stopping my father would be next to impossible on my own. I only hoped I could convince Eddy that our father was not to be trusted.