

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I LOWERED MY ARM AND TURNED TO WALK BACK, MY STEPS fast and light on the sand.

"Wait!" he yelled. "Kid! Hold on! Wait a sec." He jogged onto the beach toward me.

Wondering how good an idea it was, I slowed, then turned around and took a strong stance, ready to fight him off.

He stopped in front of me and held his hands out toward me. "No worries. I won't try to retaliate." He gestured toward the white bandage on his nose. His eyes were both bruised, and would probably get worse before they got better.

"I'm not sorry," I said. "You deserved it."

He shrugged. "Probably. Depends on whose side you're on."

I frowned. "You're admitting there are sides?"

"Aren't there?" He tilted his head slightly.

I nodded. "I think so." I held up a hand. "This place . . ." I wasn't sure what I wanted to say. I knew I couldn't trust him. But if he'd had anything to do with the island, which I strongly suspected he had, he would probably drip his own praises from his mouth without much coaxing. "It's beautiful," I finished.

"Yes, it is." He straightened up a bit. "Took me awhile to get it ready. But Rex was pleased when he arrived. Definitely pleased. We'd been up and running for about a year when you all finally got out." He noticed me watching him. "You know I disagreed with that."

"What?" I asked.

He looked out to sea, shading his eyes with a hand. "The whole underground thing. While it was being built, I thought it was brilliant. Think about it." He turned to look at me. "When the world descends into chaos, your family is set to ride it out." He put a hand to the side of his mouth, and lowered his voice. "Honestly, I rather hoped I'd get an invite if there really was an apocalypse." He breathed deep and it came out loud, almost like a sigh. "But when he told me what he meant to do, that you were all going under, with no plans to come out, well . . ." He shook his head. "I'll admit that I'll do just about anything for money, but there's not enough in the world for me to go in there, and live in that situation."

"Smart," I said.

He turned his back to the sun and faced me. "I did try to change his mind, you know."

What? My heart began to pound. "About taking us into the Compound?"

"No." He shook his head. "It was once you were in. Those first couple of days after your brother was left on the outside. I told Rex how devastated that kid was. There was still time, before the world found out. I was the one with the lies to spin into a truth the world would believe. I told Rex that he could fix it, let you all out, tell you all that it was some kind of drill. A test to see how the Compound worked. Everything could go back to how it was."

"He didn't listen," I stated.

"No, he sure didn't." Tony held his arms out to the side. "Instead, it was on to the next thing. Build him this place. That's probably why I felt I should take care of Eddy all those years. Since I'd failed at getting you guys back for him." He dropped his arms. "You know it really threw Rex when you figured it all out."

"How to open the door?"

He nodded. "I never heard him as frantic as he was that night."

I thought of the phone that had sat on Dad's desk in the Compound. "So he did call you from there."

Tony looked almost guilty as he nodded. "Every day. No different from when he called me from his office at YK." He started drawing in the sand with a toe. "I hoped we could go back to that. Once you all were out. I wanted to go back to just being his right-hand man

at YK. Meetings. Business trips." He stared out at the sea. "You might not believe it, but kidnapping kids and trapping people underground are not what I signed up for."

"You had no problem with the age reversal."

He whipped his face around toward mine. "You think I wanted to be a guinea pig? I had no choice in that! Rex *owns* me. Everything, every single dirty thing I've done for him, is documented." His shoulders slumped. "I knew it from the start. I knew what I was getting into." He put his hands on his face. "I never expected to be an experiment, though."

He didn't say anything else, and the breeze and waves were the only sound.

I shrugged. "You make a pretty good teenager. You fooled me. Fooled Eddy and Lexie."

He smirked. "It has been kinda fun. Being a kid, yet being able to afford all the toys."

I rolled my eyes. "That Camaro was totally yours, wasn't it?"

He laughed. "Well, it belonged to Philip A. Whitaker. Tony the teenager would have had a hard time explaining that."

I smiled. "I gotta say, it's much harder to hate you as Tony. Phil was such a prick."

Tony laughed. "I deserve that. I mean *Phil* deserves that."

I pointed at the house. "It's yours?"

"Of course." He smiled. "There are perks to being

a henchman. Mine include room and board with ocean-front property."

"What's next?" I asked.

Tony quickly turned and looked out at the water again.

He shrugged but didn't say anything.

I needed to know, and I felt like he was going to open up to me. So I kept at him. "Tony?" I couldn't get myself to call him Phil, even though I knew that's who he really was. "What's next? What's the plan?"

Finally he turned back around and met my eyes. "Eli, you know what's next. You know what has to happen."

"I don't," I said.

He let out a breath. "Think about it. Think about what Rex wants." He held up his hands, palms up. "What would make this paradise complete for him?"

I started to say something, then I stopped. I knew my dad, how he thought. There was only one thing that would make the island complete.

"My family," I said.

Tony nodded. "They're next."

My father wanted us all on the island. To keep. To control. Just like he told me when we were still in the Compound. Only once we were back in Seattle, I had thought we were safe.

I was so wrong.

"But Dad said we were all flying home tomorrow."

Tony frowned. "He did? In those words?"

"Yeah, he..." I trailed off and looked down at the sand as I tried to remember. What had he said? "I told

him I wanted to go home and he said that wouldn't happen before tomorrow." My heart sunk as I realized it meant nothing of the sort. "He's not letting us go."

Tony shook his head slightly. "He has no intention of letting you go now that you're here. At least, not all of you."

I blurted out, "But my mom will never come here. She'll never let him bring the others here. She won't let him."

Tony said, "Really? There's nothing on earth that would get her to change her mind?"

"No, she—" I stopped. Dad would use us. Me, Eddy, Lexie. "He'll use us. He'll use us to get her here."

Tony nodded. "He's going to send you. Alone. I'll be flying you out tomorrow. And he knows if you ever want to see Eddy and Lexie again, you'll bring the rest of your family back."

I studied his face. There wasn't a trace of smugness in his face or the tone of his voice. So what was left? Could it be remorse? Guilt?

I said, "I can't let him do this to us again. Make us prisoners in his private world."

And then I did something I never thought possible. I dropped to my knees in front of Philip A. Whitaker and begged, "Please help me stop him before it's too late."