

# THIRTY-SIX

WHEN DINNER FINALLY ENDED, AND WE'D PLAYED SEVERAL hands of cards, Dad yawned and headed up to bed. Eddy, Lexie, and I all went to our separate bedrooms. After an hour, when I was sure Dad would be asleep, I knocked on their doors and they followed me back to my room. The three of us sat on my bed.

Lexie asked me, "What's going on?"

Eddy said, "He's got a plan."

"Will it work?" asked Lexie.

"No clue. But it's all we've got." I sighed. "Tony . . . *Phil*, I mean, is planning on flying me out of here in the morning. But plan on him flying all of us out of here."

"I can't believe he is *Phil*," Lexie said. "I feel so stupid."

Eddy said, "I'm the one who should feel stupid. I brought him into our lives."

"It was planned," I said. "He would have found a way in."

Eddy said, "Yeah, maybe. I just felt so comfortable the first time I met Tony, like I already knew him."

"Because you did already know him," I said.

Eddy made a face.

Lexie perked up. "How are you going to get him to help us?"

"Even though he's a teenager now, I don't think Phil has changed that much, when it comes right down to it. And that's what I'm counting on." I didn't want to explain further. My plan hinged on nothing more than a couple of hunches, and if my gut instincts failed me . . . "I need you guys to go down to breakfast tomorrow like everything is normal."

Lexie sighed. "Right."

I set a hand on hers. "You have to do this."

She nodded.

Eddy asked, "What else?"

I rubbed my chin for a moment. "I wish we had cell phones or some way to communicate." I sighed. "We just have to time it right. I will leave during breakfast, say I want to go for a run before the flight. You guys need to keep Dad busy. Keep him here. And keep him happy."

Eddy asked, "Shouldn't we be at the jet?"

I shook my head.

Lexie broke in, "But I thought we were all—"

I held up my hand. "I won't leave without you. But you need to keep him here as long as you can. I'll come back for you. I promise. Okay?"

They looked at each other and nodded.

Eddy yawned. "I'm going to bed." He struck his hand out. I put mine on top, and Lexie set hers on mine. No one said anything, just let them stay like that for a moment, before Eddy pulled his back and Lexie and I did the same. Eddy left, but Lexie lingered by the door. She turned back to me. "I asked Dad. About my birth mother."

"And?"

She lifted and lowered a shoulder. "He said they took babies from everywhere, that all the babies got a fresh start no matter where they were from."

"Was that it?"

She shook her head. "He said he never wanted to know about any baby's background, and he never asked the people that ran the home. He also said he had never planned to adopt anyone. But Mom fell in love with me and wouldn't stop pestering him until he gave in." She smiled. "He said they both fell in love with me and couldn't imagine life without me."

I said, "There you go. You have *your* answer."

She frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

I looked down at the floor. "You have your answer. That's what I meant."

She came over and sat beside me. "What's wrong?"

"You know that you don't . . . that you aren't . . ." I sighed. "You know that you aren't your birth mother's child. I mean, she didn't raise you, she didn't affect your upbringing in any way."

Lexie nodded. "Yeah. That's a good thing. To know I'm not a monster."

I met her eyes. "But I was raised by mine."

"By your what?"

"Dad is . . ." I swallowed. "He's not right. And I'm his son. Eddy only had nine years, but I had my entire life to be affected . . . molded by his thinking." I shrugged. "What if I'm like him?"

Lexie put an arm around my shoulders. "You're not."

"But what if I am?"

She shook her head. "If you were like him, you would leave tomorrow. You would leave us here." That sentence hung in the air for a moment. "But I know you won't. I hoped she was right.

She asked, "Eli, if we do leave here tomorrow . . . will we ever see Dad again?"

If we left, would I ever *want* to see him again?

The answer to both questions was the same. "I don't know."

That night, with all the thoughts racing through my head, I was barely able to get any sleep. When the bedside clock said seven, I got up. I threw on some running shorts and a T-shirt and dug in the closet for socks and shoes. I opened the drawer of the desk and took out a pen, which I put in my pocket. Then I went down to breakfast.

As planned, Eddy and Lexie were there, plates of eggs and sausage in front of them, pitchers of juice and milk on the table. Dad was nowhere in sight. "Where is he?" I asked.

Eddy looked behind him, then leaned forward and said in a low voice, "Haven't seen him yet."

Lexie said, "Maybe he's still sleeping?"

"I don't know," I said. "When he comes, tell him I went for a run on the beach." I started to go, then turned back. I took the time to look at them both, hoping I would see them again in just a little while, when I came to get them, so we could leave there.

Lexie stood and came to my side. "Be careful." Then she hugged me. Eddy came over and put his arms around both of us.

Then we each stepped back for one last nod, and I left.

Trying to hurry, I jogged as much as I could on my way to the lab Dad had shown us the day before. The doors opened and I stepped into the cool interior. I paused there for a moment, letting myself cool off before heading down the hallway to the silver door with the keypad.

I stood in front of the silver door. My plan was to try a couple of codes, hope something worked. A very lame plan, but it was all I had. Dad had punched in only six numbers yesterday, I was sure of it. My first thought was a date.

But which one?

It could have been when we went into the Compound or when we got out of the Compound. Or his wedding to my mom. Or the birth of any of us.

The real problem was how many wrong tries would I get before it locked me out?

I took a deep breath and punched in my parents'

wedding anniversary. Two short beeps sounded, and nothing else happened.

Sweat dripped off my forehead. I rubbed my fingers together. "Please, please, please . . ." I tried again, punching in my, and Eddy's, birth date.

Two short beeps sounded, like before, only the door slowly opened.

I whispered, "Oh, thank you—"

A pretty blond woman in a lab coat stepped out through it. She frowned at me.

"Oh, hi!" I forced a big grin on my face and wiped my forehead with a trembling hand. "Wow, Dad didn't warn me how hot it would be here."

Instantly, the lines on her forehead disappeared as she smiled. "Are you one of the twins?" Her accent sounded Scandinavian, Norwegian or Swedish, I couldn't tell for sure. "I heard you arrived yesterday."

I struck out my hand, willing it not to shake. "Eli. And you are?"

She held out her hand and grasped mine for a moment, then let it go. "Dr. Sylvia Jorgenson."

"Oh, perfect!" I said. "Dad actually sent me here for you. Since I was going on a run anyway. He needs you . . ." I snapped my fingers and scrunched my eyes shut. "Shoot, I forgot the name, but it's that building next door."

"Building B?" she asked.

Wow, would she buy that I had forgotten a frickin' *letter*? I needed to sound dumber, if possible. "Oh, duh." I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, that was totally it."

She looked confused. "Are you sure?"

I shrugged. "He was talking all fast and loud, yelling actually, but I think that's what he said." I made a point of frowning. "I hope I didn't get the message wrong. Is there a phone where I could call him and check?"

"No, no." She waved her hand frantically, apparently not willing to show a lack of confidence in the boss, no matter how small. "I will go there and meet him." She brushed by me, then turned back to the open door. "I need to close that."

"Oh, I've got it, ma'am." I put my hand on it and started pushing it closed. "No problem."

She nodded at me. "Thank you." Then she marched off down the hallway, heels clicking on the floor.

I slipped inside the door, then took the pen out of my pocket and struck it in the opening so the door wouldn't close all the way. I fell back against the wall for a moment, and placed my hand over my pounding heart. "That was too frickin' close."