

THIRTY-EIGHT

My THROAT WAS SO TIGHT, I COULD BARELY SWALLOW, BUT I managed to squeak out, "What are those things?"

Dad shrugged. "We're still working on being able to dictate the precise age. Some of the people didn't *de-age* as expected, especially when we went beyond forty years or so. But all their memories and knowledge seem to remain."

My knees started to buckle and I grabbed hold of the nearest crib to stay upright. "Oh, my God! They still know everything? They're still aware?" I looked down at the creature in the crib, huddled in the fetal position, making the mewling sound I'd heard from outside. "How can you let them suffer like this?"

Dad shook his head slightly. "They did all sign wavers." He noticed the remote in my hand. "Going to blow us all up?" He started toward me. "All that will do is set off a warning that will only be a drill." He held out his

hand. "Eli, save us all a wasted day of resetting the alarms and hand it over."

"You're lying!" I backed toward the wall, trying to edge my way toward the door.

Dad kept coming toward me as he still blocked my way to the door.

I raised the black box up. "Stop! Or I'll push the button."

"Eli," Dad repeated. "It will only set off a drill." But his eyes weren't as calm as his voice. Was he afraid?

I took a chance and held up the remote, my finger poised above the button. "Back off or I'll push it."

"Fine, fine." Dad held up his hands and moved to the side so I could get to the door. I backed through it in order to keep an eye on him the whole way, and kept going until something stopped my progress. I glanced behind me.

The machine with the gene gun.

I grabbed the gun and held it out in my other hand.

Dad laughed.

I glanced down at the machine. The dial made no sense, but I saw what looked like a power button and pushed it. With a whir, the entire thing started vibrating. I held the gun out and said, "Stay back."

Dad shook his head. "Or what? You'll de-age me?" He laughed again.

I said, "That's why you didn't use it on yourself. Because the process isn't perfected yet."

The machine beeped. I wondered if that meant it was

ready. Dad kept advancing toward me, and I took a firmer hold on the gun in one hand, the black remote in the other. "I won't let you have my family."

Dad frowned. "They're my family, too. You're all my family."

I shook my head. "Not anymore. Not after what you did. And I won't let you do it again."

"We can talk about this later," said Dad. "There's been a slight change of plans. I've decided your brother and sister should go back to Seattle. You can stay here until the rest of them come."

"They won't leave without me," I said.

Dad laughed. "Really? You think they love you that much that they'd stay here and wait for you to come get them? You really believe that?" He shook his head.

The gun trembled in my hand and I felt my chin wobble.

Would I stay for them?

And I realized that I already *was* staying for them. I was standing here in this room in order to take them with me, get us home. I swallowed, and said with the most conviction I could muster, "I do believe it."

Suddenly, Tony was there. He told Dad, "The jet is ready to go." He looked at me. "You ready?"

Dad had lied to me. He hadn't changed his mind. At least, not the way he told me he had.

"No!" Dad shouted. "None of them are leaving! My wife can bring the rest of my family here if she ever wants to see them again." He lunged for me.

I stumbled, trying hard to hold on to the gene gun, that as I fell, I accidentally squeezed the button on the black remote.

Immediately, a deafening high-pitched electronic beeping began.

Dad was on top of me, grabbing for the gene gun. I showed it out toward him, my finger pulling the trigger with the hope it would shock him or something. As it connected with his stomach, my finger got stuck, keeping the trigger on for several seconds. I heard several mechanical punching sounds.

Dad rolled off me to the floor. His eyes widened and he tried to get up, but fell back. His limbs began to shake and he started convulsing.

I jumped to my feet and backed away.

As Tony and I watched, my father's hair turned darker and thicker and curlier, growing longer before our eyes. Immediately his limbs began to shrivel and shrink; then his fingers folded in on his hands and his feet curled up.

"What's happening?" I yelled.

Tony yelled back, "He's de-aging!"

My father's limbs continued to shrivel, but they stopped getting smaller. They were deflating, like a balloon that had lost its air. And then he was suddenly still. His flesh hung there, saggy, just like the creatures in the cribs.

Tony said, "My, God, it didn't work on him."