

FOUR

CHAPTER

THE NEXT DAY, MY ALARM CLOCK WENT OFF AT SEVEN. I threw on some black shorts, laced up my running shoes, and stepped onto my treadmill. The view was mainly of Lake Washington, but also of the good-size woods, separated by the security fence at the edge of the property. I put in carbuds, turned on the music, and ran several miles.

I showered and then got dressed. Dressed up, actually, in khaki pants, a white button-down shirt, and a black blazer.

Eddy met me downstairs, dressed in new pants like mine and a black V-neck sweater with a white T-shirt underneath. We went out to the waiting black SUV, driven by our bodyguard, Lee.

Lee was Samoan, about six feet five and two hundred and seventy pounds. He'd played three seasons for the Seahawks. His grandpa's cousin's wife was some friend of Gram's, who had been the one to hire him. I suspected he

got paid more being our bodyguard/driver than he had playing in the NFL.

Lee drove us to YK, where a blond man in a brown suit led us into an elevator and up three floors to a door with a plaque that read:

DIRECTOR OF CHARITABLE CONTRIBUTIONS

SHARON GREENE

Ms. Greene opened the door for us. She was tall, dressed in a slim gray skirt, white blouse, and low black pumps, her dark red hair pulled back in a tightly braided bun. With a wide smile she shook our hands and ushered us into her office. Eddy and I both took a seat on the jade-green leather couch in front of a low glass table.

Ms. Greene asked, "Something to drink?"

"Coffee, please," I said.

Eddy just nodded.

She went to her desk, pushed a button on her phone, and said, "Lila? Could you bring us a tray, please." She came over to us and sat in a matching leather chair. "So, what are you two interested in doing?"

Eddy looked at me and then back to Ms. Greene. "I think we just want to get involved." He seemed way more enthusiastic than usual.

She nodded. "One thing about a company that makes a ton of money? They also get to give a lot of money away." She clasped her hands together. "And, boy, do we give away the money."

There was a knock on the door. Ms. Greene called out, "Come in."

A petite, dark-haired woman in a gray dress, flowered scarf, and tall black boots entered, carrying a tray so full it nearly covered everything above her shoulders. She set it down on the table.

"Thank you, Lila," said Ms. Greene. "That will be all." The tray had two small silver pots on it, three china cups, three plates and various silverware, as well as a basket of scones and muffins and assorted jams and jellies and creamers. She held out a hand. "Help yourselves." She tapped one of the pots. "This is hot chocolate. The other is coffee. I can also get tea if you like?" She looked from me to Eddy.

I shook my head. "This is great. Thank you." I reached out for the coffee pot and held it up. "Would you like some?"

"Oh, polite, aren't you?" She smiled. "No, thank you."

I poured myself a cup, and stirred in cream and sugar. Eddy poured himself some cocoa and took a raspberry scone. I chose a blueberry one, which was still warm, and put it on a plate. "So, what are you expecting of us?" I asked. "I guess I should say, what are we allowed to do?"

She reached over and plucked a thick pile of red folders off a nearby file cabinet. "These are our current contributions that are soon coming up for renewal. Do either of you have particular interests?"

Eddy shrugged and took a bite of his scone. That was more like the Eddy I'd seen lately. What was his problem?

I said, "I'm interested in medicine. Like research of some type?"

I ate half my scone as Ms. Greene flipped through a few folders, then extracted a small stack of files. She set them down on the couch next to my leg. "Look through these. They are the proposals that explain everything about the medical focus of the research. So they are a little fact heavy, but see if any strike your fancy." She raised her eyebrows at Eddy.

He said, "I'm more interested in technology."

She frowned. "Let's get one thing clear. You both are set to inherit this whole shebang. Your entire lives will probably be wrapped around"—she swirled her finger around in the air a couple of times—"this place." She leaned forward. "So if I were you? I'd find whatever it is I liked the best and get good at it. Learn to love it." She leaned back. "Or you will both be very unhappy people."

I looked at Eddy. He bit his lip and looked back at Ms. Greene. He shrugged a little. "I seriously have no interest in what charities we give to. I mean, I'm all for it, giving money away. But I don't think I want to spend my time on it."

I nodded. "And I do. At least, for now. To see what it's about."

Eddy said, "I'd much rather be involved in development."

"Oh, smart boys, aren't you?" Ms. Greene clapped her hands and stood up. "Eli, take a look at those files. Eddy,

come with me. We'll get you going to where you want to be."

They left.

I picked up the files and started leafing through as I finished my scone. YK contributed to so many medical causes. Cancer, heart disease, you name it. Some of my crumbs fell on a file. As I brushed them off, I noticed the label. Progeria. I had no idea what that was, so I opened it and found a fact sheet on top.

Progeria (also known as "Hutchinson-Gilford Progeria Syndrome") is an extremely rare genetic condition in which aging progresses rapidly, starting at an early age. The word progeria comes from the Greek words pro, meaning "before," and géras, meaning "old age." The disorder occurs only in an estimated 1 per 8 million live births. Those born with progeria typically live to their mid-teens and early twenties. Though a genetic condition, it is rarely inherited. Scientists are particularly interested in progeria because it might reveal clues about the normal process of aging.

"Wow." I paged through to a set of pictures and gaped. They were of a young child with a bald head and no eyebrows. If it wasn't for the pink dress, I wouldn't have known she was a girl. She looked like a wizened little old man. "How sad . . ." I paged through more, reading about the Progeria Institute and everything they did

trying to discover a cure for the disease. There were more pictures of young children, all who looked like small, wrinkled old people.

I finished the file and set it down just as Ms. Greene came back. "Find anything that looks interesting?"

I picked the file back up. "Progeria."

Her smile immediately drooped as she sunk to the couch beside me. "Oh, my gosh. Those poor children. It's the saddest thing."

I said, "I want to go there. To the research center."

She tilted her head a bit. "Let's get one thing clear. Just because you are interested in a cause doesn't mean you have to get personally involved. Your father rarely—"

I clenched my fists. "I am not my father."

She reached out and set a firm hand on my knee. "Of course not. It's just . . ."

I stiffened. "What?"

She took a deep breath. "Having the money? To fund these causes? Doesn't mean you should get involved. Personally, I mean."

"So, I should just learn to write the check?" I asked.

"Not ever learn who the check is actually helping?"

"Or not helping," she said.

"What?" I didn't get it.

She tapped the progeria file with one long white-tipped fingernail. "This is one of those . . . lost causes. They won't find a cure. Maybe not even a decent treatment. Certainly not in my lifetime and probably not in yours either."

My eyes narrowed. "So we shouldn't fund it?"

Her words tumbled out, "Oh, that's not what I'm saying. But—"

"But what?" My face was getting hot. "We should just forget those children? Not help them?"

She let out a long breath. "YK is an industry that is all about progress. Development. Creating things today that weren't there yesterday." She looked sideways at the progeria file. "Some causes simply will not have that kind of progress."

I shook my head. "What happened to trying? Not giving up?"

"Oh, softhearted, aren't you?" She patted my hand. "But getting involved in causes like this"—she narrowed her eyes—"will only make you softer."

I yanked my hand away and stood up so fast that I knocked over my coffee. As I tried to grab it, the file fell open, and all the fluttering papers hit the floor.

Ms. Greene made no move to pick up the mess. She sat there, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

I shoved the papers into a pile and set them back on the table. "Let's get one thing clear. I want to see the Progeria Institute." Then I picked the coffee cup off the floor, and slammed it on top of the papers. "Tomorrow."

Her smile disappeared and I left.