

SIX

CHAPTER

DR. BARKLEY TOOK ONE OF MY ARMS AND HELPED ME UP.

"I'm fine, I'm fine." I brushed the grass off my knees, then got up on one knee and tied my shoe as my face burned. *Great.* Way to make an idiot of myself in front of the first teenage girl I'd met in . . . well, actually? The first teenage girl I'd ever met since I'd become a teenager myself.

The girl and the little boy walked over to me. She looked at me with an amused smile on her face.

I felt my face get even hotter.

Dr. Barkley introduced me. "This is EJ. And, EJ, this is Jamie and his sister, Verity."

Verity may have been close to laughing at me, but even so, it made her brown eyes sparkle. "Hi."

"Hi," I said.

Jamie looked up at me and said, "I'm five."

I smiled. "I have a brother about your age."

His face lit up and he looked around. "Is he here?"

Verity set a hand on his head. "Jamie, stop interrupting."

"It's fine," I said. But I didn't want to have to answer, and say that, no, my brother wasn't here, because he was perfectly healthy and didn't have to face the fact he'd be dead by age thirteen. I mustered a smile. "You going swimming?"

Jamie nodded and grabbed Dr. Barkley's hand. He smiled, and said, "Okay, I'm coming." They left Verity and I standing there.

She looked over at me. "Want to watch him swim?"

I nodded. "Of course." I reached over and picked up my phone off the bench.

As we walked, she asked, "So why are you here? Is your little brother a patient, too?"

I shook my head. "No . . . um . . . I'm part of this internship thing." I held up my journal. "This is sort of a research assignment."

"What kind of an internship?" She seemed interested, but I wished she would stop asking. My whole fake persona of exceptional-high-school-student was not all that solid.

"I'm just asking a bunch of questions as he gives me a tour, basically. And then I have to write out a report to get a grade from my teacher at school." *Nice, Eli. That sounded totally plausible.*

"What school?" she asked.

Seriously? Trying to put an end to the questions I couldn't answer, I asked, "Is this the Inquisition or what?"

She smiled. "Yes."

I wanted to stop answering her questions because I didn't want to be dishonest with her. This was my first conversation with a teenage girl ever. Well, a teenage girl that wasn't related to me. And I didn't want to mess it up by any more lying. Which was all I'd done from the moment I'd opened my mouth.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm naturally curious."

I smiled. "I thought we were going to watch him swim." I started to head closer to the pool, but she grabbed my elbow.

"Trust me; we'll stay much drier if we watch from a distance." She pointed to a bench near the pool, and we both headed for it and then sat down. I set my journal down on the ground and put my cell phone on top of it. The bench was small, and her jeans-clad leg was only an inch or so away from mine. I couldn't help but notice that she smelled nice.

Jamie had gotten in the pool with a woman in a black tank suit. He wore blue water wings, splashed a bit and laughed.

Verity said, "He loves coming here."

I tried to fend off more questions by asking some of my own. "It must be hard," I said. "The progeria."

She nodded. "He was always sort of . . . unhealthy. Even before we knew about the progeria."

I wanted to know how old she was, but didn't want to come out and ask. "How old were you when he was born?"

"Ten. My parents didn't really think they'd have another kid, but I'd always begged them for a little brother or sister." She stuck an elbow in my ribs and I jumped.

She said, "If you want to know how old I am, just ask."

I smiled. "How old are you?"

"Almost sixteen. How about you?"

"Same." Well, if almost sixteen meant fifteen years and barely a couple months. Close enough.

We watched Jamie dog-paddle over to the woman. Verity asked, "So you just have the one brother?"

I kind of laughed, and then realized I needed to lie again. "I have an older sister, too." Which was actually the truth, except that I happened to leave out a few siblings.

"Sometimes I wish I had more brothers or sisters."

Verity pointed at Jamie. "I don't know what I'd do without him." She met my eyes and shrugged a little. "I mean, I know the day will come." She sighed. "Life expectancy is, like, thirteen."

"That's what Dr. Barkley told me. It must be hard, knowing he has a . . . shelf life." I winced. "I'm so sorry. That came out wrong."

"It's okay." She lifted and lowered a shoulder. "It's kind of true." She watched Jamie for a bit before going on. "It's hard on my parents. I just try to do everything I can with him. I take an independent study at school first hour of the day, so I can bring him here three days a week." She glanced at her watch.

She wasn't old enough to drive. "How do you get here?" I asked.

Her brown eyes turned my way again. "The bus. Our schools are right next to each other, so I run him there and then get back in time for class."

"Sounds like a pain," I said.

She nodded. "It'll be way better when I can drive."

Jamie called out, "Verity! Come watch me!"

She stood up and looked down at me. "I'm surprised he didn't yell before now. Coming?"

I nodded. "In a sec."

I watched Verity walk away.

For some reason, I wanted to call her back, tell her everything: my real name, the truth about my family. I swallowed. How stupid would that be? I'd known her for less than five minutes. And there was the fact that I would never run into her again.

Just before reaching the pool, Verity spun around on her heel and jogged back to me. "Before I go . . ." She knelt down and grabbed my phone; then before I could say anything, her thumbs were a blur. "There. I mean, in case you have any questions about this place. Or anything." She handed me the phone and headed over to the pool.

Dr. Barkley joined me again. He said, "I have to go to a meeting, but I'll have someone show you out. Please tell Ms. Greene . . ." He trailed off.

I stood up. "I'm sure you can expect to hear about the funding sometime soon." I realized my mistake. "I mean, of course I don't have much to do with it, but . . ." I picked up the journal. "She'll get a great report from me about it all."

He smiled. "There's no rush." He held out his hand. I shook it. "Thank you very much for the tour." I wanted to tell him that, in my mind, it was done. He would get whatever funding he needed. I would see to it. But I'd have to let the people at YK deliver that news.

I smiled. "I hope you get the funding. And I hope you find a cure."

He nodded. "We'll do our best."

"I can find my way out," I said. And he left.

I picked up my phone and figured out how to get to my contact list.

1. Mom
 2. Lee
 3. Eddy
 4. Verity Blum.
- Verity Blum.**

After fumbling with it a bit more, I got a message to pop up: **Erase this contact?**

Getting close to anyone was unwise, not while we were trying to lie low. And then I almost laughed. Close to anyone? When had I been close to anyone, ever, that wasn't related to me? I even had trouble with family most of the time.

Plus, who said she even wanted to get to know me?

I glanced back down at her name in my contacts.

That had to mean something, right?

She put her number in my contacts. Which meant she wanted some sort of . . . contact.

My gaze went over to Verity, who crouched near the

side of the pool as Jamie tried to splash her. Verity laughed. Her laugh alone made me want to know her better.

But it would never work. Could never.

I looked again at the message: **Erase this contact?**

There was only one realistic and rational answer.

My thumb hovered over the **Yes** button.

But then I pressed **No** instead.