

CHAPTER EIGHT

WE MET EVERYONE ELSE UP FRONT. AFTER WE CHECKED out, we went to the snack bar where Lee bought a bunch of pizza slices and frozen yogurt berry sundaes. We all sat at a red picnic table in the food area to eat. Lucas and Cara couldn't decide what they liked better, so they would take a few bites of pizza, then go for a spoonful of sundae. Even Lexie, who always watched what she ate, had both.

Other than Els baking morning pastries a couple mornings a week, our meals at home tended to be healthy, no processed foods, mainly fresh, and Els and the other cook got no argument from any of us. We'd had enough boxed and canned food to last the rest of our lives.

At least I had.

But still. Pizza and ice cream once in a while was fine with me.

Back home on Mercer Island, Mom hugged all of us,

looking totally relieved that we'd survived Costco unscathed. After everything we'd been through, letting her kids go to Costco was probably more nerve-wracking for Mom than we'd ever know.

I helped talk Lucas into a nap and then went to watch some television in the den. I liked that our new house didn't have humungous rooms like our mansion did. I loved all the windows and natural light, and the small rooms were just . . . homier. The den had a huge flat-screen TV mounted over the gas fireplace, both of which were on. Leather recliners sat on either side of a large leather couch, and Lexie sat in one, watching some talk show where people were screaming at one another. She quickly wiped her eyes and shifted so she faced away from me.

I plopped down in the other recliner. "This stuff will rot your brain."

Lexie tried to sound upbeat. "These people are crazy. See that woman? She's married to that guy, but she thinks the other guy is the father of her baby. They're going to find out the results of the paternity test right now."

I wanted to ask her how she was, why she was so sad. Instead, I just asked, "How can you watch this crap all the time?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes they have people find their long-lost relatives." She pointed at the screen. "This one girl went looking for her real parents after her adoptive ones died, and it turned out her biological mother was actually the gymnastics coach that she already was living

with! Is that crazy or what?" She looked like she wanted to say something else, but Eddy walked in and started digging through the DVDs. "You guys want to watch a movie?"

Lexie murmured, "When my show's done."

I opened up the ottoman nearest me and pulled out a white blanket.

Eddy kept looking through the DVDs as Lexie and I sat there, not saying anything. Finally the credits started rolling. Lexie glared at Eddy and then looked at me. "Eli? Can we talk?"

"Um, yeah?" Weren't we already talking?

Her eyes flicked over to Eddy, then back at me. "Alone?"

Eddy stopped what he was doing and looked at her. "I'll go get us something to drink. You two have your little talk." He left.

Lexie said, "Is he mad?" She didn't sound like she cared if he was or not. She and Eddy had not exactly bonded in the past few weeks, and I was beginning to feel like I was their intermediary. So it made things worse when she made a point of leaving Eddy out of our conversations.

I shook my head. "Why can't you talk in front of him?" Lexie glanced around a bit and then leaned closer to me. Her voice was a whisper. "What would you think if I wanted to find my real parents?"

I froze. "What?" Lexie was adopted, but it wasn't something I thought of very often. She was just my sister. It was easy to forget the rest.

She nodded. "My biological parents." She pointed at the television. "So many people have been reunited. It's really cool."

I shook my head. "Listen, just because people on these stupid shows do that doesn't mean you should. Those things are probably fake and set up anyway."

Lexie watched the show for a little bit. "Yeah. I guess." She didn't exactly look convinced, but I hoped that she meant it, and the subject was done. She tilted her head a bit and the corner of her mouth turned up. "It was a good day, wasn't it?"

"Costco." I snorted. "Who'd have thought?"

Her face lit up when she smiled. "I was very happy to get my industrial-size box of Tic Tacs."

Eddy came back holding sodas and plates, along with the pound of mango salsa and huge brown bag of tortilla chips he'd chosen at Costco. He handed me a plate, poured some salsa onto it, and then ripped open the bag of chips.

Lexie turned off the television. "I'm going up to my room."

As soon as she left, Eddy asked, "What was the big secret?"

I put a handful of chips on my plate, then dipped one into the salsa and stuffed it in my mouth. "Not a big secret," I said, my mouth full.

"Says the person who's in on the secret." Eddy sounded miffed.

"Really, it was nothing."

Eddy flipped on the television and started zipping through the channels, glaring.

"What?" I asked.

He didn't answer.

"Dude, it was nothing. She just feels more comfortable talking to me alone I guess."

Eddy turned to me, his eyes narrowed and dark. "That's Lexie. Don't you remember? She hated us. And we didn't exactly like her. And now, it's like..."

"What?"

He shrugged. "You two are BFFs. I'm the third wheel. I frowned. "That's not it."

He said, "Yeah? Then explain it to me."

How was I supposed to explain that, until the last few days in the Compound, I'd isolated myself from everyone?

That Lexie and I had barely talked, been closer to enemies than siblings? That, for all those years, I had basically been alone?

How was I supposed to explain that Lexie and I had to finally put aside our differences in order to get our family out of the Compound?

Was it betraying Eddy to admit that I liked my sister? That maybe I even needed her?

Eddy waited for an answer.

"It's not that at all. Lexie's having a hard time."

"Yeah, I noticed. She doesn't do anything *but* cry."

"She was really close to Dad and she's taking it really hard." I tried to sound casual. "It's not a big deal. I'm trying to be nice, I guess."

Eddy held my gaze for a moment, then popped a chip in his mouth. "Okay," he said, his mouth full. "Just want to know where I stand."

I nodded. "You know it's you and me."

"Cool." Eddy turned to a movie and started watching. I stared at the television.

Had I meant what I said? Some days I felt way closer to Lexie than to my twin, simply because of everything we'd been through. And sometimes . . . Eddy seemed like a stranger. Reese was beginning to warm up to him, but she still came to me for everything. Lucas would tolerate Eddy, but preferred me, and Cara . . . Cara was pretty much scared of him most of the time.

As for Eddy and Lexie, I had expected them to get along better than we all used to. We were older, more grown-up, and so much had happened since then. Maybe I just wished they would get along. Because as long as those two were at odds, I would be stuck in the middle. At least we were all together, and it wasn't as if I'd ever have to make a choice.