

NINE

CHAPTER

AFTER MY MORNING RUN A COUPLE OF DAYS LATER, I showered, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, and headed down to the kitchen. As I passed Reese's room, I heard her talking. In an English accent.

For the last few years in the Compound, my little sister had spoken in an English accent, something I never understood or got used to. Finally, as things began to fall apart down there, she had stopped.

But, now to hear that again . . .

My heartbeat sped up. I rapped on the door. "Reese?"
The sound stopped.

Silence.

I rapped harder. "Reese? Can I come in?"

I heard a hushed thump, and then the door opened and she stuck her head out the opening. "What?"

What was I going to say? *Hey, I couldn't help hearing.*

you were talking with an English accent, which totally freaks me out . . . "I just . . ."

She raised her eyebrows. "Do you want to come in?" I nodded and stepped inside. The walls of her room were white, but all the material on her bed and other furniture was bright and full of flowers. The television on top of the dresser was on, but the sound was off. "What's up?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Just watching the telly—I mean television."

I let that slip go. "With the sound off?"

She quickly glanced over at the television and back at me. "I didn't . . ."

"What?" I asked.

She went over and turned up the sound. Reese had been watching the BBC News. I listened to the female newscaster's voice: "Authorities are perplexed by the recent disappearance of ninety-two-year-old Dr. Dmitri Isbayeva, a Nobel-winning geneticist, from the elderly living facility in London that had been his home for the past ten years. This is the fourth such disappearance of elderly scientists in the past six months."

I said, "That was the voice I heard."

Reese frowned. "You thought it was me?"

I bit my lip and nodded.

Reese flopped down on her bed. "You think I'm a freak and I'm going to start doing that again."

"No, no." I went over and sat down beside her, setting a hand on her back. "I was just—"

Reese interrupted me, "Worried that I was a freak. I know. The other night, what Lexie said at the table about us being freaks. It's true."

I cleared my throat. "No. It's not true. We went through something no one else has, but we are a family and we're here for one another. We'll get through this."

She sat up. "I just like British things. Hearing about England. Does that make me weird?"

I laughed. "No, not at all." I pulled her to me and gave her a hug. "I promise, we'll go visit England one of these days."

Her eyes widened. "You think Mom will let us?"

I nodded. "Eventually, we'll all get back to normal."

I hoped I was right. I was already worried about Lexie, so I was glad I didn't have to worry about Reese, too.

Downstairs, I found Eddy and Lucas sitting across from each other in the kitchen. Lucas climbed down off his stool and jumped up and down, clapping his hands. "You're ready!" He ran into me and threw his arms around my waist.

I looked at Eddy and raised my eyebrows. "What am I ready for?"

Eddy made a face. "Another family outing. The aquarium. Up for it?"

I shrugged. "Sure, why not."

"I'll get everybody." Lucas ran out of the room.

Breakfast items were set out on the kitchen counter, and I spooned some Greek yogurt into a bowl, then added granola and sliced strawberries. I snatched a small

cinnamon roll as well and went back to Eddy. He was just finishing a bowl of cereal and wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his gray hoodie. "So, you never said how the thing at the lab went the other day."

"It was cool," I said. "I mean, not cool. But it's a good cause."

"Did you meet any kids with the disease?" He took a drink of orange juice.

I plucked a couple of raisins out of the granola and set them beside my bowl. "Yeah. A little boy."

He set his glass down and tilted his head slightly. "That's it? A little boy?"

"Yeah. And the scientists and all." I stirred the berries and granola into the yogurt and shoved a big spoonful into my mouth, giving myself time to decide if I should tell him about Verity. I decided not to and shoveled in another spoonful.

Eddy said, "Not everyone's going with us."

With a full mouth, I asked, "How come?"

"Mom and Lex and Reese are online shopping. Again. They'll keep Finn and Quinn, so we'll just have Cara and Luke."

I swallowed. "Does that ever seem weird to you?"

He pushed his bowl and glass away, then propped both elbows on the table, clasped his hands, and rested his chin on them. "What?"

I held up a palm. "All these kids. I mean . . . like you said the other day. You were left with memories of me

and Lexie and Reese. And then, all of a sudden, not only do you have us back, but you have all these other kids to adjust to. Little ones."

Eddy shrugged. "I didn't like being an only child for those years. I was lonely. So this? All these kids?" He nodded. "It's cool."

But something in his words didn't convince me. I said, "Cara and Lucas are getting used to you," I said. "You've got to realize that they never saw anyone else in all that time."

"They seem to like Gram and Els okay," he said.

I raised my eyebrows.

He grinned. "Well, they seem to like Gram okay."

"Give it time," I said.

I didn't have time to think about it because Lucas came running in, dragging a giggling Cara by the hand. Her dark hair was in pigtails and she wore a purple fleece jacket. Her jeans were tucked into tiny pink Uggs, and she immediately tried to launch herself into Eddy's lap.

Eddy shot a look at me and I held out my hands. "See?" He picked her up, then stood up and started throwing her into the air, making her laugh even more.

Lucas tugged on my arm. "Can we go now?"

"Hey, okay. Lemme finish eating." I pushed away from the table enough so he could sneak up into my lap, where he sat until I was done.

Lee was waiting outside in the SUV, and Eddy and I strapped Cara and Lucas into their car seats. Then Eddy

sat in front by Lee and I sat behind him. Both little kids fell asleep on the drive over, and we had to wake them up when we got there. Lucas was fine, but Cara started crying, so I carried her into the aquarium while Lee bought tickets. There were rental strollers, so we got one of those for Cara. I pushed her as Eddy held Lucas's hand and walked toward a mammoth aquarium with a viewing window at least twenty feet high and probably twice that wide. The sign near it read, WINDOW ON WASHINGTON WATERS. I scanned the information and said, "Hey, Lucas. There's more than eight hundred fish in here."

Lucas pushed past me and went right up to the window, where he placed his hands flat against it and looked up at the bottoms of some huge salmon.

Eddy was reading the brochure and stopped. He glanced at his watch. "Hey, the dive show is about to start. There won't be another one while we're here."

"Let's do it," I said. I pushed the stroller closer until I was standing behind Lucas, and Eddy and Lee stood on either side of me.

The water inside the tank surged now and then, which made the blades of kelp sway slightly. Huge rock formations took up a lot of space, and tons of fish swam in and out as we watched. Anemones poked out of holes in the rock, and sea stars and sea urchins were stuck to the sides. Eddy bent down beside Lucas. "See the sea stars?"

Lucas's mouth was wide-open and he nodded. "Look at all the fish."

As we watched, a diver entered the water and swam

until he was on the other side of the window from all of us who were watching. A good-size crowd began to gather, mainly a lot of moms with preschool-age kids. The one man in the room caught my eye. He had a thick, reddish beard and wore camouflage pants and a black jacket. He held the hand of a little girl in dark braids who was sniffing. Her eyes were red, as if she'd been crying. She told him, "I want to stay!"

In the last few minutes before the program started, the crowd began to pack in tight around us.

My heart raced and my breaths became shorter. I felt like I wasn't getting any air. My hands began to tingle, and I pulled my collar away from my throat. I wanted to scream.

Lee grabbed my arm. "You okay?"

"I don't know. I—" Was I having a panic attack? All these people . . . Costco had been crowded, but the warehouse had been brightly lit, the ceiling high overhead, plenty of space. But here, in the aquarium, it was darker, and the ceiling was low, and I felt packed in with everyone.

"Take a deep breath," he said.

"I'm trying." I squatted down, so I was eye level with everyone's purses and strollers. Cara reached out to me. I took her hand and held it, squeezing probably harder than I should have, but having her soft little hand in my hand helped. After a moment I could breathe again, and my heartbeat had slowed back down. I stood up. Lee asked if I was okay and I nodded.

The diver started talking through his headpiece, telling us about some of the fish and other creatures inside the tank. Lucas was riveted by all the commotion inside the tank, and as I calmed down more, I found that I was, too. How long had it been since I'd seen something like the aquarium?

Since the Compound, I'd spent a lot of hours on the beach in Hawaii, but hadn't done any snorkeling. Even though the aquarium fish weren't as colorful as tropical ones were, they were amazing to watch. I found myself mesmerized and didn't really think anything of it when the diver offered to answer questions and Lucas raised his hand.

Lucas was little and cute, so of course the guy would call on him first, before I could pull his hand back down. And of course the guy would ask, "Where you from, buddy?"

Lucas said, "I used to live in the ground, but now we live in a new house." He turned to me. "Eli, where is our new house?"

So stunned I couldn't think, I managed to catch my breath in time to bark out a laugh and look around at the crowd, who were shooting odd looks at Lucas. "He likes to make things up," I said.

Eddy joined my fake laugh and added, "He's got the wildest imagination."

I nodded, and soon some of the crowd began to smile and looked at their own kids. I breathed a sigh of relief

and figured we'd better play it safe and move on. "Lucas, what should we see next?"

He looked confused, as if he really wanted to pursue his annoyance at us, but he also didn't want to blow his chance to see everything. His face finally relaxed and he asked, "Is there a food place? I'm hungry."

I grinned. "Yeah."

I saw Eddy hold out his hand to Lucas, so I pushed Cara in the stroller, following the signs that said CAFÉ. I stood in line behind Lee, who turned around to ask us all what we wanted. Lee said he'd stay in line, so Eddy and I took Lucas and Cara to sit down at a table.

Lucas asked, "Where's the bathroom?"

I stood up. "Come on."

The bathroom wasn't far—down a short hallway—and no one was inside. Probably because it was a weekday and the aquarium was mainly full of moms, who would take all their kids with them into the women's room.

Lucas went into a stall and shut the door. I heard it lock.

"You okay in there?" I asked.

"Yes."

My cell phone rang. Eddy. "Yeah?"

"Cara is sick. She took a drink of her apple juice and threw it back up. Along with her breakfast. Oh God . . ."

"Seriously?" I sighed. "Well, clean her up and I'll be out in a minute."

"Dude, can you come now? This is gross."

"And it's gonna be less gross for me?" I sighed. "Lucas, you almost done?"

His voice echoed in the stall. "No!"

I sighed. "Eddy, you've got to come in here and wait for Lucas." Then I shoved the phone in my pocket and grabbed a bunch of paper towels, wetting some. "Lucas, stay there. Eddy's coming in, okay?"

"Yes."

I jogged back out to the table, which was a mess. Cara had thrown up not only the apple juice, but also the French toast she'd had at home for breakfast. Lee was holding his hand over his mouth and facing away from her. He shook his head at me. "Sorry. Sympathetic puker."

I wanted to groan. "That's fine. I'll clean this up and then we'd better get her home."

I heard an electronic beeping come from the direction of the hallway. It wasn't loud enough to be a fire alarm, just loud enough to be annoying, so I ignored it and started in with the paper towels.

Eddy was still standing there.

I frowned. "Go get Lucas."

"Sorry." He turned and left. I wiped off Cara with the towels as best as I could and stuck her back in the stroller. Our food had come by then, and Lee had it in bags so we could take it with us. Although eating was the last thing on my mind.

At the edge of my vision, I saw Eddy come back. "Ready to go?"

"He wasn't there."

I turned to face him and noticed he was alone. "What?"

Eddy's eyes were wide and he nearly spat out the words, "He wasn't in there. Lucas is gone."