

EPilogue

NOW THAT WE'RE BACK HOME, I AM TRYING TO COME TO terms with it all. What my father did to those people. Maybe they all knew what they were getting into. Maybe not.

I told my mom only what she needed to know: Dad's plans to bring us all there and keep us prisoner, again. I told her enough about the research to make Dad appear insane, as he was.

But that room with the cribs? I keep *that* to myself. I didn't even tell Eddy or Lexie. No good will ever come from anyone knowing that.

I told Mom that Dad died in the explosion. Not a lie. Eddy, Lexie, and I don't agree about Tony. We left that part out when we told Mom everything. We fudged the truth a bit, making up a story about a rogue pilot who saved us in the end.

Obviously, Phil's days at YK are done. Even if we were

to somehow explain how Phil Whitaker, CEO, was now a teenager, Mom would throw him out.

So, for now, we keep Tony as a family friend. Sort of like that saying: Keep your friends close, your enemies closer. He knows we control him. But then, he was always controlled by my dad, so it's not that much of a change for him. He has enough money to see him through this second life he has acquired.

And honestly, Tony is the only person besides me who knows about that crib room. . . . Maybe I need someone around that I can talk to about it. Plus, we would still be on that island if he hadn't flown us home.

Somehow, deep down, I feel like that redeems him, at least a little bit. But I know very little about redemption, so who am I to judge?

Today, I finish it.

Lee is driving me in the SUV to the Progeria Institute. My backpack sits in my lap, my hands resting on the outline of the object inside. We drive through the gate and Lee parks next to the first red building.

I walk inside and head right to Dr. Barkley's office. He's expecting me, and greets me at the door. I take a seat across the desk from him, still holding my backpack in my lap.

I tell him, "There's something you need to know that I've been keeping from you. My name is Eli Yanakakis. I am Rex's son." Saying it aloud wasn't as bad as I had anticipated.

He started to say something, but I kept going. "I have

something that may help your research. But you cannot ask where I got it."

He nods. "No questions. I understand."

I open the backpack and pull out the gene gun. I set it on his desk.

His eyes widen as he carefully picks it up.

I say, "I think . . . I hope there may be genetic material in there that can help your research." I don't tell him that I had his original research on the flash drive for weeks, and that it was recently destroyed in an explosion. I hope the contents of the gene gun will make up for that.

He looks at me. "But where—"

I set a finger on my lips and shake my head.

He smiles. "No questions."

We shake hands and he walks me outside.

On my way back to the SUV, I notice the large building with the pool. I go inside and hear the sounds of laughter and splashing water. I watch the kids in the pool and sit on the bench Verity shared with me that first day.

Will I ever stop being conflicted, wondering whether blowing up the island has hurt any chances there ever were of curing progeria? My only hope is that Dr. Barkley can do something with the gene gun.

I sit here, hoping no one will ask what I'm doing. Because I'm sitting here, waiting, for only one reason: I am hoping Verity might show up.

After forty-five minutes pass, I realize she's not going to be here. I glance at my watch, wondering whether I should stay a few more moments. Or give up.

"EJ?"

My breath catches in my throat as I look up.

Verity is standing in front of me, wearing a flowered miniskirt and bright orange hoodie. She looks so wonderful to me.

All I can do is smile at her. Now that she's here, I'm not sure what to say.

She asks, "Why are you here?"

I say, "I had an appointment with Dr. Barkley."

She rolls her eyes slightly. "Another paper to write?"

I start to say something to appease her, then stop. My plan is to be honest with her, and that means being true to myself, who I am. I am done trying to run from it.

"No. There was never any paper."

She frowns.

I say, "And my name isn't EJ. It's Eli. Eli Yanakakis."

She sinks down onto the bench beside me, like her legs have given out.

Go ahead. Make your judgments. Decide I'm some spoiled, rich-kid freak

"Why?" she asks.

I am confused. "Why what?"

She asks, "Why have you been lying to me?"

The question throws me off for a moment. "Because . . . of who I am."

Verity raises her eyebrows. "So you lie whenever you meet someone?"

I shake my head. "No. I mean . . . I never meet anyone. You're the first girl I've met since—"

"Since you came back from . . . down there."

So she knew. The moment I said my name aloud, she'd probably had news reports flash through her head.

I nod. "And you must think I'm a freak."

Her tone softens. "God, no. I mean, I don't know what happened down there. But I think you're nice, and—" A look passes across her face. "Is this what you were going to tell me the other day? When we were going to meet?"

I nod.

"What happened?"

I blow out a breath and don't say anything for a moment. "It's kind of a long story."

"I have time." She smiles.

I smile back. "Next time." I look down at my hands.

"Listen, it's . . . it's hard for me to trust people. And I'm sorry I lied." Then I reach out with both hands and lightly grasp her elbows, pulling her toward me. "If you give me another chance, I—"

She doesn't pull away, but her eyes narrow. "You'll what?"

I don't know.

Part of me wants to let her go, back away, give up on it all, and never see her again. That would be the simple way.

But I *am* Eli Yanakakis. And it seems to be a genetic flaw that I never do anything the simple way.

I take a deep breath, then move my hands up to cradle her face.

I lean in, close my eyes, and kiss her. When I pull my

face back, she smiles up at me. "That's what I wanted to do when I saw you."

My face gets hot and my grin widens.

"So can we reschedule our date?"

"It was a date?" she asks, smiling.

I take a chance. "Yes. It was. It was absolutely a date."

She laughs. "Then I would be honored, Mr. Yanakakis."

"Call me Eli."

"Eli."

Then Verity grabs hold of my hand and squeezes, like she never wants to let go. And that happens to be fine with me.