


CHAPTER FOURTEEN

 In all his plottings, Luke had never thought of the screen door being locked. Though he knew his own parents locked up at night—when they didn't forget—the doors at his house had always been open for him. And he'd never been near anyone else's door.

• "Idiot," he muttered to himself.

He tugged harder on the door, but he couldn't concentrate enough to make his hands work together. Each second that passed made the hair on the back of his neck stand up more. He'd never been so exposed in his entire life.

Hurry, hurry, hurry. Get out of sight....

The door didn't budge. He'd have to turn around. Now. That was what his brain said. What his hand did was plunge through the screen. He pulled the wire away from the frame and reached through. The screen scraped the back of his hand and his arm, but he didn't stop. He fiddled with the lock inside until he heard it click.

He silently slid the screen door back and stepped past the hanging blinds into the Sports Family's house.

Even with the blinds blocking every window, the room he entered was airy and bright. From the freshly painted walls to the sparkling glass tables to the polished wood floor, everything looked new. Luke stared. Almost all the furniture in his own house had been around as long as he could remember, and whatever patterns and designs it originally carried had long ago been worn away. At his house, even the once-orangish couch and the once-greenish chairs were now all a matching sort of brownish gray. This room was different. It reminded him of a word he'd never heard, only read: "pristine." Nobody had ever stepped on these white rugs with manure-covered boots. Nobody had ever sat on those pale blue couches with corn-dust-covered jeans.

Luke might have stood by the door forever, in awe, but someone coughed in another room. Then he heard a strange *be-be-be-beep*. He tiptoed forward. Better to discover than to be discovered.

He went down a long hallway. The beeps had turned into a drawn-out "buzzzzz," coming from a room at the end.

Holding his breath, Luke stopped outside the door to that room and gathered the nerve to peek in. His heart pounded. There was still time to escape unseen, to go back to his house and attic and normal, safe life. But he'd always wonder—

Luke leaned forward slowly, moving a fraction of an inch at a time, until he could just barely see around the door.

Inside the room was a chair and a desk and a big apparatus that Luke vaguely recognized as a computer. And at the computer, typing away furiously, sat a girl.

Luke blinked, thrown off. Somehow he'd never thought about the Sports Family's third child being a girl. She was mostly facing away from Luke, and she wore jeans and a gray sweatshirt not much different from what the Sports Family brothers always wore. Her dark hair was almost as short as Luke's. But there was something about the curve of her cheek, the tilt of her head, the way her sweatshirt clung or didn't cling to her body—all of that made Luke certain she wasn't like him.

He blushed. Then he gulped.

The girl turned her head.

"I—" Luke croaked.

Before he had a chance to think of another word, the girl was across the room and had knocked him down. Then she pinned him to the floor, his arms twisted behind his back, his face buried in the carpet. Luke struggled to turn his head to breathe.

"So," the girl hissed in his ear. "You think you can sneak up on a poor, innocent, unsuspecting girl, who's home all alone? Guess nobody told you about our alarm system. A call went out to our security guards the minute you stepped on our property. They'll be here any second."

Luke panicked. So this was how he'd die. He had to explain. He had to escape.

"No," he said. "They can't come. I—"

"Oh, yeah?" the girl said. "Who are you to stop them?" Luke raised his head as much as he could. He said the first words that came into his mind.

"Population Police."

The girl let go.