

CHAPTER SEVEN

I CAN REMEMBER GOING TO COSTCO ONLY ONCE AS A KID, way before we entered the Compound. Maybe because I had no reason to wonder where the groceries came from. Honestly, I never really saw food in packaged form. Even the Baby Bels were unwrapped and on a white china plate with a line of Triscuits by the time I got them, so it wasn't until we were in the Compound that I saw the red wax circles of cheese and yellow boxes of crackers. Well, for as long as the cheese and crackers lasted, which wasn't long.

Eddy swung open my door. "You ready?" He was dressed in jeans and blue polar fleece.

"Almost." I buttoned my jeans and pulled a long-sleeved red Under Armour shirt over my head. Even though it was August, the day was damp and chilly, much like the day before. I hoped we weren't done with sunny days just yet; I wasn't quite ready for the northwest gloom to descend before autumn had even begun.

As I tied my Converse, Eddy said, "The little kids must be excited—they're already sitting in the car."

"Lee should love that." I turned back to him. "What about Lexie and Reese?"

"Actually, they're in the car, too." He grinned.

I grabbed my black soft-shell jacket off the hook on the back of the door and followed him downstairs. Mom was there with Gram, Finn, and Quinn. She looked up at us. "Quinn has a cough and Finn is fussy."

I asked, "You going to stay home then?"

Mom nodded.

I'd just been out the day before. And she hadn't been out since... since we'd last gone to YK. Which had not exactly been an enjoyable outing. "Mom, why don't you go? I can stay and help with them."

She smiled. "Oh, that's sweet, but you go have fun."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "I don't mind." Truth was, I liked staying home. I found it much less stressful than going out in public.

"Positive." She stood and went over to the window seat, to her black bag. She reached in and pulled out her wallet. She handed me seven twenties. "One for each of you to buy something. And a twenty for Lee to have a snack." She frowned. "He always looks like he's hungry."

I put the money in my jacket pocket and zipped.

Eddy leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks." I did the same and added, "Don't worry."

As we walked out the door, she called after us, "And please be safe."

I climbed into the back of the SUV with Reese and Lexie, who'd already strapped Lucas and Cara into the third row, where they were busy with green juice boxes. Lexie, apparently having decided a trip to Costco was worth her while after all, rolled her eyes. "About time." She was playing with the cell phone Mom had given her after dinner the night before.

Reese had pitched a fit she didn't get one, and from the way she was glaring at Lexie's, she was obviously still not over it.

Eddy started to get into the backseat beside Reese, but Lucas kicked the seat. "No! I want Eli to sit there."

Eddy got back out. "Maybe I should just stay home."

"No, you have to go." I set a hand on his shoulder. "He's just cranky."

"Whatever." Eddy got into the passenger seat in front. I glanced at Lee. He did look hungry.

As we stopped by the front gate and waited for it to open, the two security guards came out of the white concrete booth. Both were in their twenties: Joe had a dark beard, while Sam shaved his head and had ice-blue eyes. Both grinned and waved as we pulled out of the front gate.

When we hit the street, my heart started to pound.

Was I this excited about Costco? Or was it just that I was getting to go out, out into the real world where everyone else lived normal lives?

The trips to YK and then the progeria lab the day before hadn't been normal teenager outings. Maybe my heart was pounding at the possibility that I could actually be normal again. Costco could do that, maybe. Hand normalcy back to me.

The windows of the SUV were tinted, so I took advantage and stared all I wanted at people walking and jogging and driving beside us, knowing that they couldn't see me. I wondered, if you mentioned the name *Rex Yanakakis* to them, what would they think?

Would it be like mentioning *Steve Jobs*? Someone who was gone, who they'd only seen on television and the Internet, yet was a visionary who had influenced components of their everyday life? Is that what they thought of my dad?

Or was it not that positive? Did his name call to mind a paranoid genius billionaire who stuffed his family away underground for years?

I wiped away the condensation on the window.

And what of me? What if someone said *Eli Yanakakis* to them?

What if I had said that to Verity Blum?

I'm not EJ, I'm Eli.

What would she have thought?

Filthy-rich heir to a technology fortune? Will never have to work for anything in his life? The freak who spent years underground.

I looked over at my sisters and my little brother. If people thought that about me, they must think the same about the rest of my family. And I couldn't handle that.

Eddy glanced down at his cell phone and the GPS feature he'd called up. He pointed to the left. "I think we can get there faster that way."

He was so relaxed, finding directions on his cell phone, showing Lee the way, while most of the time I still looked around at the outside world through the eyes of someone seeing it for the first time.

My brother seemed to be a part of this world; he seemed to be normal.

I felt a twinge of envy.

Who was I kidding? Eddy *was* a part of the world. Eddy *was* normal. Something I could never be. My dad made sure of that.

"Is that it?" Lucas kicked the back of my seat. "Are we there?"

"Lucas, stop that." I looked out past Lexie and Reese at the red-and-blue sign, my heart still pounding.

Maybe I really was simply excited about going to Costco.

Lee parked. We got the little kids out of their car seats. Rain was starting to come down, so Lexie carried Cara and I took Lucas and we all ran to the entrance, Eddy and Lee right on our tails. Lexie put Cara in a cart; I did the same with Lucas, and we went inside. Lee showed his Costco card to the attendant.

Apparently he was already a member.

The first section we encountered was a bank of televisions and computers. The latest animated Disney movie was playing, and Lexie pushed Cara closer so she could

see the princess. She said, "You guys go on. I'll stay with her for a bit."

Lee frowned.

Did he want us to stay together? Was he that worried about the whole thing?

I said, "We're fine in here. I'll take Lucas and see what else we can see." Then I remembered. "Wait." I reached in my pocket and pulled out the money. "Everyone gets a twenty to buy something." I gave Lexie twenties for both her and Cara, doled one each to Reese and Eddy, and held one out to Lee. "In case you need a snack."

"Won't." He rubbed his belly and smiled. "They have samples." He pointed at the money. "But I have the membership card so we have to pay together."

I zipped the three twenties back into my jacket pocket. "Who wants to come with me and Lucas?"

Eddy and Lee stayed with Lexie and Cara, agreeing to meet me and Lucas and Reese up front when we were done. I pushed the cart past the televisions and into the clothing section. Reese immediately went to a stack of pink hoodies and started holding them up to herself.

I still had not gotten used to seeing all of us out of our stupid Compound uniforms, all those years of the girls in their matching velour tracksuits, me in my sweatpants and T-shirts. Ditching those had been liberating.

I told Reese, "That's a nice color."

Reese scrunched up her nose and put it back. "Maybe. I want to look some more." As we passed a display of velour tracksuits, she glared, looking for a second as if she

were about to spit on them, then moved on to a stack of jeans with sequins on the pockets.

The books and movies were adjacent to the displays of clothing, so I said, "Reese, I'm gonna take Lucas over there. Stay where I can see you."

Reese didn't look up. "Oh-~~key~~, Eli. I'm not stupid."

"Reese?" She was making me feel parental. "Can you please look where I'm pointing?"

She huffed, and then looked up at me through narrowed eyelids.

I pointed over at the books. She said, "Fine," and went back to the jeans.

I rolled my eyes and pushed the cart toward the books. Lucas said, "She's salty today."

I laughed. "She's what?"

He repeated, "Salty."

"Where'd you hear that?"

He said, "Els."

"Figures. You're right. Reese is salty today. Good word."

I held up my fist and he bumped it with his own. I stopped in front of a huge display of kids' books. "Anything look good?"

He reached for a colorful book about trains, but couldn't stretch far enough. I grabbed the book and handed it to him. There were novels at the other end of the row, so I said, "Hold on," and pushed him farther down. There was a thick, new Stephen King I hadn't read yet, and I picked it up to read the back cover. I read about two sentences and turned the book over to see the price. The suggested

retail price was hidden by the Costco sticker that read \$16.98. I had a brand-new e-reader at home, but I couldn't get used to reading a book that way. Maybe things would change, but for the moment, I preferred the feel of a real book in my hands. And this one happened to be right within my budget for the day. I set it in the cart.

Lucas was still paging through the train book, so I just stood there, gazing at all the people and merchandise. A table was set up behind me with little white paper cups. A short woman with a clear plastic cap covering her dark hair noticed me looking and held one up. "Sample today! Dark-chocolate-covered pomegranate seeds in a three-pound bag."

I touched Lucas's arm and said, "Be right back." I crossed the aisle and took the paper cup from her. It had several small chocolate candies in it. I said, "Thank you," and went back to the cart. "Want one?" I held the cup out to Lucas. He peered inside and plucked one out, then put it in his mouth. His eyes lit up as he chewed. "Yum."

I popped a couple in my mouth. The fruity burst mixed with the richness of the dark chocolate. "Wow."

Lucas nodded. "I like them a lot."

I went back over to the dark-chocolate pomegranate display and grabbed a bag. Maybe I'd have to use Lee's twenty for it. I put them in the cart. Lucas was still reading, so I looked for other samples and pushed the cart toward them.

Farther toward the back of the store, a woman had samples of Gouda and Havarti served on crackers. I

couldn't get the cart very close, so I left Lucas a few feet away, grabbed a few of the samples, said, "Thank you," and returned. Lucas devoured the cheese and crackers, as did I. Dairy products had been nearly nonexistent in the Compound, and since our liberation, I think all of us had eaten enough cheese to choke an ample Holstein. I pushed the cart over to a garbage can and tossed away our napkins. Then I remembered Reese and quickly wheeled Lucas back toward the clothes.

Reese had moved over to the book section, so I parked the car next to the display. Lucas was content looking at his book, so I leaned on the cart, waiting for Reese. I let my eyes wander a bit, and then Lucas grabbed for a book on the display stack and knocked the entire pile onto the floor.

"Seriously, dude?" I squatted to pick them up, and as I popped back up, I caught a glimpse of a man in dark clothing and a black knit cap staring at me from about ten yards away. He quickly slipped around the edge of an aisle and disappeared.

I told Reese, "Stay right here. We'll be back."

Lucas said, "I want to look at the books!"

"Just sit there a second." I pushed Lucas and the cart toward where I'd seen the man. But when I got to the end of the aisle, no one was there. And then I saw him again, turning another corner.

Lucas said, "I want to go back!"

"We will, just hold on." I walked faster, shoving the cart in front of me, but as I got to the end of the aisle, an

employee with a huge, orange flat cart full of cases of cans of Diet Coke and plastic bottles of SunnyD cut me off, blocking the aisle in the process.

"Excuse me," I said. "I need to get by."

"Just a minute. This is heavy."

I grabbed the handle of her cart and yanked, pulling it past mine. Then I pushed past. But when we reached the next aisle, there was no one there. I kept on pushing up that aisle where the man should have been. When I got to the end, something crunched under my shoe.

I moved my foot.

There was a small pile of white powder. Like I'd crushed a small white tablet of some kind. Like a . . . Tums.

Those last few months in the Compound, my father was never without a pack of Tums.

Dad?

My hands started to tremble. It wasn't possible. He was gone.

"Eli?" Lucas grabbed hold of my sleeve. "Your face is all white. Are you gonna puke?"

Just then a woman in a plastic cap at a display next to us called out, "Samples! Calcium supplements. They're good for kids as well as adults. Sixteen-ounce bottle."

I took one of the paper cups she held out.

Inside were two round white tablets. I looked down beside my foot. Exactly like the one that lay there on the floor, ground to a powder when I'd stepped on it.

I breathed out. *Paranoid much?*

Lucas was still looking at me with a concerned expression on his face.

I smiled. "No, I'm not gonna puke." What a dweeb. I'd imagined some guy staring at me. And then I'd freaked out over some stupid calcium supplements.

I almost laughed. If I was ever going to be normal, I would really have to figure out how to stop being so paranoid.

I waited until the sample woman wasn't looking and tossed the little paper cup, and the tablets, into the trash.