

PROLOGUE

CALLIE

DAY: 20 / POPULATION: 7

The doorbell rang.

Callie was sitting on the top stair. She thought about getting up but decided against it. Certainly, it was another neighbor. Callie didn't need another casserole and she'd long ago run out of vases for the flowers. The last three bouquets, she'd simply dropped directly into the trash bin. But mostly, she couldn't handle anymore *"I'm so sorrys."* Or *"I can't imagines."* Or *"I don't know what I would dos."*

You would cry yourself to sleep every night, that's what you would do. You wouldn't be able to eat. Your stomach would be in knots. You would do anything to turn your brain off for just a few seconds. You would do anything to stop the hurt.

Callie picked up her phone and logged into Facebook. She checked the page that Miles and Reed had created.

Find Ben Adair.

She clicked on the pinned post at the top. The picture was the same one she'd given to the Fort Collins police. It was a selfie that Ben sent her at the end of January. He'd just gotten back his first

test of the semester, a B-. He was holding the test and giving a big thumbs up. Huge smile.

Ben had been a string bean throughout high school and that first semester of junior college. It's hard to put on any weight when you're playing soccer twenty hours a week. But when he transferred to Colorado State, he quickly put on the freshman fifteen.

Callie liked him better with a bit of roundness. It deepened his dimples, which paired well with his shaggy brown hair, and light hazel eyes.

The Midwestern kid next door.

There was a new notification and she clicked on it.

"Please," she begged. "Know something."

Ben was in my Psych class. He was such a nice guy. His doodles would always make me laugh. My family and I are praying that they find him.

Callie sighed. "Thanks, Jen."

Ben's doodles had always made her laugh as well. She had an entire brown accordion folder filled with them.

Callie pushed herself up and before she could talk herself out of it, she opened the door to Ben's room.

Though it had been since the holiday break since Ben had been back home, it still smelled of him. He had a sweet, almost syrupy odor. For years, Callie had tried everything to get rid of it. Febreze, air fresheners, washing and rewashing with Clorox.

Now, she relished in its embrace.

She sat down on the bed, then fell backwards, bouncing lightly off the mattress before coming to rest.

Olivia was the right choice.

Callie laughed at the memory.

They had spent over four hours at the mattress store. They had named every single mattress, then they made brackets, similar to March Madness. Then they "played" the mattresses against each other. The salesman had even gotten into it, plugging all the mattresses into a bracket app on his phone.

The winning bed, *Chalene*, was \$3500—a bit out of their price-range—but they’d splurged for one of the semi-finalists.

It was on this very bed six weeks after they bought it that Callie confessed to Ben that she’d gone out on a date with the salesman and after dinner he used the line, “I have *Chalene* at home. If you’re interested.”

She was.

“Were you safe?” Ben asked, laughing. “I don’t want a little sister.”

“I didn’t sleep with him,” Callie had replied, slapping his arm. “Just some light snuggling.”

They told each other everything. A dynamic grown from growing up together.

Jessie had left her high and dry when Ben was three and since then, it had just been the two of them.

Now her Benji-bear was gone.

She grabbed his pillow and cradled it.

The Call came twenty-two days ago.

February 16.

It was Miles, Ben’s roommate and lifelong friend.

“Have you heard from Ben?”

Five words that shattered her existence.

It was a Friday night and Miles and John-Henry hadn’t seen or heard from Ben since he left a party on Thursday evening.

Callie had frantically checked her text messages. While she and Ben exchanged texts almost daily, she realized her last text from him dated back to Wednesday evening.

She called Ben repeatedly, but it went straight to voicemail.

Callie decided to drive instead of fly. She didn’t want to be away from her phone. She called all the hospitals in Fort Collins, but they hadn’t admitted anyone fitting Ben’s description. She prayed for every minute of the nine and a half hour drive from Overland Park, Kansas to Fort Collins, Colorado, that Ben would call.

He never did.

The doorbell rang.

"Go away!" Callie screamed into the pillow.

Just leave her alone. Leave her alone to grieve. To slowly dissolve into a puddle of sadness.

The doorbell rang again, followed by loud knocking.

"Fine!" Callie said, jumping up.

She made her way down the stairs and pulled the front door open. The man holding a saran-wrapped tray of lasagna was forty-ish, six foot, dark hair, brown eyes, bronze skin, light stubble laced with gray.

A month ago, a handsome Latino holding a tray of lasagna on her doorstep would have fulfilled a very niche fantasy of hers. But today, she would have squirted him with the hose if it were in arm's reach.

"Here," the man said, reaching out the tray.

"Um, thanks," Callie replied, forcing a smile.

"Oh, that's not from me. That was next to the door when I walked up."

"Okay." *So, then who are you?*

"Are you Calista Adair?"

Callie nodded.

The man reached his hand into the back of his jeans and pulled out a badge. He flipped it open. "Detective, Álex Torres."

Callie took two steps back.

This was it—just like the movies. The cop on the doorstep, alerting the family.

The Death Notification.

"Ben is alive."

Callie took a step forward.

"Ben is alive," Torres repeated.

"Thank God!" Callie shouted, her knees crumbling. She fell to the floor. Her chest buckled and heaved. The gravity that had tripled in the past three weeks, pushing her harder and harder down to the Earth, lifted.

After a couple moments, Callie suddenly became acutely aware

of Torres' words. Not, "We found him." Not, "He's okay." Just, "Ben is *alive*."

"Where is he?" she shouted, jumping up to her feet.

"That part is a little more complicated."

"*Complicated*? What do you mean?"

"It's better if I just show you."

"Show me? No, I need you to tell me where Ben is!"

Torres slipped a small tablet from the small of his back. "Trust me, it's easier if I show you."

Callie led him inside to the kitchen table. Torres took a seat and Callie pulled a chair next to him.

"Show me," Callie demanded.

The tablet's screen lit up with a stark red banner labeled "Crammed" at the top. It displayed one large video box and three smaller ones, all showing different angles of a warehouse. On the right side of the screen, a counter read, "Day: 20, Population: 7," followed by a list numbered 1 to 7.

Torres selected #1, and the screen refreshed.

"There he is!" Callie cried out, springing from her chair.

She leaned in, peering over Torres's shoulder. Ben was standing in the middle of a large aisle, holding a yellow wiffle ball bat. There was a small orange "1" superimposed right above his head. An Asian kid with long black hair was fifteen feet away from him—a "3" superimposed above his head—and he pitched Ben the ball. Despite missing the swing, Ben looked unharmed, smiling, and laughing.

"What the hell is going on?" she asked.

"This surfaced online last night. We only found out a few hours ago," Torres explained. "It's a live broadcast on the dark web. Ben was the first captive."

"What? A *captive*? So, he's trapped in there?"

"Yes."

"He's trapped in a fucking Costco."

"Yes and no. The warehouse is built to pretty much the exact

specifications as a Costco, but as far as anyone can tell, it's a fake; a very good reproduction."

Callie struggled to process the information. Ben was being held in a counterfeit Costco.

How could this happen?

"And no one knows where this place is?" Callie asked.

"So far—no," Torres replied flatly. "But it's early days. The FBI is taking charge of the investigation, but they aren't sharing much. They'll likely contact you soon."

They had better.

"There's something else you should see," Torres added. He clicked a link and a list materialized on screen.

Will the next person to arrive be male or female?

When will they run out of food? Over/Under 200 days.

When will the first person die? Before/After 45 days

How long will #1 and #4 go without speaking? Over/Under 2 more days

"What the hell are these?" Callie asked.

"They're *bets*. Viewers can place wagers on what they think is going to happen. Everything is paid out through crypto. Practically untraceable."

Callie's stomach convulsed as the harsh reality hit her: *her son was trapped in a twisted reality show*.

She walked shakily into the living room, grabbed her laptop, and returned to the kitchen. With a forceful slam, she placed it in front of Torres.

"Get it on there," she said, her voice strained, her fingers anxiously running through her hair. "Now."

1

BEN

DAY: 1 / POPULATION: 1

The sensation of numbness in Ben's right arm was nothing new. It happened when he slept in the fetal position, which was two or three times a week. Usually after a long night of drinking with his two roommates, John-Henry and Miles, and usually capped off by ordering a mushroom and double-pepperoni calzone from Uber Eats.

Sliding his right hand from between his knees, Ben gradually wiggled the blood back into his extremity. As the pins and needles receded, he massaged his closed eyelids with his thumb and middle finger and attempted to piece together the previous night.

They'd started with their Thursday night pre-game ritual: *Power Hour*. A shot of beer every minute for sixty minutes. John-Henry, being the music maestro, curated a Spotify mix featuring sixty seconds from sixty different songs. The rule was simple: take a shot with every song change.

Ben had eased through the first fifty-one minutes, that is, until *Billy Jean* started playing. He'd taken his shot, done a couple Michael Jackson-esc dance moves, then dashed to the sink in their three-bedroom apartment to spew.

Later, they went to a house party a half-mile away, where he and Miles won eight games of beer pong in a row. One shy of their record, which they'd set their junior year in high school. Miles had even made a plaque: *Shawnee Mission East Beer Pong Grand Ultra Champions*.

Ben groaned and shifted onto his back. His head throbbed with pain, and he fumbled around the bed in search of his pillow.

Where was it? And why did his bed feel so strangely lumpy?

He reached under his back with his left arm and felt the familiar textile of denim. But there was something odd about these jeans. They were folded.

Ben didn't fold things. Nor did Drunk Ben.

Opening his other eye, Ben turned his head to the left and caught sight of a small white sign—*Kirkland Signature Men's Jean \$13.99*.

Ben glanced down. He was sprawled on a table surrounded by a sea of blue.

Whipping his head to the side, Ben took in the surreal scene—dozens of tables filled with clothes, towering shelves in the distance, lofty rafters, expansive rows of merchandise, colossal amounts of food.

What in the world?

He was in a Costco.

Ben pushed off the table of jeans, several pairs cascading to the linoleum floor. He picked them up and plopped them back atop the others.

How did he end up in a Costco?

He could feel panic settling in when it hit him.

Reed.

Miles's older brother.

Ben was an only child and Reed had been his adoptive big brother all through high school. Come second semester freshman year, after a lackluster four months playing soccer at a junior college, Ben had joined both Miles and Reed at Colorado State University in Fort Collins.

Reed had lived in a house with five other guys right across from the dorms and Miles, John-Henry (Miles's roommate), and Ben would spend the night over there at least once a week.

Come this year, Reed and his best buddy, Scott, moved into their same apartment complex.

The prank war ignited just a couple weeks into the school year.

It was early September and Ben, Miles, and John-Henry snuck into Reed and Scott's place—which was routinely unlocked—and turned everything in Reed's bedroom upside down. Including his bed. They swapped out the box springs and the mattress, flipping the box springs upside down so the wooden frame was on top, then meticulously remade the bed.

The next morning, Reed came to their apartment and lifted his shirt to reveal a four-inch-wide and two-foot-long bruise on his chest—a consequence of swan-diving onto his bed after a long night at the bar.

Reed and Scott countered a week later by coating their place in peanut butter, liberally spreading what must have been five jars of Extra Creamy Skippy across door handles, counter tops, cabinets, bathrooms, and even their ceiling fan.

Come Halloween, Ben (Tooth), John-Henry (Toothpaste), and Miles (Toothbrush) struck again, sneaking into Reed's place and hiding a three-week-old rotten fish in the AC vent.

Legend had it that the stench became so unbearable so quickly that when Reed (Ironman) and Scott (Morpheus) returned from the bars, the moment they opened the door, the two girls they had in tow (Handmaid's Tale and Little Red Riding Hood) turned and ran.

They'd been prepared for Reed and Scott's retaliation, but the semester ended, and it still hadn't come. Evidently, their revenge would be served cold.

Now here it was.

"Okay, Reed," Ben said under his breath. "You got me."

You got me really good.

Reed and Scott must have come over to their place last night

and found him passed out on the couch. Miles must have stayed over at his girlfriend's house and John-Henry, who was very popular with the ladies, must have hooked as usual. Leaving poor, single, Ben, as the only viable victim.

But how had Reed and Scott been able to pull this off? Did they know someone at the Costco who let them in before the store opened?

What time was it anyhow?

Ben patted his pants. His phone was gone. Also, his keys.

"Idiots," Ben muttered.

He strolled through the main hallway, making his way toward the front of the store. Interestingly, only two weeks had passed since Ben last stepped foot in this establishment. He and his roommates didn't have their own Costco membership, but on a recent visit, John-Henry's parents, who had come up from Colorado Springs, treated them to lunch and then generously offered to take the trio shopping at Costco.

It was a Saturday, and the place had been an absolute zoo as they filled two shopping carts full of indulgences and essentials alike—steaks, chicken, bags of chips, soda, nuts, coffee, cereal, frozen foods galore, laundry detergent, dish soap, toilet paper, paper towels, toothpaste. John-Henry's mother had even noticed Ben's fleeting glance at a four-pack of Nasacort (a nasal allergy spray) and had promptly added it to their haul without a second thought.

In fact, it'd been one of their purchases—a large eighteen pack of corn dogs in their freezer—that had led to Ben's premature departure from the house party the previous night. Come one a.m., those corn dogs had beckoned to him like irresistible highly-processed Sirens.

Though, come to think of it, he couldn't remember eating one.

He must have blacked out—*again*.

If history was any indicator, when Ben returned home, he would find the remnants of his binge: corn dog sticks, mustard and ketchup, possibly even a half finished beer.

Ben eclipsed the seasonal merchandise—mostly Spring gardening supplies—and the front of the store came into view.

He stopped.

Ben cocked his head to the side, wondering if his mind was playing tricks on him. Two weeks earlier, right on entering, Ben had b-lined to the laptops, checking out the bells and whistles on the latest MacBook. But now, the electronics section was on the opposite side of the store, next to the optometry department.

There was only one explanation: he wasn't in the Costco in Fort Collins.

"Damn," Ben muttered. "You guys really went all out. What did you do, take me all the way back to Overland Park?"

The store's layout bore an uncanny resemblance to the Costco in Overland Park, an affluent suburb of Kansas City, just a stone's throw from the Missouri border. It was a place he knew well, having frequented it routinely with his mother.

Of course, the most plausible explanation was that Reed and Scott had brought him to one of the numerous other Costco locations in Colorado.

Ben glanced upward at the ceiling forty feet above. Wispy clouds were visible through the skylights.

What time was it?

He headed toward the electronics section and made his way to the MacBook model that he'd been scoping weeks earlier. He glanced down in the bottom right corner.

It was 12:46 p.m.

"Guys!" he screamed. "This is funny and all, but I have a test in a couple hours that I have to go to. It's like twenty percent of our grade."

Ben's ANTH 100 class (*Intro to Cultural Anthropology*) started at 3:00 p.m. He'd gotten a C on his first test of the year, so he'd studied hard earlier in the week, hoping to pull his grade up to a B.

"Guys!" he shouted again, whipping his head around, searching for either Reed or Scott hiding behind a pallet of beef jerky or one of the many checkout registers.

He was met with the quiet hum of the empty Costco.

Which begged another question: *where the hell was everyone?*

Had Reed and Scott somehow persuaded the Costco to close for the day so they could pull off this extraordinary prank?

No chance.

The cost, the logistics—it was unthinkable.

And yet, here he was, standing alone.

Ben watched the time change from 12:46 p.m. to 12:47 p.m.

That's when he noticed the date next to the time.

"That can't be right."

He moved to the next laptop and checked the date. It was the same. It was the same on five different laptops.

The house party was on Thursday, February 15. He was sure of it, because his test was on Friday, February 16. But if the date on all the laptops was correct, then today was Tuesday, February 20.

Ben had been asleep for five days.

2

BEN

DAY: 1 / POPULATION: 1

Ben took several deep breaths and tried to calm his racing pulse. This had to just be another part of their prank. Change the date on everything to make him question his sanity.

“This just keeps getting better!” he shouted, his voice ricocheting off the walls and echoing up to the rafters nearly forty feet above.

Before Ben could do anything else, he needed to use the restroom. He weaved his way through the checkout lanes and wrapped around to the bathrooms. He stopped at the mid-way point of a long expanse of employee lockers.

Where were all the employees? Was today a national holiday or something?

Ben could never keep track of President’s Day. He tried to recall the exact timing of the holiday. He knew for sure that it was sometime in February, but he couldn’t recall if it was fixed to a specific date, or did it always fall on a Monday?

But today was Friday, right?

The possibility of having slept through an entire weekend seemed ludicrous.

Dismissing the thought, another theory came to him. Perhaps the Costco was new, not yet open to the public. That would explain the emptiness.

After using the restroom, Ben's path led him back past the lockers. He curiously checked twenty of them. Each was unlocked and void of any personal belongings.

"This place is brand spanking new," he mumbled to himself. They must have secured the store for their prank before it opened officially.

A genius move.

Ben peeked his head into the employee break room and noticed a refrigerator filled with premade sandwiches, salads, sodas, and water.

"I'm getting a water," he yelled to whomever might be listening or watching him on the video cameras in the corner of the room. He could imagine Reed, Scott, and their accomplices watching him on the CCTV and laughing.

He grabbed a water, cracked the seal, and drank greedily.

"And I'm grabbing a sandwich," he added, noting that his stomach felt hollow.

In fact, he felt leaner than he had in over a year.

Ben had always been in good shape due to the physical demands of soccer, but when he'd transferred to CSU, he'd overindulged in starchy dorm food, tripled his beer intake, and ate way too many late-night calzones. He quickly put on the Freshman Fifteen and the last time he weighed himself, he'd tacked on another Sophomore Seven.

He opened the ham and Swiss sandwich and ripped off a third of it in his mouth. His stomach welcomed the food and he quickly polished off the entire thing.

Ben tossed the sandwich wrapper and water bottle into the blue recycling bin, then exited. He spent the next twenty minutes walking every inch of the Costco looking for any sign of Reed, Scott, or another warm body.

He didn't find one.

At one point he found himself near the table where he'd woken up. He spent a few minutes neatly refolding the jeans that he'd haphazardly thrown back on the table.

"Okay, guys," Ben said, "This is getting old. I really have to go to this class."

He stared back toward the front of the store.

"Aha," he muttered. There was an opening in the wall near the employee break room that led to a staircase. He'd overlooked it earlier. It must lead to the management offices and most likely where his pranksters were watching him on video surveillance scamper around the enormous warehouse like an idiot.

He jogged up the stairs. "I know you guys are up here!"
But they weren't.

The many cubicles, three offices, and small conference table were a ghost town.

Ben bypassed a desk, grabbing a piece of paper with Costco letterhead.

Picking it up, he read aloud, "Costco Commerce City, Store #541." He was familiar with Commerce City; he'd been there once for a Colorado Rapids game. It was located just north of Denver, which meant he was about an hour away from Fort Collins.

It appeared these morons had either left him here to figure out how to get home on his own, or they were hidden away somewhere—probably recording him on their phones—and weren't offering any assistance.

At least, not yet.

Ben couldn't wait around to find out.

It was probably close to 1:30 p.m. in the afternoon and if he hurried, he could still make it to his 3:00 p.m. class. He would just have to find someone outside and ask to use their cellphone to order an Uber back up to school. It would be expensive, probably a couple hundred dollars, but his Uber account was linked to his mom's credit card.

He made his way to the Costco exit. The large garage door was down and Ben grasped the chain pulley with his right hand. He

pulled down, sending the twenty-foot-wide garage door creaking upwards. When the door was just above Ben's knees, he stopped.

He stepped back several feet to get a better view.

Concrete.

"What the fuck?"

Ben raised the entire garage door, revealing wall-to-wall concrete from floor to ceiling.

His heart began to race.

He slipped through the small opening that divided the exit and the entrance and raised the equally large entrance door.

More concrete.

He slapped his hand to the concrete, hoping that maybe it was just a thin little layer that would crumble into dust at the slightest touch.

But there was no echo. No drum beat.

The concrete was *thick*.

Shaking his head from side to side, Ben back peddled. He'd seen a few emergency exits while he'd been searching the store for Reed and Scott. He weaved through the vitamin section and spotted the door with the neon green exit sign. He pushed against the door bar, but it was locked.

Five more emergency exits.

Five more locked doors.

"This isn't funny, guys!" he screamed.

He ran back up to the employee steps and picked up one of the landlines phones. No dial tone. He tried to log onto the internet on one of the computers. No connection.

Finally, he made his way back down to the store floor.

Ben slumped into one of the white picnic tables in front of the food court, the weight of the situation pressing down on him. He closed his eyes, trying to find a moment of peace, and rubbed his temples with his fingers in a futile attempt to soothe the pounding headache that had begun to set in.

It was all just too elaborate, too meticulously executed. The idea that someone would go to such extraordinary lengths for a

mere laugh was inconceivable. Not even Reed and Scott could orchestrate something this complex.

Ben's eyes snapped open as three harrowing realizations washed over him, each more disconcerting than the last: He had been asleep for five days. He was trapped inside a Costco.

And this wasn't a prank.

3

BEN

DAY: 1 / POPULATION: 1

Thirty minutes later, Ben was still sitting at the white picnic table in front of the food court. If this wasn't a prank—and he was 99.99% sure it wasn't—he'd narrowed it down to four other alternatives.

First: this was some crazy psychedelic trip. They had one friend, Macon, who had spent the past summer backpacking through South America and was always trying to get them to try ayahuasca or peyote. Apparently, he had *a guy*. Maybe in Ben's state of inebriation, Macon—who had been at the party on Thursday night—had somehow convinced him to take one of the drugs. Or most likely, Macon slipped it into Ben's drink unnoticed.

So, maybe Ben had just been drugged and this was some strange vision quest. Maybe Ben's body was still at the party, but his brain was in this bizarre Costco. Maybe Ben was supposed to find his spirit animal and then he would suddenly know what he wanted to do with his life. Maybe Ben would see a llama eating a 30-pack of Snickers and realize he wanted to switch his major from Marketing to Anthropology.

The second alternative: he was lucid dreaming. A few times in

his life, Ben had dreams so vivid that when he eventually woke up it was nearly impossible to believe that what he just lived was all in his head. Was that what was going on here?

Third: this was some weird psychological experiment that maybe he didn't remember signing up for, or one of his friends signed him up for, or maybe he'd been talked into doing that very night and he was immediately whisked away.

Was it all a sick experiment, a twisted social study to see how people would react under extreme circumstances?

Lastly, and far most frightening: he'd been abducted against his will, drugged for five days, and then locked in this enormous warehouse.

This last hypothetical was not only the most logical, it was the most frightening, and it sent Ben down a rabbit hole.

Who would do this? Who would orchestrate such an elaborate ordeal? Or could?

The sheer scale of such an operation was remarkable.

Who had the resources and the audacity to pull this off? But perhaps the even more chilling question: why? Why go to such great lengths to imprison him in this surreal Costco prison? What purpose could it serve? Ransom? Revenge? Some nefarious agenda that was beyond his comprehension?

Ben's heart was playing leapfrog. His hands were clammy. His chest hurt. His vision was blurry.

Ben had heard of people getting panic attacks before, but he'd never had one. His roommate, John-Henry, who from the outside looking in—handsome, athletic, smart, good family—seemed the epitome of composure. But he'd suffered from tons of panic attacks since middle school which is what led him to meditation and breathing exercises.

Ben had even done one of these breathing exercises with him.

He readjusted himself on the plastic bench, then pressed one finger to his right nostril and inhaled through his left nostril. Then he closed his left nostril and exhaled through his right nostril. He

repeated this several times until he managed to get his heart rate back into double figures.

His brain successfully reset, Ben said, "If it is hypothetical one or two, the drug will eventually wear off or I will wake up. If this is some crazy psychological experiment, then someone will come and let me out at some point."

But if it's number four.

He stood up and made his way back to the laptops. He tried to log on to the internet, but it sent him directly to a display loop. He checked all fifteen floor models, then moved on to the phones.

No luck.

Ben made his way back up to the administrative annex and tried all four desktop computers and the three landlines.

Dead.

It appeared all communication to the outside world was cut off.

There were several areas of the warehouse Ben had yet to investigate and he walked to the back of the store and into the large kitchen bakery area. Oddly enough, everything looked completely pristine, and it had either been cleaned for hours or none of the equipment had ever been used.

Same went for the butcher and prep area.

There was a large rotisserie. Ben had always loved the big rotisserie chickens, though he'd always joked that they were unnaturally large. But that didn't stop him from always buying one whenever he had the chance. The large rotisserie oven wasn't even plugged in. It looked like it was fresh off the manufacturing room floor.

Next up, the loading docks. There were four loading bays. Shiny concrete that led to four roll up doors where supply trucks would back in. Ben wasn't surprised when he lifted each door to reveal solid concrete.

His last stop was the tire center, which was located near the front entrance near the customer service desk. There was a large, caged door which was already pushed up.

The oily smell of rubber invaded his nostrils as he pushed

through a door at the rear of the tire center that led to three car bays with mechanized lifts. Each of the bay doors were down, but concrete was visible through the large see-through plastic halfway up each door.

Ben took a few minutes to scope out all the tools laid out against the wall.

Satisfied that there was no secret exit, at least on the ground, Ben set his sights on the roof. In a corner of the store, near the loading bays, there was a white ladder connected to the wall that led up to the roof. There appeared to be some sort of door set in the roof that could lead to the roof.

As Ben started up the ladder, he thought of his mother. She was terrified of heights. His sophomore year of high school, they had taken a trip to Seattle to see his mom's brother. Uncle Roger, who was six years older and an engineer with Boeing, had taken them to see the iconic Space Needle. At the revolving top floor—six hundred feet up—his mom had crawled on her knees to the window and peeked out.

"For fork's sake, Calista," Roger had shouted. "Get off your forking knees and stand up."

Cursing hadn't been tolerated in the strict Adair household growing up, something Uncle Roger never could shrug off.

Not the case for his mother, who had no problem flipping him the bird and a quaint, "Fuck off, Rog," as she crawled back to the safety of the elevators.

Unlike his mother's *acrophobia*, Ben didn't have any phobias, at least none that he'd noticed in his nineteen years. Though, to be fair, he didn't particularly like clowns.

But that was all based on the movie, *It*.

His mom had wanted to take him to the sequel, and he very politely said, "Fork no."

What was his mom doing right now?

If it really had been five days, then she must be worried sick. They hadn't gone five days without texting since he'd gotten his first phone in second grade. He was one of the few kids who had

an iPhone at seven years old, but his mother was going back to college at that point, and she was sometimes late picking him up.

Had his mom called Miles when she didn't hear from him? Had Miles called her when he didn't show up at the apartment at any point on Friday? Had they already filed a police report?

He climbed up the forty foot ladder until he reached the latch to the roof. It wouldn't budge.

No surprise there.

He climbed back down, then made his way to the cereal aisle, where the towering blue shelving was situated directly beneath one of the eight skylights. He climbed to the first shelf, wiggling around a Saran-wrapped pallet of Honey Bunches of Oats. He scaled to the second shelf, the third, then the fourth. He was until he was about thirty feet up in the air, about ten feet below the skylight.

The clouds had disappeared, and the skylight was filled with a brilliant blue.

Too brilliant.

4k brilliant.

The skylights were actually just LCD screens.

"Shit," Ben murmured.

Ben methodically made his way back down to the store floor. He had two more places to check, and he made his way back to the food court. He stared at the quintessential Costco food court sign hanging high up on the wall: Polish dog, Turkey Sandwich, Pizza, Chicken bake, Churro, Yogurt Parfait.

He'd tried all of them in his time. Usually, he and his mom would grab a pizza to go, which they would nibble on throughout the week. Or sometimes they would devour the whole thing while watching a *Godfather* marathon.

Ben pushed through the door and entered. Similar to the bakery, butchery, and food prep area, the food court was immaculate. The pizza oven looked as though it had just come off the showroom floor. The hotdog warmers, pizza racks, counters. Everything looked brand new.

Ben exited, then made his way back to the tire center. He grabbed a battery powered drill plus an extra thing of drill bits.

He walked to the closest emergency exit door and surveyed the screws in the door hinges. He dropped to his knees, slid the Phillips head drill bit into the drill.

“Righty-tighty, lefty-loosely,” he murmured, aligning the drill bit with the first screw.

Ten minutes later, he’d removed all the screws and the hinges hung limply off the heavy metal frame. The door was heavy, easily seventy pounds, and it took Ben five attempts to slide the door away.

More concrete.

Ben had figured every door would be sealed shut with concrete and without delay, he switched out the Phillips head drill bit for an actual drill bit. He pressed the drill to the concrete and the metal bit slowly began to eat its way. Half an inch, a full inch, two inches, three, then the full four.

He made six holes in the concrete, then he ran back to the tire center. He grabbed a hammer, the largest screwdriver he could find, a black tire iron, and an extra battery pack for the drill.

Back at the emergency exit, Ben drilled, hammered, chiseled. The concrete broke away into small sections. Crumbs at first. Then nuggets. Then brick-like sections.

Sweat dripped from his head.

“God, I’m out of shape,” Ben said, wiping away the moisture with the shoulder of his green T-shirt.

Since quitting soccer, he hadn’t exercised much. Sure, they had an inner tube water polo team, but that was just another reason to drink. He and John-Henry would go to the rec center a few times a week, but they would spend two hours tinkering around with the weights and checking out the coeds. (Who John-Henry might go talk to, but he certainly wouldn’t.) Very little actual exercising took place.

Ben continued until he’d made a three-foot wide and hand-deep divot in the concrete. When the second drill battery quit, he

dropped the hammer. He made his way to the soft drinks aisle and grabbed a Vitamin Water. He chugged it down in three large gulps and then grabbed a second. It was then that he realized how hungry he was.

He glanced upwards at the “skylights” *program* that was running on the LCD screens. They were pitch dark. He must have been going at it for four or five hours.

His stomach rumbled.

With all this food at his fingertips, there was only one thing he wanted. He found his way to one of the freezer aisles and to the eighteen pack of jumbo corn dogs. He pulled out three, thought better of it, then added a fourth.

After microwaving the corn dogs in the employee break room, he made his way back to the plastic dining table. The condiment row was in working order and he filled four small cups, three with ketchup and two with mustard. Then he grabbed the largest soft drink cup and filled it with Dr. Pepper.

Sitting down, eating the corn dogs, Ben realized this was probably the first meal he’d eaten by himself where he wasn’t staring at some sort of screen, whether it be his phone, laptop or television, in a decade.

Once he’d devoured his food, he tossed everything in the trash, and wiped the table.

“Alright,” he said, clapping his hands twice. “Back to work.”

For the next three hours, he continued to widen the hole in the concrete. It was ten inches deep and still going.

Whoever had built this place wasn’t forking around.

Ben was just exiting the tire center with one of the recharged drill battery packs, when all the lights went out.

There was no residual light coming from anywhere. He was enveloped in absolute darkness.

“Oh, great.”

The wall separating the entrance and exit wasn’t far and Ben slowly eased his way forward. His hands found the slippery sign

for either new countertops or solar energy. He worked his way along the wall until he got to the first register.

The electronics section was somewhere off to the left, but all the TVs, computers, and phones had gone dark.

They all must have been programmed to power off or go to sleep at the exact same moment.

He took a few ginger steps forward. On the last step his right ankle smashed into what had to have been the corner of a wooden pallet.

He screamed, then hobbled, he fell to his knees.

Several long minutes later, his hand hit one of the electronics' counters. He stood up and powered up one of the laptops. It came to life and gave off enough illumination for Ben to walk to the phone display. He snapped an iPhone off the display, powered it on, then turned on the flashlight.

Twenty minutes later, he had an electronic lantern connected to a surge protector, which was connected to a one-hundred foot extension cord.

He'd planned on continuing to tunnel into the concrete, but he was suddenly overwhelmed with exhaustion. He limped to a sectional sofa display, grabbed a long fleece pillow and a throw blanket, then collapsed onto the sofa.

He thought he would lie there for hours. That sleep would never come. But it came fast.

4

BEN

DAY: 366 / POPULATION: 1097

Ben sensed he was walking too fast and slowed down, allowing the three newcomers to catch up. When they had, Ben gestured at the skeleton of a sectional sofa and said, "I slept here on my very first night."

The sofa, once plush and inviting, had long ago been pilfered of its cushions and the fabric cut away, leaving just a few wooden boards remaining. The boards had escaped re-purposing, instead becoming an unintentional monument—a calendar.

There were 366 slashes in the wood.

Ben was leading the introductory tour, a job for one of the fifteen Kirks designated as guides from their current group of forty-seven. Though his next scheduled tour wasn't for another twelve days, Ben had volunteered for this shift. It was an escape, a diversion from the looming weight of his own one-year anniversary of captivity.

The latest arrivals—Candace from South Dakota, Freya from Iceland, and Maurice from Colombia, now designated as #1095, #1096, and #1097 respectively—had just emerged from their intensive two-hour *Intake* session, meticulously conducted by Michelle.

The process began with standard background questions, swiftly escalating into a rigorous interrogation designed to extract as much information as possible.

Do you know if anyone outside has clues to our whereabouts?

Have there been any recent updates or breakthroughs in the investigation?

What are your theories about our current location?

Have you come across any theories or suggestions in the media about potential escape strategies?

Can you recall the last thing you remember before you found yourself here?

Were you able to see who abducted you?

Do you have any memories from your journey here?

Post-Intake, the weary group was shuffled to Ben, who began the tour by explaining the warehouse's division into fifteen sectors, laid out in a five-row by three-column grid. He pointed out that Sector 1 was nestled in the back left corner (Northwest) and explained how the sectors progressed sequentially, culminating with Sector 15 in the far Southeastern corner. This systematic approach helped to orient the new arrivals within the vast space.

Interestingly, some of the new arrivals already had a keen understanding of the layout, having watched *Crammed* religiously on the dark web. Some captives would arrive, and it was almost as if they were tourists, asking can we see *Yellowstone* (the colloquial name for Sector 2, which housed both the butchery and the dairy), or *Värglund*, which spanned Sectors 12 and 14 and was infamously the most daunting area within the warehouse.

For Ben, the most jarring encounters were with captives who recognized him as a sort of celebrity. He vividly recalled the shock of being greeted two months back by a new arrival who had gasped in recognition, shrieking, "Oh my gosh! It's you, Number One!"

Yet, the majority of the newcomers were visibly shell-shocked, wandering the warehouse in a zombie-like daze. They absorbed

their new surroundings with overwhelming disbelief, struggling to grasp the surreal and alien reality into which they had been thrust.

This was clearly the case for Candace, Freya, and Maurice, who greeted Ben's anecdote about his first night's lodging with silence.

Ben continued walking, until they reached the center sector of the warehouse. "This is Sector Eight," he said. "Better known as Jamestown."

Named after the first town in the United States, Ben had lived in Jamestown for the first sixty-three days of his captivity.

"This is where Odette stays, yes?" Freya asked, proving that even in the small village she called home in Iceland, there was a modicum of interest in *Crammed*.

This was the most common question since the celebrity actress had joined them nearly three and a half weeks earlier.

"Odette lived in Jamestown when she first arrived," Ben replied. "But last I heard, she was trying to get residency in Sector Ten—Circuit City."

"You can move from sector to sector?" Candace asked.

Ben nodded. "Anyone is free to live wherever they like, though there are certainly some sectors that won't be as welcoming as others." Neither Sector 9 (Siberia) nor Sector 1 (The Docks) had taken in a newcomer in the past few months. "The only rule is that in order to vote in the election—we have our second election coming up here in a couple months—you have to have established residency in your new sector for at least fifteen days."

If it wasn't enough that Michelle was in charge of all Intake, she had also taken on full responsibility for all the residency matters. She seldom delegated anything, as she was a perfectionist, and only trusted herself to do things correctly.

"But most sectors find strength in numbers," Ben continued, "and don't be surprised if you get recruited over the next several days. An envoy from most of the sectors will call on you at some point. There will be lots of promises, mostly about calorie intake. Currently, captives get thirteen hundred and twenty calories a day. But there are stashes, and they might

attempt to lure you with a bag of chocolate covered almonds or some other delicacy that was thought to long ago have gone extinct.”

Ben didn't get into the minutia of all the complicated alliances between the different sectors, how HIVES West was aligned with the SoFros (South Frozen) in Siberia. Or how the Docks and the Duttons (Yellowstone) had created the Great Northern Alliance. Or how Conk A and Conk B in Sector 13 were currently being absorbed by New Värglund to create a stranglehold on the southern sectors. Or how his very Kirks had aligned with the Elevens and HIVES East to stave off a complete regional lock down.

Ben turned to Candace and said, "You're number 1095, so you'll probably be heavily recruited by the Fives. Almost all of Sector Five are Fives and they like to stick together for some reason. They seem like a pretty solid group." Which mostly fell on the shoulders of the original #5—Shirley.

"For now, it's probably best to stay in Sector 3, the *Halfway House*, with the other recent arrivals. But in Kirkland we try never to turn anyone away, so if you feel too out of sorts, we can find somewhere to put you up."

Ben continued the tour to the front of the warehouse through Concourses A, B, and C and over a tunnel that connected Old Värglund and Värglund.

"This is Sector Fifteen, the Green Zone, GZ, or the Commons. This is the location of bathrooms, the showers, the washers, and one of the prime excavation points."

There were twenty people in line for the women's bathroom and about half that in line for the men's.

"So far, the bathrooms have been sufficient for the current occupancy. At times in the early morning and just before lights out, there might be a twenty or thirty minute wait. Best to abide by the Eight-Thirty rule to avoid the rush."

"What's the Eight-Thirty rule?" Candace asked.

"Wait until after 8:30 a.m. in the morning and go before 8:30 at

night." Ben explained that the lights in the warehouse went out at 10:00 p.m.

"You mentioned showers?"

"Yes, we have seven functional showers in the old employee break room."

Near Day 200, a plumber managed to cobble together enough spare piping to attach to some for sale showerheads. This was a significant upgrade from the makeshift showers they used before—large storage tubs with holes poked in the bottom, each pre-filled with five gallons of water.

"Shower privileges are based on your number: Zeros and Ones go one day, then Twos and Threes, Fours and Fives, and so on. Today is Six and Sevens, but as you're new arrivals you're allowed to shower as well. But make sure you keep track of what day it is because if you miss your day, you'll have to find someone to trade their shower privileges."

Ben didn't detail what people often traded: food, chores, clothing, bedding, protection, as well as some things far more illicit.

"As for washing clothes," Ben said. "The plumber was also able to hook up the four display washers. There is a lottery system to get your clothes washed. Washing detergent is hard to come by, but there is some floating around and you can probably get your hands on some if you really want it." There was a finite amount of detergent in each weekly delivery, but not enough to go around.

They wanted to keep resources competitive.

Ben actually had a small stash of Tide Pods from his first weeks that he'd never told anyone about. It was his lone secret.

"Anyhow, twenty random numbers are chosen daily that will be posted on the video screen each morning."

"What screen?" Maurice asked, his English near-perfect from his many years as a tour guide in Columbia.

"There are TVs mounted throughout all the sectors." Including all the display models, there had been forty-seven different televisions. One of the tech wizard arrivals had figured out how to create an internal network that all the TVs could stream. "They're

used as digital bulletin boards.” The messages varied from simple updates about rations, to health and wellness, to scheduling of events.

Ben finished off the tour of the Green Zone by showing the three newcomers the excavation point in the break room. Six people were in the room, each taking turns chiseling away at the steel walls. “Someday we will break through,” Ben said, though he knew the words were hollow.

In 366 days, using every tool at their disposal, they’d only penetrated an inch into the formidable barrier, which two engineers and one blacksmith had deemed a near-indestructible composition of steel alloys and tungsten carbide.

They exited the employee room, bypassing a large door. Ben had intended on skipping past the door without comment, but Freya asked, “And this door, where does it lead?”

The door, originally an emergency exit, had been detached and then repurposed to block both entry and exit to the staircase.

“That leads to the upstairs management offices,” Ben said. At least that’s what it had been before day 61. “Now it, um, serves as a prison.”

A prison within a prison.

It went by an assortment of names: Shawshank, Azkaban, Litchfield, but those were fictional. This prison was all too disgustingly real and most people, Ben included, referred to it as *Attica*.

Ben didn’t like to think about Attica. He couldn’t believe his closest friend was up there with all the other criminals. Or, more precisely, who President Kincaid had deemed *criminals*.

The real criminals still ran free. They controlled the votes, so they were untouchable.

Ben continued the tour, until they came to Sector 7, which consisted entirely of four three-tiered shelves made of blue metal. The shelves were covered in cardboard: walls, dividers, bedding, anything that could give a semblance of privacy or a smattering of cushioning.

At last count, each shelf housed more than thirty captives.

Though nearly every one of them was shrouded behind the hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of scraps of cardboard that had once housed their food supply.

"This is HIVES West," Ben said. "It's actually an acronym. It stands for *Human Inhabited Vertical Encampment Shelf*—"

Ben was struck in the head by something soft.

He glanced upward.

Standing on the top tier of the nearest shelf was Harley. She was giggling and had a Nerf gun in her hand. She pulled the trigger, sending another of the spongy yellow balls raining down on Ben.

He ducked and covered. Once the onslaught was over, he picked up one of the yellow balls, which was closer to brown after having been used so often and shouted, "You better be tethered up there!"

Harley took a step forward and revealed that she was wearing the safety harness, and it was indeed tethered to the ceiling. Harley said, "Emil is tethered in too."

Emil appeared at the edge of the shelf. He waved and said in slightly accented Russian, "Hey, *Bean!*"

"Oh good," Ben said, throwing the yellow ball back up. The ball sailed over Harley's shoulder.

"Missed me!" Harley squealed, sticking out her tongue.

"You be home for dinner," Ben said with a laugh.

"Cute kid," Candace said, her voice breaking on the second word.

From her Intake, Ben knew Candace had a daughter right around Harley's age, as well as twin boys a few years older.

Candace's legs started to wobble and then she began to sob. They had completed nearly an entire loop of the warehouse and Ben said, "I think that's enough for today."

Freya and Maurice helped Candace back to Kirkland.

Ben returned to his sleeping quarters, a small section on the second level of one of the shelves in the produce room. He was

happy to see his plate of rations went untouched, something that would never happen in at least half of the sectors.

He ate his half cup of cooked rice, two ounces of canned tuna, one tablespoon of peanut butter, and four small crackers, which he knew had been calculated out to exactly 440 calories.

He was still savoring the peanut butter, when a fellow Kirk peeked their head inside and said, "Kincaid just came on."

"Okay, coming."

Ben made his way outside and joined the other Kirks, who were circled up around the 48-inch TV screen. Kincaid was handsome and appeared older than his twenty years. He'd won the election that had been held four months earlier—by a very slim seven votes—which coincidentally, had coincided with the outside world presidential election.

Kincaid stood behind a makeshift podium in the Green Zone.

"My dear friends, my brave companions," Kincaid began, "today marks one year since the start of this unforeseen odyssey we call Crammed. This anniversary is not merely a date on the calendar; it is a powerful symbol of our endurance, our courage, and our unyielding spirit in the face of adversity.

"To those who have been here since the very beginning, your endurance inspires us all. You've seen Crammed evolve, adapt, and grow. Your wisdom and experience are invaluable assets to our community. To our recent arrivals, your fresh perspectives and eagerness to contribute have been a source of renewed energy and hope.

"I stand here, not just as your president, but as someone who shares your dream of freedom, your desire for safety, and your passion for maintaining our dignity and humanity. I pledge to continue exploring every avenue, every possibility, to lead us out of here. But until that day comes, I am committed to ensuring that Crammed remains a place where each of us can feel secure, where every voice is heard, and every individual is valued.

"Under my leadership, negotiations with *Ramona* have

improved substantially, resulting in tangible benefits for every one of us. We've successfully secured more calories per person, ensuring that no one goes to bed hungry. Essential supplies, once scarce, are now more abundant. We've negotiated for more toilet paper, more feminine hygiene products, recognizing the basic dignity these necessities afford. And perhaps most importantly, we've established greater access to the outside world, a lifeline that keeps us connected and informed, a reminder that we are not forgotten.

"Our journey hasn't been easy, and challenges lie ahead, but our unity has been our greatest strength. Let us continue to stand together, shoulder to shoulder, as we face the future with unshakable resolve. We are not just survivors; we are pioneers of a remarkable story of resilience and hope. Here's to another day in Crammed, another day closer to our eventual triumph. Together, we will not just endure; we will emerge stronger."

Several Kirks clapped loudly.

Well spoken.

Though Ben supposed Kincaid had always been a gifted orator. Ben recalled the first time that he met him.

It was Ben's third week at junior college and after they had throttled one of the cross-town rivals, their coach let them have the weekend off. Ben was still living at home, so he jumped in his car and drove eight and half hours to Colorado State University.

He arrived at the Parmalee dorms around 10 p.m. on a Friday night and Miles and his roommate were having a small get together. After giving Ben an enormous bear hug, Miles had turned to his roommate and introduced him as, "John-Henry Bloomingdale, heir to the Bloomingdale fortune."

John-Henry was handsome, six-foot, with perfectly coiffed hair that naturally spilled to the left. Several of the girls at the get together were smitten by John-Henry and it wasn't until they left to go to a party Miles's older brother Reed was throwing across the street, that Miles informed Ben, "John-Henry isn't really a Bloomingdale, it's just something he says to get chicks. His last name is really Kincaid."

Ben gazed back up at the TV, where President John-Henry Kincaid was giving his closing remarks.

Was anything he thought he knew about John-Henry true?

All those nights partying together. The three of them. Inseparable.

How could he have done it?

How could John-Henry have condemned Miles to Attica?

5

BEN

DAY: 2 / POPULATION: 1

At around 8:13 a.m., Ben would have rolled out of bed. The buses from the Ram's Village apartments to CSU campus operated on a tight schedule, with departures at :18, :38, and :58 past the hour. If history was any indicator, Ben would have sprinted out the door with his toothbrush in his mouth, hoping the :18 bus was running a minute or two behind schedule.

If he missed the bus, Plan B would be set in motion. Ben would hit the McDonald's two blocks away, then walk to campus as he ate. But if he made the bus, he would arrive at campus around 8:30 a.m. He would walk to the Lory Student Center and grab a bagel with cream cheese and a smoothie and scroll on his phone for half an hour.

Either way, he'd get to his 9:10 a.m. Economics class a few minutes late and find a seat near the back of the three hundred capacity lecture hall. Then he would take out his laptop—a four-year-old MacBook his mom had bought him for Christmas his sophomore year in high school—log into his Kindle Cloud Reader, and dive into whatever fiction series he was currently reading.

Not *this* Wednesday.

When Ben woke up on the sectional sofa, it took him several minutes to shake out of his surreal daze and force himself to his feet.

Now thirty minutes later, he glanced at the remnants of his breakfast scattered across the white picnic table: two Jimmy Dean Sausage Breakfast sandwiches, a partially consumed bottle of orange juice, and a bowl containing the remnants of his second serving of Honey Nut Cheerios.

If nothing else, living in a Costco was like the dorm cafeteria on steroids.

Ben cleaned up his trash, then wiped the table down with a Clorox wipe. With his belly full, he went and grabbed a pack of toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, deodorant. He went to the bathroom and washed his face and brushed his teeth.

His arms and neck were sore from his five hours of hard labor the previous day and he dry swallowed three Advil. Also, the concrete dust had activated his sinuses and he opened up a pack of Nasacort and sent two sprays into each nostril.

His one sense of routine.

From his many years playing soccer—especially those two a day practices in the Kansas August heat—Ben knew the Advil could only do so much for his aching body. He needed to get rid of the lactic acid in his muscles.

Ben changed out of the clothes that he'd been wearing for the past four days and grabbed a pair of sweatpants (\$13.99) and a graphic tee (\$9.99). Next, he went to the Fitbit display and removed one of the display models. It had most likely never been turned on and it still had 13% battery life.

Ben ran laps around the Costco weaving in and out between every aisle. According to his watch, he ran 1.4 miles in twenty minutes. He followed up his run with some light stretching, then returned to his excavation project.

Ben spent the rest of the morning chipping away concrete until he could fully stand inside his tunnel with his body.

At 1:00 p.m., he took a break.

He quickly rechecked all the laptops and smartphones for an internet connection. He restarted all of them, tried everything he could think of, but there was no service. He did the same with the computers and phones in the management offices.

For lunch, he had a chicken bake—they sell the same ones that they make at the food court in the frozen food section—and a Dr. Pepper.

Ben was planning on doing a loop to recheck each of the twelve emergency exits when he noticed the large boxes near the middle of the store.

Scoters.

Like most college towns and big cities in the United States, Fort Collins had been flooded with scooters. Green ones, purple ones, pink ones. They were everywhere, some lined up neatly on their kickstands, but the majority discarded haphazardly in the middle of sidewalks or in the gutter.

A neighbor of Ben's had fallen off his bike when he was a kid and suffered a traumatic brain injury and Ben was reluctant to ride anything—bike, skateboard, even wheelie shoes—without a helmet.

That said, he had ridden a scooter a few times. Once, with bad results.

It was almost a year earlier. Spring break. Actually, his spring break had ended, and he'd decided to stay for another few days to coincide with the University of Kansas's spring break. It was opening day for the Kansas City Royals. He and three friends had gotten cheap seats in the outfield. By the seventh inning, Ben had consumed seven large beers and two foot long hotdogs.

When the game was over, Ben's friends headed out to the bars. But Ben had plans with his mom. He was heading back to Fort Collins in the morning, and they were going to go to dinner and a movie. A date Ben meant to keep.

It was over an hour wait for an Uber, Lyft, or taxi. Against his better judgment Ben located a scooter and scooted 12.2 miles all the way back to Overland Park. He made it 12.1 miles without inci-

dent. He had just turned onto his neighborhood street when he hit the curb and flew off.

Instead of dinner and a movie, Ben and his mom spent two hours with tweezers and rubbing alcohol, picking the many pieces of asphalt from Ben's entire right side.

When he was covered with a meter of gauze and half a tube of Neosporin, they ordered Chinese and watched an "Evel Knievel" documentary.

It had been a great night.

Taking the scooter out of the box and quickly assembling it, Ben was thrilled to see the battery came fully charged. He grabbed one of the few snowboard helmets that were left over from the ski season merchandise, then zoomed through the wide main aisleway.

After checking each of the emergency exits, Ben found himself back at the front of the store.

How fast could he do three laps?

He set the timer on his watch, then zoomed around the exterior of the Costco once, twice, then three times.

"Three minutes and forty-nine seconds," he said, shaking his head.

Two hours later, when the charge on the scooter finally died, Ben had gotten his time down to what he felt was a very respectable three minutes and three seconds.

He put another two hours into his excavation of the front entrance. The tunnel he created was head height, four feet wide, and now four feet deep.

At 5:30 he called it quits.

He rode the recharged scooter to the back of the store and grabbed an eighty dollar tray of filet minions and plopped it next to the large stove in the food prep area. He quickly rounded up the rest of his groceries: butter, garlic, steak seasoning, premium sauté pan. He sauteed the steak to a perfect medium rare just like Gordon Ramsay had taught him in the YouTube tutorial he first

watched when he was twelve and his mom had to stay late for a meeting.

While Ben waited for the meat to rest, he whizzed around and procured nice plates, nice cutlery, a nice wine glass, and the most expensive bottle of red wine that he could find—a \$158 bottle of cabernet—and a novel.

“Not sure what the fuck is going,” he said, raising his full glass of scarlet liquid high in the sky. “But Cheers.”

He cheersed his companion, John Grisham, whose author photo took up the entirety of the back cover of his new book.

After consuming his steak, two glasses of red wine, and the first two chapters of the legal thriller, Ben found a large rolling cooler. He filled it with ice from the soda dispenser, then wheeled it to the back of the store. He opened up a case of good beer and a case of seltzer and dumped half of each into the ice. Then he walked to the snack aisle. He grabbed a large bag of chocolate covered almonds, a large tub of cherry licorice, and a large bag of potato chips, and retrieved his fully charged lantern.

He took everything into the leisure and toy aisle—piano, guitar, drones, remote controlled cars—and bellied up to a full-size Pac-man machine.

“Hello, old friend.”

Ben wasn't much of a gamer, in the strictest sense of the word, but he always loved the big arcade games, especially Pac-Man. There was a bar near his junior college that was very flexible when it came to underage drinking and he and a friend—the backup goalie—would play for hours after soccer practice.

Ben ate little yellow dots, snacked, and drank for the next few hours. When the lights finally went out, at 9:30 p.m. sharp, half the libations were gone.

At 1:14 a.m., Ben took the last drink of the last seltzer. He let out a loud belch and said, “One more game.”

But he couldn't.

Ben flipped on the lantern, then scooted to the bed section. There were several full mattresses, but there was also a selection

of memory foam mattresses. Ben read the particulars off each box.

"Okay, fourteen-inch gel super fluff, we're going to call you *Martha*."

Ben dragged the box to the store floor, then pushed it into the aisle that held the pillows and sheets. He unrolled the master mattress which within minutes had already poofed up to nearly half its size. He found the most expensive set of bamboo sheets, two memory foam pillows, and the most luxurious duvet.

Finally, he snuggled up in bed. He read another chapter and a half and then fell asleep with the book on his chest.

Ba-RING! Ba-RING! Ba-RING!

Ben jolted upright.

His head pounded and he brought his hand to his face.

What was that sound? Had it come from his watch? Had he set an alarm?

He cracked one eye open. He felt far worse than he had two days earlier when he awoke on the table of jeans.

11:47 a.m.

He let out a long sigh.

Damn you, Pac-man!

He opened the alarm function on his watch, hoping to silence it. He never wanted to hear that noise again.

Ba-RING! Ba-RING! Ba-RING!

Ben ripped the sheets off and jumped up.

The ringing was coming from the far back of the store.

Was it a phone? Was it a bulldozer making that noise from outside? Was someone here to save him?

He sprinted to the back of the store, stopping near the butchery.

Ba-RING!

This time it only rang once.

Ben sprinted to his right, then to the far back of the store, where they kept the cleaning supplies, paper towels, toilet paper, pet supplies, and bottled water.

He stopped in the farthest aisle.

Ba-RING!

He turned to his left. The ringing was coming from the back wall. Behind the large pallets of dog food. There were five different varieties—stacked two deep—and Ben b-lined for the one in the middle pallet. He stuck his head under the bottom shelf and glanced around. Behind the pallets directly to his right, there was a faint rectangular outline in the brick wall—a door.

Ben grabbed a large bag of blue kibble off the stop of the stack and tossed it to the ground. It took him several minutes to clear the first pallet. He slid the wooden frame out and started on the second pallet.

Ba-RING!

“I’m coming!” Ben shouted. “Don’t leave!”

He cleared the kibble, then lifted the wooden pallet and tossed it behind him.

Just off the side of the door, set in the concrete, was a small yellow button. It was elevated above the floor about half an inch. Currently, it was flashing orange.

Ben stepped on the button with his foot.

The rectangular door swung inward.

He tried to control his breathing. It wasn’t a rescue mission. It wasn’t a SWAT team. It wasn’t a news crew.

It was a little girl.