

Chapter 1

Day 1

Following a gasp of air deep enough to suck her soul back into her body, she spluttered her way into an upright position. When she stopped coughing, she swung her head to check her surroundings, then had to shield her eyes with her forearm. Sunlight streamed in from the curtainless window directly ahead of her and forced her to squint to avoid being blinded. It therefore took her a couple of seconds to realise she had no idea where this place was; nothing looked familiar, not the plain white walls nor the wooden floorboards, not even the bed on which she sat.

Now that she pressed her brain to try and remember something, all that filled her head was a dense fog. There were no memories of people she could call family, nowhere she could classify as home, no passions or purpose or goals or desires. She couldn't even recall her own name.

The best part of a minute later, her eyes finally adjusted to the light enough to make out the other side of the room. Only then did she realise she was not alone. Another girl sat on an identical bed, frozen in place. She didn't have the same issue with the sun since the window sat adjacent to her bed. Thick copper curls fell to the middle of her back, and her icy blue eyes stayed trained on her roommate.

"Where the hell am I?" she asked.

The redheaded girl didn't reply. Though she never broke eye contact, her pupils wobbled. As her roommate stood, she shuffled back as far as she could into the corner of the room.

She held up her hands. "Hey, hey, it's okay. I'm confused too, alright? I don't know where I am or even who I am. Do you?"

The girl shook her head. As small a gesture as that was, it was a start.

She looked around the room for even the vaguest of clues, but the entire room was as basic as could be. Even their clothes were matching plain white t-shirts and black trousers.

She frowned as she looked at her top. Stuck to it was a label, on which *Susan, 17* was written in careful, rounded handwriting. With nothing else to use as an indication of her name or age, she supposed she was going with that, for the time being anyway.

“Do you have one of these?” Susan asked the girl.

After a moment’s hesitation, she brushed her curls out of the way.

Beth, 14.

No wonder she was petrified. Susan did her best to keep her distance for the time being, but in such a small space she could only do so much. It couldn’t help that she was so much bigger than Beth; even though they were as stick-thin as each other, Susan was comfortably half a foot taller if not more.

She sat down again on the bed she’d started on. “Hi Beth. I guess I’m Susan.”

Beth still said nothing. The silence lapped uncomfortably against the walls.

Outside their room, a door creaked open. Susan instantly got to her feet.

“We’re not the only ones here, are we?” a deep, masculine voice said.

“Probably not,” a second boy replied.

Susan glanced at Beth. She continued to cower. If a skinny, actively non-threatening girl frightened her, two boys would suck her even further into her shell. However, with no one else to question as to her whereabouts or how she’d got here, Susan marched to the door and out into the corridor. The two boys at the other end of the hallway halted their conversation and exchanged stares with her.

They were both imposing, especially the boy on the left. While his companion was equally as tall as Susan, he had four or five inches on both of them. His deep brown skin and onyx hair were emphasised by his white t-shirt. It clung to his muscular torso as if it were several sizes too

small, threatening to tear if he stretched at all. He probably weighed more than Susan and Beth combined.

In contrast, the other boy was pale and comparatively lean, although still broad-shouldered and athletic. His features were more boyish than the chiselled face next to him, with a soft jawline and a pointy triangular nose. His short blond hair was a couple of shades lighter than Susan's. Only his eyes added any colour to him, a deep shade of blue that glimmered beneath the skylights that illuminated the corridor.

"What do you know?" she asked eventually.

"Only our names and ages," the pale boy said. "I'm Andrew, he's Nick."

"That's only based on these," Nick added, pointing to his nametag.

She considered for a moment and scanned the boys up and down. "Why should I believe you?"

Nick gestured between himself and Andrew. "We don't know each other either, but we're choosing to trust each other. You and your wee pal are too, right?"

She checked over her shoulder to look for Beth. She poked her head out around the doorframe, though she still hadn't worked her way out to the landing.

When Susan turned back to the boys, she scowled. "I only trust her because she's scared stiff. You two are a threat."

Nick mimicked her expression. "What are we meant to do about that? We'll keep our distance if we have to, but it's not like we can shrink."

"Stay where you are, then."

They shared a look of disdain with each other, but they followed her orders. She continued to peruse them from her spot at the opposite end of the hallway, lips pursed the entire time.

"Look," Andrew said, "just because we're bigger than you doesn't mean we're any less scared or confused, alright? All we want to do is try and figure out where we are and what we're doing here. If you'll let us go downstairs, we—"

She shook her head. "If I let you go down there, you might arm yourselves."

“Why would we do that?” Nick said. “I get that you don’t trust us, but there’s—”

“If you really get it, you’ll do what I say. Beth and I will go downstairs by ourselves, and you’ll stay here. If you follow us, I’ll assume you’re a danger to us, and I’ll protect myself however I can.”

She didn’t wait for them to agree. She made her way towards the staircase with brisk strides, then stopped at the top to check that Beth followed. She tiptoed her way there, eyes darting between the boys as she did.

An uncomplicated layout greeted them on the ground floor, with the floorspace wide and open, and a sequence of doors placed to their left and right. Five metres in front of the staircase was the front door, and its counterpart stared from the other end of the corridor. The skylights lit the huge area well, though the white walls accentuated their effectiveness.

Rather than charge outside, Susan headed through the one door that already lay open. The conjoined kitchen and dining room inside was as enormous as the hall and stretched the length of the building. On the table sat a folded piece of cardboard, the word *welcome* written on it in the same font as their nametags. Six watches lay beside it, along with a handwritten note.

Burying her unease for Beth’s sake, Susan took the note and skimmed through it silently. A list of rules, a section with some supposed advice, and a threat to do what they were told. Other than that, nothing. No explanation for where they were, why they couldn’t remember anything, not even an end goal to try and complete. Still, she supposed she ought to inform the boys, if only so they didn’t break any of the rules outlined in the note.

She headed back out of the kitchen with Beth still shadowing her. At least she seemed to have won the younger girl’s trust.

When they reached the landing, a couple of unfamiliar faces stood on the opposite side of the staircase to Andrew and Nick, one boy and one girl. The boy – Fletcher – was the antithesis to Nick: short and scrawny, and in possession of asymmetrical facial features that didn’t match up from any angle. His beady eyes were framed by a pair of glasses that were far too large for his face. On the other hand, Evelyn was plump with tawny

brown skin. Her dark locks fell to her hips in loose waves. More wary glances and overt distance-keeping were their main contributions to the group dynamic. At least the boys had stayed put. Perhaps their intentions were harmless after all.

Susan cleared her throat. "We found a note in the kitchen. It doesn't explain anything about who we are or how we got here, but it seemed pretty important."

The others gave her the go-ahead, and she unfolded it and read aloud.

"It starts with the heading 'rules'. It says, 'follow these rules and you'll remain unharmed'. Then it lists them all, which are... bizarre, really. Apparently, we're to lock the doors and windows by six p.m. every evening and can't unlock them until nine the next morning. We can't wear shoes inside, and we're not to read any books or watch any videos marked with a red cross, but ones without are fine."

"Why?" asked Nick.

"I don't know, but it might be best not to call their bluff."

"Anything else?" Andrew asked.

"'Advice' is the next section. 'Don't trust anything you see outside after six. Keep windows locked so you don't forget. Never go outside alone, but it is fine to be alone inside the house. Keep track of your resources in case they go missing. Most importantly, if you break any rules, you must survive until dawn before you are safe. This in turn will only last until dusk before you're hunted again.'"

"Hunted?" Andrew asked. "Hunted by who?"

"It doesn't say, but let's not find out."

Nick rubbed his face with both hands. "Fucking hell, is this real? Am I actually awake, or is this some kind of fever dream? Have I been drugged?"

"It feels like that to me too," Susan said. "But what can we do besides follow the rules we've been given?"

"Break them and see what happens."

"And then get ourselves hunted by whoever abducted us? That would be idiotic."

Andrew nodded. "I agree with you on that. But if that's the way we're looking at it, surely that makes all of us a team, in which case we need to work together."

Susan looked him up and down for the hundredth time. "Maybe you're right, but until we figure this out, I'd like you and Nick to keep your distance. I don't think that's unreasonable."

Andrew agreed to her terms, and eventually Nick did too. From there, Susan continued to take the reins and led the way back downstairs, with Andrew and Nick bringing up the rear at a distance. She headed to the kitchen again, then handed each of them one of the watches on the table. She doublechecked that the time on each matched the clock above the doorway they'd entered from. Ten past one.

"Sounds like it's safe for us to go outside and check where we are, then," said Nick. "We can scout around and see what we've got to work with. The way it says we've to survive makes me think we're probably on a farm or something."

"No harm in checking, I suppose," Susan said. "By the sounds of it, we're here for the long haul."

Nick led the way. Andrew stuck with him, while the others continued to leave a gap between themselves and the boys. Only a couple of steps outside the front door, Nick's guess proved correct; directly opposite the house stood a large barn, which he immediately marched towards. Fortunately, the sun stood strong in the sky, and as a result the grass didn't dampen Susan's socks.

"Unlocked," Nick noted, pushing the doors open.

Despite its spacious interior, the barn contained disappointingly little: a couple of bulky machines at the back of the room, some junk-littered shelves, a small collection of agricultural tools, and an old, red pickup truck. Behind the two front seats was a bench for further passengers. Although fitted with three seatbelts, it could probably fit an extra person at a squeeze, provided Andrew and Nick took the spaces in the front.

"There's a note on the inside window," Nick said. He tugged the door, but the lock resisted. "Anyone see the keys for this thing, or should I break the window?"

"Don't," Susan said firmly. "We might need that window intact later. Let's find the keys."

They spent half a minute searching the mostly empty area before concluding they were somewhere else, then headed back to the house to check there. As they reached the front door again, something caught Susan's eye. She frowned, then crouched to inspect them.

"Shoes," she said. She stood up, one pair of black sneakers in her hands. "They're different sizes, but they're all the same. They're labelled."

"Figures," Andrew said. "The note said we couldn't wear shoes inside."

"Leave them out here, then," said Nick. "Anyway, we finding those keys or what?"

Susan returned the shoes and led the way back to the kitchen. After rummaging in all the drawers, Fletcher found the car keys. Then they trotted to the barn again, this time affording themselves the time to put on their shoes. Susan's fit perfectly; not so tight that her toes touched the end, but snug enough to stay glued to her feet.

"This is freaking me out," Evelyn said.

A couple of others echoed her sentiments, but this was only one of many, many unsettling details about the scenario they'd woken up in. That their abductor had picked out the right size of clothes and shoes for each of them ranked very far down Susan's list of things to panic about.

After getting the note from inside the truck, Susan read it aloud again. "'This car is to be used as a last resort. The tank is full, but it will go through it quickly.'"

"Is that it?" asked Evelyn.

"Yep," said Susan. "Bugger all."

"What now, then?" Andrew asked.

"We aren't going to find much in here, that's for sure. I suppose we should go and see what else we've got to work with."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Nick said. He gestured to the truck. "The answer's right here."

Susan shook her head. "That's not the answer. The note literally says that it's a last resort."

"So? Do you honestly think whoever left that note isn't playing some kind of game with us? They want us stuck here, that's why there's all these fucking rules and some vague threat to keep us in line. Let's just hop in the truck and get outta here."

"And drive to where?" Andrew asked. "We have no idea where we are. At the very least, let's take a walk first and see what we find."

Nick's scowl shifted from Susan to Andrew, but he put the argument on hold for the time being.

Once more, Susan led the way outside, then picked an arbitrary direction and started walking. There was little to make conversation about as they walked given they knew nothing about themselves. Their continued scepticism of each other led to the group fracturing into three distinct pairs, each several metres apart.

The burning sun observed overhead, making the long walk all the more unpleasant. Bar Nick and Evelyn, they were all as close to the colour of snow as humanly possible, though at this rate they would soon resemble a pod of lobsters. They weren't walking particularly briskly but Susan's skin already dribbled, and she could feel the itch of sunburn setting in.

They finally found something among the desolate landscape twenty minutes later; a seemingly endless array of tall golden crop. A spread of lonely trees marked the start of the field, each some twenty metres away from the last. Their branches were skinnier than Susan's arms, their tips leafless. From there, a blanket of wheat stretched infinitely in both directions.

"Just wheat, nothing else?" she asked no one in particular.

"And why's it so far away?" asked Nick. "It's gonna be a nightmare having to trek back and forth from here whenever we need some of this stuff."

Their respective rhetorics both faded into the wind. After a handful more wasted seconds scanning for something new to pop up, Susan suggested they make their way back to the house. She didn't wait for an

agreement from the others, but they followed obediently without one. There was nothing more for them to see out there anyway.

When they made it back to their starting location, they explored the back of the house, which had a few segments of grass fenced into individual squares. The largest was empty and led directly to the back door. The two located further from the house were both populated; one with a stack of nest boxes and a brood of hens roaming the free space, the other with another friendless tree, albeit a much healthier one than those out in the field.

Checking the nests, they found an abundant supply of eggs along with another note. Susan read it for everyone again. Though brief, it provided instructions for how to keep the chickens fed and watered. It wasn't much, but it was more helpful than the warning not to drive the truck until they needed it.

Once they'd transported the eggs to the kitchen, they spent a few minutes inspecting what else there was in the room. Most of it was fairly conventional, but one device stuck out. Another note labelled it an electric grain mill and described how to make flour from the wheat that didn't go towards feeding the animals. Besides that one point of interest, however, the room was the same as the rest of the house; wooden floorboards and plain, undecorated white walls, and that was about all there was to it. The counters and cupboards were the same oak as the floor, though the table and chairs were made from a marginally darker wood.

With nothing else to see, the group wandered back outside in the opposite direction from their earlier adventure. This time they arrived at their destination much quicker, finding an orchard of trees decorated with glossy red apples. A hundred metres over, more trees presented them with oranges.

Another few minutes' walk away, there were rows of different vegetables, marked with signs at the head of each one. Everything from peas to potatoes to corn, all in plentiful supply. Certainly, they were unlikely to starve if their sources remained as rich.

Nick continued to walk in the same direction with the justification that there might still be more hidden further away. The others did not

immediately go with him, but when Andrew followed, the rest joined the bandwagon at a distance.

Another five minutes passed before they found the next feature of the farm; a large, square plot guarded by a ring of barbed wire. Inside, a herd of cows grazed. At the point of approach, another paper note was crucified on the fence, once again left for Susan.

“‘These cows will provide milk for all your dairy products. There is a pasteuriser in the barn, along with instructions on how to make use of the milk. The cows are also to be slaughtered for meat when necessary.’ Then there are instructions on how to milk a cow properly, and more instructions for putting together cow feed.”

“Gotta be a slaughterhouse somewhere, then,” Nick said.

The grimmer parts of living off the land hadn’t occurred to Susan until now, nor did she want to dwell on them, but Nick and Andrew headed the search party again. On the way, they passed another fenced enclosure filled with pigs, again with a note. Unlike the cows, the sole purpose of the pigs was to be used for meat.

Near the two enclosures stood a tall, grey building. They wandered in through the unlocked back door. The room they found themselves in was surgically clean and entirely empty apart from the drains on the floor and a line of hooks attached to the ceiling. Through the door at the back sat a spread of butchering stations. At the end of that room were several meat lockers where a couple of cuts tenderised, but besides that, bare white dominated. The one exception was the rack of knives on one of the walls, in the middle of which sat a high-calibre pistol. It could only have had one job.

They escaped the grisly slaughterhouse within a couple of minutes of arrival. No one spoke until they were all the way back at the house.

Once there, they checked around the large property to see what else hid in plain sight, but there was surprisingly little despite the expansive area. Along with the cramped upstairs bathroom, there was another far larger and more luxurious one downstairs, complete with marble tiles that copied the colour scheme from the rest of the house. Next door was a far less impressive utility room which they left after a ten-second investigation. Other than the overly large kitchen, that left only a spacious

living room and a much more cramped lounge, the latter of which they investigated last of all.

Squeezing all six bodies into the little box left them without much room to move. The floorspace couldn't have been more than ten square metres in area. As with every other room in the house, the floor featured naked wood, and the walls were the same shade of white as their t-shirts. At least this room featured some decoration, with a large map of Scotland on the wall behind the lone settee. A fat, boxy TV hunched on a low wooden cabinet against the opposite wall, with a VCR plugged into it inside the cabinet. Fletcher immediately studied the VCR while Beth skimmed through the collection of VHS tapes stacked untidily on the shelf on the far wall.

"Found one of those red crosses," Beth announced, just about the first words Susan had heard from her. She held it out for Susan to take.

She turned it over a few times in her hands. When she stopped, she tapped the top of the case a few times. "It's numbered. Number three."

Beth continued to sift through the tapes until she found another, this time numbered one. Forty seconds later she caught the last of them, five in total. Though they were stored within cardboard sleeves, they contained no information, whereas the rest of the movie collection all featured detailed synopses of their respective plots.

"I know it said not to watch it," said Nick, "but d'you think we should call their bluff? There's got to be something important on there if we're not supposed to watch."

Susan shook her head. "I'd rather play it safe for now. I'm sure they're significant, but until we know what we're up against, we'd better follow the rules."

Andrew pointed towards the bookcase on the opposite wall. "I'm guessing that goes for those too."

She spun to follow the path of his index finger, then went to inspect. Unlike the tapes, the books were neatly arranged in alphabetical order. Those with red crosses were placed last from one to five in order.

"Same number of books as tapes," she noted.

"Think they're linked?" Andrew asked.

“They must be.”

Fletcher poked his glasses back up his nose. “But if we can’t watch them, how are we supposed to work out what they’re for?”

“Maybe it’s best we don’t work it out. We might only need them if something goes wrong.”

For a while, they continued to aimlessly scour the shelves. Nothing prompted any useful discussion, until Andrew spoke up. “Do you think there’s something to the splits in ages?”

Susan scanned each of their nametags to doublecheck everyone’s ages, then frowned. “Nothing’s jumping out at me, why?”

“We’re split fifty-fifty by gender; I would have thought it would make more sense for us to be paired up. Y’know, two fifteen-year-olds, two sixteen-year-olds, and two seventeen-year-olds. Instead, we’ve got Beth at fourteen, then Fletcher at fifteen, then Evelyn at sixteen, then the three of us at seventeen.”

She twirled a lock of blonde hair around her finger while she mulled over it. “You could have a point, but maybe we’re overthinking now.”

“Hard not to overthink,” Evelyn said. “The tags are the only clue we’ve got.”

Suddenly, Andrew’s eyes lit up. “No, they’re not. What about where we’re from?”

Susan’s frown grew deeper. “What do you mean? We’re all Scottish.”

“Aye, but you’d think if someone was taking hostages, they wouldn’t travel across the whole of Scotland to do it. The accents I’m hearing don’t match at all.”

Like last time, Susan gave it a handful of seconds of thought before she spun ninety degrees on her heels and walked towards the large map on the wall. “Actually, you might be onto something.”

Red dots marked the map. Two in the Central Belt, a couple further east, one in the Borders, and one in the Highlands. Six. As convenient as that number seemed, she initially wrote it off as coincidence, figuring they had to represent the major cities. Except what could be marked out that close to the English border?

"Wait, wait, wait." She pointed to the dot in the Highlands. "That's not where Inverness is. And those aren't quite Glasgow or Edinburgh either. These dots have to be where we're from."

"Are you sure?" Evelyn asked. "Couldn't they be something else?"

"I think she's right," Andrew said. With his index finger he circled one of the dots, located slightly east of the Central Belt. "Fletcher's got to be from somewhere in Fife. That accent's hard to miss."

Susan nodded. She pointed to the dot further north-east, near Aberdeen. "I'm pretty sure Evelyn is from somewhere east as well, so that has to be her."

Andrew circled the dot nearest Glasgow. "Aye, and Nick's from the west somewhere, so that's gotta be him."

Susan frowned at him. "Really? His accent's not that thick."

"Hundred percent. He's not from the rough side, but definitely somewhere around there."

"And you're definitely a Teuchter," Nick said.

Susan glanced at him. "Where's that?"

Andrew tapped the mark in the Highlands. "Up there."

"Okay. What about me?"

"You're dead posh," Nick said. "So, Edinburgh."

Susan looked to Andrew, squinting at him while she waited on his judgement.

"If it's between Edinburgh or the Borders, I'd guess Edinburgh too. Which leaves Beth being from down there." Andrew joined the dots between the six areas, starting at the bottom and working his way up to the east before trekking across to the middle of the Highlands. "Point is, that's a big area to cover. Hundreds of miles."

"You're right," Susan said. "And what's weirder is this place doesn't seem like Scotland. It's too flat, and there are no trees."

"And it's not raining," Nick added.

She ignored his comment. "If we're all Scottish, why would we be in another country? Something doesn't add up. But even disregarding that,

it's pretty bloody weird that we're being held in the middle of nowhere, with no way to escape but with the resources to survive."

"There *is* a way we can escape," Nick said. "I'm telling you, if we all squeezed in that truck, we'd be able to travel in one direction and find our way out of here."

"We're not doing that. What if we find nothing, run out of fuel, and get stranded in the wilderness?"

"And what if we don't? What if that's all it takes to get out of here? Who put you in charge anyway?"

"I never said I was in charge, but I'm the only one here who will put my foot down and stop you from getting all of us killed."

"You're the only one here who's taking everything I say as hostile. You might think I'm an eejit, but if you got off your high horse—"

"You think *I'm* on my high horse? You're the one who—"

Andrew clapped his hands together as loudly as he could until they halted their argument. "For fuck's sake, will you two get a grip? Yelling at each other won't get us anywhere. Like it or not, we're stuck together. Let's talk this through as a group of six instead of making it about whoever has the loudest voice."

Susan and Nick traded glares, but they eventually agreed to hear him out.

"Who thinks we should take the truck and try to find help?" Andrew asked.

Only Nick and Fletcher raised their hands.

"Oh, come on," Nick said.

Andrew held out a hand to get him to stop. "If we're a team, this is the fair way to do things. Who thinks we should break one of the rules to see what happens?"

Nick was the only one to agree this time.

"Alright. So, if those options are off the table, that means we have to try and survive using the stuff we found earlier. Who agrees?"

Everyone raised a hand.

"There. Was that so hard?"

“How long do we have to keep this up for?” Nick asked. “We could be here for weeks or even months for all we know.”

“Actually,” Evelyn said from the corner of the room, “I found something that could help with that.”

She passed a calendar to Susan, who immediately flipped through it. Another frown crossed her face as she did, and she held the calendar up for everyone else to see. “No months, just days. Thirty days per page, but...” She flipped to the second page, where the numbers continued from thirty-one through to sixty. “...they continue ascending. All the way up to one hundred and twenty.”

“What happens once we reach day one hundred and twenty-one?” asked Andrew. “Maybe that’s the end.”

“So, we’re supposed to survive out here by ourselves for four months?” Susan said. “I think that’s unlikely.”

“Not to be a pessimist, but that might be the whole point.”