

# Chapter 1

## Day 1

Following a gasp of air deep enough to suck his soul back into his body, he spluttered his way into an upright position. When he stopped coughing, he swung his head to check his surroundings, then had to shield his eyes with his forearm. There were no windows, but the bright light in the centre of the ceiling forced him to squint to avoid being blinded. It therefore took him a couple of seconds to realise he 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 he sat.

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

The best part of a minute later, his eyes finally adjusted to the light enough to make out the other side of the room. Only then did he realise he was not alone. On an identical bed, another boy sat in a similar position, using his hand as a visor against the violent star watching above. His deep brown skin matched that of an acorn, both in colour and its slight glossy sheen. Despite its onyx colour, his hair had a similar glow to it, and his plain white t-shirt served to emphasise both colours. It clung to his muscular torso as though it were several sizes too small, threatening to tear if he stretched at all.

They both reacted at the same time, jumping in surprise. That the other guy reacted the same way told him that he was equally confused by the situation, so despite his intimidating physique, he dismissed him as a

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threat. Again, they both had the same thought at the same time, opening their mouths to ask the same question.

"Where the hell am I?"

They stared at each other for a few seconds. All the while, their silence lapped uncomfortably against the walls of the box they sat in.

"You don't know either?" the other guy said.

He shook his head. "I don't even know *who* I am."

The boy leaned forward, still squinting. "Apparently, you're Andrew." He pointed towards him. "Says on your shirt. Says you're eighteen too."

He looked down at his top to see the nametag for himself. He was right, on it was simply *Andrew, 18* in careful, rounded handwriting. With nothing else to use as an indication of his name or age, he supposed he was going with that, for the time being anyway.

Andrew looked across at the other boy and spotted that he had a sticker of his own. He seemed to have figured that out for himself, as he craned his neck to try and read it. He struggled to do so, and Andrew helped him out.

"Looks like I'm Andrew and you're Nick. And we're both eighteen."

"Guess so. Don't have anything else to go with, do we?"

"Don't think so."

Briefly, they were silent again. The lack of sound echoed loudly, but with no knowledge of themselves, each other, or their location, they had nothing to fill the void.

Nick finally broke it a minute later. "I can trust you, right? You're not having me on?"

Andrew held up his hands. "I'm completely baffled, mate. But if you know nothing and I know nothing, I'd assume we're on the same side."

He nodded, then got to his feet. Now that he stood, he was even more imposing, well beyond six feet in height. Just as well that he decided they were allies, because Andrew posed as much danger to him as a block of wood did to a chipper.

"I think you're genuine," Nick said. "Fancy taking a wander, see if there's any clue as to what we're doing here?"

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Andrew shrugged. "Worth a shot."

He joined him at the door, and they walked out of the room into a long hallway, illuminated by a line of skylights. The room they came out of stood at one end, with another four doors spaced along the corridor. The boys shared a look, and Andrew was instantly sure that Nick thought the same thing he did.

"We're not the only ones here, are we?" Andrew said.

"Probably not."

"Do we wait it out, or see if—"

A door flung open at the opposite end of the corridor to cut him off, and the two boys froze in place. A girl around their age joined them in the hall, then immediately stopped once she caught sight of Andrew and Nick. A staring contest ensued between the trio for a short while before another girl poked her head around the corner of the door. She looked younger than the other girl, although her preference to hide behind the doorframe rather than walk into the hall accentuated that.

"What do you know?" the first girl asked eventually. Though the phrasing of the question was slightly odd, it wasn't entirely out of place given the circumstances.

"Only our names and ages," Andrew said.

"And that's based on these," added Nick, pointing to his nametag.

The girl 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 little companion are too, right?"

She checked over her shoulder to see if the younger girl made any progress against her shyness. She had worked her way out to the landing but remained behind her guardian. When the older girl 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."

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Nick rolled his eyes at Andrew, but both boys 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."

"Oh, come on," Nick said, exasperated. "I get that you don't trust us, but—"

"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 threat, 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, though her companion tiptoed behind her. Andrew already sensed they were polar opposites, and it didn't stop at personality either: the older girl – Susan, according to her nametag – was more than half a foot taller, surely at least six foot. Her blonde hair sat in a perfectly straight line across her collarbones. The intense brown of her eyes could not have contrasted more with the sharp, icy blue of the other girl, whose copper hair fell in thick curls to the middle of her back. Besides wearing the same identical clothing as the boys, the only features the two girls shared were their pale skin and their skeletal demeanour. Even combined they probably weighed less than Nick.

After the two girls disappeared, silence washed around the hall again. Susan's threat lingered among it, and Andrew didn't move his feet from the spot he'd been told to stay in. To his left, Nick fidgeted, soon wandering from his place. To begin with, Andrew let him pace, but when Nick approached the nearest door, Andrew finally spoke again.

"Nick, I don't think we should test Susan's patience. She doesn't seem like she's got much of it."

"She said she didn't want us to follow her, not that we couldn't move." He knocked on the door. "Anyone in there?"

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No response came.

"I'm not sure this is how we should go about introducing ourselves," Andrew said. "If there's anyone else, they'll have heard us by now. If you start barging into people's rooms, they'll react the same way Susan did."

"Well, what do we do, then?"

Andrew shrugged. "Wait for them to join us. That's about all we can do."

Nick sighed, but he trudged back over to Andrew. Not a moment later, the same door he'd knocked on finally opened. The boy that emerged 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. Yet to utter any greeting, his gaze flicked between the two onlookers.

"We're as clueless as you," Andrew said.

The boy – Fletcher – nodded. "I heard you talking."

Silence filtered back in. Fletcher wringed his hands together, eyes darting around the corridor.

"Do you trust us?" Nick asked.

"Don't think I have a choice. If none of us know anything, we have to work together."

Nick nodded. "That's what we thought too."

Further along the corridor, another door creaked open. Another girl crept into the hallway, eyes pointed towards the three boys. She was slim, though not to the extent of Susan and Beth, and her skin was a tawny brown to their ghostly white. Her dark locks fell to her hips in loose waves. More wary glances and overt distance-keeping was her first contribution to the group dynamic, though Andrew preferred that to an outburst like Susan's.

Before anyone could direct any conversation towards her, the quiet thump of footsteps on the staircase announced the return of Susan and Beth. Susan held a folded note in one hand, but she put the message on hold when she saw their two new housemates.

"Is that everyone?" she asked no one in particular.

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Andrew pointed to the only door yet to be opened. "No one's come out of that one."

The group of six waited for the final door to open by itself. After a minute of non-cooperation, Susan took charge and opened it herself. Some of the tension lifted when it transpired to be an empty bathroom, and they forced a chuckle at their overly-cautious approach.

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 in her received pronunciation.

"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?" asked Andrew.

"*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 kinda fever dream?"

"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."

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"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."

She 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 downstairs, with Andrew and Nick bringing up the rear at a distance. An uncomplicated layout greeted them, with the floorspace wide and open, and a sequence of further 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. Without a plan of their own, the rest followed her. 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, along with six watches which Susan handed out.

Andrew doublechecked that the time on his watch 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," said Susan. "By the sounds of it, we're here for the long haul."

Nick led the way. Andrew shadowed 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.

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Fortunately, the sun stood strong in the sky, and as a result the grass didn't dampen Andrew'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 just 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 checking 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, Susan – who headed the group – stopped and turned. She frowned, then crouched to inspect something at the side of the porch.

"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 all labelled."

"It just gets weirder," muttered Andrew.

"No kidding," 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. Andrew's fit perfectly; not so tight that his toes touched the end, but snug enough to stay glued to his 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.



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That their abductor had picked out the right size of clothes and shoes for each of them ranked very far down Andrew'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?" asked Andrew.

"We aren't going to find much in here, that's for sure. I guess 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 of all 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 Andrew's skin already dribbled, and he could feel the itch of sunburn setting in.

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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 Andrew's arms, their tips leafless. From there, a blanket of wheat stretched infinitely in both directions.

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

"And why's it so far away?" asked Nick. "It's going to 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, but 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 hid in plain sight 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

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floor, though the table and chairs were manufactured 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. She read through it silently, then repeated the information aloud.

*"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."*

"There must also be a slaughterhouse somewhere, then," Nick said.

The grimmer parts of living off the land hadn't occurred to Andrew until now, nor did he want to dwell on them, but Nick headed the search party and he had to go with him 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

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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 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 the UK 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, then 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.

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"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 these 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?" asked Andrew.

"They must be."

"But if we can't watch them, how are we supposed to work out what they're for?" Fletcher asked.

"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 the map on the wall struck Andrew with inspiration. "Do you think there's something to the splits in ages and nationalities?"

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, whatever. Instead, we've got Beth at fifteen, then Fletcher at sixteen, then Evelyn at seventeen, then the three of us at eighteen."

She tapped her chin with her index finger while she mulled over it. "You could have a point, but maybe we're overthinking now. What's your theory on the nationalities?"

"Well, you'd think if someone was taking hostages, they wouldn't travel across the whole of Britain to do it."

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No doubt the others had noticed that he was Scottish and Evelyn was Welsh; despite the few words she'd spoken, her accent was too thick to miss. 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.

"Again, that's a good point." She circled the south end of the map with her forefinger. "Nick's accent sounds like London to me, and I think Beth and I are from somewhere south as well. I don't imagine Fletcher is from anywhere beyond the midlands either." Her finger drew across to Wales. "Evelyn wouldn't be that far away from the four of us. So why..." She stretched up as far as she could reach, a few miles over the border into Scotland. "...would you be from somewhere so far away? Your accent sounds like it's from the Highlands somewhere as well, which is even weirder. Even between Inverness and the border must be two hundred miles, and there would be three hundred more to London."

"It could be that he grew up there and moved south later on," said Evelyn.

Susan pursed her lips. "Maybe."

"If not, then someone's travelled several hours in both directions to get him here, which doesn't make sense."

"We don't even know where *here* is," said Andrew. "What's to say we're in England?"

"Doesn't seem like Scotland to me," Nick said. "Too flat, and there's no trees. And it isn't raining."

Susan held up her index finger to halt Andrew's retort. Much like a school pupil, he did as he was told.

"Regardless of where we are," she said, "you're onto something with the nationalities. 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."

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"We're not doing that," Susan said. "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 idiot, 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?"

He and Nick were the only ones 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."

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She passed a calendar to Susan, who immediately flipped through it. A 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 fifty."

"What happens once we reach day one hundred and fifty-one?" asked Andrew.

"We can keep track manually."

"I think he means, what if something specific happens on that day," said Nick. "Maybe that's the end."

"So, we're supposed to survive out here for nearly half a year?" Susan said. "I think that's unlikely."

"Not to be a pessimist," said Andrew, "but that might be the whole point."