

## CHAPTER ONE

The truck's battery was unsalvageable. I knew it the moment I lifted the bonnet. And by unsalvageable, I mean melted. And by melted, I mean it looked like a Dali painting; the trippy one with the clocks. Everything around the battery – engine included – was black and charred. I didn't remember it being that bad when it happened, but in retrospect, it was a miracle I hadn't died in a blaze of sulphuric acid.

Silver linings.

'Forget it.' I glanced sideways at Griff. 'It's stuffed.'

Griff wasn't listening. His gaze was trained on the rise beyond the woodshed, where mist crept between the scribbly gums like a living thing, silent and secretive. The fur on top of his head stood up in scruffy tufts. His rust-coloured beard was flat where he'd slept on it.

He sniffed the air and barked.

'It's just fog, you big sook.' I turned back to the truck's burnt innards, a hollow behind my ribs. It had only occurred to me the night before to double-check the battery. The idea had come

in a flash as the storm raged outside and lightning flickered across the ceiling and static swept my skin. If the battery wasn't completely shot – if the truck could be revived – the task ahead became infinitely easier. Safer. Unfortunately, nothing short of new parts and an actual mechanic could fix the mess in front of me ... and I had as much chance of finding those as discovering the truck had magically sprouted wings.

‘Well.’ I slammed the bonnet shut. Drips like fat tears rolled down the windscreen. ‘So much for that idea.’

Griff shifted beside me. His tail thwacked dewy grass so long it obscured the truck's tyres. *We could continue this pointless ruminating*, his bright brown eyes seemed to say, *or – and this is my preference – we could eat breakfast.*

I pursed my lips and glanced across the yard. Puddles dotted the gravel track leading down to the barn. The landscape beyond had been swallowed; the trees, the lake, the mountains obliterated by the pale tide that had rolled in before dawn, blanketing the farm in white silence.

‘Fog's no good for visibility,’ I pointed out, not above grasping at straws. ‘Maybe we should wait.’

Griff cocked his head to the side.

‘You're right.’ I shoved my hands in the pouch of my hoodie and glared at the truck's battered hood. ‘I *hate* it when you're right.’

Griff lost interest. I watched him pick his way across the grass to pee against the side of the woodshed, an old lean-to that resembled something a kid might make out of Paddle Pop sticks. I blew out a pent-up breath and beckoned him towards the house.

‘Come on, then.’

I trudged across the boggy yard, over to the porch steps. Griff

bounded past me, a gangly shadow as tall as my hip, all long legs and paws he was still growing into. But it was the rack of his ribs that caught my eye. Visible even beneath his scruffy coat. I shivered and hunched my shoulders against the dawn chill. He was right. I'd waited long enough. Too long.

We were out of time.



Jules's kitchen was large and airy and always cool, even when the temperature outside crept over forty and washing dried stiff on the line. At one end, an old brick fireplace – which Jules had painted white and stuffed with cookbooks – stretched from floor to ceiling. Thin dawn light spilled through the French doors beside it, revealing a scuffed wooden dining table and mismatched chairs.

I padded past the table. Griff followed behind, his claws clicking against the lino. Fog filled the window above the battered metal sink, a solid white square in the kitchen's gloom. The bench beneath was a sea of clutter, piled with chopping boards and crockery, and souvenir beer steins stuffed with utensils. The shelves above were just as crammed, laden with floral-patterned teacups, old decorative plates, and a pair of ceramic salt and pepper shakers shaped like budgerigars. All the ornamental crap Jules had collected like a bowerbird, coated in a fine layer of dust. Stringy cobwebs hung from the corners of the ceiling. The smell of grease still lingered, the ghost of meals cooked months before.

I stopped in front of the bulky chest freezer. A whiteboard hung from the wall above it, a single word scrawled across its surface:

### WEDNESDAY

I leant against the freezer to wipe *Wednesday* away with my sleeve. The freezer's motor kicked off, filling the room with its electric hum as I grabbed the whiteboard marker from its clip and wrote:

### THURSDAY

There was a one-in-seven chance it was Thursday. Not great odds, but I had to mark each day somehow – I'd learnt that early on. If I didn't differentiate between the days, they blurred together into one big mess, the way ice-cream flavours melt together in the tub. Now, writing the day was part of my morning routine, and routine was important. I knew that from having read Jules's collection of self-help books from cover to cover. Routine was a great way to manage anxiety.

None of those books mentioned crippling terror, but I assumed the theory was the same.

At the bottom of the whiteboard there were fifty-one small strokes, tallied in lots of five. I added one more, marking fifty-two days since I'd woken up. My best guess was that placed us somewhere in late February. That made sense of the storms and the yellowing poplars along the lake. Dad always said that meant summer was at an end.

The whiteboard had a lined section for making lists. Jules had used it to remember stuff like: *Griff – tick treatment* or *Drop eggs at Jan's*. Now I used it to allocate myself tasks. It wasn't enough just to name the days; I needed something to make each one distinct. If I struggled to come up with something at the start of the day, I'd force myself to write something at the end. Something – no matter how small – that had made that day different. *Monday: ran the washing machine. Tuesday: cleared the*

*water filters. Wednesday: fried the truck battery.*

Every day was unique, if I thought hard enough about it.

My favourite task was chopping wood. There was something comforting about the weight of the axe in my hand, the whistle of the blade as it arced through the air, the echo of the split across the lake's surface. I liked to watch wood pile up towards the shed's rusted roof, and know that even if we starved over winter, we'd be warm.

'But that's not going to happen,' I said, glancing back at Griff.

Griff yawned and sniffed at the lino in front of him, as if it might be harbouring a tasty morsel he hadn't found yet. A deadweight settled in the pit of my stomach. I turned back to the whiteboard and wrote my task for the day. Just the one, but a 'doozy', as Jules would say. There'd be no forgetting maybe- Thursday if I managed to tick it off.

I clipped the lid back on the marker, pressed it into its magnetic clip, and took a step back. Thursday.

Day fifty-two, and one thing on my to-do list:

*FIND FOOD*