FURTHERMOOR

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USBORNE

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PART ONE
WEDNESDAY

For the wallflowers, and for those who refuse to look the other way.

Chapter One

Fifty-nine Bradbury Avenue

When the truth hit Bren, it was as cold and hard as the frost on the window: if he didn't get out of here, he'd die.

It was plain fact. A message to the gut, sent from Bren's tingling toes and hands. His fingers stung as if being pricked by pins of ice, so he hugged himself and shoved his hands beneath his armpits, trying to stop the shivering. But the harder he squeezed himself, the more he shook.

He'd left school about an hour ago; there was still some daylight outside. But not for long. The February sun was sinking. Its pale light oozed through the metal grate covering the window, barely filling this empty, derelict room.

But there was light enough to see. Bren pivoted on the worn carpet, checking for anything he might have missed, anything that might get him out.

There was the stained mattress, propped against the

wall. A radiator, with magnolia paint peeling from its metal. The grated window, looking down upon Bradbury Avenue. And Bren's school backpack, sitting on the floor.

But that was all. There was nothing here that could smash through the window. Nothing to get him through the locked door or even dent its wood.

Bren returned to the window to pound again with his fists – to rap with his knuckles until they bled. He shouted at the glass, crying out for help, though his throat was already raw from yelling.

It was pointless. Even if his voice carried through the double-glazing, no one would hear. No one lived on Bradbury Avenue. It was no man's land. Every terraced house on it was the same. Boarded windows and bricked-up doors. Back gardens full of weeds and litter, nettles and junk.

Bren gave up. His fists left prints on the window, blotching its whorls of spiralling ice. Frost glossed the walls too. The dated floral wallpaper – speckled in places by mould – twinkled in the cold, bluish light.

Bren's woolly gloves were on the floor; he'd taken them off to heave at the door and thump the window. Still shivering, Bren put them back on. He knew the door was jammed, but he tried it again. He rattled and strained at its handle, pulling and pleading as if the door could hear him, then started kicking with his feet. But the door was

too thick. It wouldn't budge from its frame.

Grunting hoarsely, Bren grabbed his backpack, pulled the mattress to the floor and sat down. He could feel the cold dampness seeping through his school trousers. When his stomach rumbled, he checked his backpack for something to eat, knowing as he rummaged that there was nothing to find. The food his dad had packed for him that morning was gone – he'd eaten it in the music room at lunchtime.

The thought of Dad made Bren's eyes well up. He'd be worried. Again.

Bren pulled his phone from his duffel coat, looked miserably at its blank screen. He tried turning it on, knowing full well it was dead. There was no way to call anyone. He was trapped.

But then again, maybe not.

Removing a glove again, Bren reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a watch. The room's silence amplified its steady ticking. It sounded like a knife on a chopping board, hacking the moments into seconds.

Squinting in the gloom, Bren studied the watch. Its olive-green face – set within a simple golden bezel – matched its green strap. There was a round gap at the face's centre, which exposed the cogs working beneath the dial.

Bren watched those golden, ticking hands. Nearly five o'clock.

He curled up on the mattress, put his ear to the watch and closed his eyes.

The ticking went on, lulling him softly. He could feel every tick, every tock, passing through his fingers, travelling up his arms, calming his heart.

Tick.

Tock.

Tick.

Tock.

And then he heard it. A muffled clacking. He opened his eyes.

A section of carpet tightened, before splitting with a soft tearing sound. It parted to reveal golden cogs spinning underneath. They were arranged in a broad ring, with each cog pulling carpet threads to make the tear even wider.

A circle of wooden flooring lay exposed between the cogs. It opened up, like the sliding shutter of a camera lens.

Bright light and birdsong filled the room.

The birdsong of Furthermoor.