



# CHAPTER 1

Elena woke up at 1.34 a.m. She didn't need to check the alarm clock on the bedside table. She knew it was 1.34 a.m. It was always 1.34 a.m.

This was the seventh night in a row, and it was getting to be almost normal.

She prodded the button on the clock anyway, and its dim blue light showed **1.34** in blocky digital numbers across the glass. 'Hello again, one thirty-four,' she mumbled. She got up. There was no point staying in bed and trying to get back to sleep; this she had also learned over the past week.

She opened her door without making a sound and slipped downstairs to the kitchen. Since night three she had been getting a hot drink and taking it back up to her room with a couple of biscuits. Then she would sit by her window and





consume them, watching the silent, shadowy street below. It was reassuring somehow—making a normal routine out of something so weird.

The first night was nothing that strange, of course. Everyone got insomnia once in a while, didn't they? She had woken up at 1.34 a.m. and then been unable to get back to sleep until around six. By breakfast she was groggy but not too tired for school. She hadn't even mentioned it to Mum.

The next night was when it started to get weird. Her eyes pinged open at 1.34 a.m. again. Even then, she wasn't sure it was the same time; the exact same time, to the minute. She really only noticed *that* the third night. But maybe she noticed the song that second night . . . maybe not. It was hard to be sure.

By now, though, sitting at the window on night seven, she knew it all. The time was always 1.34 a.m. exactly and what shoved her so abruptly out of sleep was something like a song. In her dreams there was a long, chiming note like someone sliding a metal spoon down an ancient bell, then a swell of . . . a voice? Was it a voice? It seemed like something singing. A dark and yet somehow golden song that rushed along like a river . . . a thin, straight river . . . a channel of vibrating dark golden song, fizzing and bubbling and beautiful.

'Will you shut up?' she said, out loud. The talking to herself had started on night five. As long as she didn't shout she knew she couldn't be heard. Mum slept like the dead. 'Seriously . . . it's just a sound in your head. Like . . . that ear thing . . . tinnitus or something. It's nothing mystical or sinister. And 1.34 a.m. is probably just when some big machine starts up over on the





industrial estate. Or at the power station. Something is making a noise and you're hearing it in your sleep and you're waking up. That's all.'

*So why can't you still hear it once you're awake?* asked the argumentative imp who plagued these nights by the window.

'It's short. It's gone by the time I sit up,' she explained.

*OK—and why can't you just drop back off to sleep again?*

'I don't know. I'm just stressed, I guess. Early hours waking—that's a classic symptom of anxiety. I know. I looked it up on the internet.'

*Seven nights in a row . . . ? REALLY? Do 13-year-olds usually get that stressed? Is this normal?*

She'd looked it up online. She'd typed in 'Why do I keep waking up at the same time each night?' A lot of suggestions came back: noisy neighbours, a gas boiler starting up on a timer, hormonal activity, pets, poltergeists, trapped wind . . .

She knew that it was nothing to do with any of the stuff she had read online. It was something else. Something *very* else. Maybe in the morning she would talk to Mum. Maybe. If Mum seemed OK; if she was having a good day.

Elena settled back into her chair and put her bare feet on the windowsill. On the street below a fox trotted along the pavement, pausing to sniff at the wheelie bins. It cast a long shadow under the dim street lights. Elena called it Velma because she thought it was probably a vixen. She'd seen it several times now. Three of those times it had paused and seemed to stare right up at her for a few seconds, before trotting away on its own business.





The terraced houses opposite seemed to stare back at her, their windows like dark, blank eye sockets. She opened her own window and breathed in the night air. It was sweet and cool, full of late May blossom and recently drenched gardens. It had been raining when she'd gone to bed at ten. Clouds drifted across the scattering of stars above, tinged with orange from the distant lights of the industrial estate. The town's street lights were energy-saving blue, but Quarry End remained defiantly lit by tall orange lamps that stayed on all night, fighting off the shadow of the broken hillside that loomed over it. The orange glow seeped across the sky towards the quiet suburban streets where Elena lived, two or three kilometres away.

She picked up a book and settled down at the window to read the night away. A bit of Cathy Cassidy would pass the time, and then she could get into bed with the dawn chorus to sing her to sleep. She might get another hour in before the alarm went off.

Maybe she fell asleep then; maybe she didn't. All she remembered later, in one of those stuttering leaps of time she kept getting, was that her forehead was against the window again, and the night beyond the thin glass seemed to be dissolving through it like tears through tissue.

And standing quite still in the street below was a solitary, misty figure, pointing a gun at her.





## CHAPTER 2

It was on the fourth morning that Matt's dad slammed him up against the wall and demanded answers.

'What's going on? You getting help? You got some little scheme going? You trying to mess with me?'

Matt tried to push him away, but he was big and heavy and as solid as a bulldog. He looked a lot like a bulldog too, his jowls hanging and his eyelids sagging at the corners, his brown eyes small and shiny.

'I told you!' Matt shouted, trying to out-blare his old man. 'I got up early! That's all. I've done three cars already. You should be pleased.'

'Why? Why are you getting up early?' said his father, giving him a little shake and blast of stale whisky. 'What are you up to?'





Matt felt tiredness suddenly wash over him like a wave, tugging him down into its undertow, drowning him. 'I don't know why,' he muttered, sagging in his father's grip. 'I just keep waking up and not being able to get back to sleep.'

Something in his face must have rung true because he found himself released and sliding slowly down the rough breeze-block wall. His dad wandered across the concrete, stepping over the sloping runnels that were channelling the last of the soapy water down to the drain, and inspected the Honda, the Vauxhall, and the Ford. All three had been left by a hire car firm yesterday, for collection by mid-morning. Normally Matt would have been up at six. He would have fully washed, waxed, and valeted at least one before breakfast.

Today he'd done all three, inside and out, by 6.30 a.m. when his father came down to check on him. Since he'd been up and working from 3 a.m. it was no big deal. One hour per car was pretty slow-going. Slacking, really.

His father wandered around the vehicles, checking the dashboards for dust, prodding the seats for too much damp, and running his finger over the hubcaps for missed streaks of road grime. There were none. Matt knew how to valet a car. He'd been doing it since he was ten.

'It's a good job,' Dad said, finally.

Matt risked a shrug. 'Learned from the best.'

His dad ambled over again, put a heavy hand on his shoulder, and peered into his face. 'Why aren't you sleeping?' he asked. 'You need to sleep. Your work will suffer.'

He was talking about schoolwork. It was a small thing, but it





meant something to Matt that occasionally—just occasionally—his dad remembered he was still at school. That his whole world did not revolve around sponges, squeegees, and Turtle Wax.

‘I dunno,’ he said. ‘Something keeps waking me up. The last three nights, about half past one. I can’t get back to sleep again. This morning I thought I might as well just get up and get some work done and maybe I’ll sleep better tonight.’

He didn’t say that he’d done the same with a different car the night before . . . just the one. But then he’d finished at about 5.30 a.m. and dozed a thin, dreamless almost-sleep on the back seat of the Merc until Dad checked in at the usual time. The slam of the garage door had startled Matt from sleep but, glancing across, Dad assumed he was cleaning the interior. Matt had groggily made scrubbing actions to help that assumption. Then, as soon as Dad had gone, he’d sat back on the spotless leather seat and played a game on his phone until breakfast.

This morning, though, he’d just worked. Three cars. One after the other. Because he was starting to get freaked out and needed to distract himself. Four nights in a row? Waking up at exactly the same time? What the hell was *that* all about?

‘Get some proper sleep tonight,’ said Dad, giving him a slightly gentler shoulder shake this time. ‘And start at the usual time tomorrow. Breakfast now.’ He turned and ambled back through the door to the apartment.

By the time they were sitting down to eggs on toast and large mugs of tea, Dad seemed to have forgotten the whole thing. His rages were often like that: a sudden eruption followed by a distracted, forgetful calm. As if nothing was wrong at all.





There was nothing to see today, but if there had been a little blood or a fresh bruise or even a black eye, Dad would not have seen it.

Mum would hand Matt a little tube of Savlon or a plaster, so *she* could see it. But she never said anything. Not one word. Except maybe ‘He’s tired.’ Or ‘He’s stressed.’

If Matt ever responded: ‘He’s drunk,’ or ‘He’s violent,’ Mum would be instantly deaf. She’d been the same with Ben when he used to bear the brunt of Dad’s ‘tiredness’. Ben, four years older than his little brother Matteus, had long since escaped to the Navy.

The violence was minor. Nothing life-threatening; no big deal. At school he had a reputation for getting into fights, so it was easy to pass the evidence off as a war wound from some scrap with another kid. Anyway, Dad could be OK. When things were going well for him he was generous and cheery—affectionate even.

And Matt didn’t think Dad ever hit Mum. That would probably be too much—but she was never bruised or bleeding, although her stuff sometimes got smashed up.

It was all normal. It was all just his life. Nothing much rattled him.

Until now. 1.34 a.m. If he woke up at 1.34 a.m. *again* he might seriously freak out.

The lack of sleep was starting to catch up with him. It hit him late morning in school, during break, as he and Ahmed hung out in the dining hall. Ahmed was going on about some computer game he’d just got into on Xbox, his enthusiastic







chatter fading in and out. Matt was opening a bag of Wotsits and wondering whether he had the energy to eat them when the floor abruptly smacked him in the face.

He scrambled to a sitting position, confused, cheesy snacks scattered around him. Ahmed was gaping, and a Year 8 girl with long fair hair was coming across towards him, looking concerned. She crouched down and said, 'Are you all right? You look like—'

Ahmed shouldered her out of the way. 'Mate! You been up gamin' all night?'

The world swam, went a little pink, and then got itself more or less upright and correctly coloured again. Matt gave Ahmed a watery grin. 'Yeah—big time, bro!'

The girl stood, shrugged, and walked away, her school bag slung over her shoulder. She looked familiar. He wanted to say thanks . . . thanks for being concerned . . . but with Ahmed in his face and the girl half a dining hall away by now the moment was gone.

'Seriously—you don't look good, man!' Ahmed was saying.

'Need to throw up, probably,' said Matt, and Ahmed backed away, looking scared. He was a total wimp about anything like that. 'It's OK—I'll see you in Maths,' Matt added, and his friend hared away, relieved he wasn't being called upon for nurse duty.

Matt did not feel sick. Not exactly. But his heart was thudding very fast, and he felt light-headed. He went to the boys' toilets and stuck his wrists under the cold tap, resting his head on the white porcelain soap dimple. The cold water gushed across his skin, cooling his blood, and curled into a spinning





vortex above the small plughole. After a couple of minutes the light-headedness passed, and his heart slowed to a normal speed. He stood up and looked at his mirror image in the glass above the basins. His short crop of dark hair was damp on one side, and a smear of cheesy Wotsit dust was on his right ear. The skin beneath his hazel eyes was blueish. It worked well with his puffy red eyelids. His face was pale and peaky. He looked like a zombie.

But worse than all of this was how very, very close he was to bursting into tears.

Matteus Wheeler NEVER cried.

He slapped himself across the face with wet hands, glad there was no other kid in the bogs who could see him. He was NOT going to cry over some lost sleep. He was tougher than that.

Matteus Wheeler NEVER cried.

He kept that in mind for the rest of the day. When Mr Thatcher had a go at him for nodding off in Physics and the rest of the class sniggered. When that girl passed him again in the corridor and gave him a strange look. All through the late afternoon and early evening when he valeted another four cars for Kowski Kar Klean. He kept it in mind as he sank, exhausted, into bed at 10.30 p.m.

And when he awoke at exactly 1.34 a.m., Matteus Wheeler cried.

