



# CHAPTER 1

*We shouldn't be here.*

As the bridge filled up with early morning spectators, the knot in the pit of Elena's belly grew tighter.

*We really shouldn't be here.*

'Come on, everyone, move along and find a space.' Mr Cochrane, his reflective yellow tabard gleaming in the dawn sun, was waving twenty students and two teaching assistants along to lean over the stone wall of the ancient river crossing. Most of the students were looking unimpressed. They'd been promised a natural wonder but all they could see on this cold April morning was a sluggish river with muddy banks.

*'Oh god—we SHOULDN'T BE HERE!'*

It was only when Mr Cochrane and several of the nearest students turned to stare at her that Elena realized her last urgent

inner cry had actually been an urgent *outer* cry. She'd *shouted* it.

'What's the problem, Elena?' asked Mr Cochrane, glancing at her briefly before fixing his eyes back on the north-eastern horizon where the river seemed to dissolve into the flat green land.

Elena grappled for the words. How could she ever explain this?

'Sir . . . I . . . I don't think it's safe. Where we are right now.'

Mr Cochrane didn't unpin his gaze from the furthest reaches of the river. 'Ssssssh, everyone,' he called out. 'We might be able to hear it coming.'

The students fell silent and Elena, every part of her skin awash with goosebumps, peered at the side of the geography teacher's head in desperation. 'Sir . . . ?'

'You're perfectly safe, Elena,' he said. 'The Wiggshall Wave is only a metre above the usual river depth. It's not a tsunami.'

Elena turned to stare north-east, along with everyone else. Of course it wasn't a tsunami. It was just the Wiggshall Wave. A minor natural phenomenon. Every so often high tides out in The Wash would overwhelm the outflow of the River Great Ouse and send a bore wave back up it for several miles. The funnel shape of the river valley meant the wave rose up quite impressively—sometimes people even surfed on it.

But it was a small wave. That was all.

'It should be visible in the next thirty seconds or so,' said Mr Cochrane, consulting his watch and a printout of the tide timetables. 'It'll be worth getting up so early for, trust me!'

Elena could already see a small wave. Not in the river but

along its banks. Voles, mice, and rats were heading up through the grass, a miniature tsunami of mammals making for higher ground. Couldn't anyone else SEE this?

'SIR! We have to GET OFF THIS BRIDGE!' She actually grabbed his arm this time and he turned to stare at her, affronted. At that moment the sound of distant sirens rose in the air, along with a low rumble on the horizon.

'I'm not messing around!' Elena heard the panic in her voice. 'We're not SAFE here!'

'Sir . . .' said one of the other students. 'What's that?'

'It's the bore,' said Mr Cochrane, wrenching his arm away from Elena and turning back to the river. 'And it's perfectly *what the hell?!*'

'RUN!' Elena yelled, sprinting for the far side. 'EVERYONE! NOW!'

But they just stared, dumbfounded, at the grey mass on the horizon and the creatures fleeing the riverbank and even the birds now swooping overhead with shrieks of alarm.

Mr Cochrane finally lifted his loud teachery voice and said: 'Everybody—I think we might need to—'

'RUUUUUUN!' screamed Elena.

At *last* they seemed to understand. The wall of grey water was clearly visible now. Some of the kids screamed, picking up the panic, *finally* feeling the threat. They ran after her as she raced across the bridge, heading for the higher ground of the high street. Glancing back she saw that about a third, on the far side of the bridge, were stumbling away in the other direction. The rest seemed to be milling about in shocked uncertainty

while their teacher just stood, rigidly gripping the bridge wall and gaping at the unthinkable scene before him.

‘SIR! *MOVE!*’ bellowed Elena, and maybe he finally believed his own ears and eyes because the bore was now tearing up the river, gaining height with every passing second. It should have been only a metre higher than the usual river surface. It was at least *four* metres higher. Finally, Mr Cochrane bellowed: ‘RUN!’ and began to shove the remaining two students ahead of him, aiming for Elena’s side of the bridge.

It was too late. They hadn’t reached the nearest parapet before the tidal bore surged over them, smashing across the bridge wall like a stampede of foaming grey horses. The force was immense. It picked them up like dolls, along with its cargo of broken branches, old tyres, metal panels, and at least one dead animal—a calf, Elena’s mind flashed, regretfully. The teacher and students were washed over the far side and into the river where the rest of the bore tore on relentlessly. They didn’t even have time to scream.

Displaced river was washing around her knees and threatening to topple her but Elena managed to wade across and spot the yellow tabards as they spun and bobbed in the current, travelling at speed. ‘PLEASE!’ she screamed. ‘PLEASE! HELP THEM!’

She didn’t know whether she’d got through—didn’t know if it was even possible for her friends to help. There were only a few of them here, safe in their holts . . . was it even fair to ask? They could be swept away too . . .

But they were expert swimmers and right now, they were

literally the only hope. Shutting out the shrieking and wailing from her classmates and the panicky shouts of Wiggenhall locals as floodwaters abruptly shattered the peace of breakfast, she closed her eyes and sent her plea again. *HELP THEM! PLEASE! They can't survive this!*

And just before the yellow tabards were lost from view she saw the first sleek dark figure emerge from the flooded bank and flip over into the water.

Two more followed, one of them glancing back at her for a microsecond as it battled the boiling wake of the bore.

*Thank you!* she sent. She had no idea whether it would make any difference now, but if three strong otters couldn't catch up with Mr Cochrane and the others and save them, nobody else could.

As the flood drained away her fellow students clung to each other, shocked and confused, while the teaching assistants, with shrill, shaking voices, tried to do a headcount. Elena clambered onto the bridge wall and sat there, shivering. Fresh sirens had started up, coming from the west. Most of the village had probably dialled 999.

Jessie Cheam staggered up to her, trying to speak through panicky sobs. 'What happened?' she spluttered. 'What *was* that?'

'It was the wave,' said Elena in a voice much calmer than she felt. 'It was just much bigger than we thought.'

'How did you know?' Jessie scrubbed the tears off her face, trying to get herself under control.

'I just . . . got a feeling,' said Elena.

Jessie nodded slowly and stared upstream. The water was still

angry but settling behind the bore wave, which was now out of sight. 'Are they dead?' she said.

'I don't think so,' said Elena. 'I think . . . they might get out alive.'

'Who was it?'

'Mr Cochrane and Dan Spelman and—I think—Megan Vasili.' Elena gulped. Putting names to the students made this nightmare more real.

'Megan can't swim,' whispered Jessie.



## CHAPTER 2

‘Matteus Tomasz Wheeler, please stand.’

Matt stood up. He did his best to keep his breathing slow and steady. He did not want to look as if he was about to cry.

A dark flicker in the high window at the back of the courtroom caught his eye and for a second he felt comforted. It was as if she’d come to remind him that everything he’d done, he’d done for the best; for a good reason.

‘Matteus,’ said the magistrate, ‘you have already pleaded guilty to the charge of taking a vehicle without consent and driving without a valid licence or insurance.’ She sighed and took off her spectacles, fixing him with a long stare. ‘Since your arrest in December, I appreciate that this trial has taken a very long time to come around, thanks to backlog issues with the CPS which are none of your doing. You have no doubt

experienced a great deal of anxiety about coming to court today, and had several months to consider your actions. Joyriding up and down the country in a stolen car is not acceptable behaviour in a 15-year-old in any circumstance—but it’s certainly made worse when the 15-year-old in question has stolen the car from his own father’s valeting business.’

Matt couldn’t help glancing up at Dad. His father sat in the public gallery in his best suit, staring straight ahead as if he’d been chiselled from stone. Mum sat beside him, focusing on the floor; he suspected she too was trying not to cry.

‘You put your family’s business reputation on the line, as well as your own safety, when you chose to take that car,’ the magistrate went on. ‘This makes me very seriously consider a custodial sentence, even though this is your first offence.’

She paused, allowing her words to sink in. Matt bunched up his fists and felt sweat trickle between his shoulder blades. His best shirt was sticking to him under his suit jacket. The flicker in the window couldn’t stop his heart rate increasing. Was he about to be sent to a young offenders’ institution? The social worker had said it was very unlikely . . . but not impossible.

‘Before I pass sentence,’ said the magistrate, ‘do you have anything that you’d like to say? You’ve chosen to remain silent so far, but it is still possible for you to make a statement in your defence; to explain *why* you did this. Right now is your last chance to do that, Matteus.’

*Matteus stood up straight, held up his hand, and allowed the starling hovering at the open window to fly down and land on it. ‘I really*



*am sorry, Your Worship,' he said, 'to put my mum and dad through so much worry. I didn't ever mean to do that. And I would never have borrowed the car if it hadn't been a matter of life and death. You see, I knew a friend was in desperate danger and I had to get to her quickly. Only, if I'd tried to explain to anyone that I'd been told this by two golden eagles, in the middle of the night in Norfolk, nobody would have believed me. I didn't have time to explain and I couldn't afford to pay for a taxi. So I took the car. I always meant to return it and replace the fuel; in fact, I was replacing the fuel when the police arrested me. Also . . . if I hadn't done it, most of the Scottish Highlands would have collapsed into a massive crater by now. If you don't believe me, ask my starling friend.'*

*'Massive crater,' said Lucky, on his fist. 'Believe.'*

Imagine if he *had* said that.

Yeah, right.

Matteus chose not to speak. Instead he just gazed solemnly at his knuckles and waited.

The magistrate sighed and put her glasses back on. 'Matteus Thomasz Wheeler,' she said. 'I have considered sentencing you to a four month detention and training order . . . however in the light of your age and your admission of guilt I am willing to give you a chance to make amends. Therefore I am imposing a referral order with our youth offending team, for your rehabilitation. This means that you will carry out some reparation in the community. You will need to sign a contract, along with your parents, to commit to certain standards of behaviour, and to carrying out tasks that are beneficial to the

people of Thornleigh.’

Matt nodded, still reeling from the first part of her sentence—*detention*—and now blinking at the crashing relief of the second part—*referral order*.

‘You will arrive at the right time, in the right place,’ Her Worship went on, ‘and perform whatever task is put before you to the best of your ability, without complaint, while under supervision. Failure to do this will land you back in court. And if I see your name come up again I will reserve your case to deal with myself.’ She eyed him with a steely glare. ‘I won’t be so lenient next time, Matteus.’

‘Yes, Your Worship,’ he mumbled.

She nodded, closed a file and concluded: ‘Your parents will cover court costs of £85. The detail of your reparation duties will be explained to you before you leave today. I hope this is the last time I see you in my court, Matteus.’

‘Thank you.’ Matt turned and walked down the steps into the subterranean corridor of the courthouse, led by a remand officer, Mum following close behind. The duty solicitor had departed some time ago. In refusing to speak about his reasons for taking the Land Rover he’d also given the man very little to do, other than state that he was a first time offender who had pleaded guilty at once. There was nothing anyone could say in his defence if he himself wouldn’t say a word about it beyond: ‘I just did it because I wanted to.’

He felt paper in his pocket and smiled for the first time in what felt like weeks. It was a handwritten note from Elena and Tima, his best friends, and the only people in Thornleigh who

knew exactly why he'd become a car thief.

*We'll be thinking of you today, Elena had written, in her neat handwriting. Whatever happens, remember that you were amazing. You did what you had to do. We will always be here for you. ALWAYS.*

Underneath Elena had signed her name with one x and so had Tima. Tima, being theatrical, had drawn a heart around her x. The letter had arrived that morning, flown through the window in Lucky's beak. Since Dad had permanently removed his mobile phone, Luckymail was the only way he could get quick messages to his friends—and get them back again. Sometimes it was a note and sometimes the starling would just repeat what Elena or Tima had said to her. Her dark rainbow-feathered throat would vibrate and she would somehow produce an eerie recording of one of them, sounding just the same, only a bit higher in pitch. It was beyond weird to hear Lucky say: 'Hi Matt—see you at the hide tonight, usual time.' She didn't really do very long messages—they tended to get a bit mangled, so that's when the notes had started. Matt did not know how he would have survived the past few months without his carrier starling.

It took another hour to go through all the paperwork with Mum at his side, signing his promise to attend his meetings and his duties, which seemed to be mostly litter picking. In fact, Matt was in no hurry to leave. He would happily have spent all day in

the Youth Offending Team office if he could have avoided his father.

As soon as it was all over the remand officer showed them back out into the corridor, where Mum threw her arms around him. 'It's such good news!' she breathed. 'SUCH good news.'

Then they had to leave the court and meet Dad.

Dad was poking a cigarette butt around with one shoe. He glanced up as they emerged from the side door of the courts and Matt really thought, in that moment, that his father would have preferred it if he *had* gone to jail. And maybe that was the truth because spending time with Dad had been almost unbearable since the day he'd come to bail him out after his arrest last December. On that cold winter's morning they'd driven home in seething silence but as soon as they'd parked outside Kowski Kar Klean, Dad had dragged him out of the car, slammed him up against the wall of the car wash and hit him across the face.

And then Matt had done something he'd never done before, despite years of slaps and shoves and beatings. He'd hit his dad back, right on the jaw. It wasn't that hard a punch; Matt had been exhausted—but his father was shocked into silence. A look flashed across his puffy features that might almost have been fear.

And then, instead of pummelling his son into the brickwork, he'd just said: 'Inside. You've got a lot of explaining to do.'

He was wrong about that. Matt wasn't going to explain. It was out of the question. From that day to this, he'd not explained anything. He'd only said: 'I took the car. I just wanted to.'

He had also said: 'I always meant to bring it back.' And

that was it. Not even Mum could get anything out of him. Explanations were simply not an option because NOBODY was ever going to believe what he said . . . and if they did . . .

Matt glanced up and saw Lucky roosting on the high gabled roof of Thornleigh Magistrates' Court as they walked down the stone steps in the April sun. He could only imagine what might happen to Lucky if the truth about their telepathic connection ever came out. Questions, capture, experiments . . .

It was ironic that, just as soon as he'd stopped being a surly, closed-down, troublesome teenager, he'd had to start *pretending* to be a surly, closed-down, troublesome teenager. It was the only convincing thing he could do. If it kept Lucky safe, it was worth it.

As soon as they got home from court Matt went to his room to get out of his suit (bought especially for his court appearance) and into his jeans and T-shirt, while Mum made him a cup of tea. He grabbed a piece of lightweight paper (he'd bought an old style airmail notepad so his messages wouldn't be too weighty) and scribbled a message to Elena and Tima.

It's OK. Not going to jail. See you tonight.

Lucky was already waiting on the windowsill. She snapped the message up in her pale yellow beak and took flight immediately. Matt let out a long sigh. Tonight he would wake up at 1.34 a.m. when the beam came through his bedroom, and then meet Elena and Tima in the hide, in the woods. They would sit around the little paraffin heater, drink hot chocolate

from Elena's flask, talk about his court appearance . . . and then put it all behind them.

Maybe this was the point when things *finally* got better. Maybe now he could get his life back on track; start to think about a future. He only had another year to go at school and then he could maybe get away from Kowski Kar Klean and his dad. He could join the Navy like Ben, his big brother. Or . . . something. Matt rested his head against the window, pondering. Since becoming a Night Speaker, everything had changed. For years he'd planned to run away to the Navy at sixteen but things were different now. There was Lucky, for a start.

He dreamed of working with animals these days. It was the obvious career for someone with his talents; if you could talk directly to birds and other creatures and have them talk right back to you, why wouldn't you want to work with them? He could be a big success at a zoo or wildlife sanctuary or maybe one of those places that specialized in birds. He'd have to cover up his Night Speaker powers, somehow—he wouldn't want to start freaking people out—but he'd find a way.

Only . . . you couldn't run away to a zoo or a wildlife sanctuary at 16. You would probably have to go to college and get at least an A Level in biology or something. Or just do lots of volunteering until you got a job out of it. Which would all be fine if he didn't have to stay *here*, at home with Dad, while he did it. One day soon, things were going to get too bad for him to stay; he knew it.

He shook his head. He would talk to Elena and Tima about it tonight. Maybe they'd have some good ideas.

A high-pitched, buzzing whine broke through his thoughts. Matt blinked, put down his pen and the notepaper, and wandered out of his room. He found Dad at the front door of the flat, with an electric screwdriver. Mum leant in the doorway of the kitchen, her face tight and pale, her arms folded across her chest.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Matt, tension rising in him once again.

‘What does it look like?’ said Dad.

Matt moved closer and peered over his father’s shoulder. A gleaming metal clasp was affixed to the wall beside the door and Dad was attaching another one to the door itself. It was a thick, heavy-duty thing; he’d seen something like it on outbuildings and warehouses . . . but on the outside.

Dad finished and put the electric screwdriver down. He picked up a massive padlock from the carpet, coupled up the two clasp rings and hooked the padlock through.

‘What *is* this?’ asked Matt.

Dad got up, shooting him a blank look, and clicked the padlock shut. He took the key out of it and put it deep into his jeans pocket.

‘You might have escaped jail today,’ he said, ‘but that doesn’t mean you’re going to carry on as normal. You’re not going to start sneaking out at nights and stealing cars again. I’ve seen to it. You stay *home* every night. You go to school, you come home, you do some cars, get your homework done, you get your food, and you get to bed. That’s it.’

‘You’re padlocking me in at night?’ Matt gaped at his father.

‘Seriously?’

Dad jabbed him hard in the centre of his chest. ‘You’re lucky I’m not putting this on your bedroom door,’ he said. ‘And if you didn’t need to pee, I would.’

Matt felt rage rising through him. He clenched his fists and took a deep breath. It was only Mum watching that stopped him jabbing his dad right back again. ‘It’s OK, Dad,’ he said, through gritted teeth, his voice cold and steady. ‘You’ve only got another year to go and then I’ll be gone, just as soon as I’m sixteen.’

‘You can’t go *anywhere* without my say so, sixteen or not,’ said Dad, glaring at him. ‘You’re in *my* charge until you’re eighteen.’

‘I’ll sign up for the Navy,’ said Matt. ‘I won’t let you stop me.’

‘Please . . . both of you!’ Mum cut in. ‘It’s been a hard day. A hard time. We mustn’t fight. Come on . . . I’ve made tea.’

‘I’m not fighting,’ said Matt. ‘I’m just making plans.’ And he turned and went back into his room before anyone could say anything else.

Lucky got back five minutes later with a message from Tima.

*Brilliant news! See you tonight!*

Matt stared at the long drop from his window ledge. He grabbed Tima’s bit of paper and scrawled on the back:

*Yeah, well . . . about that.*