



CHAPTER ONE

ALARM

I'm wide awake in a heartbeat. Sweating and breathing hard. My brain alert and scanning for the something wrong that woke me up. It's funny how when you're trying to get up for school you can spend an hour floating in that place between asleep and awake, knowing you need to open your eyes, but unable to do it. But when something thumps in the middle of the night, or there's a scream in the dark, you go from deep sleep to fully conscious in a second.

I jerk into a sitting position, hitting my head

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on the wooden slats of the bed above me. I ignore the crunch of pain, and heave myself out, turning as I do so that I can see the top bunk. In the glow of the nightlight I can see Raph in a tangle of blankets. His pyjamas are soaked with sweat because no matter how hot it is, he can't fall asleep without a cover over him. His breathing is steady, though, and his face peaceful and innocent. I wonder what he's dreaming about. I gently pull his blankets back to cool him down. But all the time I'm on edge, listening for whatever jumped me awake.

There's nothing. Just dark and quiet.

Then a creak outside our bedroom door. I take a step towards it, watching the handle turn. I know it's probably Dad checking on us. Mum's on a night shift and won't be back yet. At least I don't think so; I have no idea what time it is. My phone is charging on the desk by the window. But I can't shift that feeling of something being off.

The door opens slowly and Dad tiptoes into

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the room, jumping when he sees me, like I'm the one sneaking around at night. He gasps. Whispers a swear and puts his hand on his chest, then beckons me out of the room.

'What's happened?' I say before he's even closed the door behind me.

He has bed hair, but he's put on a T-shirt and trainers with his pyjama bottoms. I see his medical bag by the front door, lit by the light from the kitchen.

'It's Mr Iqbal. He's had a fall and needs help.'

'Mr Iqbal?' I repeat, trying to work out if I'm supposed to know who that is.

Dad pushes my sweaty hair back off my forehead. 'Yes, Mr Iqbal. He's one of my clients. Lives on the estate, in Beech block. He's old. Very frail and confused.'

'Oh yeah,' I say, like I have a clue who he means. 'But you're not working tonight, right?'

'No, I'm not,' Dad says. 'But he called me, and he's distressed and in pain. He's two blocks over so I'm going to run to his flat and check on

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him, phone for an ambulance if I need to. He doesn't have anyone else.'

'You won't be long, though?' I've never been scared of being alone in the flat, but after everything that's happened since November with the Latchitts having a massive vendetta against me and trying to maim-slash-kill me multiple times, I'm more wary.

'I won't, don't worry,' Dad says. 'I want you to lock the door behind me and put the chain on. Don't open it to anyone except me. And I'll have my phone, so you can call any time.'

'OK,' I say. 'No problem.'

'Thank you, Angelo.' Dad smiles at me. 'You make me proud.'

His phone lights up, too bright in the dark hallway. I see that it's just after two in the morning.

'It's him again,' Dad says, sliding his finger across the screen and putting the phone to his ear. 'I'm on my way now, Mr Iqbal.'

I hear Mr Iqbal's voice come through the

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speaker and it finally clicks who he is, because he calls Dad all the time. He sounds terrified, and in pain. He's wailing like a toddler. I pick up Dad's medical bag and give it to him while he tries to calm Mr Iqbal down. I open the front door and give Dad a lame thumbs up to show him I have everything under control. Dad stops outside, miming putting the chain on the door. So I close it, and rattle the chain as I pull it across. Then I hear his footsteps echoing away down the concrete walkway towards the main stairwell. I lean against the door for a few seconds, feeling the blanket of dark and quiet settle back down around me. The flat feels different with only me and Raph and the 2 a.m. silence in it.

I go into the kitchen for a glass of water. The tap creaks as I turn it on, the sudden sound making my heart lurch in my chest. I hate myself for being jumpy. I knock back the whole glass while I'm still standing at the sink and refill it. The cool tiles under my feet and the

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water that splashes on to my arms as it bounces off the glass from the tap are taking some of the heat out of my body. My heartbeat slows. I close my eyes and leave the tap running for a minute. Hallie would kill me for wasting water, but right now it feels like the only thing that's keeping me calm.

I drink the second glass of water, fill up again, and then turn off the tap with another creak. It takes a moment for the water to stop pouring, slowing to a trickle, then a rapid sputtering. Finally it settles into a slow drip, the heavy droplets thunking into the metal sink every couple of seconds. It sounds much louder in the quiet of night than it does in the day, when I barely notice it.

My thoughts turn to what I can do to fill the time until Dad gets back. I don't want to wake Raph, so I settle on watching TV with subtitles on. I've been trying to fit in as many animal documentaries as I can over the past few months, hoping that if the Latchitts come back

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with a new genetically tweaked creation, I'll already have the knowledge to be able to identify it. Maybe work out its weaknesses.

In November, the Latchitts sent giant spiders to attack me, Naira, Hallie and Gus while we were on a weekend detention. We'd all hurt their granddaughter Colette, and they thought we deserved a worse punishment than a Saturday in school with each other.

When we walked through the gates at the start of that detention, we *really* didn't get on. Hallie was basically a massive, nagging mouth on legs. Naira was annoyingly perfect and thought she was way better than the rest of us. Gus was more random than a duck in the desert and destructive as a wildfire. And me . . . I guess I was a moody loner who didn't care about anyone or anything. At least that's what I wanted people to think. We survived, just. Became friends. We made things up to Colette and hoped that would be the end of it.

But in March the Latchitts came back,

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complete with creepy masks and brain-biting parasitic worms that made us all act like crazies and play a Latchitt-created game called Flinch. Again, we survived. Again, only just. But they still want to hurt us, and they want Colette to join their unhinged family. We live with a constant fear that the Latchitts aren't going to give up until they've got what they want. Me, Colette, Gus, Naira and Hallie – now closer, stronger – have all been doing what we can to prepare for when they come back. Researching wildlife, genetic science and old nursery rhymes. We've even been trying to get fitter. Naira, Colette and I go running a lot. Hallie, being Hallie, prefers fighting to running so she's taken up kick-boxing. Gus persuaded his parents to buy some gym equipment for the garage. Now he talks about his growing pecs and guns far more often than we'd like.

I'm in the hallway, lost in thought, when suddenly I freeze. Something's changed. The flat is dark and still. The only sound is the

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dripping tap. It's dripping faster again now — the regular thump of water into the sink broken by sudden bursts of fast tapping. I go back to the kitchen to see if I can turn it off tighter, but as I walk towards it, I see that it's hardly dripping at all . . .

It feels like everything stops, except for the sound. My heartbeat, my breath, held back so that I can listen. The tapping isn't coming from the sink, or even the kitchen. It's coming from somewhere else in the flat.

A shrill voice screams from the bedroom I share with Raph.

'Angelo!'

I leap towards the cry.

'Angelo!' Raph yells again.

I grab the handle and throw the door open, every part of my body tingling with panic and dread. I see Raph standing in the middle of the room, his face pale and his eyes wide with fear.

'Raph,' I say, skidding on to my knees, grabbing him and holding him in a tight hug.



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He's shaking. 'What is it?'

He points at the window where the curtains are open, just a crack. 'There's a monster outside.'