

PROLOGUE

THE NIGHT IT ALL BEGAN

The sun disappeared behind the pointed silhouettes of the rooftops of Whiffington Town, like a hungry black dog swallowing a ball of flames.

A thick, eerie darkness fell like no other night Whiffington had ever known. The moon itself barely had enough courage to peek round the clouds, as though it knew that tonight something strange was going to happen.

Mothers and fathers throughout Whiffington tucked their children into bed, unaware that this would be the last bedtime story, the last goodnight kiss, the last time they'd switch off the light.

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Midnight.

One o'clock.

Two o'clock.

Three o'clock.

CREAK . . .

A strange noise broke the silence.

It came from inside one of the houses. With the whole town fast asleep, who could possibly have made that sound?

Or perhaps not *who* but *WHAT*?

. . . CREAK!

There it was again. This time from another house.

Creak!

Creeaak!

CRREEAAAAAK!

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The sound of creaky wooden floorboards echoed around the hallways of every home in Whiffington.

Something was inside.

Something was **creaking** about.

Something not human.

There were no screams. There were no nightmares. The children slept peacefully, wonderfully unaware that the world around them had changed. It had all happened silently, as if by some strange sort of dark magic, and they wouldn't know anything about it until they woke up the next morning, on the day it all began . . .



CHAPTER ONE

THE DAY IT ALL BEGAN

Let's start on the day it all began.
On the day it all began, Lucy Dungston woke up.

Right. Well, that's a start, but it's not very exciting, is it? Let's try again.

On the day it all began, Lucy Dungston woke up to a rather unusual sound . . .

OK, that's a little better. Let's see what happens next . . .

It was the sound of the alarm clock ringing in her mum's bedroom.

Well, it's got a bit boring again, hasn't it? Let's try that bit one more time . . .

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It was the sound of the alarm clock ringing in her mum's bedroom because Lucy's mum wasn't there to switch it off. You see, Lucy was about to find out that while she was asleep in the night her mum had disappeared . . .

OH. MY. GOSH!

Imagine waking up to find that your mum had disappeared in the night! It gives me the creepy tingles every time I tell this story. I bet you're thinking, This is going to be the best scary story ever. I can't wait to read it and tell all my friends that I'm really brave because I wasn't even one bit scared.

Even though you were totally scared all the way through.

Well, this is only just the beginning. Wait until you read what happens later when the Creakers come out.

Let me know if you get scared . . . because I am!

Back on the day it all began, Lucy climbed out of bed, slipped on her fluffy blue dressing-gown and walked across her creaky floorboards, which were warm from the morning sunlight creeping in through the curtains.

Would you like to know what Lucy looked like?

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Of course you would! Here's a picture . . .

As you can see, she had shorter hair than most girls, and it was as brown as mud, or chocolate, and even though Lucy liked it to be short, her mum insisted she keep a fringe.

'It stops you looking like a boy!' her mum would say (this was before she disappeared, of course). This really wound Lucy up, as her fringe always seemed to flop into her eyes, meaning she constantly had to lick her hand and slick it over to one side just so she could see.



Her eyes, once the fringe was out of the way, were greeny-brown . . . or perhaps browny-green. Either way, they were a bit green and a bit brown. You could say there was nothing particularly remarkable about Lucy at all, and it's true; she was no

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different from any other child in Whiffington, which is another way of saying she was quite remarkable indeed.

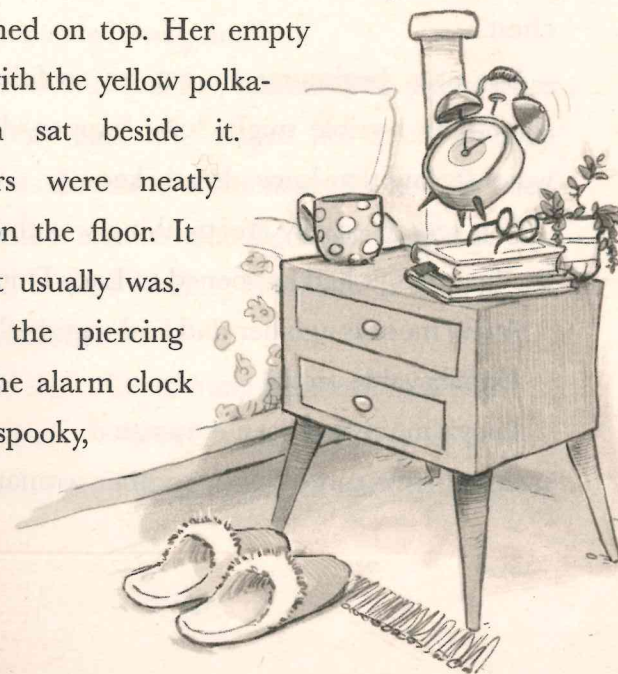
Anyway, more about that later.

'Mum?' Lucy called, padding across the landing towards her mum's bedroom.

But of course you already know there was no reply because her mum was gone!

Lucy's heart started beating faster in her chest as she gently opened the bedroom door and stuck her head inside.

Mrs Dungston's book was still on the bedside table, a bookmark poking out, with her reading glasses perched on top. Her empty cocoa cup with the yellow polka-dot pattern sat beside it. Her slippers were neatly positioned on the floor. It was all as it usually was. Except for the piercing ringing of the alarm clock and the spooky, empty bed.



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Lucy stopped the alarm clock and ran to check the bathroom.

Empty bath.

Empty shower.

Empty loo (although Lucy would have been very surprised to find her mum hiding in there).

She ran downstairs.

Empty kitchen.

Empty living room.

Empty everywhere.

'Mum? **MUM?**' she called, a note of panic rising in her voice, and her heart leaping like a frog in her chest.

She was beginning to get an awful feeling that something terrible might have happened . . . and it was a feeling that Lucy already knew.

You see, the really creepy thing was that this wasn't the first time it had happened to Lucy Dungston.

A few months ago her dad had vanished too!

Unbelievable, right?

Lucy's mum had been devastated.

'Must have run off with another woman,' Lucy had

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heard one of the other mums whispering in the school playground.

'What a cheating, rotten man!' another had said, shaking her head.

But Lucy didn't think her dad was rotten at all. She couldn't believe he would run off without saying good-bye to her, without leaving a note, without saying where he was going, without finishing the half-eaten chocolate Hobnob and barely sipped cup of tea she'd found on his bedside table the next morning.

So on *this* morning, on the day it all began, Lucy had the strangest feeling that somehow this was all connected, that something weird was going on.

Lucy ran down the hallway, snatched the phone from the little wobbly table and dialled her mum's mobile number (which she knew off by heart for emergencies, like every sensible eleven-year-old should). But, as her mum's phone started ringing, Lucy saw it flashing on the arm of the sofa.

Lucy ended the call and hung her head in defeat.

Defeat . . . feet . . . shoes . . . her mum's shoes!

She ran to the front door. A pair of cosy, flat slip-ons

with flower-shaped sparkly bits were sitting on the mat, exactly where her mum kicked them off every night and where she'd slip back into them before leaving the house each day. Surely her mum wouldn't have left the house without her shoes . . . would she?

Lucy's heart sank. This all seemed far too familiar. On the day her father disappeared, one of the strangest things was that his favourite chunky black boots with the yellow laces, which he wore every single day, were still sitting by the front door, like he'd never left. Just like her mum's shoes!

Lucy knew there was only one thing for it. She was going to have to call the police.

She'd never done that before, and her heart was pounding like a drum in her chest as she pressed the number nine three times with a shaky, nervous finger.

Now what do you suppose happened next? If you think a police officer answered the phone and said, *'It's OK, Lucy, we've found your mum and we'll bring her home right away and we'll even pick up some breakfast for you too. What would you like?'* then you'd be very wrong indeed and should probably never write a book.

What actually happened was possibly the worst thing Lucy could think of . . .

Nothing.

The phone just rang, and rang, and rang, and carried on ringing until Lucy hung up.

'Since when do the police not answer the phone?' Lucy said to herself, her voice sounding unusually loud in the empty house.

A little voice in her head told her the answer: *When something spooky is going on . . .*

Lucy pulled open the front door and stepped out into the stinking morning air. Oh, it was quite normal for the air to be stinky outside the Dungston family's house. It smelled like a mixture of bum gas with a hint of mature sock cheese, and had a sharp after-scent of freshly brewed cabbage. It wasn't the house that smelled – it was the truck parked in the driveway. It was one of those chunky, clunky, nostril-stinging, rubbish-collecting trucks that trundle around town with those jolly-looking, grubby people in grimy overalls collecting everyone's rotten rubbish bags.

Lucy's dad had been one of those jolly-looking,

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grubby rubbish-collecting people. He was the bin man for Whiffington Town, where he lived – *sorry*, where he USED to live – before he disappeared. Since he vanished, his truck had been parked in the driveway, stinking out the whole street. Of course, Mrs Dungston had tried to sell the truck, but no one wanted a stinky old thing like that. Even Whiffington Scrap Metal said that the pong was too strong for them to crush it! And so there it stayed, on Lucy's driveway.

If you ever find yourself behind one of these trucks, take a little sniff, just a little one, and you'll know what Lucy Dungston's house smelled like.

Anyway, back to the day it all began!

Out in Lucy's street, Clutter Avenue, she noticed instantly that things weren't right. Usually there was a long line of traffic clogging up the road as mums and dads took their kids to school and went to work and drove to the post office and the hairdresser's and did all the boring stuff grown-ups do. But today the road wasn't busy. It wasn't just not-busy – it was completely deserted. Not a single car. Lucy looked left, then right, then left again, then right again, then she repeated that about

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twenty more times, which I won't bother to write because that would just be silly, but when she had finished she was convinced she was right – something weird was definitely happening in Whiffington Town.

'What the jiggins is going on?' she said to herself.

What the jiggins indeed, Lucy.

Where was Mr Ratcliffe, the wrinkly old man who did yoga in his front garden in his underpants? (He claimed it was the secret to staying young.)

Where was Molly the milk lady, who delivered fresh bottles of milk from her electric van?

Where was Mario, the Italian man from the next street, who jogged past every morning in his skimpy Lycra shorts?

Where *was* everyone?!

That's when Lucy heard a noise. Her heart leapt. Was it her mum?

A long, slow creak came from somewhere along Clutter Avenue, followed by a sudden **CLANG!**

'Hello?' Lucy called.

'Mama?' a small voice asked from behind the garden fence two doors down.

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'Oh, Ella! It's just you!'

Lucy sighed in relief as Ella Noying appeared. First her bouncy Afro hair peeped out into the street, followed by her round cheeks and her big deep brown eyes that always managed to get her out of trouble. She was wearing bright pink pyjamas made of shiny silk, with her initials embroidered on the pocket. In one hand was a pair of pink, heart-shaped designer sunglasses.

Lucy never saw Ella anywhere without those.

'Lucy, I can't find Mama or Papa and my avocado needs mashing,' Ella whined.

Before Lucy could reply, another door opened across the street.

'Dad?' whispered Norman Quirk, a boy from Lucy's year at school, as he hesitantly stepped into his front garden. Norman was dressed in a pristinely ironed, meticulously clean Scout uniform, which was covered

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in the most achievement badges Lucy had ever seen.

Here is a list of some of Norman's badges:

- a *tree-climbing* badge
- a *tent-pitching* badge
- a badge for *spreading-butter-on-toast-all-the-way-to-the-edges*
- the *indoor-challenge* badge
- the *outdoor-challenge* badge
- the *shake-it-all-about-door challenge* badge
- a *bed-making* badge
- a *cake-baking* badge
- an *eating-the-cake-you-bake-in-the-bed-you-make* badge
- the *remembering-to-wash-your-belly-button* badge
- and even a badge for *collecting-lots-of-badges*

... and there were a few empty spots on his uniform he needed to fill with new badges.

'Oh, hi ... Er, I mean, good morning, civilians!'



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Norman said, nervously holding up three fingers in Scout salute, before fiddling with his neatly combed, mousy-blond hair. With his other hand, he covered his mouth to hide his train-track braces.

'You haven't seen my dad, have you?' he asked, scooping a handful of mud from his front garden and sniffing it as if trying to pick up his dad's scent. When Norman bent down, Lucy caught sight of his Transformers socks.

Ella giggled at him, not really in a mean way, but just because she found Norman sort of funny. Everyone did. Norman was . . . different.

Sometimes people who are different get laughed at, but it's always the different ones who make a difference, Lucy heard her dad's voice say in her head. He had his own way of looking at things. On cloudy days, he'd tell Lucy, 'The sun just needs a holiday so it can shine better tomorrow!' When she came second to her friend Giorgina in the sack race on Sports Day, he told her, 'Don't be upset. You just made your friend really happy!' And, when she asked him if he liked being a bin man, he said, 'You'd be surprised what people throw away, Lucy. One man's

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rubbish is another man's favourite pair of black boots!' and clipped his heels together with a wink.

'No, I've not seen your dad, sorry,' Lucy said, shaking off her daydream about her own father and elbowing Ella to stop her laughing. 'My mum's missing too.'

Suddenly another door opened and Sissy McNab ran out into the street in tears. Then Toby Cobblesmith, who had his shoes on the wrong feet. Next out came William Trundle and Brenda Payne, searching for their mum and dad, then another kid, and another, until, one by one, every child in Whiffington Town came stumbling out of their houses in their PJs, dressing-gowns and slippers, trying to find their parents. Nans and grandads, aunts and uncles – they were all gone too. There wasn't a single grown-up to be seen.

There was such a kerfuffle in Clutter Avenue: some children were crying; others were laughing; and a few were still fast asleep in bed and hadn't noticed anything yet.

'What's going on?' they shouted (the ones who were awake).

'Where are our parents?' they called.

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'What are we going to do?' they yelled.

Lucy took a breath and tried to think. 'What would my mum do?' she said to herself. 'How did my mum find out what was going on in the world?'

Then, before she knew what she was doing, Lucy found herself clambering on to the steps of her dad's stinking rubbish truck, and above the noise she yelled . . .

'THE NEWS!'

There was silence. Everyone turned to look at Lucy.

'We have to watch the news! I know it's super-boring, but whenever my mum wants to know what's going on in the world she always watches the news,' she told them.

The children looked at each other, uncertain. I'm sure you know that the news is the biggest snorefest on TV, but Lucy had a point.

'She's right . . .' Norman whispered to Ella, too frightened to say it out loud.

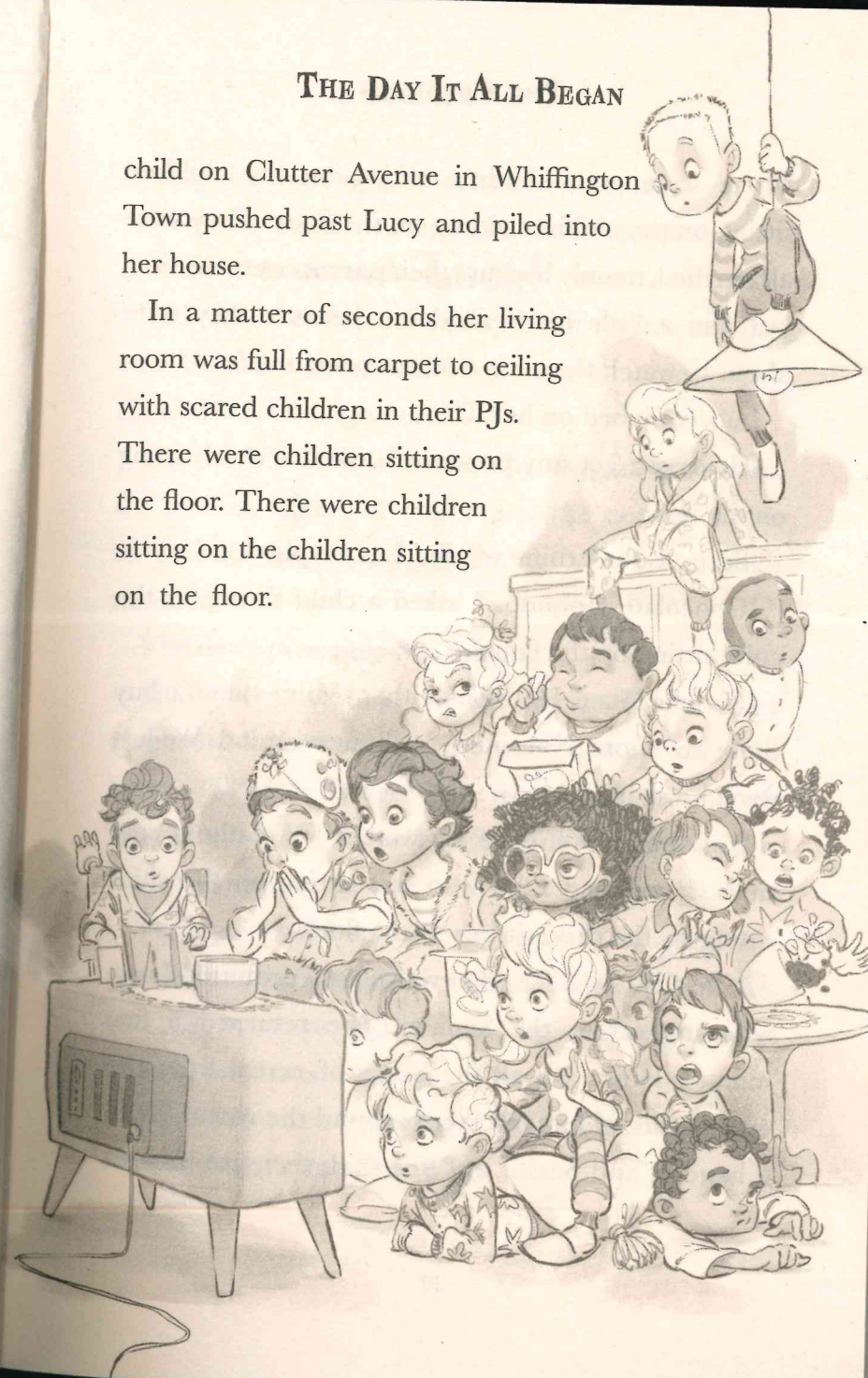
'SHE'S RIGHT!' Ella shouted, not frightened of anyone.

'To the television!' they all cried in unison, and every

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child on Clutter Avenue in Whiffington Town pushed past Lucy and piled into her house.

In a matter of seconds her living room was full from carpet to ceiling with scared children in their PJs. There were children sitting on the floor. There were children sitting on the children sitting on the floor.



There were even children sitting on the children sitting on the children sitting on the floor! They were all terrified, mainly because their parents were missing, but also a little bit freaked out because they were about to watch the news without being made to.

Lucy switched on her TV.

'Have you got any popcorn?' asked a child sitting on the floor.

'Sorry, I don't think we do,' Lucy replied.

'Chocolate Hobnobs?' asked a child sitting on the child sitting on the floor.

'No chocolate Hobnobs either. Mum doesn't buy those any more. Not since – well, never mind. We just don't have any.'

'You mean we have to watch TV without any snacks?' moaned Ella, who was sitting on the child sitting on the child sitting on the floor.

'Oh, OK – I'll see what we've got!' promised Lucy, whizzing off to the kitchen. She returned a few minutes later with all the boxes of cereal from the cupboard and handed them around the room. 'Take a handful and pass it on,' she said, then got back to

finding the twenty-four-hour news channel.

The moment it flicked on, her heart stopped.

'Oh no!' Lucy cried. **'Look!'**

The crowd of children all spat out their cornflakes and Cheerios in shock, showering the room with chewed bits of soggy cereal.

On the TV they could see the normal news desk, the normal sheets of paper and the normal coffee mug, but there was something very *not*-normal about it.

The news presenter was missing!

Ella pushed through to the front. 'Try another channel! Maybe your TV is broken, Lucy. Don't you have a *TV-repair* badge?' she demanded, turning to Norman, who tried his best to hide when everyone looked at him.

'Perhaps I could take a look?' he said sheepishly as the children nudged him across the room towards the telly. 'Sorry, oops, watch out!' he muttered as he stepped on almost everybody's fingers.

'Well? Why isn't it working?' Ella said, bashing the remote on the side of the TV.

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'Erm . . . well . . . I actually *do* have a badge in *TV-remote-control functions*. And as the only member of the Whiffington Scout Troop present today -'

'Aren't you the *only* member of the Scout Troop, full stop?' asked Ella. Everybody laughed.

Norman sat down, looking defeated, on what he thought was the arm of the sofa, but it was actually the head of another child sitting on another child.

'Here, just do your best,' Lucy said, taking the remote from Ella and handing it to Norman. Norman smiled at her, for once forgetting to hide his braces. He flicked through a few channels, hoping to find a grown-up of any kind looking back out at them.

Silly Sunrise, the kids' show, had no Funzo the Clown getting pied in the face today. *Wakey-Wakey*, *Whiffington* had no Piers Snoregan, although that was probably an improvement. Norman flicked through the sports channels, the shopping network, the cooking shows, *Whiffington Weather* and just about every channel he could think of. Not a single one of them had a single grown-up.

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It was almost as if every adult on the planet had just disappeared overnight, from Lucy's mum to the news presenter . . .

. . . they had all just **GONE!**