

Chapter 1

TILLY TURNED HER HEAD TO LOOK AT THE CLOCK AGAIN, three in the morning and she was still wide awake. Only three more hours before the alarm would shriek into action. So far she hadn't slept a wink. Panic flooded through her body as her mind raced over all the items on the list of things she had to complete by the end of that day.

Life at St Celia's Academy of Music for Talented and Gifted Students was full-on. Tilly was a boarder there and a talented music student majoring in flute. It was her final year. She had set her sights high and planned to continue her flute studies, after graduating from the Academy, at an overseas Conservatoire. At the top of the list were the Conservatoire de Paris and the Royal School of Music in London.

The morning at St Celia's, which the students had shortened to St C's, was taken up as usual with academic lessons. It was an early morning start at 8 o'clock, finishing in the afternoon at 2 o'clock sharp. This was to allow time for the students to attend their

specialist music lessons in the ultra-modern specially designed Music Block. This was referred to as the Block and was the pride and joy of both staff and students alike. It was there that the students would meet with their private tutors for specialized music lessons, followed by intensive practice in the individual soundproofed rooms. If a concert was looming, which appeared to be often, then there would be orchestral rehearsals to fit in as well.

To make matters worse, there was the proposed advanced Italian class to be squeezed into Tilly's hectic schedule. This would be taken by Signora De Luca, known by the students as, *the vision in purple* or more commonly as *the vision*. Small in height but rather broad elsewhere, she always wore layers and layers of different shades of purple chiffon which floated around her. This outfit was matched by jangly bracelets in shades of violet through to aubergine which were studded with glittering gems. Reaching half-way up her plump arms, the clinking jewellery announced her arrival.

She seemed to think Tilly had a special gift with the Italian language and had been trying to convince her to take an extra class. 'There you are!' she had screeched. 'I've been looking for you everywhere. I really need you to make a decision as soon as possible. Time is running out. Two extra sessions a week would make all the difference.'

Tilly had responded as she always did, by smiling politely and saying, 'I'll think about it.' She would

have turned around and walked away in the opposite direction even if it wasn't the way she had planned to go. She always looked so in control even though inside she was quivering with fear.

Her workload was already pushing the limits and Tilly felt, that if anyone else placed extra demands on her, she would scream and not be able to stop. She was already at breaking point.

Tilly's mind raced back to her unending list for the day. Following her normal weekly Italian class, there was her flute lesson with Mr Ford. Now retired from his busy life as a professional flute player, Jack Ford was the ideal teacher for Tilly. Short in stature, with an unkempt beard, and a cheeky grin, he delighted in bringing a smile to Tilly's face. He always insisted on referring to her by her full name, Matilda. Normally, she would have frowned at that but, because it was Jack, she excused him. He recognised that she was exceptionally gifted and he looked forward to the day when she would also stand tall on the world stage.

Jack Ford was a teller of stories. At the completion of her lesson, he liked nothing better than to fill her mind with tales of his professional life, when he had been a visiting professor at one of the state's top universities. She also learnt that in between his lecturing appointments, he had spent time accompanying top vocal artists on stage as well as performing in his own right. He was classed as being a world-famous flautist so she counted herself lucky to have Mr Ford as her

tutor. It was even rumoured, he had accompanied, on more than one occasion, a famous Italian male vocalist when he had recorded his CDs. Tilly was never sure whether his stories were true. Normally, she loved her lessons with Jack and counted down the hours to when her lesson was due but not today.

Today, the list in Tilly's head seemed to go on forever. So did the uncontrollable flowing river of fear and dread that was engulfing her whole being as she lay in bed. She just couldn't go on like this for much longer. She knew she couldn't. Night after night she had spent wide awake tossing and turning from one side of the bed to the other.

To Tilly, it seemed as though her mind had taken on a personality of its own over which she had no control. She had always had a vivid imagination. Now it was working overtime. Terrifying thoughts raced around so fast she was unable to keep up with them. When they reached their peak, at around three o'clock in the morning, it was then that the height of the panic really set in. Her thoughts took over to produce the most horrifying images. Pictures which resulted in the frightening panic attacks where she found herself sitting bolt upright in bed, her breathing totally out of control. One moment she was shivering and the next she was clammy with perspiration.

These attacks were the scariest of all. She was frightened that one night, she wouldn't recover from one of these attacks that left her gasping for air. With

her imagination running wild, she had visions of being found, alone in her room in the morning. When it was noticed she'd failed to arrive in the dining room downstairs for breakfast, she imagined Amy, her best friend, banging furiously on her door and shouting, 'Tilly, open the door! Tilly!'

She could just imagine everyone on the corridor racing to see what was happening. She saw the expressions of horror written across their faces. Jessica especially, who was well known for overreacting, would be sure to cause more mayhem by dramatically fainting as Tilly's limp body was carried out on a stretcher.

When morning eventually arrived, with its bright sunlight filtering through the thin yellow curtains, Tilly was to be found, as usual, kneeling on the cold tiles in her ensuite bathroom. Her head was stuck over the toilet bowl, where she was being violently sick. 'No! Not again! Please not again!' she gasped as she grabbed her face flannel and made an attempt to wipe her damp, clammy face.

The continual worry, nausea accompanied by vomiting and the lack of sleep, had begun to take its toll. When Tilly looked at herself in the mirror it was obvious to her how dreadful she looked. She had always been petite with delicate features. She wasn't a beauty. However, her huge hazel eyes, long lashes, and her finely arched eyebrows were the features that had made her stand out in a crowd.

There wasn't much to smile about at the moment. If her recent weight loss was so obvious to her, what must other people be thinking? This was not helped by the dark circles under her hazel eyes and her almost colourless lips.

Recently, Tilly had spent a lot of time staring at herself in the mirror in her tiny ensuite. To an observer, one would have thought she was obsessed with her appearance, perhaps not unlike a lot of teen girls who spend ages taking selfies and posting them on Instagram for the entire world to see. On closer inspection, one would have realised that there was no camera or phone in sight, no images plastered on her Instagram page. No, Tilly's thoughts were miles away.

Tilly was in another world far away, a recurring nightmare. Her own pale, thin features were replaced by a vision of her mum and how she had appeared weeks before she had succumbed to the ravaging illness that had claimed her life. Losing her mum had broken Tilly's heart into fragments so minute she felt they could never be mended.

Apart from Tilly's physical sickness, there was a cavernous hole inside her. It was as though all the joy of youth, the hopes and aspirations, and the excitement of living had been sucked out of her leaving her empty. 'Blot it out,' she said as she tightly shut her eyes and clenched her fists. 'Blot it out. Go away!' However, this image wasn't the only thing on Tilly's mind that she wanted to 'Blot out'.

Tilly had often thought how great it would be if there was a switch you could flick on which would have returned her to the life she so vividly remembered. The life before her mum had become so ill. 'Oh, Mum, I miss you like crazy. I don't know what you'd think of me now! I need you so much. I don't know what Dad will do when he finds out. I'm SO scared. I need you now.'

Unfortunately, for Tilly, no switch existed. A terrifying jolt brought her back to the present. Reality set in as another wave of nausea surged through her body and she flung herself down on the floor in front of the toilet bowl for the third time that morning.