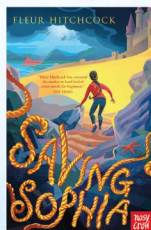
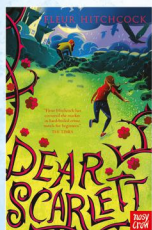


“Open the box,” says Lucas.
“Bet there’s a body in it.”

Ruby doesn’t want to open the abandoned grey cabinet partially hidden by falling snow but she does.
And immediately wishes she hadn’t...

A grisly discovery starts a chilling chain of events.
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Or will they be thrown to the wolves...

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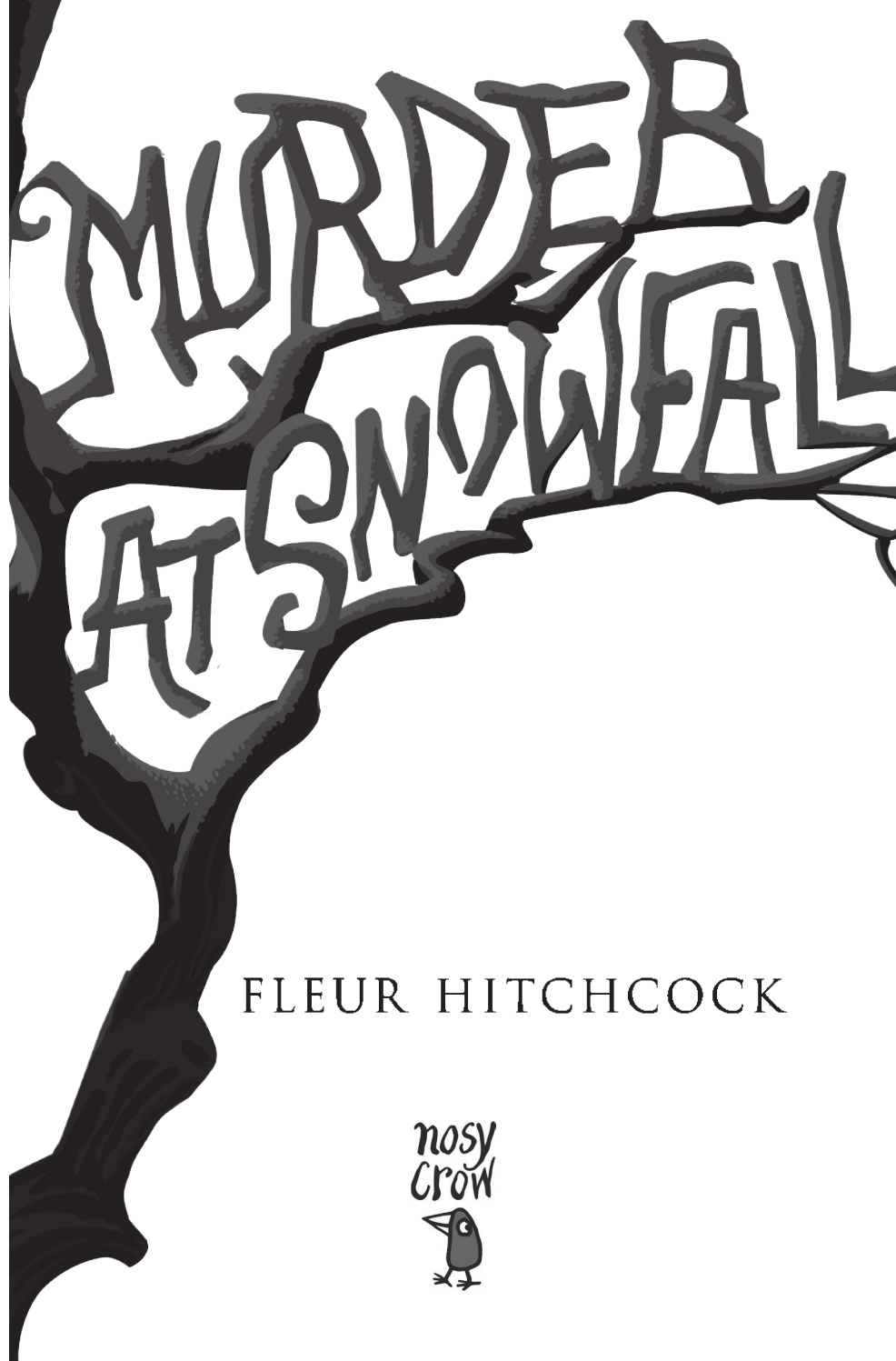
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Prologue

“I bet there’s a body in that.” Lucas pulled his blazer tight around his chest. He pointed at the grey cabinet that had appeared in the lay-by a few days ago.

“Bet there isn’t,” I said, dragging my school skirt down to cover my frozen legs. “Why would anyone leave a body here?”

“Go on then, if you’re so sure. Open it.”

I stared at the cabinet. It was waist high, at an angle, propped against the skanky barbed-wire fence. Sleet flakes were settling on the metal. It was

probably colder than we were. I touched it. It was.

“Ow!” I said. “That’s frozen. If I’d left my hand there any longer, it would have got stuck.”

“So?” he said.

I looked back at the cabinet. It was actually big enough to put a body in. “Suppose you’re right?”

“But you said I couldn’t possibly be. Go on. Open it.”

I wish I hadn’t. But I did.



Chapter I

The Christmas market’s heaving. The people are so jam-packed that I’ve barely moved and I’d swear that if I took my feet off the ground I’d be carried all the way to the hot-dog stand without any effort. Behind me, the crowd surges forward and I lean into the tiny gap that’s opened up in front of the man with the wooden neckties.

He glares at me; I’m very much in his space. Aaargh – I’m going to have to throw myself back into the people stream. I said I’d meet Mum at six, by the hot dogs. But there are two hot-dog stands

and I don't know which one she meant, and there are about a billion tourists in between.

I'm really hungry so I hope she turns up soon. Hours ago, Mia and I shared a spiced apple juice and some overpriced roasted nuts. She ate most of them. I'm not that keen, to be honest. I'd rather have had a toffee apple thing. The nuts are now a distant memory and even though I can't hear it, I know my stomach's gone full cement mixer.

I catch a glimpse of a green quilted coat. "Mum!" I shout over the crowd, not that she's the faintest chance of hearing it. "Mum!"

She's looking around, but she can't see me. With a supreme and probably antisocial effort, I ram my way through the coats and bags and get to her just as she's heading off towards the abbey.

"Ruby!" she says. And she hugs me really hard, really close. For too long. We stand cheek to cheek, our hair mingling. Hers dark and mine mousey brown.

"What is it?" I mutter.

"Nothing, nothing, darling. I'm just happy to see you."

"Can we get something to eat?" I say, pushing

her away. "Can you be happy to see me in the hot-dog queue?"

She laughs and hugs me again, and we battle back through the crowds.

A moment later I'm burning my mouth on hot onions and I don't care. They're sliding down my chin on to my uniform. I gobble the whole thing while Mum laughs at me again and then, because she's my mum and she's prepared, she hands me a tissue to mop the oil and onion from my chin.

"Anything you particularly want to show me?" she says, and we link arms and batter our way around, buying Granny some soap and Paolo a lumpy sweater that Mum says he'll love, though I'm not so sure.

"What about Lucas?" she says as we drift to the edge of the market. I think of the gingerbread and candles and carved elf statues on offer. "I think he'd rather have some new headphones," I say. "Actually, please can you give him decent headphones? Or soundproofing? In fact, can you build him his own shed? Like, miles away?"

Mum would normally give me a disapproving glance, but instead she looks around, like she's

expecting to see someone. “Headphones, you’re right,” she says, her gaze off somewhere over my shoulder. “I’ll get Paolo to do some research.”

“What is it, Mum? Are you OK?”

“Tell you in the car. It’s time we went home,” she says, taking my hand and tugging me away from the market.

“But you haven’t even seen all the stands!” I point to the indoor market. “There’s that whole bit over there.”

“Come on, love, let’s get home.”

Letting go of my arm she stomps off towards Pulteney Bridge and I’m left standing, staring at her back and wondering what’s going on.

We get to Great Pulteney Street before she starts talking.

“I’m sorry, Rube, but I’ve had an awful day,” she says eventually. “I’m just not in the mood for the market.”

“Is everyone all right? Is Granny OK?”

We stride past the huge houses; above us, coloured Christmas lights twinkle in the windows. Below, through half-closed shutters we can see into

the basement flats. Kids doing their homework on kitchen tables, people chopping vegetables, one family putting decorations on their tree. It’s Christmas perfect.

“No – nothing for you to worry about, everyone’s fine. It’s not that sort of awful day.” We swing round the corner into the side street where she’s parked the car. “It’s about work.”

The car’s freezing. I clamp my hands between my knees and breathe on to them. Even after mum starts the engine and the fans come on full blast, all the heat does is clear a tiny arc of fog from the windscreen. Shivering, we thread our way on to the main road and in silence we creep up the hill in a slow worm of traffic. White Christmas lights on either side of us. A deer made out of stars galloping over a frail balcony. A tree trussed in festive cheer. One utterly out-of-place inflatable Santa bobbing on a roof top.

My mind wanders back to the market. I wonder if Mum’d like any of the things we saw. She didn’t really react to anything, but then she wasn’t concentrating.

Shame. I never know what to give her. She

buys everything she needs and she's picky about everything else. She complains about Granny being picky, but she's just as bad herself. I look across at her. By the brake lights of the car in front I can see that she's frowning. Lines on her forehead and her mouth clamped shut.

"So what is it, Mum?"

She's considering her answer. She probably doesn't want to worry me. Which is much more worrying than if she just spat it out. Eventually, she begins to talk. "I told you Dr Price didn't turn up yesterday? Well, he didn't turn up again today."

"Stressy."

"And when I got to the surgery this morning there'd been a fire."

"What? Had the whole place burned down? No way!"

"No, but it would have done; the fire brigade said it ran out of oxygen. It was just the office that got really badly damaged – but everything's covered in soot, unreadable or melted."

I try to picture the neat and tidy surgery blackened and burned. "Do you think Dr Price did it? Is he losing it?"

"No, it was a break-in. They came in through a window. We've still not heard from him. It's so ... unlike him."

The traffic loosens and we speed up. Mum begins to talk again.

"We have digital records, of course. They're on an off-site server – but the computers have been trashed. The police were there all morning. I had to turn away patients, although the doctors saw as many as possible. I had no idea who was coming because the appointments are all computerised. It was awful."

"Not just you though? Jacqui and Oskar must have been there?"

"Oh, they were. It was all three of us trying to make it up as we went along – and then..."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. It's silly."

"Mum?" I leave the word hanging in the air and we reach the top of the hill, where we wait behind a university bus.

"I'd swear I was followed back to my car."

"For real?"

I wait for her. She's thinking.

“I don’t... I can’t be sure, but you know, where I park my car – it’s pretty tucked away? The chances of anyone else doing the same twists and turns to get there are like a hundred to one.”

We crawl past the university, and streams of bikes, buses and cars flood the roads around us. Mum slows until we’re at the top of Brassknocker Hill. We join the cars advancing in slow caterpillars down the slope. Ahead of us, the valley opens up into a few clusters of yellow lights, and a huge moon silhouettes the trees on the ridge opposite. She’s right, the surgery is in the middle of a network of small roads and alleyways. But she could just be overthinking it.

The queue halts and we halt with it. To my left is a lay-by. On sunny days tourists stop and take pictures of the valley from here. It’s famous and beautiful. It’s also a place favoured by fly-tippers, and just now they’ve left a small filing cabinet thing and an armchair. Someone’s graffiti-tagged the cabinet with a tiny white owl.

“Why would anyone follow you?”

She glances in her rear-view mirror. “I don’t know.”

“All the way to the actual car?” I ask.

She thinks about it.

“Actually, they didn’t – because I stopped for a newspaper at the end of the parade.”

“So they might not have been following you?”

“They might not,” she says.

“So you might just be being paranoid?”

“I might,” she laughs.

“Good,” I say, and stare out at the blackness.