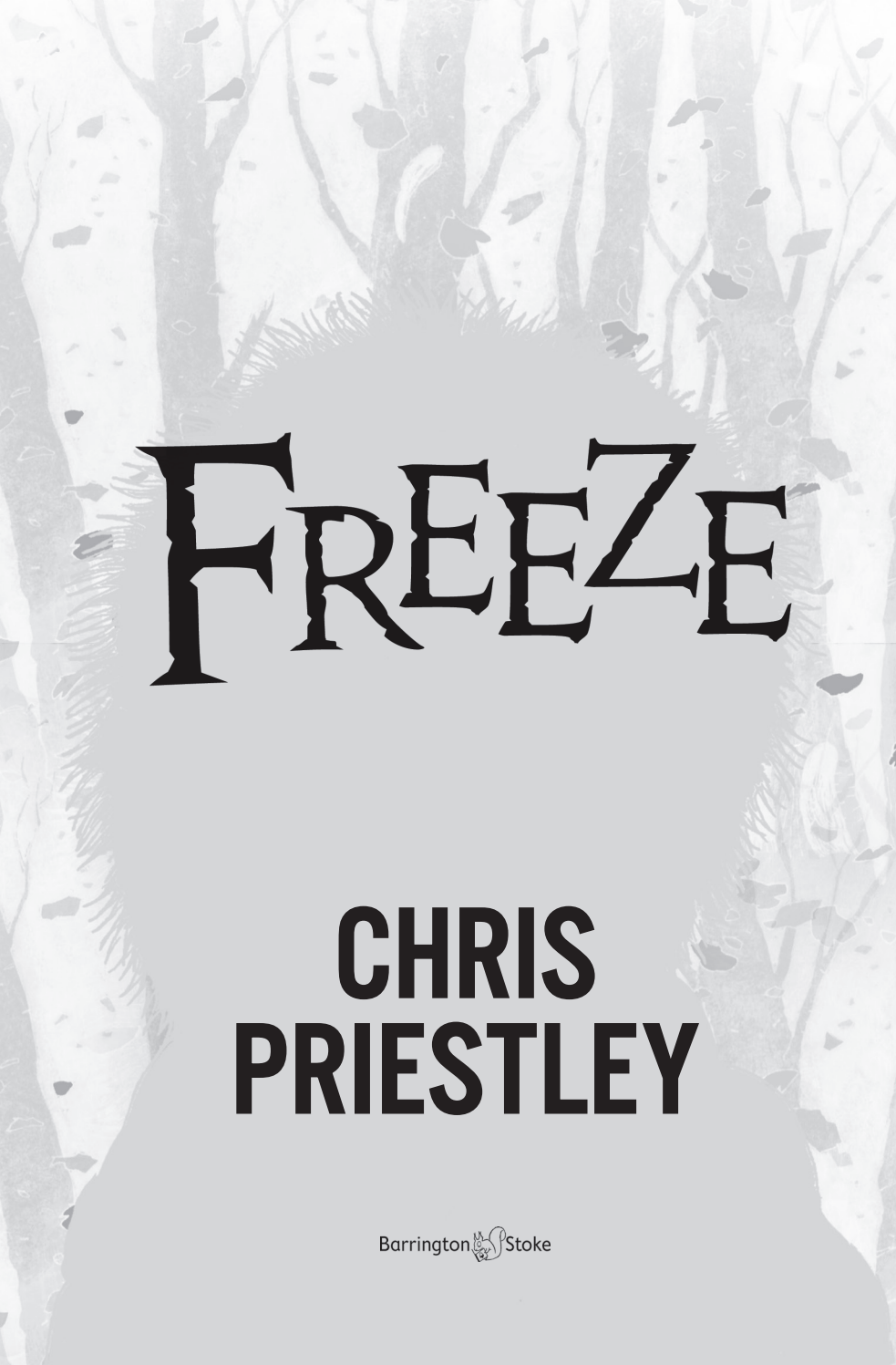

When the temperature falls, the ghosts rise ...
FREEZE
CHRIS PRIESTLEY



CHRIS PRIESTLEY

Barrington Stoke

For Alex

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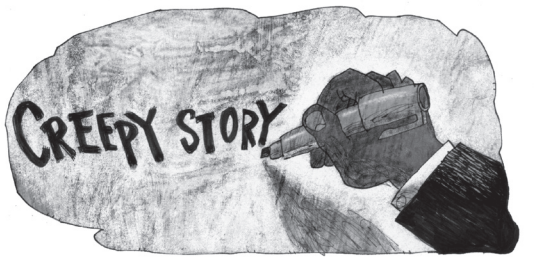
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CHAPTER 1



Maya woke with a jolt when the music started playing, not sure for a moment where she was. She gave her radio alarm clock a smack to stop the music, knocking it off the bedside table and sending it clattering to the floor.

Maya jumped up to check if the alarm clock was broken. Her mum had bought it for her to make sure she always woke up for school. She was relieved to see it still seemed to be working.

Maya opened the curtains, squinting into the cloudy daylight. She looked out over the estate, across the canal, past the old factory and the common towards the school. She suddenly had an intense feeling that something bad was going to happen.

She just didn't know what …

Maya felt like she was walking in cobwebs as she went into the kitchen. There was something hiding in the darkness at the back of her mind.

A dream. It had been a bad dream. But she could not remember what shape the dream had taken.

Her phone pinged. It was Maya's mother texting her from work to make sure she was awake and ready for school, just like she did every morning.

Maya normally did not mind – she knew her mother had to work. They needed the money.

But that morning she wished her mother was there. Just for a brief hug.

Maya got dressed, ate her breakfast and headed out of the flat to walk to school. When she got there, she found her friends Carla, Jason and Tomas outside the library.

Mrs Vargas, the librarian, was making sure everyone went in calmly. Maya joined her friends as they filed inside and then they all slumped down at the table in the far corner.

"What's the matter with you?" said Carla to Maya. "You look terrible."

"Cheers," said Maya.

"Sorry," said Carla. "But you do look a bit shattered."

"I had a really bad night," said Maya. "I had this horrible nightmare. Really bad. I haven't had a dream as bad as that since I was little."

"What?" said Carla. "That's weird. Me too. What was yours about?"

"I don't know," said Maya. "I forgot it straight away. I just remember how terrified I was. I keep thinking I'm going to remember, but it's like the nightmare is so scary my brain won't let me think of it. How about you? What was yours about?"

"I can't remember either," said Carla. "Maybe we had the same one."

"Yeah," said Maya, rolling her eyes. "Maybe."

"That stuff really happens, you know," said Carla.

Maya didn't say anything. She was too tired to have some stupid conversation about dreams. Carla always had all these weird ideas about supernatural stuff.

Jason turned round from chatting to Tomas. "Wait, are you two talking about nightmares?" Jason asked. "This is so strange. Me and Tomas were just saying how we both had nightmares too. Last night. Really bad ones, but we can't—"

"You can't remember," said Carla. She looked at Maya. "See?!"

Maya shook her head.

"But that's pretty weird, huh?" said Jason.

"Don't get Carla started," said Maya. "You know what she's—"

"OK, OK," said Mrs Varga, cutting Maya off. "Please all settle down. As you know, Miss Miller is away today and we have a supply teacher visiting us. Let's try to show that we are not a total rabble. I'm looking at you, Maya."

"Why me, Miss?" said Maya.

Carla laughed but stopped suddenly as a man stepped forward from behind one of the bookshelves.

"Hello, everyone," he said. "My name is Mr Kumar. I'm taking this lesson today. Hopefully it'll be fun."

Mr Kumar went to the white board and wrote "CREEPY STORY" in big letters.

"Today we're going to be writing a creepy story," he said. "So I hope you've all got your creepy heads on."

"Carla's always got her creepy head on, sir," said Maya.

Jason laughed loudly.

"Maya, come here," said Mrs Varga, waving at Maya to come to her.

"What, Miss?" said Maya.

“I don’t want you and Carla sitting together,” Mrs Varga explained.

“But—” Maya started to say.

“Over here,” said Mrs Varga. “Come on.” She pointed to an empty table.

“On my own?” said Maya.

Carla laughed.

Maya slumped into a chair, scowling.

Mrs Varga went behind her desk and took the register. Maya felt like it was going to be a long day.

Maya leaned back in her chair and saw someone she didn’t recognise standing outside the library door. It was a girl in a silver coat with a fur-lined hood.

LIBRARY

The door opened slowly and the girl came in. She walked straight towards Maya's table and took off her silver coat. The girl put the coat on the back of the chair and sat down opposite Maya.

"Er – who are you?" said Maya.

"New," the girl said with a smile.

This new girl was the palest person Maya had ever seen. Her skin was so white, while her hair was jet black.

"OK," said Mr Kumar. "Let's crack on. Everyone should have a piece of paper and something to write with."

Maya took a pen out of her bag and grabbed a sheet of the lined paper Mrs Varga had left on the table. She started to doodle in the top-left corner.

"So I want you to come up with some really creepy story ideas," said Mr Kumar. "When I say 'creepy', I mean properly creepy – not gory."

There was a groan from one of the boys behind Maya and she smiled. What was it with boys and gore?

"We've all got things that creep us out, haven't we?" Mr Kumar went on. "Think about that. Think about what creeps you out."

"Puppets," said Maya.

"Don't just shout out, Maya," said Mrs Varga.

"Oh yes," said Mr Kumar. "Puppets and dolls. Very creepy. OK, what if the creepy story is set in the wintertime? What comes into your mind when I say winter?"

"Snow?" said Tomas.

"Good," said Mr Kumar. "Anything else?"

"Snowmen," said Tomas.

Carla laughed.

"What?" said Tomas.

"You might not think of snowmen as creepy, but maybe we could make them so," said Mr Kumar.

"Yes, I think we could," said Tomas, frowning at Carla.

"OK," said Mr Kumar. "Anything else?"

Now hands went up all round the room.

Mr Kumar wrote every suggestion up on the white board.

"Ice," said someone.

"Icicles."

"Frost."

"Snowballs."

Carla laughed again.

"Shhh," said Mrs Varga.

"Christmas."

"Christmas. Yes. We could have a whole other board full of things just about Christmas, couldn't we? Maybe we'll do that nearer to Christmas if I come back."

Maya sighed at the idea of doing even more writing. She could not wait for the Christmas holidays.

"We won't waste a lot of time trying to agree on a location," said Mr Kumar. "Instead, I thought we'd set the stories here, in this town, even in this school if you want to. And set your stories in the present so you don't have to worry about any historical details or old-fashioned language. Imagine your story has

four characters: two boys and two girls. Just call them the four friends. You don't have to worry about names. You can always give them names later on. Have a think about what your story could be for a few minutes. Put your name at the top."

Maya stared at the board with the list of wintery words and then at her sheet of paper. She did not have one single idea. Her mind was as blank as the paper.

The new girl started writing straight away. Maya took a sneaky look at what she had written at the top of the page: "Winter".

"Ha!" said Maya. "That's where your name is supposed to go, not the title."

"That *is* my name," the new girl said.

"What?" said Maya. "Your name's Winter?"

The new girl smiled and nodded.

"Weird," said Maya.

Winter shrugged.

Maya suddenly realised Mr Kumar had moved and was standing right beside her.

"Any thoughts about a story yet?" he asked.

Maya tapped her pen on the table. Why was he not asking the new girl? She looked like she had a ton of ideas.

Maya shook her head. Mr Kumar smiled.

Everyone around her had their heads down, writing. As always, Maya felt like she was the only one struggling. Even Carla was writing away. Jason had his tongue sticking out as he focused.

"OK," Mr Kumar said after twenty minutes. "Would anyone like to read the start of their

story? I know it's hard to be first, but it would be great if someone was brave."

To Maya's surprise, Tomas put his hand up.

Mr Kumar smiled and nodded.

Tomas took a deep breath.

"My story is called 'Snow', sir," said Tomas.

Maya was surprised at how confident Tomas sounded as he started to tell his story. Tomas didn't say much in class normally and she liked that about him. It was like if Tomas didn't need to say anything, he didn't. She was jealous of that. Maya always felt like she had to say something, and she wished she didn't.

As Tomas read, Maya began to picture herself as part of his story. The four friends were not just nameless students – they were Maya, Carla, Jason and Tomas. Maya could see

the story as clearly as anything. It felt real. Completely real. She was right there.