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MURDER AT WINTERTIDE

FLEUR HITCHCOCK

nosy crow

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For Lal, my big sister, who told me about the golden ammonites, and who may take issue with the geography.



Prologue

The pale painted boards of the deckchair hut shone through the scribbles of snow falling on the shore. Something else showed through too, something grey, drifting in and out in the surf.

Only the sea crows saw it.

The Christmas trees leaning from the buildings became brighter, the amusement arcade music became louder and a single dog walker stopped and peered towards the unfamiliar object caught in the tide.

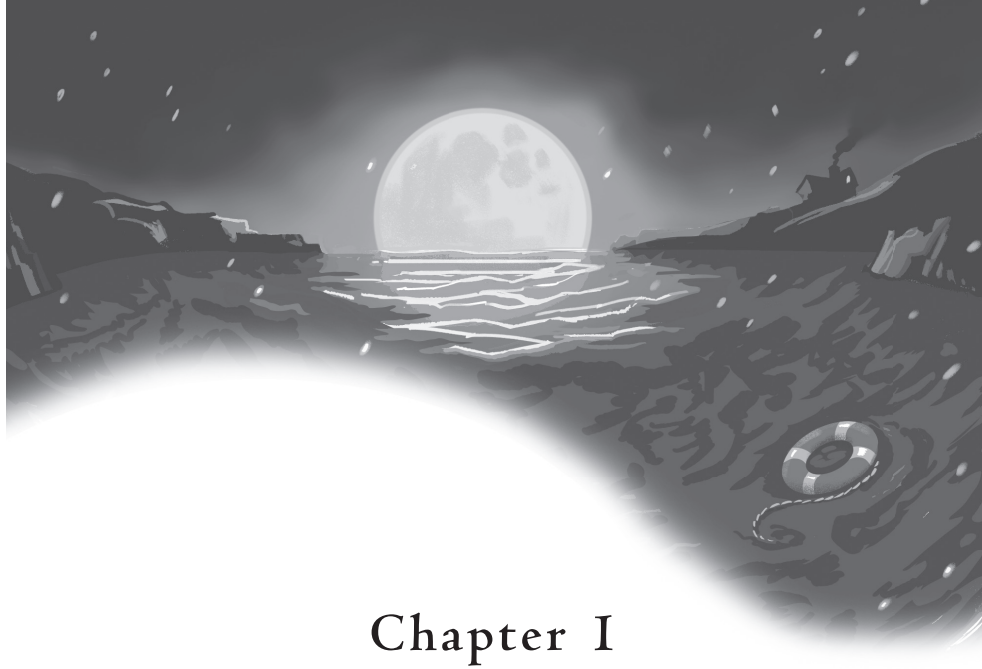
She paused, and eventually, her dog at her side,

walked over the shingle and stopped. She examined the thing at her feet.

She'd taken it for a bird, but it wasn't a bird.

What she'd thought were seagull wings was a grey hoody with white sleeves.

And, lit by the pretty lamps behind her, was a body, drifting in and out, in and out.



Chapter 1

White sludge is collecting on the windscreen wipers. The excited me is hoping it's snow, the sensible me is reckoning it's chubby rain. "Sleet", Dad calls it. Whatever it is, the car chucks it off the side and we wind on south through the waterlogged lanes, heading for Christmas.

It's a touch early to call it Christmas; right now we're on our way to Grandpa's birthday – he'll be seventy – but we're staying on for Christmas.

"Sheesh!" Dad yanks the steering wheel over and we skim the hedge as a silver van overtakes us in the

shortest of straight stretches. "Total maniac!"

I clear a small circle on the glass and stare sideways at the wet countryside. It would look amazing covered in snow. "Dad? What's it like when the sea's covered in snow?"

"Pass," he says. And then he says. "It wouldn't be. It's salty."

Dad's a scientist. An environmental one. We have only come by car because I begged. Otherwise it was the bus. And the train. And another train. And another bus. Apparently it would have done wonders for our family's carbon footprint. I feel guilty, but it is Christmas.

"I wonder if they've got a tree yet?" he says as we whizz past a track entrance with a hand-painted sign offering Christmas trees and turkeys. I imagine a massive tree covered in coloured lights, baubles on every branch.

"We're halfway through December. Grandpa and Queenie will have done that – won't they?"

Dad nods and reaches for the radio button. "All I want…" he sings in off-key falsetto, and I join in, "… is yooooooooou."

My heart lifts. It's lovely being with Dad. Just

Dad. It hardly ever happens any more and it won't last much longer so I'm determined to make the most of it.

We yowl all the way along the twisty-turny road until we come to three vehicles half blocking the way. In front of the nearest car is the van that nearly killed us. The front wheel is in the ditch.

The third car is untouched. Two women glare through the windscreen.

By the van, there are two men shouting at each other and a woman in the middle waving her arms at them.

"Do you think they're all right?"

Dad slows the car and nearly stops. I wind down the window so I can see better.

"I don't think it's anything a tow truck won't fix."

"But they might kill each other."

"Nah, not in Somerset."

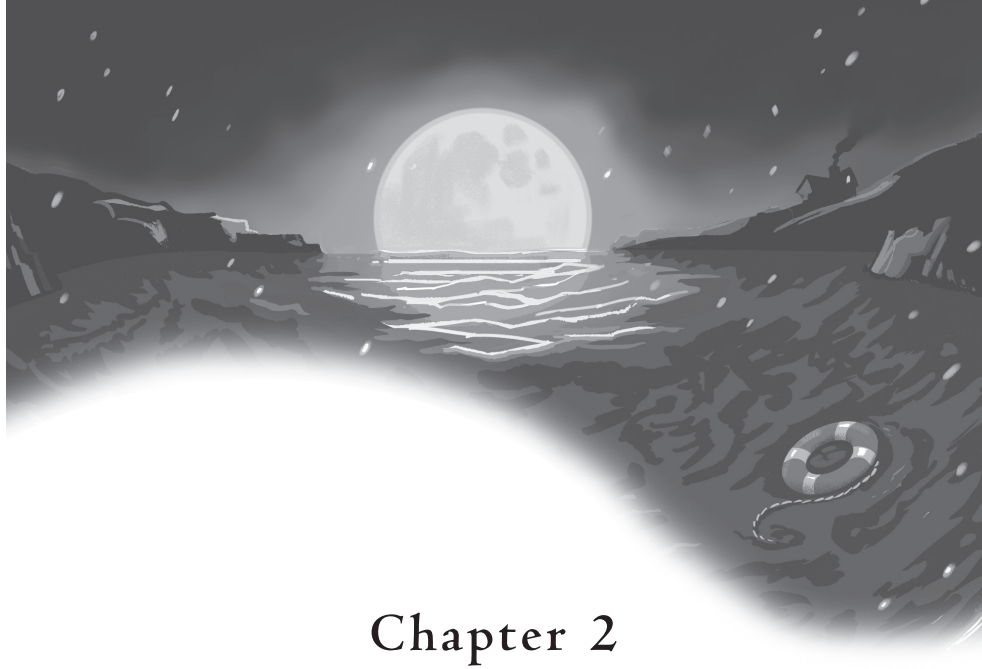
I take a good look at all the people. The man leaning on the bonnet of the van, arms crossed, bearded, is radiating aggression. He's wearing a heavy jacket with loads of pockets which makes him look bigger, but the man hiding behind the door of the car is small and mean-looking and I

reckon he'd probably win in a fight. The woman's obviously with the van driver; they're wearing the same boots. She looks like my maths teacher from school. Hair tied back, neat, She's touching the big guy's sleeve, trying to calm him down, and there's a third man, much younger, with a blue and maroon football scarf, sitting in the van flicking through his phone.

When we're nearly past, I take a picture on my phone. Not sure why.

"Karma," says Dad. "Gonna be a right pain getting that wheel out of the ditch."

We wriggle past and we sing and I Google-Map-read all the way to Lyme Regis, where the sludge on the windscreen definitely changes to snow. For a second. I'd swear.



Chapter 2

The snow has definitely stopped. We park in a big car park at the end of the seafront, miles from the house and I wheel Tina (my stepmum)'s borrowed orange suitcase along the lumpy tarmac. It's got a wheel that points the wrong way, jamming it in every crack in the path.

Although I have stolen her suitcase, we have left Tina behind with her sister. She's having a baby on the first of January and she says she doesn't want to share an uncomfortable rented house with Dad's family when she's the size of a zeppelin and only