Chapter 1

It was snowing so hard, the path had almost disappeared. The only thing that proved its existence was the snow-laden trees on either side. Apart from the fact that his spectacles kept on fogging up, Aiden was extremely happy. He loved the snow, he loved racing around in the wild with his cousins, and he loved the fact that he and Ava had just defeated Chloe and Josh in their snowball fight at the bottom of the woods. They'd had to keep up a relentless barrage of snowballs to do it and the fight had lasted for at least half an hour. Right

now, though, he was pretty sure Josh was sneaking around behind them and would mount an attack any second. For what felt like the millionth time, he took off his specs and defogged them.

"Whoop!" came a voice from his left and a snowball hit him on the cheek, sweeping his glasses from his hands.

"Josh! You total newt!" shouted Ava beside him. Aiden was vaguely aware of more snowballs flying through the trees as he fumbled on the ground for his specs.

"Argh!" shouted Josh.

"You deserved it!" yelled his sister.

Locating his glasses, Aiden wiped them off and looked over to where Josh was rolling around on the ground doing a full-on theatrical death, but still attempting to fire snowballs at them.

"Yay!" yelled Ava, charging towards her brother and dumping a load of snow on his writhing legs.

"I surrender, I surrender," shouted Josh. "It's all in my wellingtons!"

"Josh, you idiot!" yelled Chloe, running up through the trees. "We could have taken them!"

"No way," said Ava, cramming a last handful down Josh's neck.

"Truce!" said Aiden, picking ice from his collar. "I want to go sledging – I need to warm up."

"Yes!" said Ava, kicking snow off a green plastic sledge that she'd been using as a shield. "See you at the top of the field."

Josh stood up, shook the snow from his coat and raced off through the trees to find his sledge, closely followed by Bella, their grandparents' dog. "Last one there's a soggy shrimp!" he shouted over his shoulder.

"No way," replied his sister, and Ava set off across the slope that led up to Frost Castle with Chloe at her side.

Following the two girls, Aiden waded out of a drift, dragging one of Grandpa Edward's homemade wooden sledges through the gateway and into the field. This sledge was heavier than the others. It would be brilliant at coming down the hill; it was just hard work to pull it up. He didn't mind, though. He didn't mind any of it – it was wonderful to be in the countryside with his cousins at New Year. And there was snow!

He stopped to bash clumps of ice from his gloves

and looked up the field towards Frost Castle. As he did so, he saw a yellow shape coming fast through the blizzard.

"What on Earth!" he shouted, pointing.

Halfway up the slope, Ava stopped, staring in horror as a small yellow car shot through a hedge, rolled once and slid on its side towards Chloe.

"Run!" yelled Aiden, too far away to do anything. "Run, Chloe – run!

"What?" shouted Chloe, looking back at him down the field. "What – why?"

Aiden gasped as the car continued to slide. "Run! Just run!" He dropped the sledge rope and half running, half falling, struggled over the snow, his feet tangling with Bella's, both of them barely upright.

Ahead of him, Ava sprang into action. She charged towards Chloe. "Chloe! Move!" she called. Aiden watched in amazement as Ava made a superhuman leap, tackling Chloe's legs and sweeping her sideways. The two girls somersaulted over the ground and into a snowdrift as the car slid past less than a metre from them.

"Wow!" shouted Josh, staring wide-eyed as the car glided by him. It slowed, ploughed through a thick mound of snow and then finally stopped at the base of a small tree. The tree bent and snapped and dropped its load of snow over the windscreen.

The cousins stared at the car for a moment, stunned, before Josh ran to help Chloe and Ava extract themselves from the snow drift and Aiden headed towards the car. The doors and windows were all closed, and through the snow-covered windscreen Aiden saw no sign of anyone moving inside.

Ready to turn and run at any moment if the car started sliding again, Aiden put out his hand and pushed to see if the car had really stopped moving. It had.

"Hello," he said, stepping forward and peering through the windscreen. "Hello!" Inside, he could see a person bent forward, hanging from their seatbelt, their hands over their head. He tapped on the glass. "Hello – are you all right?"

The person inside uncurled, their fingers unclasped and, slowly, they raised their head. It was a young woman, and she was white as a sheet. She undid her seatbelt and slid sideways across the car,

her head crammed against the driver's window. He saw her mouth something, and she reached above her head to try and open the door. "It won't open!" Her voice was muffled. "I can't get it to move."

"Hang on," said Aiden, leaning against the roof and stretching for the handle. It creaked and made weird pinging sounds but he couldn't actually make it open. He wasn't tall enough and the angle was awkward.

"Wait a sec." Ava appeared beside him. "Maybe if we both try. You pull, I'll try and get my hand in that gap and push from underneath."

Together with the woman in the car, they shoved and hauled and, eventually, the door inched open.

"Oh my goodness," said the woman, sticking her head and shoulders through the gap and reaching out to Aiden and Ava. "What just happened?"

"I don't know," said Ava as they helped her out. "Are you all right? That looked scary."

"Did I – did I hit her?" The woman slid to the ground. "There was a girl in front of the car."

"No," said Chloe, stumbling to the car, brushing snow off her jacket. "No, luckily, you missed me. Thanks to Ava."

"I'm so sorry," said the woman, half standing and then leaning back against the car. "It's just, so many odd things have happened to me since I started wearing this necklace." She clasped a small golden pendant hanging from her neck. "And this is the final straw. It sounds crazy but I feel cursed!"