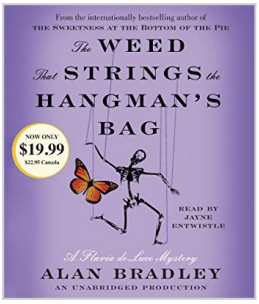

The Weed That Strings the Hangman's Bag: A Flavia de Luce Mystery

By Alan Bradley

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From Dagger Award–winning and internationally bestselling author Alan Bradley comes this utterly beguiling mystery starring one of fiction's most remarkable sleuths: Flavia de Luce, a dangerously brilliant eleven-year-old with a passion for chemistry and a genius for solving murders. This time, Flavia finds herself untangling two deaths—separated by time but linked by the unlikeliest of threads.

Flavia thinks that her days of crime-solving in the bucolic English hamlet of Bishop's Lacy are over—and then Rupert Porson has an unfortunate rendezvous with electricity. The beloved puppeteer has had his own strings sizzled, but who'd do such a thing and why? For Flavia, the questions are intriguing enough to make her put aside her chemistry experiments and schemes of vengeance against her insufferable big sisters. Astride Gladys, her trusty bicycle, Flavia sets out from the de Luces' crumbling family mansion in search of Bishop's Lacey's deadliest secrets.

Does the madwoman who lives in Gibbet Wood know more than she's letting on? What of the vicar's odd ministrations to the catatonic woman in the dovecote? Then there's a German pilot obsessed with the Brontë sisters, a reproachful spinster aunt, and even a box of poisoned chocolates. Most troubling of all is Porson's assistant, the charming but erratic Nialla. All clues point toward a suspicious death years earlier and a case the local constables can't solve—without Flavia's help. But in getting so close to who's secretly pulling the strings of this dance of death, has our precocious heroine finally gotten in way over her head?

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Editorial Review

Review
"Flavia is incisive, cutting and hilarious . . . one of the most remarkable creations in recent literature."—*USA Today*

"Utterly beguiling . . . wicked wit . . . The real delight here is [Flavia's] droll voice and the eccentric cast."—*People* (four stars)

"Bradley takes everything you expect and subverts it, delivering a smart, irreverent, unsappy mystery."
—*Entertainment Weekly*

"A pitch-perfect performance that surpasses an already worthy debut."—*Houston Chronicle*

"Discovering Alan Bradley's Flavia de Luce books is several steps beyond pleasure—it's a sheer delight."—*Winston-Salem Journal*

"Wickedly funny."—*The Times-Picayune*

About the Author
Alan Bradley is the internationally bestselling author of many short stories, children's stories, newspaper columns, and the memoir *The Shoebox Bible*. His first Flavia de Luce novel, *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*, received the Crime Writers' Association Debut Dagger Award, the Dilys Winn Award, the Arthur Ellis Award, the Agatha Award, the Macavity Award, and the Barry Award, and was nominated for the Anthony Award. His other Flavia de Luce novels are *The Weed That Strings the Hangman's Bag, A Red Herring Without Mustard,* and *I Am Half-Sick of Shadows*.

Chapter One

I was lying dead in the churchyard. An hour had crept by since the mourners had said their last sad farewells.

At twelve o'clock, just at the time we should otherwise have been sitting down to lunch, there had been the departure from Buckshaw: my polished rosewood coffin being brought out of the drawing room, carried slowly down the broad stone steps to the driveway, and slid with heartbreaking ease into the open door of the waiting hearse, crushing beneath it a little bouquet of wildflowers that had been laid gently inside by one of the grieving villagers.

Then there had been the long drive down the avenue of chestnuts to the Mulford Gates, whose rampant griffins looked away as we passed, though whether in sadness or in apathy I would never know.

Dogger, Father's devoted jack-of-all-trades, had paced in measured step alongside the slow hearse, his head bowed, his hand resting lightly on its roof, as if to shield my remains from something that only he could see. At the gates, one of the undertaker's mutes had finally coaxed him, by using hand signals, into a hired motorcar.

And so they had brought me to the village of Bishop's Lacey, passing somberly through the same green lanes and dusty hedgerows I had bicycled every day when I was alive.

At the heaped-up churchyard of St. Tancred's, they had taken me gently from the hearse and borne me at a snail's pace up the path beneath the limes. Here, they had put me down for a moment in the new-mown grass.

Then had come the service at the gaping grave, and there had been a note of genuine grief in the voice of the vicar as he pronounced the traditional words.

It was the first time I'd heard the Order for the Burial of the Dead from this vantage point. We had attended last year, with Father, the funeral of old Mr. Dean, the village greengrocer. His grave, in fact, was just a few yards from where I was presently lying. It had already caved in, leaving not much more than a rectangular depression in the grass that was, more often than not, filled with stagnant rainwater.

My oldest sister, Ophelia, said it collapsed because Mr. Dean had been resurrected and was no longer bodily present, while Daphne, my other sister, said it was because he had plummeted through into an older grave whose occupant had disintegrated.

I thought of the soup of bones below: the soup of which I was about to become just another ingredient.

Flavia Sabina de Luce, 1939–1950, they would cause to be carved on my gravestone, a modest and tasteful gray marble thing with no room for false sentiments.

Pity. If I'd lived long enough, I'd have left written instructions calling for a touch of Wordsworth:

A maid whom there were none to praise

And very few to love.

And if they'd balked at that, I'd have left this as my second choice:

Truest hearts by deeds unkind

To despair are most inclined.

Only Feely, who had played and sung them at the piano, would recognize the lines from Thomas Campion's Third Book of Airs, and she would be too consumed by guilty grief to tell anyone.

My thoughts were interrupted by the vicar's voice.

". . . earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall change our vile body . . ."

And suddenly they had gone, leaving me there alone—alone to listen for the worms.

This was it: the end of the road for poor Flavia.

By now the family would already be back at Buckshaw, gathered round the long refectory table: Father

seated in his usual stony silence, Daffy and Feely hugging one another with slack, tearstained faces as Mrs. Mullet, our cook, brought in a platter of baked meats.

I remembered something that Daffy had once told me when she was devouring The Odyssey: that baked meats, in ancient Greece, were traditional funeral fare, and I had replied that, in view of Mrs. Mullet's cooking, not much had changed in two and a half thousand years.

But now that I was dead, I thought, perhaps I ought to practice being somewhat more charitable.

Dogger, of course, would be inconsolable. Dear Dogger: butler-cum- chauffeur-cum-valet-cum-gardener-cum-estate-manager: a poor shell- shocked soul whose capabilities ebbed and flowed like the Severn tides; Dogger, who had recently saved my life and forgotten it by the next morning. I should miss him terribly.

And I should miss my chemistry laboratory. I thought of all the golden hours I'd spent there in that abandoned wing of Buckshaw, blissfully alone among the flasks, the retorts, and the cheerily bubbling tubes and beakers. And to think that I'd never see them again. It was almost too much to bear.

I listened to the rising wind as it whispered overhead in the branches of the yew trees. It was already growing cool here in the shadows of St. Tancred's tower, and it would soon be dark.

Poor Flavia! Poor, stone-cold-dead Flavia.

By now, Daffy and Feely would be wishing that they hadn't been so downright rotten to their little sister during her brief eleven years on this earth.

At the thought, a tear started down my cheek.

Would Harriet be waiting to welcome me to Heaven?

Harriet was my mother, who had died in a mountaineering accident a year after I was born. Would she recognize me after ten years? Would she still be dressed in the mountain-climbing suit she was wearing when she met her end, or would she have swapped it by now for a white robe?

Well, whatever she was wearing, I knew it would be stylish.

There was a sudden clatter of wings: a noise that echoed loudly from the stone wall of the church, amplified to an alarming volume by a half acre of stained glass and the leaning gravestones that hemmed me in. I froze.

Could it be an angel—or more likely, an archangel—coming down to return Flavia's precious soul to Paradise? If I opened my eyes the merest slit, I could see through my eyelashes, but only dimly.

No such luck: It was one of the tattered jackdaws that were always hanging round St. Tancred's. These vagabonds had been nesting in the tower since its thirteenth-century stonemasons had packed up their tools and departed.

Now the idiotic bird had landed clumsily on top of a marble finger that pointed to Heaven, and was regarding me coolly, its head cocked to one side, with its bright, ridiculous boot-button eyes.

Jackdaws never learn. No matter how many times I played this trick they always, sooner or later, came

flapping down from the tower to investigate. To the primeval mind of a jackdaw, any body horizontal in a churchyard could have only one meaning: food.

As I had done a dozen times before, I leapt to my feet and flung the stone that was concealed in my curled fingers. I missed—but then I nearly always did.

With an “awk” of contempt, the thing sprang into the air and flapped off behind the church, towards the river.

Now that I was on my feet, I realized I was hungry. Of course I was! I hadn’t eaten since breakfast. For a moment I wondered vaguely if I might find a few leftover jam tarts or a bit of cake in the kitchen of the parish hall. The St. Tancred’s Ladies’ Auxiliary had gathered the night before, and there was always the chance.

As I waded through the knee-high grass, I heard a peculiar snuffling sound, and for a moment, I thought the saucy jackdaw had come back to have the last word.

I stopped and listened.

Nothing.

And then it came again.

I find it sometimes a curse and sometimes a blessing that I have inherited Harriet’s acute sense of hearing, since I am able, as I am fond of telling Feely, to hear things that would make your hair stand on end. One of the sounds to which I am particularly attuned is the sound of someone crying.

It was coming from the northwest corner of the churchyard—from somewhere near the wooden shed in which the sexton kept his grave- digging tools. As I crept slowly forward on tiptoe, the sound grew louder: Someone was having a good old-fashioned cry, of the knock-’em- down-drag-’em-out variety.

It is a simple fact of nature that while most men can walk right past a weeping woman as if their eyes are blinkered and their ears stopped up with sand, no female can ever hear the sound of another in distress without rushing instantly to her aid.

I peeped round a black marble column, and there she was, stretched out full length, facedown on the slab of a limestone tomb, her red hair flowing out across the weathered inscription like rivulets of blood. Except for the cigarette wedged stylishly erect between her fingers, she might have been a painting by one of the Pre-Raphaelites, such as Burne-Jones. I almost hated to intrude.

“Hullo,” I said. “Are you all right?”

It is another simple fact of nature that one always begins such conversations with an utterly stupid remark. I was sorry the instant I’d uttered it.

“Oh! Of course I’m all right,” she cried, leaping to her feet and wiping her eyes. “What do you mean by creeping up on me like that? Who are you, anyway?”

With a toss of her head she flung back her hair and stuck out her chin. She had the high cheekbones and the

dramatically triangular face of a silent cinema star, and I could see by the way she bared her teeth that she was terrified.

“Flavia,” I said. “My name is Flavia de Luce. I live near here—at Buckshaw.”

I jerked my thumb in the general direction.

She was still staring at me like a woman in the grip of a nightmare.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

She pulled herself up to her full height—which couldn’t have been much more than five feet and an inch or two—and took a step towards me, like a hot-tempered version of the Botticelli Venus that I’d once seen on a Huntley and Palmers biscuit tin.

I stood my ground, staring at her dress. It was a creamy cotton print with a gathered bodice and a flaring skirt, covered all over with a myriad of tiny flowers, red, yellow, blue, and a bright orange the color of poppies and, I couldn’t help noticing, a hem that was stained with half-dried mud.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, taking an affected drag on her angled cigarette. “Never seen anyone famous before?”

Famous? I hadn’t the faintest idea who she was. I had half a mind to tell her that I had indeed seen someone famous, and that it was Winston Churchill. Father had pointed him out to me from a London taxicab. Churchill had been standing in front of the Savoy with his thumbs hooked in his waistcoat pockets, talking to a man in a yellow mackintosh.

“Good old Winnie,” Father had breathed, as if to himself.

“Oh, what’s the use?” the woman said. “Bloody place . . . bloody people . . . bloody motorcars!” And she began to cry again.

“Is there something I can do to help?” I asked.

“Oh, go away and leave me alone,” she sobbed.

Very well, then, I thought. Actually, I thought more than that, but since I’m trying to be a better person . . .

I stood there for a moment, leaning forward a bit to see if her fallen tears were reacting with the porous surface of the tombstone. Tears, I knew, were composed largely of water, sodium chloride, manganese, and potassium, while limestone was made up chiefly of calcite, which was soluble in sodium chloride—but only at high temperatures. So unless the temperature of St. Tancred’s churchyard went up suddenly by several hundred degrees, it seemed unlikely that anything chemically interesting was going to be happening here.

I turned and walked away.

“Flavia . . .”

I looked back. She was reaching out a hand to me.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s just that it’s been an awfully bloody day, all round.”

I stopped—then paced slowly, warily back as she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Rupert was in a foul mood to begin with—even before we left Stoatmoor this morning. We’d had rather a row, I’m afraid, and then the whole business with the van—it was simply the last straw. He’s gone off to find someone to fix it, and I’m . . . well, here I am.”

“I like your red hair,” I said. She touched it instantly and smiled, as I somehow knew she would.

“Carrot-top, they used to call me when I was your age. Carrot-top! Fancy!”

“Carrot tops are green,” I said. “Who’s Rupert?”

“Who’s Rupert?” she asked. “You’re having me on!”

She pointed a finger and I turned to look: Parked in the lane at the corner of the churchyard was a dilapidated van—an Austin Eight. On its side panel, in showy gold circus letters, still legible through a heavy coating of mud and dust, were the words porson’s puppets.

“Rupert Porson,” she said. “Everyone knows Rupert Porson. Rupert Porson, as in Snoddy the Squirrel—The Magic Kingdom. Haven’t you seen him on the television?”

Snoddy the Squirrel? The Magic Kingdom?

“We don’t have the television at Buckshaw,” I said. “Father says it’s a filthy invention.”

“Father is an uncommonly wise man,” she said. “Father is undoubtedly—”

She was interrupted by the metallic rattle of a loose chain guard as the vicar came wobbling round the corner of the church. He dismounted and leaned his battered Raleigh up against a handy headstone. As he walked towards us, I reflected that Canon Denwyn Richardson was not anyone’s image of a typical village vicar. He was large and bluff and hearty, and if he’d had tattoos, he might have been mistaken for the captain of one of those rusty tramp steamers that drags itself wearily from one sun-drenched port to another in whatever God-awful outposts are still left of the British Empire.

His black clerical outfit was smudged and streaked with chalky dust, as if he’d come a cropper on his bicycle.

“Blast!” he said when he spotted me. “I’ve lost my trouser clip and torn my cuff to ribbons,” and then, dusting himself off as he walked towards us, he added, “Cynthia’s going to have me on the carpet.”

The woman’s eyes widened and she shot me a quick glance.

“She’s recently begun scratching my initials on my belongings with a needle,” he added, “but that hasn’t kept me from losing things. Last week, the hectograph sheets for the parish bulletin, the week before, a brass doorknob from the vestry. Maddening, really.

“Hello, Flavia,” he added. “Always nice to see you at church.”

“This is our vicar, Canon Richardson,” I told the redheaded woman. “Perhaps he can help.”

“Denwyn,” the vicar said, holding out a hand to the stranger. “We don’t stand much on ceremony since the war.”

The woman stuck out two or three fingers and touched his palm, but said nothing. As she extended her hand, the short sleeve of her dress slid up, and I had a quick glimpse of the ugly green and purple bruise on her upper arm. She covered it hastily with her left hand as she tugged the cotton fabric down to hide it.

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