YOU WIN, CHARLOTTE FLYNN

Flying is overrated. I don't mean sitting in an aeroplane while it roars above the clouds. I don't mean hang-gliding or hot-air ballooning. I mean the bird kind, on feathery wings that soar and swoop and beat against the wind. When it comes to superpowers, flying's way down the list. And believe me I know about superpowers.

No-one *will* believe you, Aidan show-off Mooney, unless you stop boasting and start at the beginning.

Excuse me, Charlotte know-all Flynn, you're interrupting my story.

Our story, you mean.

Says who?

Says me. And without me, you'd be lying at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean saying nothing at all, so says you too.

Fair point I suppose . . . for a girl.

How about you tell your parts, I tell mine?

Your small parts.

Small but crucial. Go on, say it.

Sigh. Small but crucial.

And what about the diary I rescued after the fire? Isn't that crucial too?

OK, you win. *Our* story.

SERIOUSLY?

It was the last day of the summer holidays and I was mad. Not because it meant the end of freedom and the start of homework but because it didn't.

'Why can't I go to school?' I was sitting at the kitchen table making sandwiches with Mum. Well, she was making them while I rammed them into a lunchbox, spilling half their hammy guts.

'Aidan.' She dotted lumps of hard butter on a slice of bread. 'You know why.'

Of course I did. 'But it's so unfair.'

'It's not about fairness,' she said quietly. 'It's about safety.'

'Not mine.'

Her knife slipped and tore a hole in the bread. 'Please, love. Let's go and have a nice picnic.'

How could I, when I knew she was just trying to distract me? Tomorrow, all over Ireland, other twelve-year-olds would be walking into classrooms, opening maths books, supergluing teachers to toilet seats or whatever they did in

school. How would I know? I'd never set foot in one.

'I mean, what's your plan?' I squashed the living daylights out of another sandwich. 'If you don't think primary school's safe, you'll never be OK with secondary. So you'll keep me at home till I'm eighteen? You can't stop me leaving then. And how will I be ready if I've hidden away all my life –' my brain said *Stop right there*, but my tongue was on a roll, 'because of *your* problem?'

Mum's face was turning red. Sweat crept on to her forehead. 'I'm sorry.' She let out a trembly breath. The butter melted into the bread.

I should have said, 'I'm sorry too. I know it's not your fault.' But it wasn't mine either. And it was ruining my life.

A tear slipped from her eye, trickled down and steamed off her cheek. She rushed to the sink. Filling a glass with water, she drank it in one gulp. There was a hissing sound. She leaned back against the sink and took deep breaths. I stared at my lap, unable to look at her. Silence roared round the kitchen.

Then she mumbled something so crazy I couldn't help looking up. 'What?'

'I said you're right.'

'About what?'

'School. You should go.'

I blinked. 'As in go? As in to school?' OK, not my

brain's finest moment. But after a year of begging, it needed time to take this in.

Mum nodded.

'You mean – seriously?'

'Mm-hmm.'

'This term?'

'Why not?'

'Mum, that's . . . you're . . . wow!' I ran around the table and hugged her so hard she squeaked. I was dying to ask why she'd suddenly changed her mind. But I couldn't risk her changing it back, so I settled for more hugging and squeaking.

Good move. Perhaps because I didn't ask, she told me. Or perhaps she was telling herself, just to be sure. 'I've tried to ignore it, but the truth is you're getting too advanced for homeschool. I've been worrying about it all summer. There's not much more I can teach you. And you've just put it so –' she pressed her lips together, as if to squash the word she'd been going to use, 'clearly. Yes, it is my problem. And no, it isn't fair to hold you back. There's nothing wrong with you, and you're old enough to keep my secret now.' She smiled, using funny little muscles that made her look brave and scared at the same time. 'Aren't you?'

'Course I am! You can trust me completely, Mum.' I hugged her again.

'I know. It's other people I can't trust.' She pulled away. 'I mean imagine if someone found out. They

might lock me up, or turn me into a freak show, or –'

'They won't!' I cut in before she could talk herself out of it. 'I'll guard your secret with my life.' I made fists with my hands and punched at the fridge. I shot the oven with finger-guns and blew pretend smoke from the barrels. I drew an air sword and stabbed the toaster. When I'd killed most of the kitchen, Mum smiled again. And this time all the muscles were brave.

It took a week of Googling, phoning and driving around to find a school we liked the look of. It took another week for St Malachy's Primary to decide that, yes, they had room for one more in sixth class. Then there were books and uniform to buy. So it was nearly three weeks before I woke up to the most exciting day of my life.

And your mum said there was nothing wrong with you? I mean what the Hades is exciting about school? The pushing in the corridor? The not-quite-whispers behind your back? The jokes about your lunch, your glasses, your fat legs? The lessons are pretty useless too. Hercules didn't need to spell 'Hesperides' to steal the golden apples. Achilles didn't beat the Trojan army with his neat handwriting.

Talking of handwriting . . . the diary I found starts around then.

September 18th

And so it begins. After five years of planning and a lifetime of learning, it's a dream to be here at last. Stepping off the plane this morning, I felt the layers of legend beneath my feet and smelt hope in the cold, sharp air. It's a hope that fuels my courage. Operation Zoe will demand all my mental and physical talents – maybe my life too. If I die, all I ask is that whoever finds this diary will use it to tell the world of my sacrifice. Books, films, statues – maybe an airport or two – will immortalise my mission to save the human race.

I'LL BE GRAND

Mum's glove felt warm and smooth. At least, that's what I imagined. You can't *actually* hold your mother's hand on the way to school. Even I knew that, which was pretty impressive for my first day. But it was good to have it there, along with the rest of her, as we turned the corner and St Malachy's came into sight.

Until I looked along the pavement. Only the smaller kids were attached to parents. The ones my size were strolling together towards the school gates, all chatter and laughter.

'Bye, Mum,' I said.

'What?' Now she grabbed *my* hand. And for the record her glove *was* warm and smooth. 'Don't you want me to come in? Help find your classroom, meet your teacher?'

'No, no and um . . .' I pulled my hand away, 'no. But thanks for the offer.' Mum's a great believer in thanksing. 'I'll be grand.'

'Course you will.' Mum leaned forward to kiss me. I stepped back. She patted my shoulder instead and gave a quick smile. 'I'll be here at three. Have a great day.' She sniffed and pressed her gloved fingertips to her cheekbones.

As she turned to go, a car drew up along the kerb. The back door flew open, hitting her arm. A boy got out. He blew up his mega-long fringe and headed through the school gates.

The driver leaned across. 'Sorry,' he said to Mum. 'My son can't see a thing through that mess.' He frowned. 'I don't think we've, ah . . .'

'We're new,' she mumbled. 'I mean Aidan is. Today. Nice to meet you.' She slammed the car door and hurried off down the pavement.

Oh no. I ran through the gates, praying that no one had seen the steam rising from her cheeks.

I saw you from across the road. Not the gloves or the steam but all that lovey stuff, before the car pulled up and blocked my view. I remember thinking how pukey, and how my dad hadn't walked me to school since third class.

WHY THE BIG SECRET?

When I was small, I didn't think Mum had a problem. I thought she was normal. I thought all mothers had blue-green scales on their hands, and feet that ended in curved white claws. I must have been three or four when I began to wonder why other women only wore gloves in winter and had hands the colour of old fudge.

At first I didn't mind that Mum was different. In fact I liked it. When she shed a scale I'd hold it up to the light, admiring the oily gleam, before storing it in my piggy bank. I wanted to tell all the people I met – which wasn't many – that she could breathe the perfect size flame to melt a single marshmallow, or snort out the right amount of smoke to cook six sausages. I didn't understand why she always wore gloves outdoors, and indoors too when the plumber or the electrician came. I didn't know why I was forbidden to tell a soul that she could light the sitting-room fire with her

breath. But I knew it would upset her if I did, and that was enough to keep me quiet.

When I was six she tried to explain. But I still didn't get it. Perhaps I hadn't met enough people to know what they can be like.

'Some might find it . . . strange,' she said.

'Good strange or bad strange?' I mean, what could be cooler – or hotter, I guess – than being part-dragon?

She sighed. 'People often have trouble with things they can't understand.'

'Why?' Imagine a world without mystery. What a lump of soggy chips.

But I got the point. From then on, mum was the word on all things dragonoid. Which made her the problem too. If I met other children in the playground, she never chatted to their mums or invited them home. When I played football on the green, she wouldn't let the neighbouring kids come in, so they stopped inviting me round. The film of my life so far? *Homeschool Alone* starring Aidan Mooney. Featuring Mum, Nando and Gramps. Special Guest Disappearance by Dad.

Now I'd made it to school at last, and still Mum was causing trouble. I hadn't even got through the gates without an incident of public evaporation.

I took a deep breath and followed the crowd into the entrance hall. The long-fringed boy came up. Oh no. What had he seen?

But instead of asking how Mum's face could be part of the water cycle, he said, 'Are you new?'

'Yes.' I nodded as if my head was on a spring.

'Which class?'

'Miss Burkitt.'

'The Berk?' He grunted. 'Me too.' He headed off down the corridor.

I hurried after him. 'My name's Aidan.'

'Phil,' he said over his shoulder. That didn't surprise me. Cool boys always have names you can shorten to one syllable: Rob or Dave or Mike. And it turned out that Phil was as cool as Christmas. Walking into the classroom, he seemed to suck boys towards him like a Hoover gathering dust.

'Hey, Phil.'

'Howaya, Phil?'

I stood behind him grinning madly.

'Who's that?' someone said.

Phil glanced at me. 'Aidan. He's new.'

The three boys crowding round him didn't introduce themselves. But as I stood there with my lips stretched round my teeth, I caught their names from the conversation: Dan, Ben and Tom. A classful of cool. I cursed my extra syllable.

At last Phil turned to me. 'Why are you starting now? It's the third week of term. Did you oversleep?' His friends laughed. 'Or did they chuck you out of your last school?'

I swallowed. 'No. I was homeschooled.'

Phil widened his eyes at Tom, or was it Dan? 'Why?' he said. 'Problems?' He tapped his temple with a fingertip.

The others laughed again.

''Scuse me,' squeaked a voice from behind. I moved aside to make way for its owner.

'Breathe in, lads,' Phil said, 'it's the Chublotte.' The girl scowled and pushed past. She had thick glasses and mad coils of rust-coloured hair. The other boys sniggered.

I felt myself blush, as if I was the one who'd insulted her. 'Sorry,' I mumbled. But she'd already marched off. I followed her to a desk by the window. As she sat down, I pointed to the desk beside her. 'Can I sit here?'

I was only trying to be nice. But the way she glared at me, you'd think I'd strangled her kitten. I went and sat at the desk behind.

Number one, I haven't *got* a kitten. Number two, you'd have glared too if you'd just been insulted. And number three, I always sat alone so that no one would see me sneak-reading *Greek Gods and Heroes* during maths.