

Chapter 2

My dreams are full of flight. Mr Chen sits behind me, guiding my hand as I steer the flying machine over the city. Bouncing from river to river, spying on the rooftops, ducking the seagulls. We loop and buck and glide, driving straight for the moon, my heart high above my head, my soul free, the old man laughing in my ear. And then I wake.

I lie staring out at the blank upstairs windows of the house opposite, still half in my dreams, until I hear my name called.

“Athan, I need to go down now! Athan! Please.”

It takes a moment for me to work out where and

when I am, and when I do, I realise that it’s Beatty shouting from upstairs. Barefoot and part dressed, I climb to her room on the floor above. She sits bird-like on her bed, her red blanket pulled up over her skinny shoulders, her bright eyes watching me. A big smile spreads over her face as I enter and she reaches her arms towards me.

A fledgling stuck in her nest.

“Athan. Tell me, why’s Ma so cross?”

“Is she?”

“She’s been stamping about this morning. Steaming. And now she’s red with cross.” Beatty screws up her face. “No – worse, she’s white with cross. And it ain’t just because of the windows.”

“Boiling mad?” I asked, my heart sinking.

Beatty nodded. “So why else? Athan, tell me!”

Downstairs, the kitchen’s lit by a small lantern and even though it’s light outside I blink in the daytime darkness. “Chair, Athan,” says Beatty, her tiny fingers curled into my collar. I carry her over, balance her and her blanket on the stool by the range, and hold my hands to the empty fire grate. Almost no heat. A pot of cold porridge sits on the top; it must be hours old.

I reach into the kindling basket.

Empty.

Beatty shivers and pulls her red blanket closer over her shoulders.

“Morning, Poll. Morning, Ma,” I say. “Any bread?”

Polly, my other sister, shakes her head. She sits in the almost darkness, stitching. Our giant ma picks at some embroidery by the window.

“Do something about the range, Athan,” Polly says. “I’ve dye to boil.” She nods her head at Ma. Widening her eyes and drawing her finger across her throat.

“She’ll cut you into chops, Athan,” hisses Beatty. “She looks crosser than ever I seen her. I spec she’s sorry you didn’t blow yourself up with the windows.”

“Hush, Beatty,” murmurs Polly.

“Well, I spec she is. Look at her, she’s like she sat on a porcupine.”

Beatty’s right. Ma’s mouth is pinched. The lantern on the table lights her face but the lines seem deeper, her skin rougher. She looks old, tired. Sad.

“Morning, Ma!” I say again, pretending all’s fine.

She doesn’t answer.

Still in silence you could snap, I duck down by the fire and rake out the ash. Through more silence I take the fire bucket into the yard and breathe in the winter air.

Ice and chickens.

The good thing about destroying the henhouse is the firewood that it left. The less good thing is that I’ve been trying to rebuild it out of rubbish from the building sites and I’m not so good at it. The structure I’ve built is a tower, held up more by luck than skill, a pile of badly hammered port wine boxes. The hens haven’t been let out, but they follow me around the yard as I pick up wood because there’s nothing to keep them in. There’s nothing to stop the foxes either, only a branch of blackthorn balanced along the top of the wall. It’s spiky with long nasty thorns, and it would keep everything out if it would just stay there. Which it does for a second before tumbling off.

For a moment I watch the hens pecking around my toes, enjoying their freedom. They shake their wings and jab at tiny insects, brushing against my legs, fearless and free.

I love to see them roam, but they won’t last long

like this. I'll get Tod to give me a hand with the henhouse. He'll know how to build one. He's good at that sort of thing.

Back inside, I place a dry leaf on a small lump of ember. I blow on it and the smoke rises in a lazy spiral. Some splinters of henhouse and a piece of newspaper catch and burn for a second before falling apart, and I feed more wood into the heat.

"So first I'm woken by breaking glass sometime in the Lord-knows-when hours of the night and I come downstairs and find the shop window broken and the smell of his burning oils," says Ma

"Ah," I say, looking around for the basket of bananas.

"So I wait for you to come back. I know you can't get back through the shop door, so I imagine you might climb the wall and come in through the kitchen and I wait on the stairs."

"Oh?" I say.

"But you don't," she says. "And what do I see next?"

I wince. I really hope she didn't go outside.

"Opposite, I see two boys, shinning up the gutter of the chapel – one of them the spit of Athan Wilde."

"Did you?" I say. "How ... extraordinary."

"Extraordinary?" says Ma. "Athan, I've told you before – you could be killed up there or, worse, left a cripple. As if we didn't have enough to look after, what with your grandmother and all her..." Ma waves her hands at the petticoats drying above the stove, "...problems, and Beatty's legs and all." She sighs.

She's quite right, Tod and I did go roof running, but I open my mouth to deny it all when Polly shakes her head and points to a brown paper parcel by the door. I jump up from the stove side and grab it.

"Take it to the house with Mary, the pretty girl, where the Clays used to be: New King Street," hisses Polly.

"Athan, don't go – listen." Ma catches my elbow, but her voice softens. "Don't you understand, boy? Those roofs are tall. Plenty of men have died building those houses. You could fall any time." She draws a shaky breath.

"I'm sorry, Ma, but..." I hold the parcel up, as if it's urgent.

"Please, son, you're a fine upstanding boy – almost handsome – we can dress you up, turn you into

something, you can work for the Quality, they're always needing footmen, carriage boys. You can even work on the sedan chairs, they earn a fortune and they wear a lovely uniform. Get a job with a wig, something I can be proud of," she pleads.

We've had this conversation a thousand times before.

"Ma, I don't need to be a footman. I work for Mr Chen, I do the things he does. I'm getting to understand the way the world works, what makes things do the things they do. It's an education AND I'm earning money. Look – he gave me—"

"Oh, Athan!" She's taking it especially personally this time and her cheeks blotch. "If you wanted an education you'd have learned to read and write like your sisters. But that old man across the road – there's no future working for him, it's not a proper job. And," she says, looking into the small candle in the lantern, "he's evil. Your grandmother's right – he's a devil. It's not right, all that stuff he says."

I stand in the doorway ready to leave. "He's not evil, he's interested in real life, Natural Philosophy – all the ideas of clever men. It's different. He's teaching me—"

Ma slams her palms on the table. "He's teaching

you rubbish. He's teaching you to make pretty sparks and purple smoke. What kind of thing is that for a grown man?" Her voice drops and she leans forward, into the darkness where I can't make out the expression on her face. "And I know he's encouraging you to dance around on the rooftops. You won't get anywhere on a rooftop!"

"There's a good reason for that. We're—" I begin.

"You're what, angels? Birds? Fly, can you?" she snaps. "If God had intended you to fly you'd have been born with wings. Well, I'll tell you something, Athan boy, you haven't got wings and you won't ever have them. Even those hens you love so much have more chance of getting off the ground than you do."

"You should see what he's—" She opens her mouth to argue again so I change tack. "All right, I promise," I say, my fingers crossed behind my back. "I promise not to go on the roofs any more, I promise to stay in at night if I'm not wanted for work – how's that?"

Ma seems to double in size. "I don't care a whit for your promises, boy. You're always promising things. I'll ask your uncle about getting you work directly I see him."

“But I work for Mr Chen!” I pull the gold coins from my pocket. “See!”

“Not any more you don’t, boy.” A metal voice grates across the flagstones of the kitchen floor. Grandma totters around the corner from the stairs. She’s dressed in black with her face powdered white. She spots me at the door. “Not any more.”

“What?” I say.

There’s a long horrible silence while she shuffles into the centre of the room, accompanied by the rank smell of stale urine. She stops in the empty space in front of the stove and looks from me to Ma and back to me.

She gathers every scrap of air in the room into her ancient lungs.

“Because he’s dead,” she coughs, jabbing at me with a purple finger. “Dead, dead, DEAD!” The words echo from the walls. Behind me Poll gasps and Beatty whimpers.

“No,” I say. “That can’t be true, I saw him—”

Grandma stops me with her hand held high. She lumps herself on to a chair and surveys her audience. A horrible grin breaks over her crumpled old face. “Mrs Love’s just found the devil in his kitchen – and he’s dead as a doornail. Lying in a

pool of blood. Murdered!”

“What?!” My voice rings in the silent kitchen.

“I expect he was murdered by fiends,” says Grandma. “Demons sent by God to do Satan’s work against the diabolical.”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” mutters Beatty.

“Hush, devil child,” says Grandma.

I turn to face her. Her horrible smile stretches from ear to ear. “But that can’t possibly be true!”

“Oh it is, boy,” she says, lumbering right up close and breathing her dead breath over me. “It’s true, all right. What are you going to do now, eh?”