



CHAPTER TWO

THE FROZEN RIVER

The Great Frost! It snaked down necks, sliced through bones, and made all the knees in London quiver. Ice and snow crept into every inch of the city it could find, transforming the colours of its brickwork from tawny brown and faded red to startling silver and piercing white. Every night, a hush would descend upon London as fresh snow fell, muffling squeaking mice, forcing thin foxes underground, and freezing birds to the trees they sheltered in. People grew used to waking up each morning with frost cobwebbing their cheeks, and stopped being shocked that, even indoors, white mist would gush from their mouths every time they spoke, as if the cold had changed them all into different creatures entirely.



South of the Thames, in Southwark, the Great Frost clenched everyone in its ice-scaled grip. The streets were crammed with ice-bitten workers who couldn't afford to cross the river and live in the heart of the capital, and there were more shops and street sellers here than anywhere else. Butchers, bakers and candlestick-makers carried on with business as usual, cursing the fierce winter winds. Weavers, palm-readers, hatters and needle-makers sat hunched in pain, and numb-fingered musicians played on as people hurried past them to get out of the cold.

In Raven Lane, a shabby street, nestled a ramshackle shop, bearing a faded name:



This street looked different from how it had appeared four years ago when Arthur died and Thomasina's world changed forever. A fire had destroyed parts of Southwark some years before, and new buildings kept rising from its dove-grey ashes. However, nothing compared to the transformation that had taken place in the Burgess household.

In a narrow workroom behind the shop, Thomasina was busy making gingerbread with hands so callused and coarse they looked strange belonging to someone aged only thirteen. Ever since Arthur's death, she, instead of Mother and Father, had become responsible for making the sweets, running the household, and keeping everything spick and span. This room was where she spent most of her time.



Swirling sugar flecks sparkled in the pale morning light, and the fragrance of cinnamon and warm, flaked almonds sweetened the air. Thomasina never grew tired of this smell, despite making gingerbread day in and day out during the dark winter months. It reminded her so much of Arthur: they both used to spend hours every day making gingerbread side by side when he'd been alive.



As always, though he was gone, his voice whispered in her mind, a high, sweet sound that always made it seem like he was holding back a giggle.

You're making the gingerbread wrong.

'No, I'm not,' she muttered.

You are. Father says to put the almonds in before the cinnamon.





‘Why do you always have to be right?’ she said, turning with a grin to flick flour at her twin, before remembering he wasn’t there. She turned back again, feeling a tiny clench in her heart.

A stamp of boots sounded on the stairs, and Thomasina tensed as Father strode in. Short and broad-shouldered, with a sandy complexion like Thomasina, his impatient grey eyes roved around the room. Lips pursing when he saw his daughter, he walked towards the shop in the next room without saying hello. He’d been like this ever since losing his son.

‘Good morning to you too,’ Thomasina huffed under her breath.

With a sigh, she put down the gingerbread she was making, washed her hands, then grabbed a hunk of bread and carried it upstairs on a plate. The floorboards creaked as she hesitated outside the room at the top of the house. Then, she opened the door with her foot.

‘Mmph.’

She interpreted this as a greeting from the figure on the bed. Although weak sunlight tried to peer through the cracks in the shutters of her and Mother’s tiny bedroom, it was even dimmer up here than in the workroom. The shutters themselves were strapped together with knotted

twine and faded ribbons, protecting Mother from the howling winter wind, the curling ivy creeping up the front of Burgess & Son's, and the hustle and bustle of the world outside. A sputtering candle was balanced on a small trunk at the end of the bed they shared, illuminating the delicate stitching of the patterned patchwork quilt Mother had made before she'd withdrawn to her room four years ago because of grief.

Mother was buried in a mess of blankets as usual, eyes closed to the world. The grey hair that escaped from her nightcap trickled down her long, pink neck in rivulets.

'I've brought you some breakfast,' Thomasina said. She tried to sound encouraging, but there wasn't much to feel optimistic about. Mother seemed to feel the same and didn't reply.

Thomasina helped her mother sit up and broke the bread into smaller pieces. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she watched the older woman's eyelids trembling in the half-light, and knew that thoughts were flitting in and out of her mind like butterflies.

'Do you feel like speaking today?' she asked, already knowing the answer. 'Or opening your eyes?'

Mother chewed the bread that Thomasina handed her.



The girl's insides churned as she wiped crumbs and spit from Mother's mouth and chin. After a few minutes, it was done, and when Thomasina closed the door, there was no sound from the room she'd left.

Is she still unwell? came Arthur's voice again.

'Yes,' Thomasina muttered.

As she trod downstairs, she heard Father call her name. Frowning, she walked through from the workroom and was astounded to find a small crowd of people in the Burgess & Son's shop. Cheap tallow candles soured the dingy room, illuminating the faces of some of their neighbours. Thomasina recognised the thin face of the local undertaker. She saw an errand boy, cap in hand, his eyes shining, and noticed the tired gaze of a washerwoman, her hands red-raw from scrubbing. There was such a clamour as they all spoke over each other that at first it was difficult to understand what was being said.

'I've heard it's frozen over completely—'

'Several inches deep – some are going to try and walk on it.'

'And I saw a magical goat!'

'No, you didn't, Ethel.'

Father beckoned Thomasina over.

'There are rumours the River Thames iced over last

night,’ he said with a shiver. ‘Enough for people to stand on this time, because of the Great Frost – not like in other winters. Go and see it for yourself, then come back and tell me if the gossip is true. I’m too busy here.’ He gestured towards the people around him.

Excitement fluttering in her stomach, Thomasina grabbed her cloak and opened the door to the street, hearing the bell clang above. Could what the people were saying be true?

A gust of cold air smacked her around the face as she stepped outside. Frost encrusted all the shop signs so completely it was impossible to make out what was drawn on them, and long icicles stretched down from them like spears. Every surface appeared to be covered in snow, several inches thick, and icy sludge congealed on the cobblestones where people had already trodden that day.

As Thomasina made her way down the street, smoke spiralled from the baker’s opposite Burgess & Son’s, where plump loaves were waiting to be scooped into baskets. Picking her way across, she avoided the scraps of cast-off hides and guts that had spilled out of the nearby tannery and were strewn across the cobblestones, slimed in muck and snow. Bedraggled dogs chained outside



various establishments sniffed at bones and empty tankards as she passed.

‘Thomasina!’

Heart sinking, she saw a well-known figure in the neighbourhood hurrying towards her: a red-faced old woman carrying a basket, hands trembling in the cold.

‘Need any parsnips, dear?’ Miss Maplethorpe said.

‘Sorry, Miss Maplethorpe,’ Thomasina said, backing away from her. ‘We haven’t finished the sack I bought from you last week.’

‘Oh, go on, have a little parsnip—’

Thomasina scanned her surroundings and saw a crowd of well-dressed people she didn’t recognise, walking in the direction of the river.

‘Fresh, beautiful parsnips, lovely and big – nice and firm—’

‘Good,’ Thomasina said distractedly. ‘Maybe another time?’

Crossing the street to escape Miss Maplethorpe, she glimpsed two of the butcher’s sons, their aprons stained with blood, and walked behind them to catch scraps of conversation.

‘It’s all iced up now, that’s what I’ve heard.’

‘I don’t believe it—’

‘The best parsnips in all the land—’

Thomasina looked over her shoulder to see Miss Maplethorpe hurrying after her with what she thought was surprising speed for someone her age. Thomasina ducked into a side street.

Shouts echoed nearby, accompanied by the sound of people stamping their feet in the cold. Straining to hear where the noise was coming from, Thomasina turned a corner and saw the street ahead filling with shivering people all walking in the same direction, towards the Thames. She pushed in among them, rubbing her hands, which were already starting to sting. Being smaller than most of the crowd, she couldn’t see much over their heads, so she allowed herself to be swept down a lane as everyone crunched forward on the snow, a mass of blue and mud-brown cloaks.

‘God’s bones!’

‘It’s a miracle.’

‘PARSNIPS!’

The shouts came from the folk up ahead. Thomasina squeezed her way through the throng, working her way up to the front, where the city met open space – and she gasped.

The monstrous bulk that glistened black at night,



grey in winter and brown in summer – the beast that had always forced itself through London – was an expanse of crystallised white, glinting in the sunshine.

The River Thames had frozen to death in its sleep.