

*When you're at rock bottom, when life can't get
any worse ... you don't see the point of carrying on
...*

*... until someone walks into your world and
makes all the difference.*

A Brightness out of the Blue
by Jill Atkins

Published by Raven Books
An imprint of Ransom Publishing Ltd.
Unit 7, Brocklands Farm, West Meon, Hampshire GU32 1JN, UK
www.ransom.co.uk

ISBN 978 178591 305 1
First published in 2016

Copyright © 2016 Ransom Publishing Ltd.
Text copyright © 2016 Jill Atkins
Cover illustrations copyright ©Krystian Nawrocki; max_st; beakraus; Tomacco.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

The right of Jill Atkins to be identified as the author of this Work has been asserted by her in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988.

A
Brightness
out of the
Blue

Jill Atkins

RAVEN



1

Rain soaks through my thin coat and trickles down my neck as I hurry along the darkening streets of Madebury. Head down, arms wrapped around my body to try and stop the shivering, I'm totally tensed up against the cold, focused on getting there as quickly as possible.

Suddenly, I halt. My hand instinctively clasps over my mouth. A dead blackbird lies in front of me, its head at a strange angle, its yellow beak brilliant against the dull pavement. I stare at it for a moment, wondering how the poor thing broke its neck. I swallow hard, trying to blot it from my mind, then I carefully step over it and walk on.

There is a roar behind me. A car coming too fast races by, splashing dirty gutter water over my legs. Cursing the driver, I quicken my pace as the lights of the café come into view on

the opposite side of the street, like a beacon shining out against the murkiness of the November afternoon.

I reach the door and burst in. Blinking in the sudden brightness inside the café, I stamp my feet and strip off my coat. Then, leaving a trail of drips across the floor, I order a cappuccino from Luigi at the bar, make for the empty table by the window and sit down.

Argh! I recoil at my reflection in the glass – strands of long black hair clinging to both sides of my stone-grey face. My mouth is set in a thin, hard line. Dark eyes are frowning angrily back at me.

I bite my lip to stop the tears that well up. This is not the life I've dreamed of. I turn from the window and shut my eyes.

I'm six years old, with Mum at the bird sanctuary. A wire cage as big as a building. We step inside. Birdsong. Flowers. Tall trees. Through the branches, brilliant sunlight creates intricate yellow patterns on a deep purple path. We tiptoe, hand-in-hand, beneath the trees, dodging the patterns as the leaves flicker in the breeze. An eagle owl soars high. Suddenly, it swoops down, straight at us. I scream and cling to Mum. Then we laugh as the owl swings away.

*'Nothing to be afraid of.' Mum holds me tight.
'You're safe with me.'*

The rattling of a cup and saucer brings me back to the present. I open my eyes and dry my tears. How I'd love to go back in time, to feel Mum's arms around me, to escape from this living hell.

I begin to shiver. My jeans cling icily to my legs and my feet feel numb inside my waterlogged trainers. I'm relieved Luigi doesn't speak as he ambles over, plonks down the coffee and takes my money. I wrap my hands around the cup and feel its warmth seeping into me. I glance around. The café is quite full, yet strangely quiet. Or is it just my black mood?

I glance at my watch. I have almost two hours before I need to leave. I'd have liked something to eat, but coffee is all I can afford. It's my only luxury, once a week, my comfort zone, a shot of energy on my way to work. Sighing, I concentrate on the froth in my cup, stirring it and watching the swirl of the liquid, wishing it would whisk me away.

Is it a powerful wishing potion, one that will grant me anything I want?

I turn back to the window. Blanking out the reflected image of myself, I stare through the glass at the depressing scene. It has stopped raining at last. Satin-smooth puddles mirror the traffic lights on the corner – red, amber, green. A man closes his umbrella as he hurries by.

Suddenly, something catches my eye. The faintest flicker of light. I crane my neck to see what it is. A little white-haired, wizened woman is shuffling slowly and unsteadily past, smartly dressed in expensive-looking clothes and black boots. I take in every detail, even noting her matching leather handbag.

And then I see the ring. I lean towards the glass. A diamond ring on her finger, flickering, flashing in a car's headlights. And the diamonds look enormous. It must be worth a fortune!

Why should that old woman have a ring like that while I have nothing? Anyway, she's taking a risk. Anyone could attack such a vulnerable woman and steal the ring. Anyone ...

There is something intriguing about the old lady and I can't help watching her closely, curious.

Suddenly, as she totters past the café door, she trips. I smother a nervous giggle as she lurches forward, waving her arms in the air in an attempt to save herself. Like a slow motion replay. Then, there she is, on the pavement in a crumpled heap.

Before I realise what I'm doing, I'm on my feet, pulling on my coat and hurrying to the door.

'Are you all right?' I ask as I step outside.

The old woman sits up, clutching her handbag. Her dazed eyes stare up at me. In the light from the doorway, I see splashes of mud on her face. There is blood on both her knees.

'Yes, dear,' she whispers. 'I'll be fine.'

But she doesn't look all right. I quickly flick my hair behind my ears and move forward. There is a faint scent of lavender as I reach down and place my hands under the old woman's armpits. Light as a bird, all skin and bone, the poor old thing winces and cries out as I pull her to her feet.

'Have you got far to go?' I ask.

'No ... left at the corner ...' She points. 'Not far from there.'

'Hold my arm,' I say. 'I'll see you home.'

A moment later, we begin to move unsteadily along the street. The woman trembles and grips my arm tightly. Her nails dig like talons into my wrist. I feel a bony elbow jabbing my ribs. A moment ago, she had felt so easy to lift. Now she weighs me down as we struggle slowly along. At each step, I hear a slight rasping of her breath.

Yet, despite the woman's frailty, there is something about her I can't explain. At her touch, a ripple of excitement has shot through my body like an electric current, making me tingle all over.

As soon as we turn the corner, I realise I've never been in this street before. There are no shops – just wide gateways, long front gardens and large houses. Trees stand stark and leafless along the side of the road. Brown and gold leaves cover the pavement in a broad waterlogged carpet. I tread carefully, aware that we could slip easily. Street lamps cast their pools of orange glow at intervals along the road and, as we pass beneath the first one, our bodies cast a grotesque two-headed shadow that stretches out over the leaves in front of us. As we stumble along, it grows longer and slowly fades to nothing.

At last, the old woman stops at a black wrought-iron gate.

'Here we are.' She lets go of my arm and leans heavily on the gate, as if she is trying to regain her strength.

I peer through the gloom. Behind a wilderness of tangled bushes, dark rectangular windows stare blindly out at me from the high red-brick walls of a house. Tall stone pillars guard the front entrance and in one corner a round, pointed turret stretches upwards like Rapunzel's tower, its single window as

sightless as the rest. A creeper entwines itself around the whole building as if trying to choke it.

‘You live *here*?’ I whisper.

Suddenly, I notice two luminous eyes glowing out from the doorstep. A shadowy shape slowly slinks towards us. Then, as it reaches the light of the street lamps, a black cat materialises, like The Cheshire Cat. Except this cat has no smile as it rubs the side of its face on the gate post.

The old lady turns to me.

‘Thank you so much, dear,’ she says. ‘I’ll be all right now. What’s your name, so I can remember you?’

‘Ella.’

‘I’m Martha.’

I presume I am being dismissed, but I feel drawn to this old woman, as if she has me on some kind of invisible cord. A shiver passes right through me and I feel slightly dizzy, overwhelmed by a peculiar and inexplicable sensation that Martha might somehow change my life.

2

I know I should leave, but my feet refuse to budge. I smile at Martha, desperately hoping that my instincts are right; that there *is* something special about her; that the chance won't slip away.

'Goodbye, then,' I whisper, wishing very hard that something will happen so I can stay.

All at once, Martha crumples. For the second time, the old woman is on the ground, her bag clutched tightly to her chest. She lies totally still, eyes closed. Is she dead? I stare, stunned. Has my wish done that?

Then Martha moans and her eyelids flutter. I shake myself to get rid of the beginnings of panic as I lift her again. I push the gate open with my foot and half-carry, half-drag her into the front garden, the cat leading the way. Martha clings to

my arm more fiercely and painfully than before, and several times we stagger and almost fall on the uneven path.

‘How do you cope,’ I ask, ‘when you don’t have me to hang on to?’

Martha doesn’t reply. She seems to be concentrating on reaching the house. She is struggling with her breathing as we reach rough steps and begin to climb. Inside the porch, the darkness is so thick I can almost touch it. I feel a prickly sensation all over my skin as I grope my way to the door. In spite of her weakness, there is a feeling of magic about her.

‘My key,’ Martha whispers. ‘In my pocket.’

She trusts me completely, I think, as I push my hand deep into Martha’s coat pocket and pull out a long, cold metal key. Its teeth feel rough against my fingers and I can’t help closing my eyes for a second, hoping it is going to open up a better life for me.

‘Will you unlock for me, dear?’

I bend down and feel for the keyhole, inserting the key and turning it. The loud click echoes back to me from inside the house and the door creaks as I tentatively push it open.

Total darkness. I inhale deeply. A damp, musty smell.

Autumn. A walk in the woods with Mum and Dad. A lifetime ago. I carry a basket, half-full of mushrooms. Mum knows what is safe to collect. She has shown me several poisonous toadstools, deadly enough for a witch’s brew.

I hear rustling. Rats? I shudder and quickly run my fingers along the inside wall, feeling for the switch. Expecting brilliance, I shade my eyes in anticipation, but the single light bulb is just enough to reveal the vast, high-ceilinged hall.

‘In you go.’ Martha releases my arm.

Stepping inside, I immediately have the sensation that someone is watching me. I look around at the faded wallpaper, the low armchair, the old-fashioned hat-stand and the oval mirror on the wall.

Then I see it. A huge, sleek black bird sits silent and still on the newel post at the bottom of the wide staircase, its slate-grey eyes gleaming. I gasp, then, recovering, stare back without flinching.

‘Don’t worry about Corvus.’ Martha’s voice resounds across the hall.

I turn to her. ‘Corvus?’

‘The raven. He’s been with me these sixty years and never done anyone any harm.’

I look more closely, blink then frown. Sixty years? Do ravens live that long? Then I smile. I’ve been trying to out-stare a stuffed bird.

Martha comes inside and shuts the door. She seems steadier now and more confident, as she takes off her coat and hangs it on the hat-stand. I guess she is glad to be home.

‘You’re so wet and bedraggled, dear. You must have been caught in that deluge. Come into the kitchen and dry yourself in front of the fire.’

‘But ...’ I protest, but not very loudly. I like the thought of being warm and dry.

‘Why don’t you stop for a cup of tea?’

My resistance is low. My need to stay is taking over, even though I know I only have a little time now before leaving for work.

‘OK. Thanks.’

Taking my arm again, Martha flicks on more dim lights and we follow a narrow corridor to the kitchen. It’s like walking into a museum, with its cream walls, square butler sink, wooden draining board and a large black kitchen range that takes up most of the far wall. Martha pulls out a chair from under the oak table in the middle of the room, deposits her handbag on the table and sits down heavily. She leans back and sighs.

‘Take your coat off,’ she says. ‘Put it by the range to dry.’

Peeling off my coat, I hang it on a hook at the side of the range and rub my hands together in the warmth from the fire. Then I remember the blood on Martha’s legs.

‘I’ll bathe your knees,’ I say. ‘They must be sore. Then I’ll make some tea.’

I fill a kettle from a single tap at the sink. There is a pile of dirty dishes on the draining board, quite a lot for one old woman, I would have thought. I put the kettle on the range then, fetching a bowl of water and a cloth, I kneel in front of Martha.

‘I’ll try not to hurt,’ I say, as I begin to wash out the mud and grit.

‘Thank you, dear.’ Martha places her hands in her lap.

And there is the ring again. Dazzling, stunning. I can't take my eyes off it.

'You like my ring?'

I look up, startled, guilty, but Martha's blue eyes are sparkling like the ring.

'It's beautiful,' I whisper as I dry Martha's knees. 'It must be very valuable.'

'Yes, it is.'

'Why do you wear it out in the street? It could have been stolen.'

'I've been to visit my elderly sister today and she loves to see it,' says Martha. 'It reminds her of our mother. The ring was hers.'

I swallow hard and bite my lip, trying not to show the emotion that is welling up inside. But she has noticed.

'What is it, dear?'

I'm surprised at how quick-witted Martha is. I shake my head, too full to speak.

'Did I say something to upset you?'

I shut my eyes and bow my head.

'Nothing to be afraid of. You're safe with me.'

'Do you want to talk about it?' Martha's hand gently strokes my hair. Such a wonderful comforting sensation. I've missed it so much.

I feel confused. I hardly know Martha, but I feel

bewitched. I badly want to pour everything out to her; about Dad's hateful new wife; about my job; about my new lodgings with Velcro, Bea and Tilly; about Mum. Yes, especially about Mum.

It might take away the pain.

The piercing whistle of the kettle breaks the spell. I jump up and rush to the cooker to turn it off, the desire to confide in Martha having instantly evaporated. By the time I've made the tea and brought two cups to the table, Martha's head has nodded forward and her eyes are closed, her breathing deep and steady.

I study her ring. The crystal-clear stones set in deep gold are breathtakingly beautiful. I'm suddenly aware I could so easily take it. She's a feeble old woman and I'm fit and strong.

I snap myself out of those thoughts. How could I even think about stealing from her? That's not my style at all. Instead, I go back to the sink and use the remaining hot water from the kettle to wash up the dishes. Then I sweep the floor and wipe down the cooker.

When I return to the table, I sit down opposite Martha, who is still fast asleep. My own eyes close as I take a sip. The tea is not very hot now, but I don't mind.

Warm, sweet tea. Just like Mum used to make it. Me and Mum. Drinking tea together while the birds sing cheerfully outside.

‘Are you on your way home, dear?’

I jump and almost spill my tea. I open my eyes. Martha is staring at me.

‘No!’ My voice is sharp. Home? That tiny room where I sleep isn’t ‘home’.

‘Sorry, dear. I didn’t mean to startle you.’

I force a smile.

‘I’m on my way to work. I always go to Luigi’s on Fridays. It’s my treat.’ I glance at my watch. Quarter to six.

‘Oh, no.’ I stand up, pushing the chair back, grating it against the stone floor. ‘I must run. I’m going to be late.’

‘Where do you work?’

‘In that big office block in the centre of town.’ I’ve never told anyone before. It is hardly the best place and I’m not proud of it. I don’t want Martha to know what my job really is. I fetch my coat and hug it around me although it is still rather soggy. ‘I work six till ten every evening.’

‘I see.’

I begin edging away.

‘How old are you, dear?’

‘Sixteen.’

‘Ah.’

‘Will you be all right now?’ I ask. I want to get away before Martha asks any more questions.

‘Yes, thank you, dear. I’m fine. I’m going to write a letter when you’ve gone.’ Martha’s hand delves into her handbag. The hand emerges. Her fist is clenched. She reaches out towards me. ‘Here.’

I feel that electric current again as my hand meets

Martha's for a second. Then I fold my fingers round a crisp note that passes between us. I mutter my thanks and rush away along the corridor, confused, embarrassed, ashamed that I had, however fleetingly, contemplated stealing from her. As I reach the hall, I open my hand. A twenty-pound note. Then I feel the sharp eyes of Corvus, the raven, on me. I thrust the money into my pocket, open the door and stumble out into the darkness of the porch, slamming the door behind me.

Using the glow of the street light to guide me, I trot along the path to the gate. The black cat is sitting there, watching me, as if making sure I leave the premises. Then I run swiftly through the dark streets, watching my shadow in flight as it stretches and fades after each lamppost.

3

‘This isn’t good enough, Ella.’ Hazel’s shrill voice cuts through the dreary hum of the electric floor cleaner as I arrive, panting, inside the main entrance. There is a click and the hum dies away. ‘You’re five minutes late.’

I wince at the harshness of her voice that echoes around the empty lobby. Hazel is standing in front of the lifts. She steps away from the cleaner and places her hands firmly on her hips.

I can’t help smirking as I wait by the door for a moment to get my breath back. Hazel’s bleached mop of hair and her plump body in its luminous pink overall reflect upside-down in the shiny mock-marble floor. It makes me think of an overweight flamingo standing in a pool of custard.

‘It’s not funny!’ snaps Hazel.

'I'm sorry,' I mutter. That's a lie. I'm not sorry at all. Who does Hazel think she is, anyway? She's only a lowly supervisor in a grotty job in an even grottier building.

'That's fifteen minutes docked from your pay.'

I bite my lip to stop the temptation to answer back. Fifteen minutes' pay is peanuts compared to the twenty pounds I've just 'earned' from Martha. My hand travels to my jeans pocket and pushes the note further down. I don't want to lose it.

'If it happens again, you'll have to go,' Hazel nags. 'If I can get here on time I can't see why you can't.'

Muttering under my breath, I amble across the lobby with my chin held high.

'Oh – *now* look at those footprints on my nice clean floor.'

I turn my head to look.

A line of footprints in wet sand. A hot, sunny day at the beach. The smell of seaweed; taste of salt on my lips; seagulls wheeling and squealing overhead. We've built a sandcastle almost as big as me. I'm jumping up and down, yelling, pointing at the sea. The tide is coming in. Dad is building a wall to try and stop the sea. Mum and I are laughing. We run into the waves, leaping and splashing.

The waves push forward and retreat, each wave coming a little bit nearer to our castle. I want the castle to last for ever, but soon it's surrounded. It

collapses and is washed away, leaving nothing but a misshapen mound of sand.

Washed away, like all my dreams.

‘Don’t you forget who gave you this job,’ Hazel snaps. I feel her disapproving grey eyes following me. ‘You’ve got no references. I could have sent you packing then and I can just as easily do that now.’

‘Yes, Hazel.’ I hate having to admit it, but I can’t deny the truth. Four weeks ago, when I fled from my home in Barnfield, I’d been desperate for a job, *any* job, even one as disgusting as this.

‘Turning up like that ... if that other girl hadn’t left me in the lurch ... ’

I shut out the cutting voice as I reach the far side of the lobby. Pushing through the swing doors, I step into the stairwell and open the door of the store cupboard. Trading my coat for a pale green overall, I pull out the mop and bucket, the disinfectant and loo brush, sprays, cloths and rubber gloves, and head up the stairs.

Rose, my fellow cleaner, is on the first-floor landing, her grey hair tied up in a bright flowery headscarf. She beams at me.

‘She been on at you again?’ she asks.

I nod. ‘Threatened me with the sack!’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah, just because I was five minutes late.’

I stop at the ladies’ toilets and push the door open with

my bottom. The bucket clangs as I let it drop. ‘This place stinks – in more ways than one!’

‘Got to earn money somehow.’

I nod. ‘And Madam Hazel’s got no idea. I *am* well qualified for this job. My ghastly step-mother treated me like a slave!’

‘Ah well,’ says Rose as she walks away. ‘Keep your chin up.’

I pull on the rubber gloves and move through the row of cubicles, scrubbing hard, working off my frustration. As I clean the washbasins and mop the floor, I begin to feel calmer.

Was that meeting with Martha really meant to happen? Is it possible that she could really make a difference to my life? Was that feeling of magic real – or only a figment of my imagination?

I’d like to visit her again. But the thought of that makes my stomach somersault. What excuse would I have to go there? It was so easy the first time, picking Martha up and taking her home. Then it seemed almost natural for her to invite me in. But it would be a different matter plucking up courage to go back. Would she be pleased to see me again?

Standing in front of the mirror, I reach in my pocket and pull out the purple note. I lift it close to my face.

‘I hope you’re the first of many,’ I whisper. ‘I’m going to save you, hide you away where the others won’t find you. Not that Bea or Tilly need you. They’ve got fifty-pound notes coming out of their backsides! Rich daddies, mansions to live in at home, Olympic-size swimming pools in the garden. And I’m sure Velcro’s too nice to even dream of pinching anything. But ... ’

I carefully fold the money, tuck it back into the pocket and gather the cleaning equipment together.

Friday night. I sigh. Everyone else must be out enjoying themselves while I'm stuck in here. Not for a second longer than I have to, though. I keep an eye on my watch as I scrub and polish away. I want to be ready to leave on the dot of ten.

At two minutes to ten, I hurry down the stairs. Exactly on the hour, I leave the equipment in the cupboard under the stairwell, strip off my overall, swap it for my coat and close the door. The swing doors fly open and Hazel blocks my exit.

'Well?' Although I'd expected her voice to bring me to a halt, as it does every evening as I'm about to leave, it still makes me jump.

'All done, Hazel,' I say, keeping my voice calm.

'Clean enough to eat your dinner off?'

'Yes.' I clench my fist and dig my nails into my palms to stop the urge to say something I'll regret.

'I'll check, of course,' Hazel snaps. 'If I find they're not up to standard ...'

I feel like exploding. This woman is so infuriating! I grab the pay packet that is pushed roughly into my hand. Then I squeeze past her and speed across the shiny floor to the main entrance, without leaving the ghost of a footprint anywhere.

The night air strikes cold on my cheeks as I begin to sprint along the High Street. Suddenly, I skid and almost fall. The pavements are treacherous. Ice has formed on the puddles while I was working.

Treading more carefully, I reach Bella Casa café on a corner. It's a much bigger place than Luigi's and it's always lively

in there on a Friday night. I can hear music and laughter from inside. I stop outside for a moment to watch and listen. My breath billows out in clouds of white mist as I stamp my feet and pull my coat sleeves down over my hands, trying to avoid freezing to death. Frost crystals have formed on the roofs and windows of the parked cars.

Just as I'm setting off again, the café door is flung open. Four lads rush out, talking loudly and laughing. I gawp and feel my blood pumping faster through my body, bringing a tingling sensation to my fingers. One of them is the best-looking boy I've ever seen. That tanned face and those gorgeous deep brown eyes. His golden hair shines like a halo in the bright beam of the café lights.

My heart is fluttering like butterfly wings. What's the matter with me? I'm not normally struck down at first sight by attractive males! Perhaps my life is changing in more ways than one. Maybe Martha has done this to me. Maybe she has more power than I'd ever have guessed.

'See you tomorrow at the rugby ground,' he calls, as they all set off in different directions. 'Ten o'clock?'

The sound of his voice bowls me over. So gravelly, like a pop star.

'See you, Finn!' someone calls.

'Finn,' I whisper, as I began to follow him. 'Yes. I like it.'

I feel a draw, like a magnet, and I'm unable to resist my wish to find out more about him. I wonder what makes me begin to tail him. All I know is I have this idea that goes round and round in my head and won't go away: 'Finn, you're the one for me.'

*Friday 12th November
Madebury*

Dear Cecily

Oh dear! I'm afraid I'm becoming quite unsteady on my pins. I must remember to carry my stick with me next time I come to see you. After I got off the bus on my way home, I fell over again, you see, right there in the High Street. If it weren't for a girl picking me up, I don't know how I would have got home.

Ella, she said her name was. A strange girl, gaunt, sad. I think she must be going through some kind of crisis. I can't make out what the problem is, but she fascinates me. I wouldn't say she

is homeless, but I'm sure she doesn't live at home. I wonder why. All I know is that something is unsettling her.

She was very cagey about her job. She wouldn't discuss it. Oh, I do hope it's nothing dishonest or dangerous. Mind you, she had an eye for mother's ring. At one point I thought she might be thinking of stealing it. But she didn't, even when I dozed off at the kitchen table. I suppose that's why I gave her money – as a thank you for picking me up off the street, and for not taking advantage of me.

Jack would be very angry with me if he knew I'd invited another total stranger into the house. But he doesn't know and I won't tell him yet. It's my secret. I know you'll keep it, too.

It seems to me that Ella is a poor lost soul. I'm sure she was about to confide in me, then changed her mind. I'm determined to help her. I might be decrepit, but I haven't lost my power. You will tell me I am too mischievous, but I have to confess I have cast a little spell upon her. I hope it will work and have a happy outcome for her. I have a strong feeling I shall see her again very soon.

Your loving sister

Martha