

Exerpt

‘You go first,’ I whispered.

Janet didn’t argue. In this matter of life or death she presumed that neither of us had any intention of playing the hero. Besides, she was far too anxious to get home. Pointing downwards, she stepped on to the stone.

Nothing happened!

Her face changed – utter disbelief sweeping over it. I ran across the room peering down at the circular stone. We both stood on it, turning to face the fireplace, turning to face the door, face the window. We moved the fire screen – *nothing – nothing* – NOTHING!

Janet giggled hysterically, her hand flying to her mouth to stem the noise. Covering her face with her hands she collapsed, her body rigid with shock. I simply felt cheated, the decision on my future once again whisked away from under my nose. Pulling wildly at my hair, I tried to focus my thoughts and recall the exact sequence of events, before I fell down the time-chute.

‘For God’s sake, Janet; pull yourself together, crying won’t get us out of here.’ I bent down and pulled her hand away from her face. ‘There’s something – something different. Try and remember.’

She gazed up at me, her face all screwed-up like a lost kid.

‘Janet, it’s the sun. Did you have sun?’ I hissed urgently, suddenly remembering how warm the sun had been and my feeling cold.

She stared across at the windows reflecting only the grey of

the afternoon clouds. 'Then it's no good – all this for nothing,' she said, as if the world had just ended. She stood up and began stamping her feet on the stone, trying to bulldoze a response out of it. She glared at the window; willing the clouds to move aside and let the sun through. I put my arm round her.

'No big deal,' I said lightly, as if it really didn't matter. 'We got in once; we can do it again, easy. But next time, it'll be sunny.'

Her feet were super-glued to the stone and I had to drag her away. I guess if I'd been stuck here for two years, working as a servant and terrified of my own shadow, I wouldn't have wanted to leave either. She'd got in and now wild horses weren't going to drag her out again.

We reached the wicket gate safely. Janet cast yet another lingering glance at the sky. I knew she'd have waited forever if there'd been the slightest sign of sun, but there wasn't; the sombre clouds thickening and spits of rain now beginning to fall.

I opened the gate, flinching backwards as I spotted the dour figure of the steward – Mr Perkins – his arms folded, waiting outside in the lane.

A shrill voice piped up. 'I told yer, I told yer I seed 'em.'

I know I went white. My hands fell to my sides and we stood there, for all-the-world like a couple of ten year-olds caught smoking in the school toilets.

'What are ye doin'?'

'I came to see Richard, Mr Perkins,' I said, my voice high-pitched and quivering with nerves.

'Callers don't use the wicket, they use the front gate. You an' that girl,' he pointed to Janet as if she was a bit of filth he'd just scraped off his shoe, the nails on his fingers black and pitted, 'were up to no good.'

I noticed his eyes, narrow and cunning like a weasel.

'You was in the parlour wiv her spells.'

'That's ridiculous, we were looking for Richard. You know perfectly well we're friends.' I caught Janet's sleeve, taking a step round him.

He ignored me and, swinging round, pushed his face at Janet.

Gross – his breath would have floored a skunk at twenty paces. ‘I know what I saw. You may have fooled Sir Richard with ye innocent ways, but I know ye’re a witch and her too,’ he jerked his head at me.

Janet, looking terrified, took a step back while I took a step forward, drawing myself to my full height.

‘That’s nonsense,’ I said, staring him straight in the eye, trying to tell myself this was simply another bully I had to face down.

Bully or not, he wasn’t backing down. I watched nervously as he hitched up his trousers, hiking his belligerence up a notch at the same time.

‘We’ll see about this sneakin’ about. My boys saw ye cavortin’ together – let’s see what the pastor has to say.’

He grabbed my arm and I pulled away.

‘Don’t be so stupid, Mr Perkins, I can’t see why you’re making such a fuss. You know I often meet with Richard; we’ve been friends since we were children.’

I might have been speaking to a brick wall for all the notice he took. He grabbed my arm again, his nails digging viciously into the flesh. I stared at his face, almost spitting into mine, lines scalding their way downwards – like deep furrows in a ploughed field – ending at the corner of his mouth, others criss-crossing his forehead. This wasn’t about me seeing Richard or saving his child; this was because Janet had made him look a fool in front of his employer. He wanted revenge and he didn’t care how he got it; the worst type of bully possible and I knew he’d stop at nothing to regain his pride.

Janet knew it too – her face ashen, her eyes wide and staring. With a gasp of fear, she pulled free and ran.

‘Janet stop, he can’t hurt you.’ I shouted and then, without thinking, I yanked my arm free and ran after her.

My wooden clogs were heavy and slowed me down and I scrunched my toes to stop them falling off. I would have been better bare-footed, except my feet were already cut and bruised. I heard thuds on the ground behind me and increased my pace,

trying to catch Janet. I wanted to call out – *Janet, Janet, not that way, run towards home where it's safe* – the words hammering in my chest, but I hadn't enough breath to shout them.

She reminded me of a wounded animal running haphazardly in circles, aimlessly darting from cover to cover, anything to escape its pursuers. She reached the bridge flying across it, the door of the chapel banging open. I ran in after her and stopped. She was crouched near the front of the chapel, where the pastor had stood to address the congregation, her eyes staring.

'We're safe,' she panted. 'We're safe in the chapel.'

She hadn't been running heedlessly after all, she had purposely sought sanctuary.

My chest heaved too; not with the need for air but with fury that one person – one single bullying person – could create such mindless fear in someone else. I put my arm round her. 'He can't hurt us, Janet, we've done nothing.'

'Molly, you're so stupid. Of course he can.' She screamed the words at me. 'This isn't the twenty-first century. Men rule here; you're a woman – of less worth than an animal. This may be 1648 but they're still barbarians, and if they don't understand something they're scared shitless and lash out. Can't you see that?'

Everything in me begged for her to be wrong, because if she was right we were in big trouble.

I don't know how long we sat in the chapel, watching the light change, becoming gloomy and then dim, while the sky outside grew dark. The hours ticked by and I began to feel hungry and stupid. Mr Perkins had wanted to frighten us and he'd succeeded big time. Here we were cowering in the chapel while he was at home, sitting in his armchair by the fire, a contemptuous smile on his face. And no one had come looking for me, so I hadn't been missed but if we were to escape a beating, we had to get back as quickly as possible.

I got up and stretched, tip-toeing to the door to listen. All was quiet. Janet joined me.

'Come on,' I said. 'They must have gone by now. Let's go home.'

Cautiously, I pushed open the door. It was dark and quiet – nothing moved. I stepped out, Janet following.

The door slammed shut behind us, the noise making me jump. A torch burst into flame, illuminating the faces of the men waiting patiently for the fox to crawl out of its den.