

Person for TRIAL

On suspicion of
WITCHCRAFT

TO BE HELD AT THE
SPRING ASSIZES

GLASTONBURY,
FOR THE COUNTY OF SOMERSET

12th January 1616

I

A FEW MONTHS EARLIER ...

IN WHICH OUR HERO'S LIFE
TAKES A STRANGE AND
DRAMATIC TWIST

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We lived in a hamlet called Fair Maidens Lane, which wasn't a lane at all, but half a dozen moss-roofed cottages cowering against the weather. For as long as I could remember, there'd been no grown men amongst us, just women, girls and my brother, Jem. As for fair maidens, there was Abigail, my elder sister, though she was only middling pretty. Our womenfolk were a capable lot, breeding pigs, catching fish, crushing herbs, and birthing babies in the local towns and villages, and had a reputation for doing all of it well. Yet we were our own little community, bounded by the Severn Sea on one side, the Quantock Hills on the other. And because none of us needed rescuing like maidens in stories had you believe, our hamlet's name came to be a fine joke. No harm was meant by it, at least, not then.

The first sign of change was a slight shift in the air which I supposed was the coming of autumn because it made gooseflesh rise up along my arms. Then Jem,

who at fifteen summers was two years my elder, got taller as if he'd grown overnight like a magic plant. Every morning his breeches rose further from his knees. Where once he'd been as soft as a fresh loaf, he was now all wrist bones and shoulder blades, and had a voice that squeak-boomed when he spoke.

'Mercy, brother! Grow any taller and the birds'll start perching on you,' I exclaimed one morning when he had to bend to avoid the ceiling beam above our heads.

'Come here and say that, Fortune Sharpe!' he threatened, Fortune being my name, though I was yet to discover why.

We chased each other out of the house, ducking and squealing under Abigail's laundry lines, which sent next door's youngster pigs tottering to the fence to see what all the fuss was about. Our neighbour, Saddleback Sally, was known far and wide for breeding exceptional pigs. We ran on, past Leathery Gwen's, who had skin as tough as hide from the hours she spent catching crayfish along the shore. The timber cottage opposite hers was home to Ruth and Jane Redfern, local midwives and clever in the ways of herbs.

Before we knew it, we'd reached the last dwelling in the hamlet, Old Margaret's, with its dairy where she

made delicious yellow cheeses. In the pasture beyond, she kept a herd of cows that our mother, and her milking stool, tended every day. Mother was paid well for her skill. And so we'd always been told to be polite to Old Margaret.

As Jem and I hurtled past, still laughing and shouting, Old Margaret was out in her yard rinsing cheesecloths.

'What's all this noise, then?' she cried, flapping a cloth at me. 'Anyone would think the devil himself was chasing you!'

I slowed down.

'Haven't you anything more useful to do than tear around, making mischief?' she scolded.

'Sorry,' I muttered, though I'd never been a walk-on-tippy-toes sort of girl, and Old Margaret knew it as well as anyone. I'd grown up wearing boys' shirts and leggings, and my only dress was an ugly hop-sack thing that'd once been Abigail's. Unless Mother told me to wear it, it stayed stuffed in a dusty corner under my bed.

Old Margaret turned to Jem. 'About time you earned your keep, and all.'

'Yes, mistress, sorry, mistress,' he said, so contrite I couldn't help sniggering behind my hand.

Apologising again, we hurried on. A sharp left took

us up over the common land before it dropped away steeply to the coast. If you followed your feet downhill through the gorse bushes, you'd arrive at a little brown-sand cove where the river ran into the Severn Sea. It was my favourite place in the whole world – not that I'd seen much of anywhere beyond Bridgwater, but still.

The beach was empty. Once Jem and I had wrestled each other to the ground, and I'd declared myself the winner, we fell apart to sit on the sand. Every day I'd find a reason to come down here, to stare at the ocean and smell the salt air. It came from Father, my special love of the sea. I'd been only two years old when a savage winter tide snatched him from the shore where he'd been out glatting for big, fat eels. My one memory of him was how he slept at night with the shutters open in all weathers, just to hear the waves. It brought peace, so he'd said.

Usually, it worked like a salve for me too, yet today I found myself mulling over our encounter with Old Margaret.

'D'you think she meant it?' I asked Jem, chewing the frayed edges of my thumbnails. 'About us needing to be more useful?'

At home, us children all had our tasks: collecting firewood, feeding hens, chopping herbs, growing

vegetables, making candles. Though none of it brought in any real coin, like the saddleback pigs or Old Margaret's cheese.

Jem stretched his long spindly legs. 'You know there are people watching us, don't you?'

'Where?' I spun round, scanning the hill of common land we'd just passed over.

'Not *right now*, you goose,' Jem tutted. 'Generally, I mean. It's been going on for a while, so Abigail says. They're riding as far as the crossroads once, maybe twice a day.'

The crossroads was about a quarter of a mile from Old Margaret's house. It was where the main road stopped and became a narrow track down to our cottages.

'Who's watching us?' I wanted to know.

'Our neighbouring landowners, apparently—'

'Who own all the land between us and kingdom come,' I finished for him. 'What do they want with us?'

'They're just looking – for now.'

This last bit he said in a wary, loaded way. For we both knew how rich these landowners were, and that wealth meant power. These men decided the laws a magistrate might enforce, and the punishments for breaking them.

Not that we'd done anything wrong. No one here owed money or had thieved anything or done a murder, as far as I knew. Yet the thought of being watched unsettled me. Since Jem didn't say any more about it, and with the sea spread before me, I soon forgot it, though. And I wondered how the waves might look to someone in Spain, say, or even further away in that brand-new country they were calling America. There were many different ways of seeing the same thing.

As we soon found out to our peril.

A few days later we were sent to collect kindling. Luckily, there'd been a high wind in the night that had shaken the trees, so the ground was strewn with dead leaves and gnarly grey twigs. It wasn't long before our baskets were full. We were about to turn for home when Jem cried, 'Tree down!' and we saw first the upturned roots, then the trunk of an oak that'd fallen right across the path.

It was pretty early in the autumn for a storm to bring a whole tree down, though it was a young oak of middling height rather than the great old ones that grew along the boundary with the pasture beyond. That said, it was a usable piece of wood. And by the looks of things, we were the first to find it.

'You know what this would be grand for, don't you?' I asked as we both stared at the tree.

'The stove?'

'This isn't kindling, flea-brain!' I was thinking fast. 'This could be a boat.'

'Who in Fair Maidens Lane needs one of those?' Jem asked.

'Anyone? Everyone?' I threw my arms up, excited. 'Think how useful a boat could be! People could go fishing in it or travel along the coast when the roads are bad in winter.'

Jem wrinkled his nose. It was a look I knew all too well, and it meant he was impressed. He'd obviously not forgotten Old Margaret's scolding, either, and could see the potential in my plan.

'We'd better hide it, then,' he said. 'Just in case anyone takes it for firewood.'

A fair bit of huffing and grunting, and it was obvious we weren't strong enough to move the tree from the path. So we made do with heaping leaves over the top of it, and hoped that would be enough to keep it hidden until we could return.

We were back within the hour, having pleased Mother enough to be allowed a little time to ourselves. I'd smuggled the short axe from the woodpile up my sleeve, and Jem's pocket bulged with his knife and a couple of razor-sharp flints. Together we set to work on our felled tree, first removing the roots and the upper branches, until we were left with the trunk itself. This alone was hard enough work, and soon we were too

warm for jerkins and jackets, and sweating like a pair of pigs.

'It's going to be magic, isn't it?' Jem chattered on as we worked.

'You could wager my life on it,' I agreed. 'Everyone'll be amazed when they realise we've made a boat all by ourselves. The whole hamlet will want to use it.'

'We shouldn't tell anyone, though, should we? Not until it's done.'

'Definitely not.'

We spat on our palms and shook hands to seal the secret. Just as Jem started cutting again, his knife went still.

I sat back on my haunches. 'What's the ...?'

He told me to shush. He'd seen something – somebody – straight ahead, coming out of Old Margaret's cottage, the outline of which was just visible through the trees.

At first it was hard to see what was happening. There seemed to be two or maybe three men, all dressed in tall dark hats, their cloaks flapping about like wings. Old Margaret was in the midst of them – at least, I guessed the bare, white, kicking legs were hers. They were dragging her away, forcing her into the back of a cart. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but it sounded

shrill and angry, and I'd the sudden queasy feeling things weren't right. I scrambled to my feet, thinking we should do something to help her.

It was then I saw the others: Leathery Gwen, the Redfern sisters, Abigail, all standing by, watching from the roadside. No one was interfering. Or speaking up. They were letting these men take Old Margaret away, which confused me even more.

The voice I heard next was our mother's. Milking stool still under her arm, she came charging out of the yard after the cart, shouting at the top of her lungs.

'Have pity!' she cried. 'Margaret Ford is an old woman! She is innocent of all your charges!'

'Charges?' I turned to Jem in amazement. 'She's not a criminal!'

Within moments, it was all over. Old Margaret was in the cart. One of the men, his hand flat on Mother's chest, shoved her out of the way. The horses strained, the cartwheels rolled through the mud, and Old Margaret disappeared from the village. Everyone else went back to their houses.

We rushed home to find Mother already there, white-faced and dazed. Abigail was trying to make her sit down, which she was refusing to do.

'Who were those men?' I asked, then realised I knew

the answer. 'Oh Lord, they're the ones who've been watching from the crossroads, aren't they?'

'You'd better tell her, Mother,' Abigail muttered under her breath. 'She'll only keep on until you do.'

Mother swallowed, wincing as if her throat hurt. 'A rival cheesemaker has made some *accusations* against Old Margaret, that's what.'

I frowned. 'Accusations?'

'Of cursing his cheese, though the man's a complete lubberwort for saying it. 'Tis his own doing if his rennet won't set, not poor Margaret's.'

'It all goes back to King James himself, so I've heard,' Abigail piped up. 'And how his mind runs to witchcraft.'

'Old Margaret's not a *witch!*' I was stunned.

'She's old and grumpy,' Jem said. Mother glared at him. 'Which wasn't a crime last time I checked,' he added hastily.

I expected Mother to tell us to stop gossiping, but all she did was give her face a weary rub.

'It's those landowners behind it,' she admitted now. 'They've always been suspicious of us. They've seen how well we live here, how quietly, and all they want is our land for themselves.'

'But it's Old Margaret's land mostly,' I said. When

the nearby monastery was abandoned its lands were divided up. Old Margaret bought a share which included Fair Maidens Lane and ran all the way down to the sea. Everyone in our hamlet rented their furlongs direct from her. It was an unusual arrangement, not least because there were no men involved.

'They can't just take it off her,' Jem pointed out.

'They can if she's broken the law – and believe me, they'll think of something. They've been jumping at the chance to get their hands on our pasture,' Mother replied.

'Why can't they leave us alone? We've done nothing wrong,' I insisted.

'We're women thriving by ourselves – that's what we've done wrong,' Mother said, and fiercely. 'If we want to survive, our life here is going to have to change.'

I was pretty certain it already had.

Old Margaret didn't return, despite Mother telling us she surely would. The days passed, the weather cooled, the leaves on the trees turned golden, yet we remained watchful. The landowners would be back – everyone expected it. Jane Redfern said we should block the path, Leathery Gwen suggested fresh crabs as a peace offering. No one could agree on what to do.

The very next Sunday Mother dragged us to church, making doubly sure we were tidy and that I, for once, was wearing my gown. Though the law fined people who didn't go to church, no one had ever checked on our tiny parish – at least, not in the past. Things were different now, and the sight that greeted me proved it: everyone in attendance in their best clothes, singing loudly at the hymns. I couldn't shake the feeling that it was fear that brought us here.

In the days and weeks that followed, shadows as dark as bruises grew under Mother's eyes. And when

she wasn't trying to coax milk from Old Margaret's cows, she was reminding Jem and me to keep our heads down.

'You stay out of trouble, d'you hear?' she warned. 'Those landowners are looking for something to pin on us.'

'Won't Old Margaret ever come back?' I asked.

'She will, I'm sure of it,' Mother said firmly. 'That's why we're keeping her cows going.'

She'd roped us into helping at the dairy, and it was hot, stinky work. My brother, as always, was eager to please. But I wasn't easy-natured like him, or sensible like Abigail, and was soon fed up of washing pans and rinsing cloths. Since Old Margaret's disappearance, there'd been little time for boatbuilding, and we'd had to snatch odd moments before the light failed at the end of the day.

Then, another change.

People started being suspiciously nice to Jem – people who, as far back as I could remember, had chided us for our silliness and noise. Leathery Gwen offered him the pick of her crayfish catch, Saddleback Sally wanted his advice on her sows. Jane Redfern wondered if he'd like her father's best cloak? In our hamlet of bonnets and muddy skirts, my lanky brother was suddenly a prince.

I thought it funny to begin with. 'But you snore like a pig, and your feet smell of old cheese, Jem Sharpe!' And he laughed, because he was baffled by it too – embarrassed, even.

The special treatment went on, day after day, and with it came new responsibilities. Jem was asked to check fences, weigh pigs for market, talk money with local merchants, plan services at our church. Rents were paid to him instead of Old Margaret, and he locked all the coins away in a battered box, which was then hidden in Old Margaret's cellar.

All this began to nibble away at the brother I held so dear. As if the joy was leaking out of him and he was turning into a middle-aged man. It was typical of Jem to do his best at whatever task he faced. But he no longer had time for building our boat. And I got annoyed.

We'd carved out the trunk enough for us both to sit inside it, and shaped the underneath into a sort of hull. A few more hours' work, and our little dugout boat would be ready to take down to the beach for testing in the water.

Yet on the very afternoon we'd agreed to do the finishing touches, I found Jem at the kitchen table, practising writing his name. I stood over him, impatient.

'What about our boat?' I asked. 'Aren't you coming to finish it?'

'Can't you see I'm busy?' he replied, not looking up.

'You're turning into a right dullard, you are.' I scowled at the top of his head.

Jem put down his pen and sighed.

'Now don't fly into a temper, Fortune,' he said. 'I didn't ask for this to happen. But everyone decided it would be best to have a male in charge, at least while those landowners are still sniffing about...'

'Balderdash!' I cried. 'The women here are more than capable, you know they are!'

Even so, a little voice chimed in my head. The world beyond our hamlet was a different place, with different rules. I'd seen it myself sometimes at market, when traders would ignore Abigail to deal instead with Jem. Then there was what Mother said, about keeping our heads down. After what had happened to Old Margaret maybe now wasn't a good time to be different.

Jem picked up his pen again. He looked fidgety and pale.

'I mean it. I'm not enjoying this any more than you are. Ask Mother if you don't believe me,' he said.

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I'd planned to. Yet that night, noticing the frostiness between us, Mother explained before I had a chance to ask.

'It seems those men in black cloaks have lost interest in us at last.'

It was true we'd not seen the landowners again since the day they took Old Margaret.

'Having a young man to keep us in check seems to have worked,' Mother said, though from the look on her face I wasn't sure *she* agreed. 'I'm sorry it fell to you, Jem, but you were our obvious choice.'

'He's our only choice,' I remarked.

'And don't think I'm enjoying it,' Jem muttered again.

'Tsk. You've taken to it well, son.' Mother ruffled his hair, frowning as she did so. 'Though, by my word, these aren't the locks of an important young man. It's time you had your first haircut.'

Whilst she got to work on Jem's curls, I sat on the stool opposite, pulling faces. Both Abigail and Mother wore their yellow hair in long neat plaits, whereas Jem and I had the same dark knotty curls that swarmed about our heads like bees. Slice by slice Jem's locks fell to the floor. By the time Mother had finished, the difference was startling.

'You're the dead spit of Father!' Abigail gasped, hands cupping her cheeks.

'Oh Lord, he is,' Mother agreed.

Frustratingly, I couldn't remember what our father had looked like. But this serious young man with his long thin face definitely didn't look like me any more, and I felt bewildered, almost scared. It was as if I'd just said farewell to my dearest friend, and a part of myself in the bargain.

'Cut mine too,' I insisted, suddenly.

Mother hesitated. Girls didn't have haircuts: they plaited and combed their hair, or tucked it neatly under a bonnet.

'It couldn't look any worse,' Abigail reasoned helpfully.

'Just to the chin, then,' Mother relented.

A few cuts and it was done. Though I liked smoothing it behind my ears and feeling the air on my neck, it didn't make me resemble Jem again. If anything, we now both looked like strangers.